

# The Magic Animal

## GENE WOLFE

*Gene Wolfe is perceived by many critics to be one of the best—perhaps the best—SF and fantasy writers working today. His most acclaimed work is the tetralogy *The Book of the New Sun*, individual volumes of which have won the Nebula Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. He followed this up with a popular new series, *The Book of the Long Sun*, that included *Nightside the Long Sun*, *The Lake of the Long Sun*, *Calde of the Long Sun*, and *Exodus from the Long Sun*, and has recently completed another series, *The Book of the Short Sun*, with the novels *On Blue's Waters*, *In Green's jungles*, and *Return to the Whorl*. His other books include the classic novels *Peace and The Devil in a Forest*, both recently rereleased, as well as *Free Live Free*, *Soldier in the Mist*, *Soldier of Arete*, *There Are Doors*, *Castlevue*, *Pandora* by Holly Hollander, and *The Urth of the New Sun*. His short fiction has been collected in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories* and *Other Stories*, *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days*, *The Wolfe Archipelago*, the *World Fantasy Award-winning collection Storeys from the Old Hotel*, *Endangered Species*, *Strange Travelers*, and *Innocents Aboard: New Fantasy Stories*. His most recent books consist of a two-volume novel series, *The Knight and The Wizard*, a new collection, *Starwater Strains: New Science Fiction Stories*, and the long-awaited new entry in the *Soldier of the Mist* sequence, *Soldier of Sidon*.*

*In the strange and evocative story that follows, he takes us into the deepest recesses of a mystic wood and involves us anew in one of the oldest of stories . . .*

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V

VIANE could understand the speech of animals. That is the thing you must know about her, not the first thing, or the main thing, or the most important thing. Nor is it the only thing. It is the thing you must know. You must know it because you cannot understand it. Viviane—here she comes, the brown-blond not-terribly-large girl urging the dappled mare to more speed—did not understand it herself.

She did not understand it, although she did not put it that way. When she

thought about it, she could not understand why other people could not—which is the same thing. That is the way it is with talents. One has a talent for music, another for baseball. One has a talent for acting. (You know her.) Another can fill the whole auditorium with the song from one little ordinary-looking throat. And none can ever understand why others cannot do the things they find so easy and natural.

Viviane understood the speech of animals, and sometimes (quite often, in fact) animals understood her. That last is not equally mysterious. Animals often understand us, and Viviane’s talent is not so rare as you might imagine.

The dappled mare jumped a little creek in fine style and came to a full stop without being told; and Viviane, who had been enjoying the song the wind sang and thinking about starting high school next month way over in Rio Colorado, tried to see what had made her stop. Without success.

“That is a drawing-in wood,” Daisy said very plainly. “I’m not going in there.”

“All right.” Viviane made her voice soothing. “I wasn’t going there anyway.”

“I am not,” Daisy said.

It did not quite follow, or so it seemed to Viviane. “You sound,” she told Daisy, “as if I said I was. I didn’t say that at all. I said I wasn’t.”

Daisy only tossed her head nervously.

Viviane tapped her with her heels. “This trail doesn’t go there, and you’ve been over it lots of times. Let’s trot.”

“Let’s not.”

“Trot,” Viviane repeated.

“It’s not the same, that wood.”

“Trot!”

Daisy trotted, then broke into a thrilling headlong gallop.

This, Viviane told herself, is what getting the right boyfriend—not just any

boyfriend, the right one—for my freshman year would be like. A rush and rhythm. A sort of—

Daisy had stopped again, this time as abruptly as the very best roping horse. Viviane was conscious of flying, of spinning, and of nothing much after that.

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THEN of lying in coarse grass in an uncomfortable position. For a time that seemed long, she could not think what she might do about it.

At last she sat up and rubbed her head. No bones broken, as well as she could judge. Her watch—a big, tough quartz watch her father had given her for camping—seemed intact, its pink plastic case undamaged, its hands pointing faithfully: 1:27.

“You will be going into the wood,” a dusty rattlesnake told her, “and I will come with you and protect you, if you like. I could wrap myself around your right arm.”

Viviane spat dirt and a few grass fragments. “You scared Daisy.”

“Would you like to be stepped on?” The rattlesnake had coiled itself defensively. “By a horse?”

It had a point, and Viviane decided to change the subject. “I understand animals,” she said. “I always have, but they’ve never talked quite like you.”

“Pity,” said the rattlesnake.

“Usually it’s ‘I’m tired,’ ‘I’m afraid,’ or ‘I like you.’ Snapdragon told me how much she loved her kittens once. Things like that.”

The rattlesnake rested its chin on a shiny stone, not quite looking up at Viviane. “Now you may understand us better. It is because of where you will be.”

“Where I’ll be?”

“Yes.”

“Not where I am now?”

“No.”

“All right.” Viviane’s jeans were dirty; so was her denim shirt. She brushed them off. “Where will I be?”

“In the wood. Shall I come, too?”

“No.” She tried to make her voice firm.

“If you don’t like the wrist idea, I could stretch around your waist, I think.”

“If I say no again, will you bite me?”

“I will say it for you,” the rattlesnake told her. “No, but remember that you might have had the blessing of serpents.” It flowed into the grass and vanished.

Viviane stood, finding it more difficult than usual. The trail stretched before her and behind her, but she could no longer remember where it came from or where it led. The wood—a beckoning wood of pine and scrub oak that stretched up the side of the mountain—promised shade and cool water.

It took her some time to trace the little creek to its spring, a small and secret pool whose outflow was quickly lost among rocks and roots. She had drunk and was perched on a rock wiping her mouth with her bandana when a shrill voice behind her said, “There you are! They said you had come. We need your help. Nod, please, so I will know my speech is not too alien to you.”

Viviane turned and stared.

“Oh, nod! Please, please nod!”

Slowly, Viviane did.

“There! I knew you would!” The speaker was a small . . . Woman? With four gauzy wings that fluttered nervously behind . . . Her? “We need your help,” she(?) said. “You need your help. Am I making myself clear? When I say we I mean us. Do you understand the Matter of Britain?”

“Sorry I stared.” Viviane did her best to look away, with mixed suc-cess. “I’ve never seen anyone quite like—never seen anybody even a little bit like you.”

"I understand. If . . . You're not going to attack, are you?"

That took some digesting. Viviane composed several interesting thoughts and rejected all of them; everything, she decided, was already much too complicated. At last she said, "You're afraid of me? *You* are afraid of me?"

