The Crunchy smack of the moving van ramming the Gingko tree in front of her house didn’t wake her. Neither did the annoying ding-dong of the doorbell pressed too long and too loud. Nope, It was the shriek her mother made as she raced in and vaulted onto her bed that did it. Ambril’s mother was tremendously good at screaming.

 “Get up! Get up! We’re already late!” Her mom peered down at the slightly crunched van. “The movers are on time for once, which makes us---later than usual. “ She wrapped her robe around her as one of the movers squinted up at the house. “Not until today have they ever, ever been here when they said they would, how many times is this Sweetie”? A grunt from the quilt was all she got. She prodded the quilted mound with her big toe. “How many times have we moved, Ambril? I’ve lost track.”

“Eleven times!” A mass of tousled brown hair emerged.

Her Mom smiled. “Eleven times is the charm!” She jumped from the bed and was through the door before the old bedsprings had time to squeal. Ambril could hear her skipping down the stairs, opening the door and then the gentle hum of polite conversation. Move Number Eleven had begun.

She groaned. She did not want to get up; she never, ever wanted to get up again. She loved this old turreted house stuck on a hill overlooking the San Francisco Bay. It had been home to her brother, her Mom and herself for nearly a year, the longest time they had stayed anywhere. She had actually made some friends for once…well sort of. And now they had to pack up and move to a boring country town and act like they were happy about it.

They were moving back to the town she had been born in. She didn’t remember it, of course, being three when she last saw it. But her Mother expected big smiles from her every time she mentioned its name, Trelawnyd. It was a stupid name Ambril decided and burrowed back into her comfy bed.

A few minutes later, however she was up when she heard the heavy clump of boots and the rumble of dollies in the house.

The thought of big sweaty guys in her bedroom made her cringe. Better get changed! She jumped from her bed into T-shirt and jeans, snorted at what she saw of herself in the mirror: skinny, grumpy, freckly-- a mess. She scrunched her unruly tangle of hair into a lumpy ponytail and grabbed her backpack. She then skittered down the stairs.

 Her Mother was holding court in the hallway. “Hi Sweetie!” Her smile was huge. Ambril smiled mechanically and slumped down on the stairs to watch the parade of things being carted away yet again.

Her mother turned back to the movers. “That was my great Aunt’s. You’d better not drop it or she’ll haunt you like she did my mother after she dropped her punch bowl!” She warned the wheezing mover guiding their old kitchen table through the door. “Be careful with that! It’s twice as old as all of us put together!” she hissed at another as a large hutch bumped the doorframe.

 “Unloading the contents of the furniture would’a made it much easier for everyone, Ma’am. You should try it next time,” grumbled the hoisting the hutch.

“Well, everything’s going into storage this time,” Ambril’s mother said as she picked up a crystal bowl sitting on a table seconds before one of the movers picked up the table. “Well, almost everything. It seemed a waste of time, really to pack it all in boxes.“

She smiled again at Ambril showing every single one of her teeth. “We’re going back home in style! New furniture, new clothes, new life.” She sighed contentedly. “I would never have thought this possible even six months ago.”

Just then the outlandishly large, old hutch swayed and dipped as it went past the stairs where Ambril sat. It wobbled again. The top cupboard door opened launching a wooden missile straight at Ambril’s head. A sharp, jarring crack reverberated through the old house followed by a lot of creaking and swaying.

“There goes another earthquake,” said one of the movers hoisting the hutch. “Just an itty bitty one, though.”

Ambril rubbed her head irritably as the strange object bounced into her lap. Normally she didn’t mind a little earthquake now and then. It sort of spiced up the day. But that one had gotten personal. She looked down at the thing in her lap. Dusty and old were words too good for it, filthy and ancient were better. Ambril smiled, it was interesting. She gently held up the slim, carved cylinder to get a closer look. It was a little longer than her foot and slightly thicker than her wrist. It wasn’t perfectly round or symmetrical. It really looked more like the thick part of a twisty branch than anything else, but it didn’t feel like one as it was hollow. She shook it slightly and could hear something moving around inside. The best part was that it had been carefully and intricately carved. She wiped some of the dust off it and found the carvings were of animals and plants all woven together.

