

Gwidi At Willow Hills Farms

A Wild Goose Tale

By Sid Breman



Chapter 1: Gwidi Arrives at Willow Hills Farms

Punch was always the only one of the four dame geese to jump out of her nest when the rooster crowed. This morning was no different. She shook the last remnants of a good night's sleep from her feathers, then stretched and made her way to the water dish. She liked the first drink in the morning at this time of the year because it was cool. As she drank her three coop-mates were stirring.

Suzzan, Shill and Salom slowly roused themselves and, after stretching, joined Punch at the water dish, then all four moved to the food trough and had a bite of breakfast. With those two tasks accomplished, they groomed themselves and waited for the darkness outside to completely disappear so they could get on with the day. No one talked this early. They just concentrated on waking up.

In another coop, next to the dames' lodgings, Georgie's left eye popped open with the first notes of the rooster's morning song. It was always too early for Georgie, but he would have to wait until the rooster finished before he could resume sleeping. He was the only goose gander at Willow Hills Farms and enjoyed the luxury and privacy of his own coop. The rooster paused at the conclusion of the first verse, and Georgie thought he was finished. No such luck. The second verse came louder than the first. Georgie considered that it would not be a good idea to leave the sun halfway above the horizon and resigned himself to being awake through the entire performance.

He reflected on how Willow Hills was a great place to live. It was big. It would probably take all morning to walk around the fence if he was inclined to try it. He was not so inclined. The geese, he and four dames had their own compound, separate from the chickens, whose numbers exceeded the leaves on a large tree. They lived in five large coops, arranged like the spokes of a wheel. There was ample room for the chickens to roam about during the day, and protection inside at night.

The food was OK, and there was plenty of it. Security was good and maintained by a pack of dogs, led by Ralph. Georgie had become friends with Ralph shortly after arriving at Willow Hills. He had only been here a

couple of months and was still sleeping in his own coop, separate from the Dames. He was confident that his charm would soon win them over to him.

In the middle of the rooster's third verse, he remembered there were several mouthfuls of feed in his trough, so he ambled over to the trough and started eating. Intending only to have a small, before breakfast, snack, Georgie was soon into a full morning feast. He had not remembered leaving so much food the night before because he had eaten his fill then. When he finished all the food in the trough, he was thirsty, and discovered his water dish was empty. Now he would have to walk to the lake in the semi-darkness of the early morning. He was surprised, when he walked outside, to see that the whole sun was above the horizon. He considered that he must have been eating longer than a couple of mouthfuls.

At the lake, he drank his fill, dipped his head into the water, then waddled in and started stretching, flapped his wings a couple of times, then floated motionless for a few minutes thinking about how to spend this day. He was half dozing when something touched his tailfeathers and he shot into the air, honking wildly. When he hit the water, he heard Ralph laughing loudly as only a Rottweiler could.

"Curse your bones, Ralph!" Georgie shouted as he composed himself in the water. "Must you always come so silently and scare my tailfeathers off!"

Ralph continued laughing while he rolled over in the grass. "I still have it!" he said. "I can still attack before my enemy knows I'm coming. That is quite an accomplishment for a dog of my years. You know, that's what keeps you safe at night, don't you know?" Now he was sitting up scratching his right ear with his hind paw.

"Yes," Georgie replied while trying to regain his composure and dignity. "I appreciate the fact, as you have told me many, many, many times, that Willow Hills has never had a wolf attack since you came here. But do you have to practice on me?"

Ralph had stopped laughing and was now just chuckling softly, keeping a big smile on his face. "I will try not to do it, but it is just so tempting because you are always so unaware of what is around you."

"That is because," Georgie said, "you are supposed to keep me safe, so I don't have to worry about what is happening around me."

“Fair enough,” said Ralph, still enjoying having scared Georgie halfway to Heofon.

They continued to chat about what the day would bring, if it would rain, and the other details of farmyard life when they heard the four dames, who occupied the coop next to Georgie’s, coming down to the lake. There was Suzzan, Salom, Shill and Punch. The first three had white feathers, while Punch had black. They walked, bunched together, so that no creature could separate one of them from the rest. They entered the water a respectable distance from the dog and gander.

Neither Ralph nor Georgie could understand what they were talking about as they were all talking at once. At the water, they began bathing and splashing, all the while continuing their conversation.

Ralph asked, “Have you been over to visit the dames yet?”

“No, not yet.” Georgie said. “I have only been here a couple of months and I am biding my time.”

Ralph was chuckling again. “You keep biding, and you won’t be able to do them any good when you get there.”

Georgie gave Ralph a dirty look and made a gesture with his right wing.

Suddenly, there was a large splash followed by the dames’ frantic honking. Ralph took one giant leap and was in the water beside them. “What happened? What’s Wrong?”

A wild goose, a dame, had fallen out of the sky and landed almost on top of the bathing geese. No one answered Ralph’s questions. For a few seconds, all just stared at the lifeless body in their midst.

Suzzan was the first to react. She put her neck under the neck of the lifeless dame and lifted. “Help me! She is still alive!” she said.

Salom and Shill moved in and got under her body. Together they moved the wild goose to the shore. Punch got in front of Ralph and pushed him back.

“Make way cur! We have her!” Punch said. She did not like Ralph.

Ralph and Georgie gave them space. The dames had the situation well in hand. Neither of them saw any reason to interfere as the dames were in no danger, but they were distressed.

The four dames looked at the wild dame laying in the grass. She was bleeding from a gash in her head and a wound on her left side. Their assessment was that she had been attacked by a hawk and must have fought back as she had feathers in her talons. She was just barely breathing.

Shill asked Suzzan “What should we do? Should we help her? She is wild.”

Suzzan thought for a few seconds. “Yes, she is wild, but I don’t think that matters. I have never even seen a Wild One up close, but now that I do, she looks just like us except for her coloring and I think we should help. She probably will not live awfully long anyway. Let’s take her to our nests.”

The four dames lifted the Wild One on their backs and moved to their coop. Ralph and Georgie just watched.

Chapter 2: The Dames discover a world exists outside Willow Hills. A Healer saves Gwidi.

They put the Wild One in a spare nest and tried to make her comfortable. Then the conversation turned to how to help this poor creature who had fallen into their lake. None of them had any idea how to stop the bleeding. In fact, they had rarely seen any animal bleed. Shill had seen it once, but people were there, and they took the injured creature away. The discussion went from dame to dame, when they heard the Wild One mumbling what sounded like a song. They paused and listened.

There was a definite tune to the mumbblings, but they did not understand the words. Suzzan asked if it was possible this Wild One was saying real words or was this just gibberish. Once again, all four were talking at once, about the possibility they were hearing a language they had never previously heard and was it possible a Wild One was intelligent enough to speak even in gibberish. After a short time, they were interrupted by a tiny voice coming from the rafters.

“Excuse me, excuse me, up here!” the tiny voice said. It was Joshua, the head of the Mischief of rats that lived next to the lake. They were constantly raiding the feed troughs at night and had been warned that serious harm would befall them when, not if, they were caught.

“Rat!” Punch honked. “Rat! I hear you up there. Remember what I told you I would do to you if I ever caught you inside our coop again?”

Punch made a leap towards the rafters but did not have enough room to spread her wings and fell back to the floor.

“Wait, wait, you do not understand. Your Wild One is not mumbling gibberish. She is praying!” Joshua paused, hoping his explanation reached them.

“Praying?” Suzzan said.

“Praying?” Salom, Shill and Punch echoed.

“To whom is she praying and what words is she using? I have never heard anything like those words” Suzzan asked. The three other dames whispered and nodded in agreement.

Before speaking, Joshua showed himself. He had been hiding behind the top rafter and now moved to the cross beam that was the bottom of the central truss.

“I assume this means we have a truce, and I am not going to have my head ripped off now that I have exposed myself.” Joshua said.

“Agreed!” Suzzan said. Punch bristled in the background.

“First, your injured Wild One is speaking the language of Nature. It is used by all creatures that can speak in the Wild. I speak it. Mice speak it, rabbits, lions, wolfs, everyone speaks Nature.” Joshua paused, expecting a reply.

“But we have never heard it.” Suzzan said.

“True, nor have you ever been in the Wild. You speak what we call Farmyard, which is a corruption of Nature and what the People speak.”

“But you speak our language and Nature. How so?” Salom asked.

“Well, because of my circumstances, I often must travel through the farms and speaking both Nature and Farmyard is a matter of survival. But let us not dwell on that point. We are wasting time. Your Wild One is praying to Zezek, and she is praying very well.”

“Wait, wait, she prays to Zezek? I thought all the Wild Things were savage heathens. You are telling us that...” Suzzan was cut off by Joshua.

“I will explain more later. Right now, it is important that your Wild One gets proper care and attention. Where is your Healer?” Joshua asked.

“Healer? What’s a Healer?” the dames asked.

“I thought as much. You don’t even know what a healer is, let alone have one. I summoned our best Healer and her attendants. They are standing by and will come in if you agree not to harm them. They are very much afraid of you.” Joshua said.

At this point, the dames were all confused, and simply nodded agreement with Joshua.

“Please move to the other side of the coop. They need room, and as I have already said, they are afraid of you.” Joshua said.

Four dames lined up on the far side of the coop and watched a parade of rats emerge through the cracks in the floor. The Healer ran up the Wild One’s neck and examined the gash on her head. Then scurried down to the open wound on her left side. The Healer jumped to the edge of the nest and started talking in, what sounded like, the same language the Wild One had been mumbling. It was only then that the dames noticed the attendant rats were all chewing something.

The Healer almost disappeared into the nest next to where the Wild One was bleeding and a line of attendants ran up and each one spit their chew into the wound. The Healer packed the wad into the wound and slowly the bleeding stopped.

When the gash was completely covered and the bleeding had stopped, the Healer moved to the wound in the Wild One’s head and the same process was repeated. The Healer made a high-pitched whistle, and four more attendants came up through the floor cracks while the other attendants retreated.

The Healer was standing on the Wild One's beak and each of the four new arrivals spit a wad into the Healer's paw, which she then forced into the Wild One's beak. The Healer sat back and crossed her front paws. The dames were not sure, but they thought she looked like she was praying. At least, that is what it looked like to them. Within a short time, the Wild One became completely quiet and the dames saw her body relax. They could tell she was in a deep sleep.

The Healer said something in the direction of Joshua and disappeared into the bottom of the Wild One's nest.

"You can come back now." Joshua said. "Your Wild One has received the best care we can provide. If she is going to survive, we will know by tomorrow. Let us pray to Zezek for her healing. Till then our Healer will stay with her, in the bottom of her nest. Please honor our truce. She is our best Healer and beloved by the Mischief." Joshua turned and was ready to leave.

"Rat, wait." Suzzan said.

"Yes, what is it?" Joshua replied.

"Why did you do this? You risked injury or death to come here. You trusted us when you had no reason to do so. You do not even know this Wild One. Why risk so much for a stranger?" Suzzan said.

Joshua sat and raised himself upright, then rubbed his head with both paws. It was obvious he was thinking. Finally, he spoke.

"Every creature has an obligation to every other creature." he said. "Our obligation is to help, when possible, without putting your own life at risk. If we ignore the distress and peril of others, then so will our distress and peril be ignored. Zezek has said it is so.

When I heard your Wild One praying, it was the most beautiful prayer I had ever heard. I decided my life was worth risking for this one. She is a true daughter of Zezek."

"Wait, this is too much for us to take in. You believe in Zezek?" Suzzan asked. "Yet, you wild creatures kill each other constantly. How does that fit with your obligation and your belief in Zezek?"

Joshua signed. “Your first obligation is to yourself and your family. Creatures in the wild only kill for food to survive. That is the law of Zezek, probably one with which you are not familiar.”

Suzzan and the other dames were totally confused. Too many things were happening too fast, and now religion had been introduced into the situation and the Rat had introduced religious ideas of which they had never heard. It was confusing enough to think that rats and wild geese prayed to Zezek. Now a wild goose was lying in one of their nests and may die before the next sunrise. They discovered there are creatures called healers who treat creatures who have been injured. And there is a language used by all wild creatures not understood by farmyard creatures.

Before disappearing through a crack in the eaves, Joshua said “I can see that you are confused by what has happened today, so I will stop back and check on your Wild One. If you would like, I will answer more of your questions. Till then, ask yourself this. You do nothing to bring feed to your trough, yet you eat every day when creatures in the wild spend their entire life searching for food. Why are you so blessed by Zezek? And what job did Zezek give you?”

Joshua was gone.

Chapter: Hazzel learns the Gwidi will survive. Oscar earns his keep.

Hazzel stayed behind in the main chicken coop each morning to finish her meditation. At least, that is what she told to other hens of the Holysynod. Actually, she stayed behind to talk to Oscar and got caught up on all the happenings of the previous day. Oscar was a rat who came up through the floor each morning, and, for a small bag of cornmeal, delivered a review of the previous day. Hazzel, as the spiritual leader of all the farmyard, needed to be aware of what was happening at Willow Hills. If she had to deal with a rat to accomplish that task, so be it.

Oscar stayed hidden inside Hazzel’s nest, so that if anyone should look in the Willow Hills spiritual leader was meditating and talking to herself.

“Your flock was very busy yesterday, but the big news happened this morning!” Oscar said. “Just after dawn, a wild goose fell into the into the lake and almost landed on top of the dames who were taking their morning bath. Instead of running away, as they had been told to do when a wild

thing gets in the yard, they decided to help it and took it into their coop. Ralph and Georgie think the wild thing will die shortly. I have rats checking on what's happening and, if you like, I can give you another report later today." Oscar did not want to give the whole story away. He could milk this for a couple of trips.

"Yes." Hazzel said. "Give me an update at noon. But I have some questions. What kind of injuries does this creature have? Is it a gander or dame?"

"It is a dame, and she has a cut on her left temple and a large gash on her left side, just below her wing." Oscar said.

"Fine, what else is happening? Are those heretics in the Soueas coop still preaching their blasphemy?" Hazzel asked.