"Well, you are big. And I am certain you can spring very fast ..." The wings fluttered so hard that for a moment their owner was lifted off her feet. "If you chose to."

Viviane felt she should show her teeth but smiled instead. "You mean like Snapdragon? Snapdragon's my cat. I call her Snappy."

"Are cats the ones with tails? My name is—is . . . Oh, I forget! I mean, they gave me something to tell you, I know they did. Ariel? Was that it?"

"She's a mermaid, I think. She has lovely red hair." Viviane smiled, recalling the movie. "I'd like to have it on DVD."

"You don't think that's right?"

"I really don't." Viviane shook her head. "You're more of a fairy, aren't you? And you're a girl? Like me?"

"Only not so big."

"So you should have a girl-fairy name. What about Tinker Bell?"

The wings drooped, and their owner looked a trifle downcast. "It is awfully long. I doubt I could remember it."

"Well ..." Viviane dipped her bandana in the spring and wiped her face with it. "Gee, I read—"

They had been joined by a coyote. It nodded frostily to the (very) small winged woman before addressing Viviane. "This ladybug, or whatever she is, is about to dispatch you upon a mission fraught with danger, my child. You may need the assistance of someone swift, someone with sharp teeth who is not afraid to use them. I proffer my services, gratis. Pro bono, as the expression is. I too have a stake in this matter, you see. Do you wisely choose to accept them?"

"I—I've never shot one of you." Viviane found that her mouth was dry and

wished she might drink from the spring again. “I want to say so, first off. It’s the truth. There’ve been times when I could have.”

“So you think,” remarked the coyote.

“But I—I...” Viviane turned to the small woman with wings. “Please— my gosh, I still don’t know your name. When I was little I read books about fairies. Now I can’t remember them. Wait. Nimue’s one. Do you like it?”

“That is you, I believe.” The small woman giggled.

“No, I’m Viviane.”

The coyote made her a stiff bow. “I am He Who Dismays All Hounds. You may call me Dis.”

“I don’t *want* to call you.”

“You probably like dogs,” Dis said, wagging his tail somewhat awkwardly. “You humans do, far too often. I despise them, but I’ll be a dog for you. For you alone.”

“No!” Viviane shook her head violently.

“As you wish, Viviane.” The coyote drew himself up. “You might have had the blessing of the pack. I sincerely hope you will not come to regret having refused it.” He turned and trotted away, vanishing (as it seemed) behind the first rock.

Viviane watched until he had gone, then knelt to drink again.

When she stood up, the (very) small winged woman said, “Viviane, Viviane, Viviane! How pretty!”

“Thank you.” Viviane dipped her bandana as she had before; the cold water revived her flushed face.

“I will be Viviane, too!”

“That’s me. How about Vivien?” Viviane spelled it, and added, “No-body can tell them apart anyway.”

"I was told about you before I came," Vivien said, "but not half enough. Your minds are so, um, like clouds. It makes me awfully dizzy."

Why it's *Alice in Wonderland*, Viviane told herself. That was a good book, and a good movie, too. How did it go? "I'm mad, you're mad, we're all mad here." That was it, or close.

"I am *not* mad at anybody." Vivien sounded as firm as it is possible for a small woman with gauzy wings to sound. "I am hopeful. Very hopeful in-deed. We need you. You need you. You called me a fairy. Would you like me to grow the little horn-things?" Her tiny forefingers, smaller than a baby's, wiggled on either side of her forehead.

"Well, those .. ."

"Like a snail, you know? I think I could do it."

"Please don't." Viviane wiped her face with her damp bandana all over again. "I was sort of enjoying this, and I'm afraid it would scare me."

"We almost always do." Vivien hung her head. "We never mean to. Or not usually. But you call us gnomes, brownies, leprechauns, sprites, Mar-tians, pixies, and elves, ever so many awful names we have no title to. And you are afraid of us no matter what you call us."

"I'm *not* afraid of you." Viviane made it as firm as an almost-high-school student and accomplished horsewoman could make it.

"Really?"

"Yes! Absolutely!" Somehow, saying it made it so.

The small woman appeared to draw a deep breath, taking in at least half a teaspoon of air. "You say we steal children. We never do. I promise. I will swear to that by anything you like. By everything."

"I *am not* a child!"

"But sometimes we recruit children. We simply have to. Honestly, Viviane. In the end we will give him back to his mother. Or to you. Whichever comes first."

"I'm sure I don't want him."

“You will. But—but you have got to recruit him for us. The first part. Bring him to us, but make sure he doesn’t have any iron on him when he comes. Or steel. Or anything like that. It distorts the field.”

“But I’ve . . .” Viviane paused, looking blank.

“No, you don’t.”

“Wait! My pocketknife.” Viviane thrust her hands into her pockets. “It’s gone. It must have fallen out when I fell off.”

“See?” Vivien looked pleased. “You’re not wearing spurs today—”

“I don’t need them with Daisy.”

“And the rivets in those blue trousers are copper. The change in your pockets is copper and nickel. You can talk to animals, so naturally you can talk to *me*. And you’ll do it. I *know* you will.”

“Do *what?*”

A big raven landed between them with a distinct thump. “Take the kid,” it told Viviane. “You take, they teach. After that, you keep the kid on track.” Its voice was a harsh croak.

The small woman said, “Hello, Nevermore.”

“Wait just a minute.” Viviane looked from one to the other. “You two know each other?”

“Sure,” quoth Nevermore.

“He ...” The gauzy wings fluttered nervously. “You must understand him. I, well—he ...”

“He don’t work for free.” Nevermore cocked his head knowingly at Viviane. “That’s what she’s tryin’ to say.”

Viviane nodded. “I’ve got it.”

“Swell. Now you listen up, honey, ‘cause I’m only goin’ to say it once. I been



here before, an' all this she's goin' to get you to do ain't goin' to be half as easy as she lets on. With me on board there'll be two of us, an' I been through the mill a couple times already, see? You want me, fine. We'll talk about it. You don't, I'll split now an' no hard feelin's. Only don't call me when you're in the soup, 'cause I don't carry no cell phone."

"And I'll have the blessing of the birds," Viviane added.

"Blessin' of the flock. That's what we call it. You bet you will. Plus smart advice, an' a pal that's not too goody-goody to do a little spyin' for you. An' this an' that."

"I want you," Viviane said. "How much?"