 “Ambril give me that old thing, it has to go into storage, honey.” Her mother reached for it. But Ambril was not in an obedient mood. She wrinkled her nose at her Mother. “Why does everything have to go into storage? This is our stuff we grew up with this! It’s bad enough we’re moving to a brand-new house in a weird little town but do we have to go without ALL of our things?”

 Her mother pursed her lips and put her hands on her hips saying, “I’ve told you this at least a hundred times, Ambril. Feldez, your soon-to-be stepfather has gone to a lot of trouble with this new house. And though our antiques looked fine in this house, the new house is very modern and these old things…lovely as they are---.” Her hand reached out to sadly pat the old grandfather clock as it marched by---“just won’t fit in.”

She grimaced at her daughter. “You’ll see what I mean when we get there.” She stroked Ambril’s hair absently as she watched the living room furniture being heaved onto dollies. “It won’t be forever, we’ll look around for a summer place and give these things a new home someday soon.”

Ambril wasn’t having any of it. She wrinkled her nose in distaste. *Modern, New, just won’t fit in*. Well what if she didn’t fit in? Would they ship her off someplace too? Ambril protectively hugged the funny old tube to her chest and pointed at the underside of their old coffee table. “You might as well put me in storage too. “ She said as petulantly as she could. “I’d be happier there anyway….See, there goes a little bit of me!” Her name was childishly scrawled in what looked like toothpaste across its underbelly. She had done it when she was seven when her mother had gone off to a party without her.

 Her mother blanched. “That’s a Nineteenth century Biedermeier table, Ambril, I had no idea you had---how could you do such a thing!” Her mother scowled then ran after the table with a wet rag.

Ambril was still angry. “I don’t see why we can’t take a few things!” She yelled after her. The tube felt warm in her hands. “Mom! What is this thing?”

 Her mother having finished wiping down the table was now staring savagely at a mover who had just caught a porcelain vase on the verge of tipping off its stand and said distractedly “What thing honey?”

 “This thing, see? The thing that fell on me.”

 Mother whirled and squinted at it. Her expression changed. “Oh, I remember it now. That was my grandmother’s. I’d forgotten about that.” She smiled inwardly. “It was one of her favorite things. She always had that by her.” “Can I keep it?”

 Her Mother started and looked at her closely. “Of course you can keep it, silly, all of these things are just going into storage. We’re not throwing a thing away. Just give it to this nice man---“ She grabbed the sleeve of a mover with a large pile of boxes and dragged him over. “---and he’ll take very good care of it for you.” The mover looked at Ambril pleadingly. There were beads of sweat standing on his forehead and his arm was quivering under his load.

 “No, Um, thanks though,” she said to the mover waving him on. She turned back to her Mom “I mean I want to take it with me, to the new place.” She paused thinking. “You know, Trelawnyd. Please? I promise I’ll take good care of it and everything”. Ambril hugged her new find again to her chest.

Her mother quickly closed a cupboard sailed past.

“We’ll have to talk about this in the car, I’ve been thinking that we really should make some changes…some *adjustments* . Just small changes, you know, nothing earth shattering. But we’ll talk later.” She paused and looked doubtfully at the tube. “I guess you can keep it… for now.” And to herself muttered. “I don’t know why Feldez would object to something so small anyway.”

 *Adjustments*? What did that mean? A door slammed above and her brother, Zane ambled down the stairs. He had that stretched look of a boy who had grown way too much and too fast for his own good. His wavy blonde hair stood out in wild strikes from his head and matted gracelessly over his eyes. He regarded Ambril morosely.

“Looking forward to our new digs?” He sauntered down the stairs until he got to a pile of clothes innocently blocking his way. “Thinking you might actually make some friends this time?” He hooked the clothes with his foot and dumped them neatly on to Ambril’s head. “Hoping you might for once, fit in?”

He snorted as a button got caught in Ambril’s hair. She struggled with that for a while. The rest of the clothes rolled down the stairs. Freeing herself finally she turned and lunged at her brother just as her mother turned and gasped.