Oscar tittered and Hazzel knew he was laughing. He always laughed when she used the word heretic. "Yes, they are." Oscar said. "Can't be more than six that actually believe. On the other hand, none of them are talking about doing anything. It is just all talk now." Oscar paused and waited for a question. When none came, he went on telling her about the more mundane events of the day, such as who was ill, who was injured, who found the most delicious insects. Most importantly, how the young pullets and cockerels were fairing. They were, after all, the real reason for the farm. They were the ones who would go off and keep the insects from destroying the crops on the other farms.

When he had finished, Hazzel dropped the small bag of cornmeal down into her nest. Oscar grabbed it and said he would be back at noon. Although the bag of cornmeal was half as big as him, he carried it and exited through a hole she could not see.

Hazzel disliked dealing with rats, but it was the only way to know what was happening in the yard. She knew that Oscar had agents, several actually, in every coop. Disgusting little creatures, but necessary. She stretched, shook herself and left the coop to join the other hens. It was time for morning prayers, and no one could start without her. She emerged and saw the entire flock awaiting her arrival.

Chapter: Punch meets Gerif.

The four dames discussed their situation and decided that one of them would always stay with the Wild One. Someone, they thought, should be there when she wakes up to explain to her what happened. Of course, they also wondered if she would be able to speak to them given that they now understand that wild creatures have their own language. All these events were confusing for the dames. Suzzan decided on her own, they needed to organize the facts in their heads.

“First,” she said, “Creatures in the wild speak a language different from us. Next, they also believe in Zezek, and they pray. Next, they have Healers who treat the sick and injured. Finally, the rat who we thought was a thief, is a caring creature who is concerned for the life of another creature. All this is more than I can digest without spending some time thinking. Do you agree?”

The other dames mumbled more to themselves than to the group, but there were no objections.

“It is settled.” Suzzan said. “I will take the first turn here. Salom, you come next, then Shill, then Punch. Now go about your day.”

It was mid-afternoon when Punch entered the coop. The three other dames had said that nothing had happened. Neither the Rat nor the Healer had come back, and the Wild One had not moved. The only sign she was still alive was that she was breathing. Punch settled in and quickly fell asleep.

When she awoke, the shadows on the coop wall told her the sun was setting, it was the end of the day. Then she heard little feet scampering and saw the Healer running back and forth from the water dish to the Wild One’s beak, where she would spit a mouthful of water. A small mouthful, but none-the-less, a mouthful.

“Do you need some help?” Punch said.

The Healer was startled and stopped in her tracks. She sat upright and crossed her front paws bowed her head. “I am sorry. Did I wake you? Please forgive me.”

“No, that’s fine. You go about what you are doing. I just wanted to know if I could help in any way.” Punch said.

“Gwid needs water,” the Healer said. “I must carry it one mouthful at a time, and she is a lot bigger than a rat, so it is taking a long time. Would you like to try it?”

Punch took a beak full of water and moved close to the Wild One and moved her beak, so the tip pointed towards the roof. Punch let the water slowly run into the Wild One’s beak. She did this three more times when the Healer said it was enough.

“Thank you.” the Healer said. “You saved me a lot of time and I have a lot to do. Excuse me, please.” She went about her duties, scrambling up to the head gash then down to the wound on the Wild One’s side. Then she turned and bowed in Punch’s direction and was about to leave.

“Wait, please.” Punch said.

The Healer turned and bowed again. “Yes, what can I do?”

I, we, have several questions. Can you stay and talk?” Punch said.

The Healer glanced at the shadows on the coop wall the said “Yes, I have time. Ask away.”

Punch’s mind was racing. What should she ask first? There were so many questions. Finally, she said “You referred to the Wild One as Gwid. Is that her name or is that what she is?”

“Gwid is her name. She says it while she is praying. It is a common name for girl goose.” the Healer said.

“Ok. Did she say what happened to her?” Punch asked.

“No, she is not awake. She is praying in her sleep. The medication I gave her will keep her asleep for a long time. She has a lot of pain right now and it is better that she sleeps.”

“What was she saying in her prayers?” Punch asked.

“She prays the Songs of Peace, which has many verses. She is praying from her heart.” the healer said.

“So, you speak the language that Rat called Nature, yes?” Punch asked.

The Healer tittered and Punch realized she was laughing.

“Yes, I speak Nature, and Farmyard as well. Most rats do. For us, it is a survival skill. By the way, the one you just referred to as Rat is Joshua. He is the leader of our Mischief. He is very highly regarded by our kind.” The Healer said.

“What is a Mischief? Punch asked.

“That how we refer to a group of rats, like a group of your kind would be called a flock.”

Punch paused, she was a little confused, and perhaps a little overwhelmed. Too many new things were happening, too many new words, too many new ideas.

The Healer waited for a moment, then bowed again and started to leave.

But Punch continued, “You said she was praying the Songs of Peace. Are there many Songs?”

“Many Songs of Peace, and many Songs of Love. There are Songs of Work, Songs of Joy, Songs of War.” the Healer said. “Have you not heard of them before?”

Punch was a little embarrassed because she had only heard a few of the Songs of Zezek, and she knew less, but she did not know there were so many. Here was a wild creature telling her things about Zezek and up until today she did not even know wild creatures could talk, let alone recite long prayers.

“I have heard some, but not many.” Punch said. Her head was spinning with all this new information, and she wanted to think about it all. “Can we talk another time?”

“Yes, another time, I will return in the morning.” the Healer said. “My name Gerif.”

“I am called Punch, and I am pleased to meet you.” Punch said.

“Same.” the Healer said. She waved with her right forepaw.

“Thank you Gerif.” Punch said.

“Just doing what Zezek wants me do.” the Healer replied, and disappeared into the nest where the Wild One was sleeping.

The other dames returned to the coop as the sun was setting. Outside at night was no place for a goose, especially with all the reports of wolves trying to get into the farmyard.

“Anything new?” Suzzan asked Punch.

“No, not really. The Healer came back and checked the Wild One. She said the Wild One will probably sleep for a long time. That’s all. Oh, and she said the Wild One is called Gwid, a common name for a female goose.” Punch said.

The three dames that had just returned began discussing the name Gwid, with all of them talking at once. Punch just settled into her nest and fell asleep, hoping that when she awoke, her head would stop spinning.

Chapter: Gwid stops a hawk from attacking her flock, and is injured, but discovers she is among friends.

Gwid’s family was the last formation in the flock, and everyone’s head told them they were close to their summer nesting grounds. It was the end of a long night’s flight, as the sun rose on their right side. Everyone knew that as the sun rose, so did the chance that a predator would find the family an attractive target. Naturally, precautions were taken.

The formation leader slid back to the end of the left line of geese and told Gwid and her sister, Eiddew, to fly cover for the last leg of their journey. Both nodded agreement. They arched their wings arose several measures above the \wedge formation. Gwid flew to the right and Eiddew the left.

Eiddew saw the attacker first, a hawk rising from the right out the forest below and headed straight for the family. Eiddew honked to alert the flight and pointed her beak. Gwid got the message before her sister honked and was already diving at the approaching threat. Normally, that was enough to warn off an attacker, but this one kept coming. So did Gwid.

The two collided, as Gwid came in claws first, and hit the hawk square in the neck. The hawk was totally surprised and made one effort to free itself from the goose’s grip. It twisted and gouged Gwid’s side then gave a dying swipe and caught her on the side of her head. The hawk’s body went limp, and Gwid let go of the carcass. It quickly fell out of sight.

Dazed, she righted her flight and started gliding. She knew she was bleeding, and she could not see out of her left eye. Eiddew came down beside her. She inspected her sister's wounds.

"You have to land!" Eiddew said. "I'll get help. There is a small lake just ahead. Land there."

Gwid could not answer but nodded affirmatively. She could not see out of her left eye. Eiddew peeled off when the lake was in sight and started calling for the Healer. When Gwid was over the lake, she started to slow down to land. That is when she passed out.

Eiddew returned with a Healer and an assistant, but it was too late. Gwid was surrounded by four farm geese. They were dames, but they were not attacking Gwid. Now, they were just looking at her. Eiddew, the Healer and the assistant pulled up sharply to avoid detection. Once high enough, they circled and watched. The four dames carried Gwid into a coop. The circling trio marked the location in their heads and returned to the family formation which was about to land in the nesting grounds. Thankfully, the farm was just a short flight from the nests. Eiddew could return and, hopefully, free her sister.

Gwid heard a passage from the Songs of Peace. She heard her name and saw her grandmother waving to her, then she was tucked under g-mum's wing, and everyone was happy. The Songs continued. Ganda came up to her and they rubbed necks and purred in time with the Songs.

Ganda looked into her eyes and said "You must go back. I will be waiting when you come again." And he pushed her away from the light.

Gwid awoke but did not move. She realized she was inside, away from the natural elements. Perhaps it was a cave or a hollow tree. She could not tell, and she dared not open her good eye. All creatures were taught that when they were injured, stay perfectly still. Do not move. Do not make any noise. Do nothing that would attract a predator.

She heard a tiny voice that sounded like a buck rat say, "Where is your Healer?" The creature, a rat she hoped, was speaking the farm language.

"Healer? What's a Healer?" another voice said. This voice came from a dame goose, and it was also in the farm language. Gwid realized she had

been captured by farm geese, but they were not hurting her, and a rat was calling a healer. She knew rats were good creatures.

“I thought as much. You don’t even know what a healer is, let alone have one. I summoned our best Healer and her attendants. They are standing by and will come in if you agree not to harm them. They are very much afraid of you.” the rat said.

Gwid heard the shuffling of webbed feet and could tell there were at least two other dames in the enclosure.

“Please move to the other side of the coop. They need room, and as I have already said, they are afraid of you.” the rat said.

Gwid heard the healer, and her attendants enter the enclosure. The healer spoke in the Wild language and told the attendants to start chewing as much cherry tree bark as they could because they would need a large bandage. She told them to start applying the bandage as quickly as possible.

She ran up Gwid’s neck to inspect the head gash. The healer was humming a tune from the Songs on Tranquility, which made Gwid feel safe.

The healer asked the buck rat if any of the dames spoke Wild. “Not a word.” he replied.

As softly as she could, the healer whispered in Gwid’s ear “Exhale slowly if you can hear me.”

Gwid let out a long breath, just enough to let the healer know she could hear.

“You have a small gash on the left side of your head and there is blood caked over your eye. I am going to remove the blood and I want you to open your eye so I can examine you. Do not worry. The dames are on the other side of the coop, and they will not see your eye open.” the healer said.

The healer gently pulled the caked blood away from Gwid’s eye until the eye lid could open. Gwid saw the healer’s face. As she suspected, it was the face of a gentle mother who was also a gentle healer.

The healer sniffed all over Gwid's face and looked deep into her eye. Finally, she went back to Gwid's ear and said "You are going to be fine. You have lost a lot of blood and you will be weak for a long time, but you will heal. I am going to give you something to make you sleep. Do not fight it, just relax. These dames mean you no harm. You are safe."

The healer pushed a small ball of medicine into Gwid's beak. At first there was just a strange taste in Gwid's mouth, then the world got fuzzy, and she fell asleep. She slept for a long time.

At one point during this long sleep, she stayed awake long enough to hear the healer say "My name is Gerif. What is your name?"

One of the dames said, "I am called Punch, and I am pleased to meet you."

Then Gwid fell back into her deep sleep. She was not aware that Eiddew was flying above her. Normally, she and Eiddew knew exactly what the other was doing and thinking, it was a twin thing, but the head wound must be interfering with their normal communications.

Chapter: Oscar and the other reporters meet. Booger trades information with Tire.

Oscar, and all the other rats that worked on the farm, traveled from place to place through an underground system of burrows that permitted them to travel undetected to all parts of the farm. Back at the Mischief, he deposited the bag of cornmeal with the quartermaster and hurried to the debrief meeting. He was not the last reporter to arrive, everyone was chattering about the day and enjoying treats someone had brought back from the barn on the north side of the farm. Before he had finished eating, the last reporter arrived, and Joshua entered the room. The reporters fell silent waiting for their leader to speak.

Oscar was one of a dozen reporters who covered the five chicken coops. He had the prime assignment of covering Hazzel, who not only paid him for his information, but also gave him more in return. She never realized she was giving him important news because she always talked to herself after he told her something.

The other eleven reporters covered the rest of the coops. Each rat sold information to a chicken or a group of them and gathered information from

them. These were lucrative relationships because they received more value than they gave, and the chickens felt the same way. Everyone came out as a winner.

Now, they had, finally, established contact with the goose coop. The dames had been the last hold-out at Willow Hills. Every other creature on the farm had been very willing to exchange information for food. Not so the geese. Now, hopefully, that had changed.

Booger sniffed his way along the fence, very slowly. Although it appeared as if he was looking for rats, he was waiting for one rat to appear. Near the northeast corner on the corner of the farm he finally heard the voice he was waiting to hear.

“Hey, hey Booger! You got some news for me?” It was Tire, Boogers connection to the Mischief.

Booger continued sniffing, but now went in a circular pattern. To anyone watching him, he had just caught a scent and was getting ready to track something. Tire remained out of sight in the deep grass.

“I’ve got something to trade. How about you?” Booger said.

“Hey, you first.” Tire said.

“I’m going to have to tell Ralph about the burrow to the oak tree.” Booger said.

“Why? We just got that operational last week. You’ll ruin a good thing.” Tire said.

“Yea, well consider this. There must have been a whole parade of your buddies there yesterday. I must report it. If I don’t, the boss will think I lost my nose, and when a dog loses his nose, it’s goodbye food ticket, and I will be replaced by a dog who will catch every rat that uses the burrow. Do you want that? What was going on over there, anyway.” Booger said. He was now intently sniffing one spot just to make a good show of it in case someone was watching.

Tire scratched his nose and thought for a minute. “How about this? You tell Ralph that you smell a rat, but don’t mention the burrow. We’ll plant a small

nest so that you can discover it and be a hero. I'll make sure there is nesting material you can find and plenty of rat smells. You don't have to discover the burrow right now, later maybe." Tire paused, waiting for a response.