"You got one of them new quarters on you? A shiny one?"

Viviane fumbled her change from a pocket of her jeans and prodded it with a forefinger. "Here we go." Picking up the coin, she polished it on her shirt. "Oregon, two thousand and five. How's that?"

"Perfect." Nevermore hopped a bit nearer and held out one claw. "Fork it over."

Viviane did.

"Okay. I just accepted your retainer, see? You get my services. I gotta take this to my bank, but I'll be back before you miss me." Transferring the quarter from claw to beak, Nevermore spread black wings of surprising size and flapped away.

"Gone!" A sigh escaped the small woman. "What a relief!"

"Will he come back?"

"Oh, yes. He will find you eventually. They fly awfully high, and they can see for a thousand years from up there. He has a great many contacts, too. The overworld, you know. You did not ask my advice."

Viviane nodded. "I suppose I should have. Are you older than I am?"

"That is neither here nor there. I know how old you are, Viviane, but not how old I am. Yes, you should have. Had you done so, I would have warned you

that although he is honest by his own lights—or ... Or I think he may be. I mean..."

"You mean you're not sure." Viviane was getting impatient.

"That although Nevermore is honest by his own lights, his lights are black as his feathers. Shall we go? I will explain what you have to do on the way."

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"THIS is the spot." The small woman fluttered above Viviane's head. "It's got to be, or at least I certainly hope it is. See the oaks? Stand in the circle."

"In the fairy ring? All the mushrooms?"

"Is that what you call them? We use them for markers sometimes, in the woods. We like woods."

Viviane nodded. "I'd heard that."

"Now when you appear in this boy's bedroom, you may frighten him. I hope you won't, but you might. He'll see a shimmer on his floor, like a pool of water there. You'll come up through the water—you won't get wet—and it will drain away. Don't watch it. Watch him. If he starts—"

"I know what to do." Viviane stepped into the ring.

"Taking his hand will be the signal. Don't do it till he consents. You may raise your arms now. Or keep them at your sides. As you wish."

Viviane raised them.

It seemed a typical boy's bedroom, dimly illuminated by a night-light. A periodic table was taped to a wall, beside a picture of a president now obsolete by several terms. The small boy kneeling on his bed was dark, with black hair and shining eyes that seemed to see through her.

"Hello!" She smiled. "Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you. Or anybody."

"There was water on my floor," the boy said, "and you came out of it like—like—"

“A swimmer in a movie,” Viviane suggested.

“A fish jumping,” the boy said. And then, “I’m not afraid. If I were afraid, I’d yell for Miriam.”

Viviane smiled again; she had a charming smile. “That’s good. Who’s Miriam?”

“The sitter. She’s watching TV.”

“Do you like TV?” A thought had occurred to Viviane.

The boy shook his head.

“Then let me explain things another way. We’re going to do introductions, but *different* introductions. First I’m going to tell you my name, and then I’m going to tell you your name.”

“Like a game,” the boy said.

“Sort of like that, but it’s not a game. My name will be my name for real, and your name will be your new name, and your name for a long, long time. I’m Viviane.”

To himself the boy said, “Viviane the water lady.”

“And you’re Myrddin. It’s what your new teachers will call you.”

“I’ll get new teachers?”

Viviane nodded. “I think you’ll like them. Do you like the teachers you have now?”

“New teachers are always interesting.” Myrddin’s expression was unreadable; his eyes were brighter than ever, perhaps with excitement.

“They will be, but the things they teach you will be more interesting than they are. Have you ever wanted to be an animal?”

Myrddin only stared at her.

“A wolf, or—or a hawk.” He looked like a fledgling hawk, she thought. A

hawk too young to fly. But soon . . .

As if he read her thought, he said, "I'd be able to fly?"

"Yes," Viviane said, "and do lots of other wonderful things." The small woman could fly. Did she like it?

"Why are you giving me this?"

Here it was. In spite of all she could do, Viviane sighed. "Because you're the person who can stop a lot of bad things from happening. You've got a telescope on your dresser."

His eyes darted toward it, and returned as swiftly to her.

"Without you, there won't be any. Not ever. People will still look at the stars, but they won't know what they are. Nobody will work out that chart of the elements. Not ever. Most kids will die of diphtheria and smallpox, now and always. People—"

"When will I start?"

"Now," Viviane said. "Give me your hand, Myrddin."

He offered it, she took it, and they sank until night had gone and broad daylight shone through the oaks, bathing the fairy ring in a soft green-gold radiance. The small woman landed before Myrddin, half his height.

Viviane gestured. "He's in his pajamas. No iron, okay?"

"I know." To Myrddin, the small woman said, "That is why we had to have Viviane fetch you—why we could not come ourselves, Myrddin, though we—would have liked to. Give me your hand? You must, or nothing else will work."

He did, and the two of them walked away, fading out before they would have been lost among the shadows of the trees.

Hearing the fluttering of gauzy wings, Viviane turned around.

"There you are!" the small woman exclaimed. "We need you. Will you come? I know you must be anxious to get home, but—but you *must*. You just *have*

to. Really.”

Viviane looked at her watch, then squinted up at the sun. “Okay, if you’ll tell me something first. Two things.”

“I. . . Sometimes I get mixed up.”

“I’ve noticed. Will you try? You’ve got to be honest if you want me to bail you out.”

The small woman looked stricken. “I—well ...”

“You’re always honest and truthful. Except when you’re not. I’m trying to be helpful here.”

“Well—yes.”

“I’m the same way, but I want your promise. Swear you’ll answer these, and you won’t hide the truth.”

“I will,” Vivien promised, “if I can. But I may not be able to. I fib when I have no idea, mostly.”

“Don’t fib this time. If you can’t answer, say so.”

The small woman laid her hand on her heart. “Only the truth!”

She really needs me, Viviane thought. Great! Aloud she said, “First the time. I got thrown from my horse, and she was gone when I woke up, so I was out awhile. After that, I walked to these woods. That took a while. I had to hunt for a spring, and that took a while, too.”

“I understand.” The small woman smiled brightly.

“I talked with you and we went here, and I talked with that nice boy—”

“I am so glad you like him!”

“And we came back here. Et cetera, right? Well, my watch says its still one twenty-seven, so it’s stopped. Only the sun doesn’t seem to have moved either. All that stuff had to take a couple hours. Maybe more.”

"You wonder about that. Naturally you would. We can, well, do things with time, Viviane. It's an invariable for you. I know that."