“Ambril, just look at this! I just finished folding these things! She picked up the clothes and shoved them into her daughter’s arms. “Refold them NOW, neatly, they are donations, but we don’t want anyone to think we’re slobs. Right?”

She gave her son a brilliant smile. “Hi sweetie, so glad you are at last out of bed! There’s cereal in the kitchen for you.” With that she swept into the dining room. They could hear her berating another mover who had apparently upended a potted palm.

Zane smirked at his little sister. “Yep, we have to keep up appearances,” he said smugly, “or at least you and Mom do. Me? I’m not gonna bother. It’s a waste of time. Our ‘home town’ is the one place on earth that our family will NEVER make it in.” He slid into the kitchen. “Mom’s delusional.” He said just before the door swung to.

Ambril sighed and began to fold the old clothes. Normally she would have stuck up for herself but it wasn’t worth it these days. Zane had been a terror ever since they learned they were moving back to Trelawnyd . Granted there had always been times when he was a jerk, but after the night Feldez and her Mom had broken the news to them about their engagement and the move, he hadn’t been the same; no sideways grin, no help with homework, no practical jokes.

Ambril remembered that night vividly. Zane had raged and shouted and sworn that he wasn’t going back, that they couldn’t go back, and that he’d run away and join the army if they tried to force him. His Mother had finally stopped him by wrapping her arms tightly around him until he had quieted down.

It had left Ambril shaky and jittery to see him so crazy. She couldn’t figure it out, it wasn’t all bad, this move. Mom was happier than she had been in years. For once they had enough money for clothes and food. Ambril shook her head as she gave a final pat to the somewhat messily folded clothes and picked up her backpack. There was something about this little hometown of theirs that really freaked out her brother. She slung her backpack over her shoulder.

 “Mom? I’m going down the street to say goodbye to Chao Feng.”

“Great, honey, say goodbye for us all and pick up some bagels will you?” Called her Mother from the dining room. There was a magnificent cascading clatter of metal and then silence. “The silverware stays in the drawer, Alright? IN THE DRAWER! IN THE DRAWER!”

Ambril tiptoed down the stairs before she got roped into any more tidying up. Just as she opened the front door Zane emerged eating cereal.

 “Bagels? Greah, I wan’ cinnamom and raisim, careem cheese,” said Zane his grin showing a large amount of cereal. “If ya don’’t,” he crunched menacingly, “I’ll make life miserabo in da car.”

 Ambril made a face at him. But she knew she’d bring him just what he wanted. If it would guarantee a quiet ride she’d have brought him the entire grocery store. As the door slid shut he added, “You’ll see, you’re gonna wish you’d neva heard a tha’ stupid---” but door clicked shut before he could finish.

Ambril jogged down the steps and along the rolling, much mended sidewalk. Well, she thought, at least she’d at least have someone there, not necessarily, a helpful some one but a living, breathing, kid-sized person to go through this with.

 When had it started to feel as if their family really wasn’t a family anymore? When had they started tip toeing around each other trying to stay out of each other’s way? But the cool morning sunshine was beginning to work its magic and refused to let her stay upset.

**Chapter 2: Chao Feng’s Tea and Remedies**

Ambril picked up the bagels before heading over to her favorite neighborhood haunt, Chao Feng’s Herbal Remedies.’ She stopped to tie her shoe and voices just around the corner.

“When’d she get here?” said a small squeaky voice.

“Just before you.” Said the low, familiar voice of Chao Feng. “She felt it too, of course.”

“I don’t see how you could NOT have felt it if you had the least bit of magic in you, earthquake my front teeth!” The squeaky voice continued. “I guess things have well and truly started, wouldn’t you say?” There were some chewing noises. “She’s so young though.” There were some louder chewing noises. “Ummm yum what are these?”

“Edamame, very good for you,” said Chao Feng.

 There was more munching. “Well,” the squeaky one belched. “No telling what that old witch will do. I wouldn’t put it past her to try something nasty while they’re on the road.” “Sid try these they’re so tasty.” The squeaky voice mumbled, her mouth clearly full of something.

“I am *NOT* eating off the sidewalk!” Said a squawking sort of voice.