"That could work." Booger said. "I think we could pull this off. Let's do it."

"OK, here's what happened yesterday, just so you know and can work with it," Tire said, "really top-level stuff. You should know this so we can pull this off. You heard about the wild goose that fell in the lake, didn't you?" Tire paused.

"Of course, I saw it. That's not news.," Booger said.

"No, but this is. The wild thing is alive and will recover, but the healer needs access to the goose coop to treat her, so you need to stall for time."

Booger lifted his head up, pretending he was sniffing the air, then put his nose back to the same spot. "Yea, I can do that. You are sure about your information?" he said.

"Sure as I have a long tail." Tire said. It was a common reply from a rat because rats did not trust short, tailed creatures. Or a rat with a short tail was not to be trusted.

Chapter: Gwid realizes she is with friends and is examined by Gerif. Gerif gives her instructions on how to heal.

The smell in the air told Gwid it was mid-morning. She had slept through the entire day and night. For the first time she opened both eyes and took in her surroundings. She was not in a cave or hollow tree. It was a structure made by people using the flat pieces of trees. It was closed in on all sides, including the top and bottom. There were nests on either side, enough for a dozen geese, and an opening between the nests at either end. There was plenty of room to stretch one's neck and wings if the nests on either side were empty.

At the opposite end of the structure from the nest in which Gwid rested, a grey goose, a dame, was sleeping in the end nest. Gwid studied here and liked her immediately. Her aroma said she was honest and one to be

trusted. Gwid did not know much about farm creatures, but in the wild, one could generally smell good and evil. This one smelled good.

Punch stirred and was startled when she saw Gwid awake.

“Hello,” Punch said. “How are you feeling?”

Gwid said. “My body hurts. My head hurts. I am thirsty, and I am grateful to be alive.”

Gwid’s voice was deep and raspy. It was not at all what Punch thought it would be. Also, she spoke with an accent, very much like the Gerif’s.

“Are you Punch, yes?” Gwid said.

“Yes,” Punch replied. “And you are Gwid, yes?”

“I talk in my sleep, don’t I?” Gwid said.

“Yes, and you must hear in you sleep also.” Punch said. This brought a chuckle from both of them.

Before the conversation could go any further, Gerif came up out of the nest next to Gwid. Speaking the Wild language, she said “And what is my name? Did you hear that also?”

“You are Gerif. Healer of the Rat Mischief.” Gwid said.

“Good!” Gerif said. “That means your mind is good. How is your side?”

“I have pain, but it is bearable. I have felt worse.” Gwid said.

“Be still. I am going to examine your wounds.” Gerif said. Before beginning the exam, she turned to Punch, and in Farmacyard said, “Good Morning Punch.” And she waved a greeting.

Punch nodded back and said, “Good Morning.”

Gerif did a very thorough examination, covering the entire wound. She sniffed, touched, and sometimes tasted the area around the bandage. When she had finished, she let out a shrill whistle and the attendants appear out of the nest next to Gwid and started to change the bandage.

“Were you all in that nest all night?” Punch asked Gerif.

“No, no, no, there is a hole in bottom of this nest. I had patients to attend to back at the Mischief,” Gerif said.

When the attendants had finished, Gerif ran up Gwid’s neck and spoke directly into her ear. “You are healing nicely. You may get out of the nest to get food, water and to answer Nature’s call. Then you get back in the nest and rest. Do this until the Moon is full. The bandage will fall off at that time. You can then walk about, but do not fly until the Moon is full again. Then you will be healed, and you can reunite with your family.”

Gwid nodded and said, “You have given me my life and I thank you. I am in your debt.” This was a traditional response to a Healer in Gwid’s flock. She hoped it would be acceptable to Gerif.

Gerif bowed and gave a traditional response. “The debt was mine to pay. You owe it to another.”

Gwid knew that rats were good creatures, and they knew everything that was happening around them. They were good allies to have.

Chapter: Ralph smells a rat.

Ralph met Georgie at the lake that morning and asked what was up with the Wild one. Georgie knew absolutely nothing but thought he did.

“She probably will not make it through the day.” Georgie said. “She lost a lot of blood, and the dames have no idea how to care for her. I told them they should have let die where she was, but no, they had to drag her into the coop. Now it will probably be up to me to get the carcass out when she dies inside.”

“Agreed,” Ralph said, “I can smell death in the air. She’s probably gone already. Let me know if you need help. The quicker we get it out of here the better. You know it doesn’t make me or the rest of the pack look good when a Wild creature can just fall into the farmyard.”

Ralph continued to explain how difficult it was to keep the wolves, foxes, and coyotes out of the yard. He told Georgie how the pack sometimes was on duty all day and night, and how a wolf attack would come in the middle of the night and every one of the pack had to be ready to react on a moment’s notice. And he went on and on about how great he was at his job.

Then Ralph said something that caught Georgie's ear. "Ya know, if these geese get their head full stories about the good life outside the farm, we could have a real problem on our hands, what with geese and chickens wantin' to jump the fence and see the world. I'll tell you I have heard some wild tales about the outside world. All lies, mind you, but they are not going to know that. Next thing you see is wolves, coyotes and foxes just waiting on the other side of the fence and the fowl jumpin' into their mouths. Then we will have a real situation on our hands."

Georgie had only been half listening and nodding his head in agreement, but this made him sit up and pay attention. In a flash, he realized the Wild One was a threat to him, if the dames started jumping the fence, his harem would be smaller. Not a situation he wanted to face. It was bad enough that he still wasn't allowed into the dames coop.

"Wait, wait, wait," Georgie said, "what tales about the good life are you talking about?"

Ralph replied. "What? You never heard how these wild things lie about how they live? Well, it is well known among dogs that Wild creatures like to sneak into farmyards and coax the animals into the wild because then the wolves, and the coyotes, and the foxes will eat the farm creatures and leave the wild things alone. So, wild things come in here and tell lies about how much food, fruit, vegetables, meat, they have, and how they can go anywhere they want. The wild dames talk about the great lovers the wild ganders are, and the ganders talk about all the dames that are out there. Pretty soon the farmyard creatures start venturing out and as soon as they do, bang, a wolf has them and they are never heard from again. So, when the escapees don't come back, the wild things tell the farm creatures the ones that left are having such a good time that they will never come back. So, more farm creatures leave, and soon there is no one left and the dogs that were supposed to be guarding them get the axe, literally. Now, do you see why I am concerned?"

Georgie now had a concerned look behind his beak. "I think I am starting to see your concern." he said. He was thinking more about the food and the dames than being eaten by a wolf.

Ralph continued "You know we stopped a whole pack of wolves last week. It was the middle of the night, and they were creeping in through the east

fence. Hell-of-a-fight, but we caught them before the first one laid a foot in the yard. Do you know what a wolf could do to that fat butt of yours? Georgie! Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, yes, of course I am." Georgie said. "I just don't like to think about a wolf chewing on my butt."

Ralph continued for a while talking about how hard his pack worked, when one of his mongrels, one named Booger, came up and sat down just out of hearing range. Ralph finally stopped and growled: "What?"

Booger nodded his head signaling he wanted to talk privately.

Ralph, who had been lying down, roused himself and went over to Booger. When he was sure Georgie could not hear, he said "Speak!"

Booger, who seemed overjoyed to be talking to the boss, had trouble sitting still. "There's a rat, rats somewhere in the Yard. I keep getting a strong smell of rats, and it is daylight. Doesn't happen very often."

"Where were you when you got the first smell?" Ralph asked.

"West side of the lake." Booger said.

"OK, do some circles through the yard and see if you can find our rat. Go!" Ralph said.

Back at the edge of the lake, Georgie asked what was up.

Ralph said, "I think I smell a rat."

Then he slowly fell into his mid-morning nap. Georgie did the same.

Punch had been watching, waiting for them to fall asleep. Once they had, she helped Gwid out to the feed bins and the water trough. She thought it best to finish these tasks while Ralph and Georgie slept or were nowhere in sight. She did not trust either of them. Neither did Gwid.

Chapter: The Dames become nurses. Gwid tells tales of life in the Wild. Life is good.

All the dames took turns caring for Gwid, but Punch was the most attentive. It was not that others avoided working, Punch just moved in and did it. She liked this Wild One called Gwid. She did not know why, because she did

not like many creatures. She barely tolerated the other dames. Of course, she did not let them know how she felt.

Every day, Gwid would go outside shortly after the girls returned from the lake and have her breakfast. They would all gather round in the shade of a large oak tree and ask about the outside world and Gwid's life as a Wild One. Gwid happily complied and answered their questions. But it was not all one sided. She had questions about farmyard life. Over the days and weeks that Gwid was healing, she became a part of their flock. Gwid quickly learned to speak Farmyard correctly and lost her accent.

Many stories were told, and they shared many laughs and some tears. Gwid told them about searching for food every day and if you did not search, you did not eat. Of course, there was all manner of food to eat. She said Zezek gave them shoots, roots, seeds, stems, grasses and grain, bulbs, berries, and abundance of insects. But you had to search for these foods yourself. Unless a goose was sick or injured, then all the geese would bring food and drink, so that none went hungry. However, if a goose was just too lazy to search for food, no one would bring it to them.

The dames told Gwid they had never had to search for food because it was always in the food troughs. People brought it every day, along with water. The food was almost always corn, sometimes oats or wheat, but they never had to search for it. The same with water. It was always there in the bowls.

Once Gwid was able to walk on her own, the five dames developed a routine of sorts. At sunrise, all five went to the lake to freshen themselves with the cool water. Gwid was always careful not to get her side wet. Then they would have breakfast in the shade of the large oak tree next to the dames' coop.

Breakfast included a new treat, courtesy of Gwid. She showed them how to take the leaves from a plant that grew by the lake and let them soak overnight. In the morning, the water had turned into a delightful brew that helped them wake up faster and greet the day with a smile.

After breakfast, the five would waddle over to a small hill just east of the chicken compound and enjoy the late spring breeze that came up each morning. The sun was not too hot yet and they could see the entire farm. Sometimes they watched the antics of the young chickens, some of which

always seemed to be running, while others walked or marched about the grounds, never straying too far from their coop. Gwid noticed that the dogs were out by the fence, and they always adjusted their position to get in front of any chicken that strayed too far from the flock.

All the while the dames talked. They talked about all manner of things. The weather was a popular one, the food, another. Of course, there was always talk about Georgie and when would more ganders arrive. So far, none of them had taken a shine to Georgie. They asked Gwid about life outside the farmyard, but she generally gave short answers, telling them that life in the Wild was a daily struggle for food and safety, and the dames should be happy they lived in a farmyard.

Gwid did not really believe what she told the dames. Very quickly, she realized that none of these geese would survive a day in the wild. They had no idea how to protect themselves from any of the many predators out there, and if they did manage to avoid getting killed, they would soon starve before they learned how to hunt for food. Geese in the Wild spent their entire lives learning how to survive. These creatures would have no chance against Nature.

She, on the other hand, could not wait until she could fly home. Her head was still a little fuzzy, but now that she was out walking, her sense of direction was coming back. By the time she could fly again, she was sure she would find the summer nesting grounds. For now, she was biding her time.

One day, shortly after she started walking, she notices the shadow of a goose pass right over top of her. It was her sister, Eiddew, flying very high to avoid being noticed by anyone but Gwid. The other dames were too oblivious to catch it. They really did not pay much attention to what was happening around them.

Gwid let out a loud honk, letting Eiddi know that she was safe and secure. Upon hearing Gwid's signal, Eiddi reversed the direction of her flight, which let Gwid know she received the message. Gwid was relieved. Now she knew that when the time came, she could return to her flock without getting lost. Gwid hoped that her mental communication with her sister would return soon.

Those days at Willow Hills Farms were pleasant for Gwid, but she was anxious to return to the life she knew. It was best that these farmyard creatures did not know what life outside the farmyard was like.

Chapter: The chickens hold the Quarter Moon service. Gwid flies. Hazzel makes a request.

As the moon waxed past a quarter, Gwid awoke feeling very restless. It was well before dawn, and, normally, if she were living in the wild, she would have stayed in her nest because one never walked around in the dark. But here, at the farm, she decided to go outside and perhaps walk-away her nervous energy.

Her head was still fuzzy from the blow she received, but it was getting better. Last night she had the distinct feeling that her family's nesting grounds were due north of Willow Hills. This morning she was sure of it. She was starting to make a little contact with Eiddi. It was the first time they had ever been separated. And it was the first time she did not know what Eiddi was thinking. She prayed her sister knew what she was thinking.

Her eyes were already adjusted to the darkness, and the light of the moon permitted some distance vision as she walked to the top of the hill behind the coop. When she got there, she was surprised to see a large group of chickens assembling on the east side of the chicken coops. There was a small group of hens in the center and the rest of the flock had formed circles around them.

Gwid decided to be a spectator and sat down under the tree, being careful to keep her back protected by the bole. Even though she felt safe on the farm, she was not about to drop her guard.

A chicken in the center group stood up and started singing. Gwid recognized the song. It was from the Songs of Praise and gave thanks to Zezek for all his blessings. The chicken doing the singing was not the best vocalist, but it was an acceptable offering. When she had finished, another hen stood and sang.

At the end of the third hymn, a rooster crowed and Gwid noticed the dawn was breaking. When the cock finished, the assembled group began singing

a psalm from the Book of Life, and while they sang, they swayed back and forth. Gwid closed her eyes and started singing, quietly, to herself. She did not realize it, but on the last verse, she sang at her normal volume, and was swaying with the music.

She had never seen a group of creatures praying together. In her flock, everyone prayed, but it was not organized like this. Every morning one of her flock would start a song. Others would either join in or stay silent and enjoy the music. But it was never organized.

At the end of the psalm, the assembly started breaking up and each chicken went about their day. Gwid stretched and thought she would do the same. She could hear the dames gathering at the lake, and, without thinking, spread her wings and push off into the air. She caught the gentle breeze coming off the lake and glided all the way to the water's edge where the dames were bathing.