"Only not for you."

Vivien shook her head.

"You put butter in the watch." Viviane sighed. "Or else you never beat Time. When we're through here, will you take me to the Griffin and the Mock Turtle? I always wanted to see them."

Viviane was cheered immensely by the small woman's puzzled look. "I will be happy to show you griffins," she said, "once we are through with Myrddin. Mock turtles . . . ? I really . . . Perhaps I can find some."

"Don't worry about the Mock Turtle," Viviane told her. "We'll get to him later. Here's my second question. Exactly why do you need me this time? The first time was because there was iron in Myrddin's room. But now you've got him, don't you?"

Vivien nodded. "We do. This is, um, quite different. He is, you know. Older."

Slowly Viviane nodded. "Okay."

"More—ah—mature than you are, actually. And we—he objected . . . To continuing his studies, you know. And there's still ever so much for him to learn."

"He wants to drop out."

"I—suppose so. It sounds . . . He—ah ..."

"What?" Viviane set her jaw. "Tell me, or you get no more help from me."

"Wants to go looking for you." The gauzy wings drooped. "He cannot possibly find you, you see. He must learn much more before he can, ah . . ."

"Can *what*?"

"Search the past for people. For you. So we—it was my idea, Viviane. If you hate me for it, well, you do. We told him that if he studied, the time would come when he would see more and more of you. And—oh, I am so sorry! I never should have. And I will not tell. Not now! He must tell you himself. I... I like him, and I

know you did, too. You said so. I would be . . . Stealing from him. I could never face myself again. Never!”

“If I go with you, he’ll tell me?”

Mutely, the small woman nodded.

“You’ll bring me back here after? Soon?”

“Yes! I promise!”

Together, they walked into the wood.

Things changed. There is no other way to say it. The trees Viviane had known all her life thinned out, and soon were no more. Strange new trees replaced them, kind trees for the most part, but secretive. The sky was a shade darker, the sun larger but not quite so bright. The air—motionless, windless air that seemed to await something new and strange—held a delicious chill. “Is this fairyland?” she asked.

At once the small woman shot ahead, turned long enough for a brief smile, and vanished among the trees.

A man’s voice shouted, “Viviane?”

“I’m here,” she said, and was at once assailed by doubts. Was she? Really? “Are you calling me?”

He ran lightly and silently, but not so silently that she caught no whisper of his coming. Then he was there, dark, hawk-nosed, and scarcely taller than she was. He dropped to his knees before her. “Oh, my lady! My dear, dearest, beloved lady of the lake. How I’ve longed for this moment!”

She crouched, bringing her face to the level of his bowed one. “You...They can do things with time. She said that. Are you Myrddin?”

He nodded. Slowly, gently, he took her hand between soft, long-fingered, brown hands that might have been a pianist’s. “I am. I’m Myrddin, my lady, your lover and your slave. Your slave no matter what may befall, and no matter what you or I may do or say.”

“I don’t want to have a slave, Myrddin.” Would he be angry? “I want a

friend. A good and faithful friend.”

He looked up and smiled, perfect white teeth flashing. “Your slave and your friend, my lady. Faithful always.”

Viviane reached toward him, and he toward her, and without her will-ing it in the least—or not willing it, either—they were in each other’s arms.

They kissed, and kissed again, and though neither knew much about it, each kiss was sweeter than the last.

Until at length they sat side by side, she with her sun-brown arm about his waist and her head on his shoulder. He with a more muscular arm around her shoulders and his cheek brushing her hair.

“They promised I would see you again someday,” he told her. “If I learned everything. If I studied till I passed every test, I’d see you again.”

She squeezed his hand.

“I came to doubt them. Gwelliant I caught and shook till she greatly feared me. Show her to me, I said. Show her to me once, and I’ll believe you.”

Viviane lifted her head from his shoulder until she could see his face.

It was the face of one who is angry in a dream. “She said she would, and left. Soon she returned. You were coming, and your name was Viviane.”

“It is,” Viviane whispered.

“A lake arose from my floor. You must remember that. The shimmer-ing water rose, and soon you rose from the water.” He sighed. “To me you will always be the lady of the lake.”

“I saw you on your bed,” she told him, “a little brown hawk, too young to fly. You’re bigger now, but a brown hawk just the same. You’ll always be that, my brown hawk, small but fierce.”

He chuckled, then grew serious. “Even when my beard is white, Viviane?”



“Yes. Even when your beard’s white. Even when we’re both old.”

“You don’t know. I see you don’t. It’s when you’re to be mine. When my beard is white.”

“Really?” She stared at him. “Is that what they told you?”

He shook his head. “It’s what I found out for myself, and it’s true. One of the things I’ve learned is to look with clear eyes on what’s past and what’s to come. I’ve combed the years for a time when we’ll be together, not for hours but for a time so long that a tree might grow from a cutting. Far in the past, that time existed. When it begins my beard will be white.”

For seconds that seemed long, Viviane tried to grasp what he had told her—to truly understand and accept it; but even when she knew she had to speak, she still could believe it true. Haltingly, only because she knew she must say something, she said, “You’re going to live a very long time. That’s what it sounds like.”

“Yes!” His arm hugged her, the hard, firm grip of a man who clings to something precious. “But I haven’t told you everything. The rest isn’t the crowning part. The crowning part is that once we’ve saved the future world, we’ll be together for many, many years. For decades, it may be.”

They kissed again.

“You should know this, too, Viviane. Once you and I are together at last, I’ll grow younger as the years creep by. Younger and younger, till at last we’re the same age.”

“Really? You didn’t just dream it?”

“No,” he said, “but if I had, it would yet be true. My dreams are no longer the idle fancies of a night. They haven’t been for a long while. I’ll grow younger, and you older. At last we’ll meet. After that, I’ll grow younger still. It’s hard to speak of this.”

“Then don’t,” she said. “Let’s be happy now. I am.”

“So am I. But you must know. When I’m a child again, you’re to return me to my mother. It will be arranged by them—by Gwelliant and the rest. My mother will never know I’ve been away. I’ll grow up then, like any other child. And you’ll

call out to me once more.”

Somehow, Viviane felt sure it was the truth. “Yes, I know I will.”

He shook himself, shivering as if chilled. “We’ll win in the end. That’s what I’ve seen, and it’s what matters. In this too-short day, we have till moonrise. Let’s make the most of it.”