“Who are you to talk! Oh don’t be silly, it’s just a little dirt, just look at yourself!”

“It’s not the dirt, it’s the sticky chewing gum, candy wrappers and bits of plastic that I mind, they tend to give me…eeeer… gas. “ Said the squawker.

There was a squeaky snort. “Well here then, just try this!”

Ambril straightened up. As she stepped around the corner she could have swore she saw a fat, blue-eyed squirrel feeding an old crow. Her friend Chao Feng was sitting in front of his shop smiling at them.

When they saw her, the squirrel disappeared into a drain gutter and the crow flew off with what looked like a large bean in its mouth.

“Hey, who were you talking to?” Asked Ambril.

Chao Feng stared a second too long at a massive gray hawk settling itself on a telephone wire before answering. His blue eyes crinkled. “I talk to my bunions, they have a lot to say today.” He grimaced as if in pain and then twinkled at her from his scuffed- up plastic chair. Ambril was sure that Chao Feng was at least 200 years old. He was pretty cool for being so old as he wore hand painted sneakers and sported a dragon tattoo. “Ah, good, you come to say good bye before you go?”

Before Ambril could question him any further he had jumped up from his chair and with one last look at the hawk he ushered her hurriedly into his shop. “I have something for you, I so glad I finish in time.”

 Ambril paused to fill her lungs with the pungent, mysterious smells of Chao Feng’s shop. Hidden away behind the drawers were dried roots, berries and dried wriggly things Ambril felt positive were not of this world. The drawers that lined the walls were every size, shape and color. Yellow star shapes, green triangles, One was even a snarling tiger. Each one bore a Chinese symbol. Ambril felt certain Chao Feng could cure anyone of anything, including the black plague, if you happen to come down with it.

Long low counters lined three walls with miss-matched stools parked in front of them. There was also an assortment of shiny, streamlined gadgets as Chao Feng liked to play around with electronics.

“What you got there?” His shaky finger pointed at the carved cylinder poking out from Ambril’s backpack. She had forgotten all about it but eagerly showed it to her friend as she settled into a stool by a checkerboard.

“It was my great grandmother’s. It fell out of an old hutch and bonked me on the head.” She rubbed the bump on her forehead. “My mother thought it should go into storage, but---“

 The old man smiled. “It hit you there?” He rubbed his own head and then nodded wisely. “It stay with you then. You must take it.” His wrinkled hand traced the engravings and carefully examined it from every angle. The more he looked the bigger his smile. He finally said softly, “This is puzzle box, very, very old and very, very good quality. We have also something like it in China. My grandmother had one to put her secrets in.” He smiled to himself. “It took my mother three years after my grandmother’s passing to unlock all of its mysteries.”

His hands moved slowly up the side of the box. “Then she locked them back into the box and gave to me.” He chuckled softly. “I still trying to figure them out and she been gone over many, many years.” His hands slid along just under the top prodding carefully.

 Suddenly his face brightened. “Ah yes,” He offered the cylinder to Ambril. “Now, press here and here.” Ambril could feel small bumps though she couldn’t see them. She pressed gently and then harder. As she did there was a small, soft click and a small drawer popped out. Ambril bent closer and peered into the tiny drawer. There was something shiny there. She carefully fished out a long loop of gold chain until it snagged on something in the back. She wiggled and pulled gently until she felt it give and a round object slid into view. Twirling in the bright sunshine it dazzled.

 “Wow!” One of Great Grandmother’s secrets!” said Chao Feng.

 It was a medallion with a gemstone carved into a flower. The green gem was shot through with gold. It was decorated with gold tracery resembling her puzzle box. Ambril thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

 “Ambril,” he said. “This very precious to you. This is keepsake of your ancestor, your heritage. In my country, such things are more precious than gold…. and more powerful than swords…. Guard it well.” He took the chain and slipped it over her head. It felt light around her neck, a whisper of family secrets.

Mr. Feng turned the object and held it up for her to see. “Hide this from everyone. It will keep you safe, bring you good luck.” He said in barely a whisper. “It must be your secret shared with just your great grandmother.” His eyes crinkled at the edges as he continued.