"Well, look who's flying!" Suzzan said cheerfully. The other dames chuckled.

Gwid landed gently. "I probably should have walked, but I wasn't thinking. I will be more careful." Gwid said.

"You looked graceful." Shill said. "I wish I looked that way when I flew."

Everyone chuckled.

While they were eating breakfast, Gwid asked, "Do the chickens often sing?"

Salom replied, "Yes, every quarter of the moon, and a big celebration on the full moon. It's quite a spectacle, but we generally don't get up that early."

This led to a conversation about the religious life of the chickens, and how many of them were very devout, while a small number of others were outright rebels and disavowed any faith. Their conversation was cut short when they heard Hazzel and her entourage of six hens approaching.

"Well, this is a first!" Suzzan said. Hazzel had never visited the goose compound. As the acknowledged leader of the dames, Suzzan stepped forward and when Hazzel stopped, Suzzan nodded and said, "Good

morning to all of you. May I offer you some water? It is fresh and cool this morning.”

Hazzel nodded, “That would be delightful. My hens would enjoy a cool drink. While they do, may I speak with Gwid for a few moments?”

Suzzan looked at Gwid and Gwid stepped forward. “Good morning,” she said to Hazzel. “How can I be of service?”

“Let us walk.” Hazzel said.

They walked to the east and when they were alone, Hazzel said, “I heard you sing this morning. You have the gift, the gift I have not heard for some time.”

Gwid thanked her for the kind words but did not say anything more.

After several steps when both were silent, Hazzel cleared her throat, “Gwid, the entire flock was stunned into silence this morning. Most have never heard such wondrous music. Even the non-believers and heretics came out to listen. Would you consider singing for us on the next quarter moon? You would not have to come down to the flock. Just sing from your little hill, under the tree.”

Gwid knew that Hazzel was not being considerate of her feelings. She knew that Hazzel did not want to stand in the shadow of a goose. That was fine with Gwid. She would not want to be in the middle of the flock either. They walked a few more steps in silence.

Finally, Gwid asked, “What would you like me to sing?” which was Gwid’s way of saying Yes.

They spent a good portion of the morning discussing the psalms Hazzel wanted sung and they agreed on the lyrics and tunes Gwid would use. When they finished their discussion and returned to the group of dames and hens, the ten of them were chatting like old friends. It appeared that, in addition to arranging their next service, the chickens and geese had made a breakthrough in intra-farm relations.

On the next quarter moon, Gwid brought out the entire flock. Everyone said it was the largest crowd they had ever seen. It even included the non-

believers and heretics. Gwid would sing at every quarter gathering for the rest of her time at Willow Hills.

Chapter: Ralph decides to evict Gwid. Booger reports to Ralph on the rat activity. Ralph decides to take revenge.

Ralph was surprised when Gwid sang the first time. He thought she would never recover. Then he was shocked the second time. He called the pack together that morning and told them to be extra alert because he thought the wild goose was up to something. To his lieutenants he said they were going to have to do something about the wild one.

Ralph enlisted Georgie to help evict Gwid. They started for the dames' coop, with Georgie bringing up the rear. All four dames met him at the coop entrance. As he approached, the ladies formed a semi-circle, spread their wings, and hissed as loudly as they could. Ralph thought better of tangling with them, as he knew he could not beat all four. Deep down, he knew he would probably lose if he fought just one of them. Female geese could be vicious when protecting their home or loved ones. It was clear, the dames now considered this Wild One part of their flock.

Ralph backed off, but he was not done. He left Georgie by the lake and started looking for Booger, who he found on the west side of the yard watching a group of cockerels play football. He looked to be half asleep, but that was just his style. He was wide awake and ready to pounce on anything that moved.

Ralph knew he had grown up in a garbage dump where he became a top-notch ratter. He learned to scavenge for his food and fight the rats for the best meals. He spoke Rat and had contacts with the Mischief that occupied the land East of Willow Hills. He often got good information from them in exchange for chicken feed.

"Booger, tell me about the rat you smelled the other day." Ralph said.

Booger once again had trouble sitting still in Ralph's presents. His tail wagged so hard, the entire rear half of his body swayed back and forth. Also, he walked in half circles around Ralph. His deference was obvious.

"Yes, yes, I talked to my source today, and found out the rats have a nest in the large oak tree next to the geese's coops. They have used it for a long

time. The steal food and other things they need from the farmyard and store it in the nest.”

“How did they get away with it for so long. Like, why didn’t we find it before? We cover that ground on regular patrols.” Ralph said.

“Sure, we do, but we go out by the fence. They built and nest and stay there. From there they could jump to other trees and buildings and never touch the ground, so we would never smell them.” Booger said. He was finally calming down a little.

“OK, so, why did we smell them this time?” Ralph asked.

“Seems there was a whole group of them, close to one of the geese coops. Wait, that didn’t sound right, goose coops, maybe?” Booger said.

“Doesn’t matter, goose geese. I know what you mean. Go on.” Ralph said.

“Yes, anyway, a whole bunch of them were on the ground around the coops. Don’t know why.” Booger replied.

Ralph thought for a few minutes, then told Booger, “Go find out why a group of rats would be around the geese, er, goose coops. And do it fast.”

Booger scratched his right ear with his hind paw and said, “Goanna need sugar or honey to get that kind in info from a rat, boss.”

“Go to the kitchen. Tell the cook I sent you.” Ralph said. Booger was gone in a flash.

Ralph realized he released Booger and now a section of the fence was wide open. He decided to stand the guard until the relief came. He had not watched a football match for a while, and he needed some quiet time to think about the rats. When the game was finished, Booger returned. Two of Ralph’s lieutenants had been watching their boss and decided to join him. If the boss was talking to one of the underlings, they needed to know. They arrived before Booger.

The rat-mongrel, as he was known to the lieutenants, hung back while Ralph talked to his lieutenants.

“Booger! Get over here!” Ralph yelled. “Report!”

Booger crept cautiously forward, tail between his legs and giving the lieutenants a wide berth. When he was in front of Ralph, he spoke. “The rats helped the wild one survive her wounds. That’s why we smelled so many of them. They were all over the coop.”

Ralph looked at his lieutenants. “What do you think?”

The two lieutenants looked at each other, then one nodded and the other spoke. “We need to wipe them out. They have been stealing more and more food and just plain causing trouble. They’re in and out of the big coops all day long. Next thing you know, they’ll be in the barn and the corn crib, and we can’t watch the chickens and chase rats at the same time. Let’s just kill ‘em all.”

Ralph thought for a few moments. All three of them had already forgotten about Booger.

“OK,” Ralph started, “Get the entire pack together right after dark. We strike just before the start of the midwatch. Let’s get to it.”

Booger was left alone overlooking the game field. He anxiously watched the sun, hoping the night would come soon so he could reach Tire in time to warn him.

Chapter: Gwid discovered what the dogs are really doing.

The dames were, once again, sitting on top of the small hill east of the chicken compound, enjoying a pleasant day. They had all moved to the shade of a tree at the crest of the hill, at Gwid’s insistence. She told them too much sun was not good for their feathers. She really did not want to tell them it was for protection from attack by a hawk or falcon, but they seemed to be totally unaware of that threat. She really did not understand why. Perhaps they had never experienced an attack from above. Perhaps, no one ever told them about hawks and falcons.

The four quickly fell asleep, unaware that Gwid would remain awake. In the Wild, someone was always awake and alert, watching for any hint of a predator. Not so at Willow Hills Farms.

Gwid looked out over the chicken compound and started taking in the details she had not noticed before. The five coops were arranged like the spokes of a wheel. With the chickens outside and most of them gathered in the center with fewer along the outer edges, from the top of the hill it looked like a huge, white, star. She was tempted to take flight and get a better view, but her wounds were not quite ready for that move.

She also noticed that there was a chicken wire covering the top of the compound. This was probably the reason that hawk and falcon attacks were rare. The only real threat would be from the ground, which was protected by the dogs. Gwid could see the whole farmyard from her position on top of the hill and she scanned around looking for the guard dogs.

There were always ten dogs around the perimeter of the yard, sometimes more. One dog was at the end of each coop, positioned back far enough that they had a good view of both sides of the activity on either side of the coop. That made five dogs. Then there was one dog between each of the dogs at the end of the coops. They, too, were back about the same distance as the other dogs. Based on her experience with coyotes and foxes, these canines would probably have no trouble stopping them or chasing them away. However, even if all of them came together, they were no match for a pack of wolves. She had seen wolves in her travels. Of course, she knew there were no wolves in this area. According to her flock's historian, the wolves moved west when the people came, and that was long before anyone in the flock hatched. Ralph was just trying to scare the geese and chickens to make his job easy, she reasoned.

As that thought coursed through her brain, she saw something that made her think again. She noticed that all the dogs were facing into the chicken compound. Also, they were closer to the compound than the fence. If the dogs were guarding the yard against intruders, they would be facing towards the fence and be closer to the fence than the compound.

These dogs were not protecting the yard from intruders. They were making sure none of the chickens escaped. She looked towards the coops where she, the dames and Georgie lived. There was a dog watching them from a safe distance, not close enough to be readily noticed.

The moon was half full that night and Gwid was happy her stay at the farmyard was almost over. A chill came over her unlike any she had ever experienced before.

Chapter: Gerif seeks Gwid's help.

It was the middle of the night when Gwid was awakened by the sound of tiny feet scratching on the roof. She listened to make sure it was not a predator, and realized it was the sound of several rats. Within a few moments, she heard one slip into the coop through the eaves. It was Gerif, and the sound of her quick footsteps woke the other dames.

“Gerif, what’s wrong?” Gwid asked in Nature.

Gerif was breathing heavily and shaking with fear. “The dogs came. They attacked in the middle of the night and ripped up the ground. They dug into the burrows and started killing anyone they found. Joshua led a counterattack, but it was no use. There were too many dogs. He was killed at the beginning of the battle.” Gerif paused. She was crying. When she regained some of her composure she went on. “They were ripping up the dens and burrows just killing anyone they found. Many of the Mischief made it to our escape route. They will be able to hide until the dogs are gone. Thank Zezek we have always planned, and” she paused to catch her breath, “we had advance warning from a friend. We, me, and my attendants were trapped between the dogs and the farmyard. We escaped to the oak tree through a borrow, and now we have no way to get to our emergency shelter, and the dogs are sure to find us by morning.”

Gerif sounded like she was near collapse from fear and exhaustion.

The dames asked Gwid to explain what was happening. She said, “The dogs attacked the rats in their burrows, and now Gerif is trapped here.” Then she called the attendants to be quiet and still. They stopped immediately.

“Gerif, where is this emergency shelter you mentioned? Gwid asked.

“It is due east of the Mischief about a morning’s walk. Gerif replied.

“Can you find it in the dark?” Gwid asked.

“Yes, it is a white building people have abandoned, and it has a tall, pointed tower in the front. People used it to pray to their God. Now it is empty.” Gerif replied.

“OK, up to the roof.” Gwid told Gerif.

The coop roof was flat and tilted towards the oak tree. During the day, it was a shady resting place for small birds. Gwid had never had the urge to get up on the roof. There were too many other pleasant places to sit. Now she found herself surrounded by twelve rats which included Gerif.

“Now,” Gwid said in hushed tones to the assembled group, “I want everyone to stay here and stay quiet. We know the dogs are out and about tonight, but they will not smell you if you stay still and be quiet.”

There was enough moonlight and Gwid could see them all nod their heads.

“Gerif, jump on my back.” Gwid said.

Gerif leaped onto Gwid’s back and asked, “What are we doing?”

“We are going to find your emergency shelter.” Gwid said.

“But you should not be flying with your wound.” Gerif said.

“I am fine, and this is an emergency.” Gwid said.

Indeed, it was an emergency. Gwid knew that the dogs would find them easily. She knew that what she had told Gerif, and the attendants, was not true. The dogs would pick up their scent very easily even if they were quiet and still. She was trying to keep them calm. Now, she told Gerif to hold on and leaped into the air. She felt Gerif grab hold of her feathers and press her little body as close as she could to Gwid’s back.

It was a beautiful night sky, partially cloud covered with the half-moon above. The air was clean and cool. It would have been a great night to be on a migration flight. She was flying due east and she could see the lights of the town off in the distance.

“Is your shelter before the town or in the town?” Gwid asked.

For the first time Gerif raised her head and took in the view. “Oh wow, I have never seen anything like this in my entire life!” She exclaimed.

“Sweetie! Before the town or in the town?” Gwid asked.

“Before, just on the edge.” Gerif said. “There, just in front of you, I see it.” Gerif said.

Gwid saw the building with the tall, pointed tower. She circled once, then landed next to the tower. Gerif jumped off Gwid’s back and ran up to one of the open windows in the tower. She gave a shrill whistle and waited. Another whistler replied and within a few moments, several rats appeared, and they exchanged hugs and greetings.

Gwid interrupted the celebration. “Gerif! Come, we must work fast.” Gwid said. Gerif told the group of greeters to wait there. She told them that they would return with more survivors.

Back at the coop, Gerif organized the attendants and told them what was happening. Gwid would fly them, one at a time, to the shelter where other survivors would meet them. There was a sense of urgency in her voice and the attendants heard it. They too knew that being still and quiet would not keep the dogs from smelling them.

The operation went smoothly. A rat would jump on Gwid’s back and she would fly the white building and land on the roof where her passenger would jump off. Gwid returned to the coop and would do it again. Gerif stayed at the coop and was the last one to leave.

Before Gerif jumped off Gwid’s back, she climbed up to Gwid’s neck and gave her a hug. Then she jumped down and stood in front of Gwid.

“What will you do now?” Gwid asked.

“We will rebuild the Mischief, but stronger and deeper than the old one.” Gerif said. “And, this time, the dogs will find it much harder to attack us.”

Gwid said, “I am sorry you have lost your dear Joshua. He was a good rat.”