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THIS was not the stand of pine and oak that Daisy had called a drawing-in wood. Nor was it the strange expectant forest in which she had been so happy. Its towering oaks were familiar, but older than any she had ever seen. And though their upper leaves were bathed in sunshine, the black loam she trod lay in a twilight no sunshine could reach.

“Anywhere in here,” the small woman told her. “You may build it anywhere you like. I am no builder myself—”

“Neither am I,” Viviane said.

The small woman ignored her. “But if I were doing it, I would try to build it close to the building materials.” The gauzy wings fluttered nervously. “I mean, I could not fly carrying an armload of sticks, and I would try to save steps.”

“I don’t see any sticks.”

“There must be some around somewhere, you know. All these trees? There are bound to be sticks. Just build it, and now I have to go.”

“Wait!” Viviane reached for her but missed.

“It need not be big.” Vivien rose into the air and out of reach. “Have I said that? I feel sure I have.” She vanished among the leaves, her voice floating back: “*Two rooms. One big room.*” Very faintly: “*You know.*”

“Oh, my gosh,” Viviane said to no one and nothing. Then louder and with increased feeling, “Ohmygosh!”

A raven dropped from the top of one of the surrounding trees to land with a considerable flapping upon a nearby branch. “You ring for me, honey?”

Viviane took a deep breath and found she was smiling—a wan smile, or at least it felt wan. “I,” she said fervently, “am very, *very* glad to see you, Nevermore.”

“You got a bit of company there.” Nevermore cocked his head, regarding her through one bright eye. “You need a nest?”

“A little house,” Viviane explained. “A shack, a shed, a hut.”

“Same thing.”

“The idea is to make this kid Arthur think Myrddin’s been living there. Vivien—the other one, the fairy—is going to bring furniture and stuff. My job’s to build the house. The nest? Only I don’t have anything to work with, and I wouldn’t know how if I did.”

“Got it.” Nevermore spread his wings. “Right up my alley.”

“You mean you’ll help?” It seemed too good to be true.

“I mean I’m gonna take care of it, honey. First we got to do the Blessin’ of the Flock. Stay right there.”

Viviane did, watching the black bird as he threaded the moss-robed trees clanging like an iron bell, his deep and solemn croak echoing through the forest.

When he was out of sight and sound, and the forest hushed and hopeless once more, she sat down on a protruding root, put her head in her hands, and thought about home. About meals in her mother’s bright kitchen. About lying on the rug in her room and doing homework to music. About cleaning Daisy’s stall and bringing Daisy an apple. Her homework had been hard sometimes, and cleaning the stall was hard work always; but at that moment she would gladly have given her new saddle just to be home, with the stall dirty and a theme due in—

A little bird with a bright red breast had flown to the tree nearest her and perched on a twig to study her. It was followed almost at once, with a great deal of noise and commotion, by a flock of swans. These landed (badly) on the forest floor all around her. A pair of partridges came next, and after them a constant whir of wings and far too many birds to count.

The last to arrive was a great golden eagle. Its weight bent a limb just above

her as it spread its wings like a canopy over her head.

“When I say down,” Nevermore mumbled, “you kneel an’ spread your wings like this. Got it?”

Viviane managed to nod.

“Receive now,” he intoned, “the Blessin’ of the Flock.” At the final word, his voice became an urgent whisper: “*Down!*”

Viviane dropped to her knees and bowed her head, and spread her arms wide. The wings of every bird save the eagle were pointed toward her. “Receive the Blessing of the Flock!” was pronounced in a thousand ways by birds of a thousand kinds. Ravens croaked it. Crows cawed it. Warblers warbled it, and ducks quacked it. The swans—mute swans all—merely mouthed it, but gray geese from Iceland hissed it. It should have been a ca-cophony, and in a way it was. Yet there was a beauty there, the odd, hard beauty of wild things that need not be pretty to please nature (though they often are).

It was followed by a thunder of wings as every bird except Nevermore flew away.

“Now what?” Viviane rose, dusting her knees.

“Now you get your nest, honey.” Nevermore preened himself. “We’re good at it.”

“What’ll I owe you?” Once more, Viviane pulled the change from her pockets.

“Nothin’. You ain’t used up your retainer yet, see?”

The first whirring of wings came even as he spoke. Eight or ten sparrows had returned, busy and quarreling, with tiny twigs and wisps of straw. After that, the house seemed to grow faster than any bird could fly. Now and then its walls appearing through a seething mass of beaks, claws, and feathers.

“It ain’t bad,” Nevermore opined, as a patient willow-wren added its finishing touch to the roof. “I coulda done better, only it woulda taken me a lot longer, see? Let’s go in an’ have a gander.”

The door, a door of woven sticks, was standing open. Viviane entered and found she was treading on a carpet of hay, straw, down, and feathers. There were three rooms, each larger than she had expected, each accessible by an arch rather too small. Two boasted little round windows.

“Three openin’s, get it?” Nevermore flapped up to land upon Viviane’s shoulder. “Three openin’s an’ three rooms. Most of us can’t count higher than that. Me, I can get into the twenties, only it’s confusin’ after that, so I just say a lot. Most times that does it. Three or twenty-three, they done the best they could. Like it?”

Slowly, Viviane nodded. “It really does look like a wizard might live here, doesn’t it?”

“Sure. Like, he might get us to build it for him. Save him some work.”

She nodded again. “Right. You’re having a little fun with me, aren’t you?”

“Me? No way!” Nevermore actually sounded sincere.

“You’re allowed to have a little fun after what you’ve just done, so enjoy yourself. I don’t think you could do anything that would make me mad after this.”

“Got it, honey. Got it, an’same here. You can jerk my chain, just don’t make me fall off my perch.”

“In that case, I’ve got a question,” Viviane said. “This isn’t a fun question. It’s perfectly serious. When all the birds came, I saw two brown hawks, kind of small and plain, but solid-looking.”

“Sure. You want their names? I’ll try to find out for you.”

Viviane shook her head. “I just want to know what kind of hawks they were. Like Cooper’s hawk or a red-tailed hawk? I know they weren’t either of those, but they remind me of Myrddin, so I’d like to know what they are.”

“Pigeon hawks,” Nevermore told her. “Only say merlins when you talk to them. It’s politer.”

Suddenly the whole house was full of gauzy-winged people carrying tools or stepstools, shelves or seashells, tables, tablets, or trinkets, old books or bold

banners or a hundred other things, each more miscellaneous than the last. “How do you like it so far?” Vivien asked. She was holding a big glass retort filled with green liquid that bubbled of itself.