“Tell no one, not your family, not your friends. They not understand that your ancestors give it to you, that they *choose* you.” He released her suddenly. “You promise you will do this?”

 She nodded slowly at her friend. When she was little and life had gotten tough, she liked to think of her father watching over her. She took the sparkling medallion and tucked it under her T-shirt. “Sure.”

Chao Feng smiled a grey-toothed grin at her as he slipped behind the counter. “I finally finish this thing---But where?---Ah! Here it is.” He straightened up holding a small robot.

“This not just a toy, This is special AI robot!” He said proudly. He set the robot on the counter and turned it on. “You know, AI, Artificial Intelligence, you teach, he learn so that one day, he like a little friend to you.” Chao Feng pressed a button and the robot began walking jerkily toward them. “It’s an antique, from the 60’s” said Chao Feng “I put in all new works, though so it’s up-to-date, more or less.” He continued obviously proud of his work. The robot narrowly missed walking off the counter. Just as it teetered on the edge, It swung a foot around, swerved and marched the other way.

“See? Spatial sensors too! He learn. More you let him do, more he do it better.” He twinkled at her as he handed it to her. It was clearly a used robot, but it felt solid. It was made of metal painted red and had lights that lit up when it was on. The front label had been partially ripped of leaving only ‘ff ‘on the top line and ‘Lit’ below.

 Chao Feng smiled warmly. “We miss you, Ambril.” He squinted up at her. “You special, you must keep this in your mind; it so easy to forget. Keep yourself open to new things. Now that your great-grandmother has marked you, she will watch over you, help you, I know.

But you be careful, old saying, it say: ‘Don’t run into the dragon’s mouth unless you know he is fast asleep.’” He looked up just for an instant and gave her a warm smile. “I wish you good luck on your journey.”

Ambril nodded mutely, not trusting herself to say the words in her heart. She smiled one last time and slowly walked out.

The hawk was gone but a large assortment of crows and sparrows were perched in the mangled Ginkgo tree watching her Mom load up their old minivan.

The movers were still huffing and puffing up and down the front steps but she could see they were nearly done. Ambril grunted as she sat down hard on the front steps. She was going to have to work at feeling more optimistic about this whole thing. It was bad form to start out believing the worst about a new life. It’s not like she hadn’t made changes before. What was Zane so worried about?

A while later her mother’s voice echoed hollowly through the emptied house. “Come on darlings! It’s time to go!” The last dolly laden with boxes tottered through the hallway and down the front steps. Ambril walked one last time through the living room staring at the cold bare walls. Could this really have been their home?

 Her mother appeared swinging a coat around her shoulders with one hand and keeping a firm grip on Zane with the other. “Give it one last look before we go.” But Ambril didn’t want to. It wasn’t home any more.

Zane snorted. “Come on Mom, this is gross.” He wriggled free and slouched out of the front door.

 “It’ll be uncomfortable at first,” she called after him, “but eventually...you’ll see.” She let it drop looking sadly after her son and then frowned at her daughter’s robot. “Oh please Ambril, what is that? A doll?”

Ambril was indignant. “It’s an AI robot, you know, Artificial Intelligence?” She paused to shine up his head a bit. “It was a present from Chao Feng…AND,” she added defiantly “I’M TAKING HIM WITH ME.” Sticking her chin out, and avoiding her Mom’s eyes, she resolutely marched out of the house.

“All right, but don’t let Zane see you with---“. Her mother’s warning came too late.

Just outside the front door Zane was waiting for her, he’d been listening.

“Oh, little Amby baby has a new doll, does she?” Zane snatched the robot out of her hands so fast Ambril had no time to react. “Let’s see.”

“Hey! That’s mine, give it back!” As Zane began to toss it in the air keeping an eye on her face so that he could watch it go from horror to pleading and back to horror.

 “It’s from Chao Feng, Zane, come on!” Ambril made a grab for it but Zane caught it and held it up high, shook it right over her head and laughed at her as she jumped and tried to grab it back from him. Then he lazily tossed it over her head straight into the tangled branches of the Ginkgo tree, where it stuck.