Gerif said, “Thank you for those kind words.” She was upright, sitting on her rear haunches, with her front paws crossed in front of her chest. She looked down at her feet and said, “You have given me my life and I thank you. I am in your debt.”

Gwid said, “The debt was mine to pay. You owe it to another.” Then she added, “I must hurry and get the other.”

Gwidi made seven more flights carrying Gerif's attendants to safety.

Back at the coop, the dames were still awake and wanted to know what had happened. They had heard all the noise on the roof, but they were not sure what was happening. Gwid told them the whole story. As she was finishing, they all heard the dogs outside sniffing around.

Punch stuck her head out of the coop door and said, "What do you dogs want at this time of the night?"

One of them said, "We can smell rats. Have you seen them?"

"They were up in the tree a while ago." Don't know where they went. I think they went back into the tree." Punch said.

"OK, give us a honk if they come back. You know those things carry disease, don't you?" the dog said.

Punch got back into her nest and said to no one in particular, "Why would the dogs attack the rats now?"

Salom replied, "I heard two dogs talking the other day and one said that Ralph was mad at the rats because they were interfering with the harmony of the farmyard. He said Ralph was going to do something about it."

The coop was quiet for a few moments, then Suzzan said, "I think we should keep a close watch on our dogs. I am not sure they are really protecting us."

It was the first time Gwid had heard any of the dames mention their safety.

Chapter: Gerif elected leader. Ralph hears the After-Action Reports.

Gerif navigated her way from the roof to the little room where the bell hung and out on to a rafter where she could see the big room. Rats were everywhere. It looked like most of the Mischief had escaped with minor injuries. She quickly made her way to the front of the room and found the lieutenants under the window with all the colored glass.

As she approached, the rats started saluting her. "Why are you doing that?" she asked.

The senior lieutenant responded, "With Joshua gone, we have elected you our leader."

Gerif thought for a moment. Then she nodded and started asking for reports. There was no time to lose. The dogs could pursue them, and it would be the end of the Mischief.

Ralph and his three lieutenants were debriefing the night's operation. They concluded that the primary objective, kill Joshua, had been achieved. Also, their secondary objective, destroy the Mischief, had also been achieved. The Mischief of rats would no longer be a problem for Willow Hills Farms Security.

Ralph also told the group he expected the Wild Goose to leave very soon, and she did not pose a problem for them. He had reports that she was not encouraging any of the other geese or chickens to leave the farmyard. However, they would, never again, let a wild creature take up residence in the farmyard. The next one just might try to encourage geese or chickens to escape, and that would be unacceptable.

Before Ralph ended the meeting, one of the lieutenants said, "We are missing one dog. He didn't return from the raid."

"Which one?" Ralph asked.

"Booger." the lieutenant replied.

"Do we have any details?" Ralph asked.

"We are pretty sure he's dead." The lieutenant said. "He and another dog, the big one, looks like a cartoon, they call him Goofy, went in on the left flank. Goofy said they ran into a whole army, must have been a couple hundred. Booger sacrificed himself and ran smack into them. They were all over him. Goofy said he was lucky to get away."

Ralph stretched his neck, shook his head, and sneezed. "That would explain why we ran into such light resistance. The main body was going to attack our left flank, but Booger stopped them. Anyone see his body?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "They must have carried him off. Just like rats. They probably ate him."

Sub Chapter: How Booger became a part of the Mischief

Tiki had lived in the city all her life. It was a miserable existence where everything was dirty, and life was one constant battle to get enough to eat. When she realized she was pregnant again, a great sadness fell over her because none of her pups had ever lived more than a few days. One lived long enough for her to name. She called him Bingy and gave him every ounce of nourishment she had, but it was not enough. This time she decided it would be different.

All the dogs told stories of life in the country, outside the city. The stories told of green fields, and lots of food, fresh air, and clean water. They all said it was a joy to live there. Unfortunately, no one knew how to get there. Tiki decided she would just start walking until the city was gone. Everyone said it was “outside” the city, so there must be a way “out” of the city. That was her reasoning, and she was desperate to leave.

She walked all day and found an empty building to sleep in that night. The next day was much the same. The following morning, she came to the end of a street and there was a large open field, much like the city park but bigger. She could not see the end of the grass, and when she walked to the crest of the first hill, all she could see was grass and hills.

Her first day in the country was just as every story had foretold. There was plenty to eat and clean water to drink. There was game everywhere and grains and roots, even bugs that were bigger and tastier than in the city. By late afternoon, she had eaten her fill and was tired. She did not want to sleep in the open, so she used a trick she learned from a dog who had escaped from a circus.

Tiki found a large tree and ran at full speed. Two body lengths before she hit the tree, she leaped into the air, and, using the force of her forward motion, ran up the side of the tree trunk. She stopped when she could feel her weight was about to pull her down. Now she could sleep knowing that a predator could not surprise her. She did discover later she was sharing this tree with a racoon, but she did not bother it and it did not bother her. She had done this many times on the side of an abandoned building to get to the second floor, without the racoon, of course.

Tiki noticed that half a moon had passed since she left the city, and she could feel that she was gaining weight. She thought she felt her pups squirm, but it may have been her imagination. She wondered how many

she would have and if they would be boys or girls. Never had she ever thought that life could be this pleasant and clean.

It was morning and she was still resting in another large tree, when she heard a cat who was after something. She did not like cats and decided to see what was happening. Shortly, she came upon a cat, several feet up in a tree. The cat had cornered two young rats who were trapped in a squirrel's nest inside the tree. Normally, Tiki would just walk away from such a situation, but that was because she usually did not have any energy to spare. Now, she had plenty of energy.

The young rats were crying and calling for help. The cat was yelling at them and reaching into the tree trunk but could not grab them. Tiki interrupted the attack.

"Hey cat," Tiki yelled, "leave the children alone. You're going to scare them to death."

The cat looked around, and, thinking it was well out of the dog's reach, said, "Mind your own business, Mutt. I'm going to eat them to death, and it's fine with me if they die of fright. Buzz off!"

Tiki turned and walked away. When Tiki was far enough away from the tree that she could reach full speed at the base, she turned and started running.

Tiki hit the base of the tree at full speed, ran up the trunk and was sitting beside the cat in an instant. The cat was so shocked, it jumped backwards to get away from Tiki, and found it had jumped too far away from the tree and had nothing to land on but the ground below. The cat hit the ground running and was never seen again.

When Tiki was done laughing, she looked in the hole and, in the dim light, could see two young rats still shivering with fear. She could also see that one of them was injured. It looked like the cat had landed a solid scratch on the smaller of the two, a young doe, and she was bleeding.

The two young pups were too scared to leave the squirrel's nest. Tiki found some plantain leaves and made a bandage for the doe. The young buck had to apply the bandage under Tiki's instruction. The pups' names were Joshua and Gerif.

It was late in the day, so everyone settled in for the night.

The next day, the pups climbed on Tiki's back for the ride home. As Tiki came to the crest of the last hill, she saw, spread out before her, the largest garbage dump she had ever seen. It was like a dream come true. The contents of every dumpster in the world in one place.

They arrived before noon, and the children were in their parents' loving care once again. The leader of the Mischief, a doe named Merilee, along with Joshua and Gerif's parents, thanked Tiki profusely. Tiki accepted the thanks graciously and wanted to slip quietly, but the rats created an impromptu feast, with more food than Tiki had ever seen in one place.

Tiki stayed that night and every other night for the rest of her life. Her son was born next to the Mischief. She was surprised that she only had one pup but was so happy he was healthy. She named him James for no reason at all. She just liked that name. Among his rat friends, his nickname was Booger due to an unfortunate sneezing accident. However, he was always called James by them when Tiki was around.

He was as big as the largest rat the day he was born, and he grew rapidly. He was quickly as big as Tiki and the two of them became the protectors of the Mischief. No cat, or any other predator, ever came near the Mischief.

End Sub Chapter

Chapter: Lightning strikes Willow Hills Farm. Hazzel asks for help.

Half of the next morning had gone smoothly, and the five dames were atop the hill enjoying the shade of a tree. Gwid's command of the Farmyard language continued to improve and, as she talked, she sounded as if she had been raised on a farm. There was more breeze than normal that morning, and she sniffed the air and said "Ladies, it is going to rain, and thunder, soon. We should get back to the coop."

"How do you do that?" Suzzan asked. "Every time it is going to rain, you know it before it happens."

"It is simple." Gwid said. "You can smell the rain coming. It is the same with lightning and thunder."

"Well, maybe you can, but I ..." Suzzan's words were cut short by a blinding flash and the loudest clap of thunder any of them had ever heard. They were all knocked down by the explosion.

The lightning had hit almost in the center of the chicken coops. There was a cloud of dust rising from the spot where it had hit. Most of the chickens on the east side of the coops had been knocked to the ground.

Slowly, they were getting back on their feet, and staggering awkwardly around. It was then that the dames saw that several chickens were not moving. Shill made a motion to run towards their coop, but Gwid said, "Stay where you are. We are as safe here as anywhere."

That afternoon, when they all had decided it was safe, they returned to their coop. The topic of the day, of course, was the lightning strike. None of the four farmyard dames had ever seen lightning that close before. Gwid was relaying a story about the time lightning had hit a tree in her family's nesting area when they saw Hazzel and five hens approaching their area. The chickens and geese had always had a courteous relationship. Neither of them would say they were friends, but nor were they enemies. They did not compete for food or space. Everyone at Willow Hills had a "live and let live" attitude towards other species. They did not avoid each other. They just did not get together. Gwid's singing had been the first interaction between them, but the relationship had not developed further.

The six hens lined up in front of the geese, and after, what only could be described as an awkward silence, Hazzel spoke. "Today, twelve of our sisters were killed by the lightning. Zezek is caring for them now. Unfortunately, all of them had just begun brooding. We have found replacement hens for all but two of the nests, and we understand that none of you are brooding yet. We would like to ask if two of you would consider sitting on these nests that will otherwise not hatch."

The four farmyard geese stood perfectly still and tried not to make eye contact with Hazzel. They were not used to helping other creatures. As a matter of fact, the first time any of them had helped someone was when Gwid fell into their midst.

"I will." Gwid said without hesitation.

The six hens were shocked and rocked back on their feet. Seconds passed.

"And so will I." Punch said.

Now the three other dames were also shocked, and everyone seemed happy, including Hazzel. But she was not happy. Going to the geese for help was the last thing she wanted to do, and she made the move reluctantly. If she had thought the wild one would volunteer, she would not have made the move. Everyone had agreed that Gwid would soon be gone, that she wanted to get back to her flock. Hazzel would not have asked Gwid to sing if she thought the goose would be around for more than another full moon. Gwid had far too much influence already. Now she would be staying even longer. Hazzel knew she would have to act soon, but for now she would wait until the eggs hatched.

Chapter: Punch learns to be a mother and gains a deeper understanding of Zezek.

Gwid and Punch were finally settled into their brooding nests, after a flurry of activity on everyone's part. A large contingent of hens hastily moved the two nests of eggs down to the coop where the dames lived. As that was being accomplished, the dames rearranged the interior of their coop. They had never realized how much room they had. When they were finished, there was space for ten nests, five on either side of the coop.

Gwid decided to take the nest on the southwest corner of the coop, while Punch opted for the one diagonally across the aisle from Gwid. That way, they reasoned, they would be close and could talk, but would not crowd each other. That would leave six open nests, and Suzzan, Salom and Shill would not be crowded either. It all happened long before sunset.

The first night was a bit strange for all of them, given that none of them had ever brooded eggs before. Gwid had sat in, many times, while one of her sisters would feed or answer nature's call. But, neither Punch nor any of the others had sat on eggs or been anywhere near a brooding dame. It was all very strange for everyone.

In the morning, Suzzan and Shill relieved Gwid and Punch so they could have a break. Salom said she would be happy to help when needed. Everyone was getting involved. After the bustle of the morning calmed down, the two surrogate hens settled into serious brooding.

After a long period of silence, Punch asked Gwid, "Why did you volunteer? I know you were anxious to get back to your family, and now, you will be delayed even further."

Gwid thought for a moment then answered with her own question, "First, you must tell me why you volunteered?"

Punch had not expected Gwid to toss her question back, mainly because she was not sure, herself, why she had volunteered. It was a reflex reaction, the kind that had labeled her a hothead in the past, that tendency to react without thinking. Now in the silence of the coop, she was trying to understand her actions.

"I am not sure." Punch said. "Perhaps because I have come to respect your opinion. I know that if you had not volunteered, I wouldn't either. Maybe, I am just impulsive and don't think enough about the consequences. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Yes, it does." Gwid said.

There were a few moments of silence and then Gwid continued. "I volunteered because it was the right thing to do. In the wild, we all depend on each other. Zezek's laws say. 'Protect yourself, protect your family and give aid to creatures in need, and you will be rewarded. My family is safe. They will wait for me. These little ones need me now.'"

Punch said, "I never heard the last part of that law, the 'give aid to creatures in need' part. Is that something from the wild where you see a creature that is hurt, and you feel badly for them, so you help them?"

"No. You give aid to creatures in need because someday you may be in need, and you pray another creature will come to your aid. Like you and the other dames did when I fell injured into your midst. I would have died if it were not for you and for the rats, Joshua, the Healer, and her aides. I was rewarded because I had helped other creatures, then I was helped, and now, I am helping again."

This was a new concept for Punch. She said, "Do you know that we almost didn't help you? We weren't sure what to do, and then Ralph and Georgie came over and wanted us to stay away, and we said no and brought you inside."

“Yes, I know you almost left me in the lake, but you didn’t. Deep down, you knew what was right.” Gwid said.

Punch asked, “Can we know something we really don’t know? Do you think that Zezek talks to us inside our heads so that we can do what is right without thinking about it?”

“You have just seen it happen twice to yourself. What do you think now?” Gwid said.

Punch fell silent, while Gwid started humming a tune from the Songs of Life.

Chapter: Hazzel affirms her friendship for geese. She give Ralph her blessing on his plan.