“I like the house a lot,” Viviane said, “and I hope you do to. But these . . . This clutter—my gosh!”

“The wooden snake?” Vivien positively grinned. “That is a bedpost. There are four, all different.”

Nevermore’s soft croak was almost soothing. “For the other four kinds, most likely. Birds, snakes, fish, and cats. Number five would be you, only he’ll sleep in there, sec? So that rounds out the five.”

“It’s a mess, just the same.”

A cracked voice said, “A place for everything, and everything out of place is my rule, my dearest, dearest darling.” The speaker was old and bent, his long gray beard nearly white. Advancing with the help of a con-torted staff, he took her hand, holding it gently between his. “My lady of the lake,” he whispered.

Viviane took a deep breath. “They told me you’d be old, so I expected that. But your eyes haven’t changed. They haven’t changed at all.”

They embraced. No doubt there was a flurry of wings as Nevermore, Vivien, and her gauzy-winged friends departed; but Viviane did not hear it—or indeed, hear anything save his sighs and the pounding of her heart. He kissed her, and one small, hot tear (only one) coursed down her cheek. “Oh, Merlin. . .” It was less than a whisper. “Oh, my own, my darling Merlin...”

When they separated at last, he said, “Sit down. Sit down, please, precious lady. Will you not? To make me happy? For as long as you stand, I shall think you about to desert me.”

She did, choosing a small chair curiously carved.

“You’re stricken, dear ageless lady of the lake, to see me as I am, a man of many years. I could grow young again before your eyes, but the transformation would be ultimately unreal, and—alas—but temporary. To make it real is past any power of mine. Past the powers of the kind lady I name Gwelliant, as well. And in all truth, lady, her powers are less than mine.”

Viviane took a deep breath, drawing in a rich and nourishing atmosphere spiced by the forest and untainted by smoke. “Are you saying you can really, I mean really and truly, do magic with all this junk? I don’t believe it!”

Merlin smiled, showing one broken tooth and several discolored ones. “That I am not, dearest lady. My powers are in me. You wish me dentures, and I know it. Watch.”

He passed his hand across his mouth and smiled again. White teeth, nearly perfect, gleamed in his dark face. “I have two sets, you see, my lady. Not two sets of false teeth, as you think, but two of true teeth. These are my own, as the others were. And I may display either, as I choose. I have other parts as well, doubled and tripled in a few cases. I cannot display them for you because they are within me, but with them I may do many things. All this ...” A wave of his hand took in the books, the strange instruments of science, and even the stuffed crocodile hung from his ceiling. “Is but stage dressing.”

Tapping his forehead with a long forefinger, he added, “The magic’s here. As it always is. Now then. Do you wish to see me change my shape? Or do you wish to change yours, for an hour? We’ve a bit of time, Gwelliant tells me, ere Arthur comes.”

“I. . . Well, I—I’d like to be a bird. A—a dove. Can you do that?”

Viviane did not change at all—or so she felt; but the cozy room of sticks swelled to theater size, and the curiously carved chair on whose seat she perched was far larger than the dining-room table at home.

*You are a dove, my dearest.*

The voice in her mind emanated from the compact brown bird on the other side of the vast room. She knew that, and did not wonder how she knew, or even how she had been changed. She was a—she had forgotten the word. Still she could fly, and wanted to. Spreading white wings, she fluttered through the doorway.

The brown bird flew after her, far more swiftly than she. *I am a merlin. I won’t harm you, but guard yourself if you see another like me.*

Not harm, she thought. Not harm. She flew into a tree, leaving the pile of sticks behind. Landing upon another stick there, she nearly fell. Once she caught

her breath, she would fly high.

The sky was still wide and blue, though the sun was low. Up she flew, and learned to fly by flying.

*There are eagles. There are many hawks. Better to hide among the trees.* It was the brown bird.

The sky grew darker. When an owl swooped toward her, the brown bird flew at it, keening, talons wide. The owl veered away. *Lower. Follow me.*

Reluctantly, she did.

*Lower! On the ground!*

The brown bird had vanished.

*Down here! Before you die!*

She landed, and found herself—found Viviane, in her boots and jeans and denim shirt—crouching on the floor of an ancient forest.

As she stood, a small man with a long gray beard laid a hand upon her shoulder. “Arthur has not yet come, but we must return to my cottage before he does.”

She nodded, and as they walked side by side, her hand found his. “It was wonderful,” she whispered. “Not as wonderful as I had expected, but wonderful just the same. Thank you.”

“You may find yourself a dove again,” he told her. “Be careful. Earth or running water will make you think yourself as you are now, and you’ll be yourself once more. Have I made that clear?”

“I think so.” She spoke so softly that she had to repeat it.

“If you think yourself as you are now when you are high, you will change and fall a long way. Take care.”

“And stay low,” she murmured. “Sure.”

“It will be truly wonderful,” he said, “when we are together at last. I will be



older than, but being with you will make me grow younger.”

Slowly, she nodded. “I heard about that.”

“I’ve years to wait and work.” His hand tightened on hers. “I’ll work and wait full of joy, knowing what’s to come.”

The little woman with gauzy wings was waiting for them at the hut of sticks the birds had built for Viviane. “Hello!” she called.

“Hello, Gwelliant,” Viviane said. “Do you mind if I use your real name? I like that better.”

“You may call me that,” the little woman told her, “but we have no real names. Only unreal ones, like Vivien and Gwelliant.”

“No real names?”

The little, gauzy-winged woman shook her head. “We don’t need them. There aren’t many of us left, you see.”

“When you were bringing in the books and the round thing with all the pointers it seemed like there were an awful lot of you.”

“No.” The gauzy wings, drooping already, drooped further. “That was all. Our whole population, and you saw some of us three and four times. We would bring something and look for something else, perhaps for days. When we got it, we would return to the time when we brought the first, and bring that, too. We are very few.”

Viviane nodded to herself. “Every time a child says, ‘I don’t believe in fairies,’ a fairy dies. I read that somewhere.”

“We are not really fairies either, Viviane. We are—There is no time. Here we are and you must act for us.”

“I’m getting really, really tired of it. Is this the last time? Before Merlin and I get together for all those years?”

“Two, but they will be done in five minutes if only you will do them. Stand there.”

It was a fairy ring.