“You jerk!” Ambril was furious now. She ran over to the tree and tried to shake the robot down but the robot stayed stuck until a large crow landed on the branch, and bounced the metal man out. It fell to the ground with a clank. Ambril rushed over and swooped it up.

“Zane! You really need to control yourself.” Ambril’s mother snapped from the front steps. “You know it isn’t her fault.” She shrugged on her handbag. “It isn’t your fault, or mine either.” She stepped determinedly down the stairs. “What happened, happened.” She walked right up to her son and shoved a sweatshirt at him. “Right?”

Not waiting for a response, she marched him toward the old minivan loaded down with their junk. “Right! Now I want a nice pleasant ride this afternoon.” She tugged at her daughter, who reluctantly followed them. “No fighting, no whining, no bloodshed. Got it?”

The van dipped dangerously low as Zane got in. There were mounds of boxes strapped on top. And curiously just as her mother came around the van Ambril saw a fat blue-eyed squirrel scramble up a stretchy cord and disappear among the boxes and bags on top. It seemed to be having a hard time squeezing in between the boxes.

“Mom? Mom I think there’s---“

“NOT A WORD.” Her Mom gave her that look. “I WANT ABSOLUTE CALM!” She was scary looking what with all that hair escaping from her messy bun.

So without a word, Ambril meekly squeezed herself in beside the crochet set and a stack of Zane’s stinky sneakers, cradling her backpack and robot.

 **Chapter 3 To Trelawnyd: On Top**

Crochet balls broke free and rained down on Ambril as the old minivan pulled jerkily away from the curb. Ambril watched the old house slide away as she grumpily stuffed the balls back into their case. She wedged it shut with one of Zane’s sneakers.

She sighed, dispirited, they were off on a journey to where she had been born but not a place that was home. It didn’t matter how much her Mom told her it was, it just wasn’t. She mashed her face up against the crochet bag and began to examine the robot and plotting her revenge on Zane carefully, he was so touchy now.

The robot looked fine really. A few more scratches and a little dent to one foot was all she could find that was really wrong. It seemed to work when she turned it on. Though the head listed to one side, it was kind of friendly looking that way. The battered label said “ff “on one side and “Lit” on another place.

“Fa lit,” she said, sounding it out, “ffffa-lit. fLit, yeah, that’s a good name for you, actually.” She liked it, it wasn’t a usual robot name. “Flit, it is, then pal.” She cocked her head the same way as the robot and smiled. Zane made a raspberry sound at her and slouched lower. Her mother guided them through traffic as Ambril watched her favorite city roll by.

Outside, On top of the car, it was bedlam. A large crow had joined the squirrel. Both were obviously unaccustomed to car travel, at least when traveling on top of a car. They were getting blown around, blasted by horns and choked by exhaust. The squirrel looked around critically and industriously began gnawing a hole in a nearby canvas bag. “We need a safe haven, Sid.”

The squirrel rubbed a lump on her head and winced. She had gotten it when a stretchy cord holding the boxes in place had broken free and catapulted her into a nearby bus; straight onto the lap of a blue-haired lady and her rabid Chihuahua.

Both began shrieking, one nipped her and the other wacked her with a tapestry handbag. She managed to clamber out the window and make a swan dive onto Ambril’s van just before the bus veered off onto another street.

 She was just spitting out a large mouthful of canvas when she stopped and sniffed. “What’s that awful smell?” Looking around she suddenly froze. “Uh Oh, Look!---Sid---!” Sid cocked his head and looked up at the large gray hawk just above them. As the squirrel pointed, it folded its wings and launched itself into a meteoric dive straight at the car.

“Lord, Aster, it’s her! Quick, nip inside there, I’ll see if I can deflect her!” The crow cawed as he spread his wings. Aster wriggled through the hole she had just made just as the car made a sickening lurch to the side. Peering out the hole she saw that the hawk had grabbed one of the stretchy cords and was jerking the cord up with every beat, destabilizing the minivan.

 “Cheeky nasty old bag!” She said ruffling her tail. Sid dive-bombed the hawk’s massive head and squawked insults but it had no affect on it.

The hawk began to beat its powerful wings, jerking the cord up and up. The bag Aster was in careened to the very edge of the rack, knocking Aster hard into a sharp, pointy Christmas ornament…which gave her an idea.