Oscar was under Hazzel’s nest waiting for her meeting to end. He had to swallow hard to continue dealing with her since he knew she had approved the raid on the Mischief. He had lost several family and friends in the raid. Among the missing was his good friend Tire.

Oscar popped his head up next to Hazzel when he heard the last of the other hens leave.

“Quite a busy day yesterday, no?” he asked.

“Much more than I care to handle again anytime soon.” Hazzel replied. “But I am sure you know all about that. What else has happened? I heard you rats were all dead. Speak! I’m in a hurry today.”

“First, we are not all dead. We are very much alive and in business. The big news is that everyone is wondering why chickens have gone to geese for help. Seems like every chicken wants an answer to that one.” Oscar said.

“Well, that is why I am in a hurry today.” Hazzel said. “The uproar is so loud; I didn’t need you to tell me that. I have prepared a sermon that will put everyone’s mind at rest. And you note this, rat, and spread the word. Zezek’s laws say, ‘Protect yourself.’ That part, everyone knows. This part is less known or understood. ‘And if you are in need, seek help from any creature.’ And that is what we did. Geese are fowl just as we are, and we need to be closer to them. By the way, I glad you are not dead.”

Oscar was letting the concept soak into his head. Never had he seen a chicken turn to a goose for help. Never had a chicken expressed any concern for a rat's life. "And what message do you want me to spread?" he asked.

"Tell them the geese have always been our friends. The fact that one of them is now our lead vocalist for our quarterly services. And now, they are helping us save some of our chicks." Hazzel said.

Oscar went to the roof and hid under the eaves, and watched the matriarch walk with her entourage to the west side of the farm. At the gate, one of the dogs let them pass, then they walked behind the barn. He jumped back into Hazzel's quarters, through the floor, and into the burrow. He took the tunnel that led to the barn, and a few minutes later, he was perched on the second floor of the barn watching Hazzel and Ralph talk. Their minions were back out of earshot, but Oscar, in his vantage point, could hear them. They were still on the initial pleasantries. Good, he thought. He had not missed anything. Then the real discussion began.

"So, why have you called me all the way out to this smelly barn?" Hazzel asked.

"I think it is time we did something about our visitor?" Ralph said.

"And, just what do you have in mind? I tried to give her the chance to fly away, but she wants to stay and raise these chicks. She may be here forever now." Hazzel said.

"Yes, but you don't want that, and I don't want that. She is drawing your people away and she is making my job tougher. I think she is going to try to take a lot of chickens with her when she leaves and that is not acceptable.," Ralph said.

"So, what are you proposing?" Hazzel asked.

"I do not have a plan yet. I wanted to get your approval before I did anything because there will either be eggs or chicks involved and this must look like a wolf, or fox, or coyote, or something vicious killed her." Ralph said.

Hazzel shook her head and ruffled her feathers and thought for a moment. Then she said “I don’t care if you must kill all of them. Just get rid of her. When do you think it will happen.”

“Probably after the eggs hatch. She will be inside until then. Let’s see what happens because she could decide to leave once they hatch. If she doesn’t.” Ralph ground his right front paw into the dirt.

Chapter: Punch learns to sing. Gwid’s life before Willow Hills Farm. Zezek provides.

On the third day they were brooding, Punch noticed that Gwid was constantly humming, something she had not done before. Finally, she asked, “Gwid, why are you humming so much?”

“I am talking to the little ones so they will know me when they hatch.” Gwid said.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?” Punch replied.

“Did you know your Mama when you were hatched?” Gwid asked.

“Yes, of course. I knew her by the sound of her.....” Punch stopped. She had answered her own question. This was the very beginning of a long and on-going conversation. The two dames had very different life experiences, more than they had realized.

Punch had been hatched and raised on a farm. She stayed with her mother, sisters and brothers while she was a gosling and their mother taught them how to talk, things they should do, and things they should not. Beyond that, there was very little to learn. The people supplied food and water, kept them safe from predators, and gave them shelter. When her mother went away, they all missed her, but that was also the way it was on a farm. Creatures came and went and there was never an explanation as to why or where they went. It was just a part of life.

Gwid, on the other hand, was raised in the wild. From the moment she was hatched, her mother was her protector, and constant companion. She learned to be always aware of her surroundings and live in harmony with nature.

Subchapter: The twins are born.

Dechrau, who was also known as Dandaloo, sat on her nest patiently waiting for the eggs to drop. This time, she was sure it would happen, unlike the two previous seasons when her nest remained empty. This time, she could feel it.

As the sun past midday, Aris returned with her meal, which consisted of wild oats and wheat. He did not say anything, but just placed the stems within her reach and quietly roosted close enough to touch her. Assured their family was protecting them, they both dozed. When they awoke, there was one egg in their nest. They waited, but no more arrived.

It was slightly larger than the average egg, but that fact did not make up for the fact that it was only one. After several days, and assurances from her mother that one egg was not unusual for her first brood, Dechrau settled in to hatch her clutch, and sing the brooding songs and the songs of Zezek her mother had sung to her and her siblings.

The pecking inside the egg started as the full moon pulled the sun into the sky for the start of a new day. It was then that Dechrau and Aris discovered the egg contained two little hatchlings, twins, a most unusual occurrence among geese. And the little goslings proved to be as unusual as their birth.

From the very beginning, it was apparent they were different. They did not talk to each other, at least not in words that anyone could hear. They could communicate without talking, moved and act as if they were one goose with two bodies, and sometimes their mother thought they could read her mind. Dechrau named them Gwid and Eiddew after their grandmothers, but she called them Gwidi and Eiddi. As they grew, so did their abilities.

They could sing. Geese from other flocks would travel great distances just to hear them, especially during each full moon when they sang the Songs of Zezek in beautiful harmony. Whatever feelings of inadequacy Dechrau Oshe listened to her children sing.

Among the flock, they were known as the best food gatherers and the most desirable sitters for young goslings. They could out fly and out maneuver hawks and other predators, and could hear, smell, and feel a threat before anyone else was aware that danger was near. But the Games was where they were truly outstanding, especially playing Skit.

Each season, before the migration, the flocks would gather on the largest lake to hold a series of competitions, the biggest being a Skit. The object of the game was to put an apple in the opposition's nest. Each time a team was able to deposit an apple, a member of the opposite team retired. The match was won by eliminating all the other team's players. The twins excelled at Skit. The sisters developed a maneuver that the other team had difficulty stopping.

One sister would toss an apple in what seemed to be a direction where no bird could possibly catch it, while the other, knowing beforehand where it was going, could swoop in at the last second and catch it. This play would give the twins team the win. This worked well, except for the last match they played before Gwid's accident.

Eiddi hurled an apple into a blank space in the sky and Gwid was on it in a flash. Unfortunately, so was a drake on the opposing team. He anticipated their move and dove in at top speed. The result was that he and Gwid collided in mid-air and spiraled down into the lake. And that was the beginning of Gwid's relationship with Ganda, her soulmate for life.

Their courtship was brief, even by goose standards, but Ganda was blessed by Dechrau and Aris, and he joined their flock for the migration south. Ganda and Gwid built their nest together that year, but no eggs were produced in their first mating season. And, contrary to what the twins expected, their relationship grew even closer, which they did not think possible.

As the flock gathered for the migration north that year, they were on a foraging trip to build up fat for the trip, when Ganda dropped down low to investigate a strange group of geese on a small lake. Gwid heard a loud crack that sounded like lightning hitting a tree and saw Ganda go limp and fall to the water below. Then she saw the dog jump into the water and start swimming towards the lifeless goose. She dove straight at the hound and hit it directly in its head, digging her claws in as hard and deep as possible. The dog, bloodied and howling with pain, retreated to the shore. She wanted to go after the people responsible, but she knew that would be a waste of her life. Rarely did a goose get the better of a people.

With the help of several others, Gwid managed to take Ganda's body back to their flock's nesting site where she grieved for her loss. In the morning,

her family helped carry Ganda's body to the top of the highest tree. They draped it with leaves and used ivy vines to hold it in place. They knew that when they returned the next season, his remains would have flown to be with Zezek. The migration started on the next sunrise. It was at the end of this trip that Gwid attacked the stalking falcon and sustained the injuries that caused her to fall into the Willow Hills Farms. Some of her flock said the attack was an act of selfless courage. Others said Gwid poured all her grief into that fight.

End subchapter

Gwid and Punch sang together, and Punch absorbed and learned all the songs, and she learned to speak Nature. It became her language of choice when speaking with Gwid.

She also learned about living in the wild and how Zezek provides and protects all creatures in nature.

Food is provided everywhere to all creatures, but they must find it. No bird or four-legged animal or fish or snake or insect should expect food to be placed in front of them. They must hunt and search for it has been provided.

All creatures are given shelter, but they must find it. The shelter is on the ground among the trees, the rocks, and the grasses. The materials are provided, and the creatures must gather them together into a shelter. Some may dig holes in the ground while others bring sticks to build a nest.

Protect yourself and your family! Zezek has given every creature the special skills they need to avoid and evade the predators. Birds can fly away from most threats, but there are flying ones to deal with. Others can become invisible and blend into the trees and grass. Still others are strong. Always be aware of your surroundings. Know when a threat is near.

Protect your flock. Protect others when they are in need, and they will protect you in your time of need. Ignore them and they will ignore you.

Every creature has its place in nature. Each creature has tasks to fulfill.

It was a lot for Punch to absorb, but she remembered it all. She had never realized how much there was to learn about living in the wild. She always assumed the wild thing lived just like the geese and chickens. The food

was there, and they ate it, and the dogs kept them safe. Now she was seeing the world in a totally different light. She wondered if she would survive in nature, or would she end up being some creature's meal on her first day off the farm. She was not sure she wanted to try.

Chapter: The peeps emerge from their shells and are named. Gwid and Punch establish a routine, training begins. Gwid rejects Hazzel's offer.

The first chick started pecking on its shell just before the full moon. As the little ones emerged into the light, Gwid named her hatchlings. The first was Cyn followed by Allie, Tryd, Peddi, Pummy, Chewy, Seith, and Wyth. Of Gwid's brood, eight of the nine eggs hatched the first day, and one just sat motionless. Days after the others hatched, when she was sure the egg had no life, she carried it to the top of a tree next to the lake. She named the unhatched peep Bachy.

Of Punch's brood, all seven of her eggs hatched the day after Gwid's. She drew on her new language skills, and dubbed them Golygus, Hardy, Ewylly, Gally, Cyf, Cry, and Buddy.

In total they had fifteen chicks peeping and eating everything in sight. The first two days were bedlam, then Gwid brought her peeps under her maternal control. Punch observed, learned, then did the same. They also decided that the chicks first language would be Nature. They would learn farmyard soon enough.

Each morning, the two dames took their adopted children down to the lake to drink and bathe. Gwid had found a shallow spot where the chicks could enjoy the water without fear of a predator coming from below. Then the newly formed family would start the days gathering as they marched in a ragged formation, pecking and eating anything in their path. Punch was amazed at the amount of food they found every morning.

"Where does it all come from?" she asked Gwid.

"Zezek provides." Gwid said.

Punch became a teacher and a student.

Each foraging expedition also provided the setting for lessons about living in the wild. Gwid taught them to be constantly aware of their surroundings. Look, listen and feel what is happening, she would tell them. Also know the creatures around them. She identified the birds, the four-legged animals, and the insects they encountered. Every day was another lesson. Sometimes she would disappear, then suddenly she would pounce on them from above.

“If I had been a fox,” she would say, “you would be my breakfast.”

At mid-day, everyone took a nap, except Gwid and Punch who remained awake and on guard. When the chicks awoke, it was playtime. The two geese led the little flock to the top of the hill, under the oak tree, where the little ones would run down to join in the games the others had been playing all day.

Shortly after the broods hatched, Hazzel and a delegation of her lieutenants came down to the lake while the peeps were frolicking in the water. Gwid met them before they came too close to the water, while Punch kept an eye on the children and an ear on Gwid and the chickens.

“Good morning, Hazzel.” Gwid said, “Have you come to admire our broods or is their other matters you wish to discuss?”

Hazzel, never being one to beat around the bush, got right to the point. “We have come to take the peeps back to our flock. Surely, you must be tired caring for them, and they need to learn to be chickens. Now...”

Gwid cut the matriarch off but did so politely. “Hazzel, I am sure you are aware that any bird, be they goose or chicken or other, who hatches an egg also dedicates herself to care and protection of the hatchlings. In the wild, we call it the cuckoo’s child. Even when the hatching was not voluntary, the hatchling is cared for. We will raise our children until they are big enough to decide on their own where to live. Does that meet with your approval?”

Punch took a quick glance away from the chicks and could see that Hazzel was puzzled and confused by Gwid’s position. Hazzel knew that if the chicks returned to the compound, they would be motherless and left to fend for themselves, where here, at least, they had caring mothers, even if they were geese. After a long pause, a silent one because Gwid just stood there waiting for an answer to her question, Hazzel cleared her throat and spoke.

“Well, that does take a load off my mind because I thought you would not want to raise a brood of chickens. I am so glad you feel the way you do, and I will carry your message back to the flock. I am sure it will meet with their approval. Is there anything you need, or can we help you in any way?”

Gwid nodded to give Hazzel deference. “We are fine and in need of nothing. But, should a need arise, we will come to you first.”

Hazzel nodded back and said, “Good day then.” And the troop turned around and marched back to the chicken compound.

When Gwid joined Punch and the delegation of hens was well out of hearing range, she asked, “Was all of that true, what you told Hazzel?”

Gwid said, “I may have made up some of it.”

Geese did not smile a lot, but Punch could swear Gwid did that morning. Only Gwid knew that the smile was only partially caused by politely dealing with Hazzel. The other reason for joy in her life was she and Eiddi mentally reconnected. Gwid concluded that her wounds from the encounter with the hawk were now completely healed. She felt whole again, and so did Eiddi.

On the crest of the rise, west of the lake, Ralph and Georgie watched the proceedings.