“There will be a lake all about you, but you will not get wet. Soon, Arthur will throw his sword into the water. You must catch it without cutting yourself, so take it by . . .”

A fish swam past Viviane, and she did not hear the rest. Looking up, she could see the shimmer of waves. It was broken, as someone flung something long and heavy into it.

It was a sword bigger than she had ever imagined a sword might be, and as it sank by her she snatched its hilt, wetting her hand.

“Good.” The little woman’s voice sounded in Viviane’s ear. “You must not bring it back. It is steel and would distort the field. Feel at your feet. The scabbard is there.”

Viviane did. “It’s beautiful! Can you hear me? It’s really lovely, and all set with jewels.”

“We made it.” The voice was more remote than as ever. “Thank you for your praise. Pour out all the water, please, before you sheathe the sword.”

Water and mud, Viviane thought, but the water that came forth from the mouth of the scabbard sparkled and shone, a river of tiny diamonds. When the last was gone, she sheathed the sword.

“One more, please, Viviane. One more, my dear friend, and all your tasks are done. You will have saved us then—and yourself, too. Yourself, your family, and all you hold dear. Count to five and hold the sword above the water. Let Arthur take it. And that is the end.”

When the sword was gone and the lake with it, Viviane stepped from the ring. Walls of stone rose block by block in the distance, higher and higher as she looked. Flowers sprang up at her feet. Not far away, a fountain played. As she walked toward the fountain, a great white tower rose behind it, lifting its proud head until it was far above the tallest trees. A moment more, and crows flew around it—no, black birds too large for crows.

She found him sitting on a marble bench, watching his fountain with rheumy eyes. “You’re young still.” It was an old man’s cracked voice, “I’m old, and Arthur sleeps. *Hie lacet Sepultus Inclitus Rex Arturius in Insula Avalonia*. I dare not

sleep, dearest Viviane. Not yet. And so this.” He pat-ted the bench. “Come, sit beside me.”

She sat, trying not to sit primly.

“You will not be eager of my kisses,” the old man said.

Viviane whispered, “You’re wrong.”

He seemed not to have heard. “Never fear. Never fear, my darling, you will not have to endure them. Nor these, my words, if you do not wish to. You need not listen, but I must speak.”

She nodded. “And I’ll listen. I’ll listen to all you say, Merlin.”

“The Table Round is sundered. Arthur lies with his queen, while its lesser knights war one upon another. Camelot will soon fall to the pagans. All is lost.” He sighed. “Except the dream. The dream lives in fireside tales and the musings of plowmen. It must not die. Men everywhere must know that once there was a time of justice, when brave men bent the knee to God and sallied against a dark and evil world. When brave men came forth to do what was right because it was right, though they risked life and lands.”

“I know one,” Viviane said.

“You’re fortunate.” That man’s palsied hand found hers and clasped it. “I must wait and watch, touching many though I cannot be touched. I must see to it that the flame burns still, however faint, however smoky its light.”

He fell silent. Viviane waited.

“You need not linger with me, O Lady of the Lake. You need not, nor will I force you. But I hope . . . I—I wish, please, dear lady ... I wish ...”

“Your wish is granted,” Viviane told him. “I’ll stay.”

\* \* \* \*

WHEN it was over, when all the flying years of shared happiness had flown at last, a small woman with gauzy wings guided Viviane back to the spring into which she had once dipped her bandana. “You have helped save us,” the small woman said. “We will always be grateful to you.”

Viviane nodded absently. “What’s your name? I’m sure I used to know it.”

“Yes, you did. It is the same as your own. I am Vivien.”

“I remember.” There was a great deal to remember, and Viviane knew she would never be able to remember it all.

“Do you also remember that I told you we were few? You said that each time a child said, ‘I will not believe in fairies,’ a fairy died.”

“Did I really say that?” Viviane smiled.

“Yes, you did, and in a way it is true.” Vivien seated herself on a small stone beside the pool. “We are your future, Viviane, just as we are the future of Arthur’s Britons, and of Myrddin’s whole family—of his brother’s descendants, his sisters’ descendants, and his own. If the people of Arthur’s day were to stop believing in beautiful things and trying to make them come true, we would perish, becoming less and less probable until we winked out. If the people of your day ever stop, it will be the same.”

“I’m going to have to think about this,” Viviane said. “Why are you so little, and why do you have wings?”

“We were more once,” Vivien explained; her gauzy wings rose in joy as she spoke. “So many that we crowded Earth. We did not want the plants and animals to die to make room for us, so we made ourselves smaller and smaller. When we had become as small as I am, we realized we could fly, if only we had wings. So we gave ourselves these. See them?”

“I certainly do. It’s wonderful to fly, isn’t it?”

Vivien nodded and rose into the air, her gauzy wings a blur of motion.

“I did it once. He made me a white dove, and I flew.” Viviane looked into the pool at the reflection of her own lined face. “I’d be a gray dove now, I suppose.”

There was no reply. The small Vivien with gauzy wings had gone.

Viviane sighed, examined her reflection once more, and looked at the thin, blue veins on the backs of her hands. Talking to herself as she some-times did

now, she said, "I suppose I'm sixty. Or older ... I should've marked the years, but it would ... I felt..."

"You look good, honey."

"Nevermore!"

"Sure. Unless you mean you don't never want to see me again. I ain't easy to get rid of."

Viviane stared, and nodded at last. " 'And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting, on the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door.' We read that in school."

Nevermore bobbed his head. "Pretty, ain't it?"

"I hadn't thought of it like that, but yes, I suppose it is. The thing that I don't understand, the part I don't understand at all, isn't that raven. It's you, Nevermore. You're a magic animal. He's gone back to his mother—I took him ..." She wept.

Nevermore waited patiently until she dried her eyes. "You took him back. You did the right thing, honey. You knew it was, and you did it. That's not somethin' to cry over."

"He's gone, and that little woman is, too. So there shouldn't be more magic animals. Not any, including you."

"I got some teachin' to do." Nevermore cocked his head, regarding her through one bright eye. "Only I don't teach for free. How 'bout that pretty watch you got?"

"This?" Viviane glanced at the pink watch—1:27. "It's stopped. It's been stopped for years. I don't know why I put it on this morning."

"Don't matter," Nevermore told her. "I want it."

"Then you can have it." She took it off and held it out. "Will you answer questions for me? For this?"