She picked up the ornament and raced over to another stretchy cord with it clamped in her teeth. This hurt a bit and made it hard to see. A box labeled “Grandmother’s tea cozies’” tumbled off narrowly missing the squirrel’s tail. She hurriedly pulled back the cord, and using it like a sling shot, took aim and let the ornament fly. It shot upward, straight at the hawk’s head and broke into a thousand little pieces.

It surprised the bird enough to make it let go of the cord. The cord snapped back hard as the car careened dangerously onto the shoulder.

 Inside the van, Ambril’s Mother wrenched the steering wheel hard, the car veered back onto the blacktop. “Whooo! That was close, I’d forgotten how strong these coastal winds can be!” Ambril mother exclaimed.

Zane grunted and rearranged his slouch. Ambril, having been bombarded by crochet mallets this time wearily put them back in their bag and stuffed a squashy bag filled with socks she found marked “future puppets” in with them.

 “Come on you nut case! You fancy some more?” Aster shouted as she pulled out another ornament. The hawk glared at her a moment and then banked swiftly down toward her. The squirrel was caught off guard. A large talon grabbed her and mercilessly squeezed all the breath out of her. It then flicked her away and off the speeding van as if she was just a piece of garbage. The squirrel twirled around helplessly, her paws flailing until she hit the rocky shoulder hard and rolled head over tail several times before becoming still, very, very still.

It was dark now and Ambril’s mother flipped on the headlights, illuminating a dense forest on either side of the road. Above the hawk had grabbed another cord and had began to open its wings preparing to unbalance the car and send it off the road again. But before it could do so, a shiny black blur came at it from above and a bright yellow beak stabbed it smartly in the eye. It was knocked completely off-balance. The hawk rolled as it caught a nasty up-current and was hurled crazily into the trees.

The crow hung there a moment searching for any sign of the giant bird, but the forest remained quiet. Then he heaved a sign of relief as he watched the van roll through a gate in a massive stonewall.

He flicked a wing and turning smartly he flew low and swift over the pavement to the inert fuzzy lump lying in the road.

“Aster?” He nudged her gently, “come on now, you’ve had worse.” He looked at her worriedly. He prodded her again a bit more anxiously. Finally she stirred, rubbed her shoulder and winced.

“What? What happened?” Her eyes suddenly snapped open wide. “Mercy! they’re all right aren’t they?“

The squirrel smiled wide at her old friend. “Ha! We got her this time, didn’t we!” Then her brows flew together and her chin came up. “What was she thinking? Going after a family of helpless humans like that!” She got unsteadily to her feet. “I tell you Sid it isn’t like the old days when everyone knew their place and stayed there.” She paused to gingerly probe a new lump on her head. “Well except for that time when the Tylwith got uppity, and they thought they had been cheated and left, remember that?”

“Tylwith’s have always been uppity if you ask me.” Said Sid.

She paused to shake her right rear paw and take a tentative step. “And then all the earth-kind went off in a huff, Sheesh!” She groaned a bit and pulled out a twig from her left ear. She looked at her friend who had cocked his head at her in a knowing way and she sighed.

 “Yep, I know what you’re gonna say; stop grousing, it’s just business as usual, the world’s always been a rip, raging, mucky mess so you might as well just get used to it, roll up your sleeves and get back to cleaning it up as we always do.”

The crow lifted his beak and cawed in a laughing sort of way.

“O.K., I’m done.” She stopped, looked about her and put her hands on what would have been her hips if she were human. “Now what?”

“NOW, we find ourselves a snug, warm place with a pot of tea and a fire.” Said Sid looking at her critically. “In other words---home for you. I think I’d better be the one to—“. There was a flash of light and in place of the crow a tall thin man dressed all in black stood.

He reached down and in a fluid motion swooped up his furry friend who rubbed her eyes and said. “Gees, Sid, give a body some notice.”

“Notice? Come on Aster, you’ve known me for what…four or five hundred years? And you can’t tell when I’m gonna shift by now?” He cackled as his long strides soon took them inside the walls and into the darkened forest.