“Doesn’t look like our wild visitor plans to go anywhere soon. George said.

“Nah she doesn’t. I am going to have to keep a closer eye on her. She can stay or leave anytime. I am more concerned about who tries to go with her” Ralph said.

Chapter: Oscar initiates a counter offensive.

Oscar had been a busy soldier since learning of Ralph’s plan to get rid of Gwid. The first day had been gruesome. He did not dare let Ralph out of his sight for fear that he would miss the details of the attack on Gwid. He needed help and he found it from two young bucks, Jobo and Lance, who were part of the barn scavenging team. He drafted them on the spot and sent Lance back to the mischief to get additional help.

That day, Oscar and Jobo stayed close enough to hear Ralph, but far enough away so the dogs did not catch their smell. Help arrived in the late afternoon when one of the mischief lieutenants showed up with a full

surveillances team. Oscar was told to report back to the Mischief. He took Jobo with him.

The center of the Mischief was now the abandoned white, people building with the pointed to tower. Burrows connect it to the old Mischief, and the rats found they were more secure being spread over a much larger area. Additionally, they started to colonize the area between the farm and the building.

He went straight to the big hall where Gerif, her lieutenants, and the full assembly of elders were gathered. Everyone was sitting on top of a large table people had left in the building. The table sat at the far end of the large room, next to the window filled with colored glass. The setting sun cast large colored shadows on the group, which was so large that one of the Assembly members fell off the edge.

The only information they had was that Oscar had discovered a plot to kill Gwid. This news had the entire Mischief upset.

Gwid had become a sacred creature in the Mischief since she rescued Gerif and her attendants. They viewed her as their savior. That status had been strengthened every time she sang at the chickens quarterly religious service (All rats went to the chickens' prayer service. The chickens just did not know they were there). A threat to Gwid was a threat to every rat and they were already united to do everything in their power to keep her from harm.

Oscar stood in the middle of the Great Circle and explained to the assembly what had happened. He took Jobo and Lance with him in case there were any questions for them. Both young bucks were trembling with nervous energy. They had never even been to a gathering of the Assembly, let alone in the Great Circle.

Oscar explained how, on a hunch, he had followed Hazzel to the barn and saw and heard Ralph and Hazzel plotting to kill Gwid. He told them Ralph was the initiator and Hazzel had simply agreed to the plan even if it meant killing some of the chicks.

The Assembly immediately voted to launch a full scale offensive to stop any harm to the revered goose who they had come to love and worship. Gerif appointed Oscar a lieutenant and placed him in charge of the operation.

She pledged any resources he needed. Oscar, in turn drafted Jobo and Lance as his minions. Before nightfall, a team of does and bucks were always within earshot of Ralph. Anything Ralph said or did was recorded.

Chapter: The date of the attack is set. Booger, Tire, and the missing rats return.

Oscar directed the surveillance operation from the top of the oak tree next to the goose coop. The tree provided excellent coverage of the area, and the tree hollows were connected to the burrows, giving them quick access to the Mischief.

Two days before the quarter moon, Oscar saw Jobo running across the field between the chicken coops and the oak tree. This was unusual because he was supposed to use the burrows to avoid being seen by the dogs.

Jobo ran up the trunk of the tree and stopped, panting heavily, and gasped out “The attack will come the morning of the full moon.” The young buck told his boss that Ralph had hired three strays to attack the goose coop before sunup. The attack would be timed so that it happened just before the chickens started gathering for the service. Ralph figured it would hold the most impact and impression upon the chickens that they needed protection and life outside the fence was dangerous.

Back at the Mischief, Oscar stood in front of Gerif and the Lieutenants and gave his report. The planned attack was one of the worst scenarios they had imagined. Multiple dogs attacking the coop. In this case, the rats planned to ambush the dogs before they got to the coop. They knew it would take a large force and they would suffer a high casualty rate, but there was little else they could do.

In the middle of the discussion, one of the sentries leaped up on the table and yelled “There’s a dog coming towards the building.”

Gerif ordered everyone to the eaves of the roof. If they had to, they could attack in force.

From the eaves they could see something coming through the tall grass. It was big, whatever it was. Then a dog's head came into view above the grass.

It was Booger! And Tire was riding on his head!

When they emerged from the tall grass, all the rats listed as missing in the raid were behind them.

Chapter: Booger tells the story of their escape

Before the dogs raided the Mischief, Booger had arranged for his escape from the farm. He believed it was only a matter of time before Ralph or one of his lieutenants discovered that he had only joined the Willow Hills Farm Security Pack to spy on the dogs. His loyalty was to the rats of the Mischief who have been his comrades most of his life.

He would position himself on the far left of the attacking dogs. Tire would have a large squad of rats who would jump on Booger and appear to kill him and drag his body away. Booger had convinced Goofy to be next to him. Goofy was not too bright and could easily be convinced Booger was dead. Goofy was also a coward, despite his size, and would run away at the first sign of real trouble.

Once away from the main part of the attack, Booger and the rats with him planned to circle around to the far side of the Mischief campus and meet at the abandoned white building with the pointed tower. Unfortunately, they were forced to go further north than they had planned and became lost.

Unable to find the meeting spot, and disorientated. The troop of dogs and rats fled north towards the swamp where they knew they would not encounter people or dogs. They traveled all night and, in the morning, arrived at the swamp.

Their luck did not seem to be getting any better in the morning because they found themselves in the middle of a wild goose nesting area. As dawn broke, the geese had them surrounded. It was then that Tire, standing on Booger's back looked at one of their executioners and screamed "Gwidi, is that you?"

"How do you know that name?" the goose asked.

Tire had a lump in his throat. He was nervous. “I know Gwidi, Gwid, because she fell into the farm beside our Mischief and she was injured and our Healer saved her, and we all love her because she sings so beautifully, and.”

The goose stopped him. The aggressive tone in her voice had changed to one of friendship and warmth. “You are the ones who saved my sister. Bless you.”

Booger, Tire, and the rest of the rats were accepted into the flock. The injured ones received care, and everyone was fed. They decided to stay with the geese until everyone was healed and they could travel together.

When the time came to leave, Eddi and three other geese flew over the area and laid out a route for them to find the abandoned White building with the pointed tower.

When the excitement of the “lost ones” being found, calmed down. Gerif called Booger and Tire over to her. She was excited because they now had a connection to Gwid’s family, and she hoped they could enlist their help to stop the attack.

“Booger, Tire, can you get in touch with Gwid’s sister?” Gerif asked.

Tire and Booger laughed. “Of course.” Tire said, “Do your stuff Booger. “

Booger turned his nose to the sky, and let out a long, low howl. Almost immediately, four geese came into view and landed in front of the building.

Chapter: Eddi and the geese join the attack Booger saves the day.

Gerif reassembled the War Council on the floor so the geese could participate, and after much discussion, concluded that their only chance of stopping three dogs would be an ambush with a large force of rats and geese. The rats would attack first on the dog’s flank, followed by the geese from above. Hopefully, they could inflict enough damage on the dogs, that they would retreat. They knew the loss of life and injuries, both rats and geese, would be high.

Booger had been silent throughout the entire discussion, then “Wait, wait” he said, “we don’t have to lose even one life or limb in this fight. We are putting our weakness up against their strength.”

One of the geese spoke up, "So what are our strengths?"

Booger responded, "I remember listening to Gwidi tell the dames about the day the people killed her Ganda. Their dog swam out to get his body, but Gwidi would not let him have it. She landed on his head and pushed him underwater. The dog gave up and retreated. She let the dog go only because she wanted to try to save Ganda. Unfortunately, she couldn't. Had she chosen to, she could have killed the dog simply by going back and landing on its head and pushing it under."

"Sure," said one of the rats, "but how are we going to convince the dogs to swim across the lake when they can simply walk in from just about any direction?"

Booger continued, "First, the area between the goose coop and the fence by your, now destroyed, Mischief is the only area that is not patrolled by the dogs. Second..."

Another rat interrupted, "Why is that?"

"Why isn't it patrolled?" Booger said. "It isn't patrolled because Ralph isn't worried about the geese trying to escape."

Again, Booger was interrupted. "Wait, what? The dogs are protecting the chickens, aren't they?"

Booger sighed, "The dogs aren't protecting the chickens. The dogs are there to make sure the chickens don't leave. Have you ever seen a dog watching the fence?"

There was a long silence in the room.

"Ok, let me finish here," Booger said. "Second, entering the farm at the corner where the lake ends, and the farm begins is the closest point of approach to the coop. Ralph will want his assassins to get in and get out as fast as possible."

One of the geese said, "And why will these dogs swim in instead of walking through the destroyed Mischief?"

"Because there is one thing that dogs find scary, snakes! We will find these dogs and convince them the whole area is full of snakes and the only why

they can get in is to have us lead them. And we will lead them into the water.” Booger said. He could tell some of them needed more convincing.

When he finished explaining the plan, and everyone agreed, his first told Oscar to return to the surveillance team. They could not chance missing the identifying the assassins. Next, the geese left to recruit a team to attack the dogs in the water. One of the geese asked how they would be able to see the dogs in the dark, and Booger assured them they would see them. By now, everyone was trusting Booger’s judgement. Finally, he had Gerif gather the entire Mischief and send them into the woods to gather as much Fairy Fire as they could find. This little-known substance would give the team the ability to see their advisories in the dark.

One of the young rats asked, “What’s Fairy Fire?” His mother told him it was old tree bark that glows in the dark. “What’s it for?” the child asked. His mother said she wasn’t sure, but she thought it would be used to help stop the bad dogs from hurting Gwidi. That was good enough for everyone and the entire Mischief headed into the forest.

Oscar immediately drafted Tire onto the surveillance team which now consisted of about thirty rats. Ralph could not scratch his ear without a rat knowing about it. Their break came the next day when Ralph met with the three dogs, the day before the attack. The whole surveillance team now followed the three dogs. Ralph had given each of them a large bone as partial payment for their work, and the dogs retired to the edge of the town, next to a tall brick wall, to eat their fill. Oscar, backed up by Tire, decided to take the initiative. Time was now too short to wait for instructions.

As the dogs ate, Oscar yelled from the top of the wall, “Hey dogs, you better enjoy those bones because you’re going to work for them.”

The largest of the dogs, and the obvious leader, said “What do you know about work, rat? You eat garbage and like it.”

“I know you are going to cut through the old rat mischief and attack the geese tonight.” Oscar said.

All three dogs stopped gnawing their bones and looked at each other. Then the leader said in an aggressive tone, “How do you know that?”

“Ooooh, hit a nerve, did I?” Oscar taunted. “Wonder who else knows?” Oscar danced around on the top of the wall and laughed. “Rats know everything. And we also know that without our help, you three mutts will never make it through the old mischief.”

Now the three dogs whispered among themselves. Then the leader asked, “And why won’t we make it through the mischief without your help?”

Oscar kept laughing and dancing. “Because there ain’t one of you mongrels that ain’t afraid of snakes, and that mischief is crawling with ‘em since we rats left.”

The smallest of the three said, “Snakes! Jake, you never said nutten bout snakes! Take your bone back. Ain’t no way I’m goin there.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” the leader said. “This rat says he can get us through the mischief. I don’t like rats, but let’s hear him out.” Then he turned to Oscar. “OK, rat, what are you proposing, and how much do you want?”

Oscar stopped dancing and got serious. “I know a way around the snakes, and I want half of your food.”

The three dogs went into their huddle again. After several minutes they decided that the snake story was real and they could agree to give the rat half of their food because once they had done their job, they could kill the rat and any of his friends.

“OK, Rat, you have a deal.” The leader said.

Oscar then gave the dogs instructions. They would meet on the northeast corner of the mischief when the moon was directly overhead. Then Oscar told the dogs he would leave and make sure everything was ready. He would meet them at the designated place and time. What the dogs did not know was that Tire and several scouts were hidden around the area to make sure the dogs did not try to go on their own. If they did, the alert would go out and the alternative plan would be activated. Rats knew you could not always trust dogs to keep their word.

Back at the white building with the peaked tower, everyone was working to be prepared for the attack. Most of the mischief was in the woods gathering Fairy Fire. A lot of it would be needed to make the primary plan work.

The geese had returned to their flock to practice their parts and select who would be involved. By evening they had settled on nine geese who would make the actual attack. Eddi wanted to be one of the nine, but she was excluded because she was emotionally involved.

Chapter: Attack

The dogs showed up at the appointed time, but only because Tire and the scouts had pelted them with rocks to wake them up. Oscar climbed up on the leader's back and directed the group forward. When they turned the first bend in the path, the dogs saw that the path was illuminated by the blue-green glow of the Fairy Fire.

"Wow!" the three said in unison. They were awestruck by the illuminated path in front of them.

"It's to make sure we stay on the right path and snakes hate this stuff. Can't be too cautious with snakes, you know." Oscar cautioned them.

As they moved further into the forest, the grass was taller and formed a wall on either side of the path. The full moon was directly overhead and gave additional light for their passage. Above, the flight of geese could clearly see the dogs' progress because they appeared as dark spots on an otherwise, glowing path. They emerged on the east side of the lake, a good run north of the south bank that bordered Willow Hills Farms.

The bank of the lake where they stopped was glowing with Fairy Fire, as was the bank where the dames would gather in the morning. Now Oscar explained that the only way to get to the geese without going through the snake-filled, abandoned mischief was to swim there.

"Oh goodie," one of the dogs said. "We get to swim too!"

"Shhh," the leader admonished. "You'll wake the geese."

Before the dogs started their swim, Oscar and Tire attached a large patch of Fairy Fire to the back of each dog's head with pine pitch. "That's so you can keep track of each other. Good luck." Oscar said.

The dogs started swimming.

"OK," the goose flight leader said. "This is it. Let's do it." And she peeled off, followed by eight others. Each of the first three geese took aim at one

of the glowing patches moving through the water. The full moon gave them additional assurance they would hit their marks. They hit simultaneously, forcing the dogs' heads underwater. In rapid succession, two more geese hit each dog.