"You bet I will, honey." Nevermore's bill closed on the strap. He backed away before transferring it to a claw. "Soon's I take it to the bank. It ain't far, and

I'll be right back."

She shook her head. "I'm not comfortable here. I don't know why, but I'm not. I know I'm back in my own time. The fairy—I mean that little woman with wings—told me so. I'm uncomfortable just the same, maybe just because I was so happy until today." She looked around, trying to re-call the direction from which she had come so long ago.

"That way, honey." Nevermore pointed with one wing. "Go that way, and you'll get out quick. Don't worry about me, I'll catch up."

When he had gone, she walked in the direction he had indicated. She was old now. Old, and there would be no pension for her, no Social Security. Would she starve? It didn't matter, she decided. Her life was over, and she would be better off dead. The world might be right now, as the small woman said; but she was not right for the world, and knew it. How happy they'd been, once upon a time. . . .

"Okay, honey." Nevermore swooped past her head to crash-land on a limb not far ahead. "You got questions? I got answers. Not for every thin', but lots of answers just the same. Whatcha wanna know?"

"I should've been thinking of questions while you were gone." Confronted by her negligence, she felt foolish and helpless. "I didn't, I was wool-gathering. What questions would you ask if you were me?"

Nevermore balanced upon one leg to scratch his head. "You said you didn't get it about magic animals. Maybe you could ask about that."

"All right." For a moment Viviane bent her head in thought. "That little woman I assumed was a fairy is gone. Merlin was a great and powerful wizard; but he was a little boy the last time I saw him, and anyway he's gone, too. But you are . . . Well, you know what I mean. Why?"

"I've got clearer questions than that now an' then, honey. So what I'm goin' to do is say it my way. Then I'll answer. You're sayin' there's two of us here an' one's a magic animal. How come? Ain't that it?"

"Fine," Viviane said.

"It's 'cause you're here, that's all. You're the magic animal, honey. Not me. You can turn yourself into a bird. You think I can turn myself into a girl? I can't. I

can't build a fire or open a door. I like shiny stuff, just like you. Only I can't make it. I have to find 'em or steal 'em or bargain for 'em like I did. That shirt you're wearin'? I like the buttons, but I can't button 'em. Or un-button 'em neither."

"I don't believe I follow this."

"Well, try. It ain't tough. Humans are the magic animal, the only one there is. Ask your horse or any dog you run into. You got a cat?"

Viviane nodded.

"Cats catch birds, and there ain't much we can do about it except fly. Suppose they were tryin' to catch you instead. How long you think they'd last?"

"You said I could turn myself into a bird." Viviane looked thoughtful. "I didn't do that. Merlin turned us both into birds."

"He gave you that shape, honey."

"That's what I said."

"So you can use it if you really want to. Once a wizard gives somebody a shape, she owns it. Get me? Like, if he'd given you the things you got on your feet. Once he gave 'em, they'd be yours. You could wear 'em or take 'em off, see?"

"You're saying I can be a bird again if I want to."

"Right."

"This—it used to be a drawing-in wood. Daisy told me." Viviane paused, feeling the wood's rejection. "It isn't anymore, or not for me. If I were a bird, I could get out quicker."

"Sure."

"Then I'd like to be one. Why aren't I?"

"Maybe it's because you got too much sense, honey." Nevermore studied her before he spoke again. "You're goin' to need somebody who knows his way around. You're goin' to need somebody like that bad. I'll do it, only you got to do like I say."

“I will.”

“Okay. Stick with me. I ain’t goin’ to chase you. Fly down below me, all the time. Don’t ever get as high as I am. You goin’ to do that, honey?”

Viviane nodded. “I’ll do whatever you tell me to.”

“I’m not goin’ to tell you anythin’ except what I just did. Look up at the sky, okay. Now close your eyes, but keep on seein’ the sky when you do. Spread your wings. ...

“Now go!”

She did, and opened her eyes again as soon as she was on the wing. The black bird rose through the trees until it was higher than the treetops, and she with it.

There was the mountain, with the wood on its flank. There was the trail, a yellow-brown thread winding among the hills. And there—

Someone was hurt or dead, sprawled beside the trail. The black bird had seen it, too, and shot ahead of her, lower and swifter with every beat of its wings. She followed it, knowing it was the right thing to do, though she could not remember why. Here a silver thread crossed the trail—the creek, of course. The black bird was across it already, lower and lower. And she—

Was a wingless girl, hurtling through the air.

\* \* \* \*

THE roar was not just the rush of her blood in her ears. Bruised and aching, she sat up and saw her mother’s ATV raising a dust plume as it sped along the trail. Her voice was gone, but there was a damp red bandana about her neck. She took it off and waved it.

“Are you all right, Viv?” Her mother bent over her, and her mother’s fear lent a tremor to her mother’s voice. “Daisy came home without you, and I’ve been worried sick.”

“I don’t know.” Viviane cleared her throat and spat. “I—you recog-nized me, Mom?”



“Of course I recognized you!”

“I don’t have a compact. Can I see yours?”

“Your face is bruised, Viv.” Her mother sounded more worried than ever. “I wouldn’t—”

Viviane spat again. “I don’t want your makeup, Mom. I just want to see it.”

A badly bruised girl of fourteen stared back at her out of the powder-dusty mirror.

Snapping the compact closed, Viviane returned it and struggled to her feet. “I’ve got a crazy question. Will you answer, please? Even if it’s crazy.”

“Yes. Anything.”

Viviane held out her right arm. “Am I still wearing that pink watch Dad got for me?”

“It must have come off when you fell,” her mother said. “We can look for it later.”

“Don’t bother,” Viviane said. “I never did like it much.”

Her mother had begun to search already. “Here’s your Swiss Army knife.” She waved it triumphantly.

“I think I’m short a quarter. Don’t bother to look for that either.” Vi-viane was scanning the trees at the edge of the wood. She accepted the shiny red knife and flung it to the black bird perched there. “Here you go,” she called, “and thanks!”

\* \* \* \*

ON the third day of the new school year, sitting in the cafeteria with Joan, she froze.

Joan tried to follow her eyes. “What’s the matter, Viv?”

Viviane put down her fork and pointed. “That guy. The little one.”

“Him? That’s Joe—”

“Never mind.” Viviane motioned her to silence. “It doesn’t matter what you call him. I know his real name.” -

She jumped to her feet and waved. “Merlin! Over here! It’s me, Viviane!”

The dark, slender boy whirled, eyes wide and bright with hope.

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