Chapter: Ralph retreats.

It was midmorning, the next day, and Ralph was in the middle of a training session when one of his lieutenants interrupted him. "You better come see this Boss."

The lieutenant led him to the west edge of the lake, just in front of the barn. There Ralph saw why the wild goose was still able to sing that morning. Before him were the carcasses of the three assassins he had hire to kill Gwidi.

"We found them on routine patrol. I think one of them met with you last week." the lieutenants said.

"Does anyone know what happened?" Ralph asked.

"Nothing, this is the way the sentry found them." The lieutenant replied.

OK, get them hauled out of here." And Ralph left with the stub of his tail pointing down.

Later that day Ralph and Hazzel met behind the barn. He told her he was not going to try again because he knew the word would get out that these dogs died working for him, and dogs were a superstitious lot.

"Why would the word get out? We are the only ones who know." Hazzel offered.

"Yea," said Ralph, "you, me, and every rat that ever stepped on to Willow Hills Farms. They are probably out there right now spreading the word. Heofon, I think they had something to do with this. You cannot trust a rat." Ralph spit.

Up in the barn, Oscar, Tire and Jobo did a little dance.

The surveillance team continued to follow every move Ralph made, just in case he changed his mind. The all agreed, you cannot trust a dog.

Chapter: The chicks learn about their mothers,' and they have to make a decision. Gwidi sees her time at the Farms growing short.

Since the chicks had hatched, Gwid and Punch had led their broods on the same path. First, they went to the lake, then went east till the until the shoreline turned north where the fence started. At that point, the little parade turned south and feasted among the high grass and bushes that grew over the fence.

They would go all the way to where the fence turned west. There, everyone would rest in the shade of a large maple tree. The chicks would bury themselves in the soft feathers that covered their adopted mothers' bellies and nap. After the nap, they would retrace their steps and arrive back at the little hill with the oak tree next to the goose coop, where the chicks would play games with other chicks their age.

One evening after the games, as they were returning to the goose coop, Golygus asked, loudly, "Aunt Gwidi, why don't we just go down to the compound and eat there, and then we can play all day? Wouldn't that be fun?"

Gwid had told Punch this question would be coming. "Yes, Goly, that would be fun, but what would we do if the food wasn't there, or if the other chicks ate all the food before we got there? Would that be fun?"

Goly was quiet for a few steps then said, "No, that wouldn't be fun at all."

"Well, that is why we go out and find our own food, so we won't be unhappy and hungry." Gwid said. She knew the subject wasn't closed, and would be revisited, along with other questions that were brewing in their little heads.

Gwid and Punch had become mother, aunt, sister, and teacher to their broods. Fortunately, whenever Gwid had a question, she could send it to Eiddi, who could ask their mother.

After the second quarter of the third moon, Gwid called the little flock together for a meeting shortly after mid-morning. They were in the southeast corner of the farm, where few chickens ever ventured. Even the dogs did not come out this far. The food was abundant, and everyone had already eaten their fill. Gwid had the chicks form a circle with Punch directly opposite her.

“I want you all to listen very carefully.” Gwid said. When they were all settled, she began. She told them about the day the lightning struck and killed their mothers, and several other mother hens. So many were killed that there were not enough hens to sit on all the eggs. Hazzel had to come to the geese and ask for help and Punch and Gwid volunteered.

Gwid paused, waiting for a sign of understanding or a question.

“Why did you help?” someone asked.

“We helped because we already loved you.” Gwid said.

“But you didn’t even know us!” was the response.

“We loved you even before we knew you, just as you should love others even when you don’t know them. That is how we survive in the wild. We look out for others when they are in need, and they will look out for you if you are ever in need.” Gwid said. She waited to let the lesson sink in, then she continued. “We loved you before and when you hatched, we loved you even more.

“And, why do we have to hunt for our food while the other chicks are given all they want. Why do we have to worry about predators when the dogs protect everyone else?” Allie asked.

“We, Aunt Punch, and I, wanted to be sure you knew how to survive in the wild, because some day, you may have to do that. I know it isn’t likely, but you can never be sure. Life often takes unexpected turns.” Gwid said. Again, she paused, waiting for a question. It was a point she had recently covered and knew they still questioned the wisdom of working while others were playing.

“So, why are we here today?” Cyn asked.

Gwid replied, “Today, you are old enough to start making your own decisions. You can stay with us, and continue to learn about living in the wild, or you can now join the flock and play games all day and be fed by the people. It is your choice. We will still love you either way.”

“Do we have to decide now?” Cyn asked.

“No,” Gwid replied, “you can decide in your own time.”

The group was silent for a while, then Pummy said, "I'm hungry.," and the flock started feeding again.

Later that day, after the games, Chewy, Wyth, and Hardy did not return to the goose coop. Gwid was not surprised. She had seen a brother, sister or cousin leave the flock to join farm geese, and they were never seen again. She did not understand it but knew it had happened.

The morning after the hatchlings saw their third full moon, Gwid led the tiny flock down to the water and waded in until she was floating.

"Everyone, come now. Time to learn how to swim." She said.

Punch got a nervous look on her face and said, "Gwid, chickens can't swim!"

"Punch, don't you know that all birds can swim? It is all in our feathers. Herd them into the water. They are big enough that no fish is going to have them for lunch." Gwid said.

The group waded as far as they could, then stopped and stared at the water. Finally, a bold chick, Ewylly, one of Punch's girls, took that last step and she was floating. The group gasped, then cheered, and started plunging in after her. The rest of the morning was spent learning how to swim. The chicks could not move as fast as goslings because they did not have the webbed feet, but they made up for it with enthusiasms. They were naturals. Their buoyancy was also helped because they were not as fat as the chicks in the big flock.

On the second day, Gwid led them to a small island in the middle of the lake. The island was unlike anything the chicks or Punch had seen before. Except for a narrow strip of land at the edge of the water, tall grass, weeds, and wild bushes covered everything. They also found the most delicious berries, something they had not encountered on their previous forages. The chicks ate their fill, but only after Gwid gave them the nod that the food was safe. There were also nuts and seeds that were new to them. Everyone spent the morning eating their fill and, following Gwid's lead, stamping pathways through the tall grass. In the center of the island, there was a tall oak tree surrounded by a good-sized clearing. The troop paused there at midday, and everyone took a nap. Except for Gwid. She perched high in

the oak and kept watch. When the two broods awoke, they got their first flying lesson.

Gwid spread her wings and glided to the ground.

“Ewylly, come here and jump on my back.” she said.

Ewylly obeyed.

“Now hold on.” She said.

Gwid spread her wings and flapped, taking off and flying to the top of the oak. She told Ewylly to get off and stand on the tree limb. When the chick was off, Gwid asked “Are you afraid?”

“No.” Ewylly said. “Uh I’m not sure, maybe, yes, I am scared.”

“Why Ewylly? You are a bird. You can fly.

“Everyone says we can’t fly, and I have never seen a chicken fly.” Ewylly said.

“OK,” Gwid said “you cannot fly. Just spread your wings as far as you can, close your eyes and pretend you are flying. Let the wind blow through your feathers.”

Ewylly closed her eyes and stretched her wings out as far as she could. A gentle breeze was blowing, and she felt her body growing lighter. It was a pleasant feeling and she truly felt like she was flying. It was at that moment Gwid kicked her little behind and she was airborne. She opened her eyes and gasped. She was heading straight for a tree.

Ewylly leaned her head to the left and, much to her surprise, she flew to the left and missed the tree. She could see the water slightly to her right and she leaned again and glided to the lake. Her landing was a little rough as she splashed in headfirst. When she surfaced, she immediately looked around, and saw Gwid right behind her.

“You see, little one, you can fly. You are not like those fat-butt hens who spend all day eating. You work hard and you are slim, like a bird in the wild. You can fly!” Gwid told the excited chick.

“I’m going to do it again.” Ewylly said, and before Gwid could stop her she was back on the island. She and all the other chicks were trying to climb

the tree and start flying. Punch started helping any chick that need a boost to get up the tree. It was not long before none of them needed assistance.

The rest of the day was a flying circus. The chicks discovered they could flap their wings and get up in the trees by using their feet to catch hold of the bark. With this method, they were able to get higher and higher. Then when they leaped in the air, they were flapping and flying. Before the sun started setting, Peddi had flown all the way around the island.

Gwid called the little flock together. Once they had settled down, she told them they had to keep their flying a secret for now. The other chickens and the dogs would not view this as good news. Gwid was especially worried about the dogs and what they might do to stop them. Cyn interrupted her.

“But the dogs protect us.... don’t they? She asked.

Gwid lowered her head down close to the chicks and spoke in a near whisper.

“You can plainly see that the dog make sure that nothing can get into the farmyard, right?”

Every chick nodded in agreement.

Gwid continued, “That also means that nothing can get out of the farmyard!”

Cyn spoke up again “But they are protecting us.”

Gwid looked around as if she were making sure no one else was listening to them. “Have you ever noticed that all the guard dogs have their backs toward the fence?”

The group, beaks hanging open, nodded their agreement.

“If their backs are to the fence, how could they see something getting through the fence?”

There was a long pause. Finally, Gwid broke the silence. “Little ones, let this be our secret. In due time, we will let everyone know what we can do.” There was another pause. “Now, before the sun sets, lets swim back to our coop and get a good night’s rest.”

Chapter: Sickness Visits the Chicks

Gwid, Punch and the little flock kept their secret by only flying on the far side of the island. Several weeks had passed and the flying students were learning and getting stronger every day. Still, they could not fly any distance without getting very tired. Gwid told them it would take time.

The quarter moon came and Gwid sang at the morning service. Everyone agreed her singing was getting better. After each service, there would be a parade of chickens who walked up the hill to thank Gwid for her inspirational performance. Gwid, of course, returned their thanks.

This service was very moving for Gwid because she realized it was time to return to her family. The morning breezes were turning chilly, telling her that fall would soon be upon them. It was time to migrate, and she wanted to be back in the Wild. The chicks were old enough to survive on their own. Besides, Punch would be here to look over them.

When the last chicken had given their thanks, Gwid paused to just drink in the view. The sun was fully up, and the dew was disappearing from the grass. She could feel the warmth returning to the air.

On the far side of the chicken coops, she could see a big red truck being loaded with cages full of young chickens who had volunteered to go north to fight a locust plague. They had been told they could eat their fill every day until the plague was over. Brave young chickens she thought, but how strange it was that there was a locust plague. She had heard the legends of the insects and how they would eat everything in sight, but the stories all told that no locust had been seen for many generations.

She returned to the coop to find everyone upset. Pummy was sick. His head was hot, and his stomach ached. He had not been able to eat or drink anything.

Gwid was the only one who had any experience with sickness, and she jumped into action. She had to get Pummy to a healer as fast as possible.

“Punch, help Pummy climb up on my back.” She said.

Punch obeyed, and they soon had the little sick chick in place. She thought of flying to the white building but opted instead to seek her flocks’ healer. It

would be unwise of her to give the dogs a signal that the rats were still operating in the area.

“I am going to fly him to our healer in my flock. Please stay here and keep the chicks inside. I will return before nightfall.” With that, Gwid leaped into the air.

She immediately started mentally talking to her sister. She was not sure it would reach her over such a long distance, but it did. Eiddew responded immediately. From their earliest days, all they had to do was think and the other would answer.

“I need a healer for one of my chicks.” Gwid thought.

“She will be waiting. I will meet and guide you.” Gwid heard in her mind.

Shortly, Gwid saw Eiddew flying at full speed straight ahead. She looped upside-down, then arched into a circle and came up beside Gwid right-side up.

“You always did like to make a grand entrance.” Gwid said when her sister was flying beside her.

“I love you too!” Eiddew said. Although they had not seen each other all summer, they had been communicating every day since Gwidi’s head had healed. She continued, “Lady Grey will be waiting for us in the square. How bad is your little one?” The square was the center of the nesting area where the geese, who were not hunting, would gather.

“He is sicker than any bird I have seen. Do you remember when that drake got into the awful smelling fruit?”

“Yes.” Eiddew replied.

“Like that, but he hasn’t had anything weird to eat. He woke up this with it, and none of the other chicks have it.” Gwidi said.

Eiddew saw the nesting grounds ahead. They were in the center of a swamp the flock had used for generations. It provided all the protection they needed from people and predators, and it had an abundance of food.

“Here we go. Follow me,” she instructed.

Eidew went into a gentle dive, keeping her speed slow. She did not want Gwidi to lose her passenger. She leveled off just before a hammock of trees, and weaved between the trunks, landing on a large patch of ground where the bush had been trampled down from a season of nesting. Lady Grey, the Flock's Healer and four attendants were waiting for them. As soon as Gwidi landed, they surrounded her.

Lady Grey started examining the chick immediately, touching him in various places with her beak. Then she looked in his eyes and said "Someone has been eating stink bugs! We will get him fixed up right away. Can he stay overnight?"

Gwidi gasped a long sigh of relief. "Of course," she said. "But I must get back to the other chicks. Are you sure it is not too much trouble?"

"You go back. We will be fine, won't we Pummy?" And Lady Grey led the procession towards her nest."

As soon as they were away, Gwidi was surrounded by family and friends, all wanting to know what it was like to live in a farmyard. It turned into a bit of a party. After more time than Gwidi wanted to spend away from her chicks. The sisters embraced and Gwidi spread her wing and took off.

She was so happy to have spent time with her flock. Gwidi decided today would be her last day at Willow Hills Farms. Tomorrow, she would sing her last Quarterly service, bring Pummy back to the Farm and say her Goodbyes and Farewells to everyone and leave. It was time. It was time. With that decision made, she scanned the sky for any threats. Finding none, she tilted her body into a gentle dive that would let her glide all the way to the Farm.

Suddenly, her body was slammed by what felt like a solid wall, but nothing was there. She was stunned and falling. Gwidi shook her head and cleared her mind. She righted herself and started flying again. She realized that she had not hit anything solid. It was a terribly strong stench of death, so strong, it had almost knocked her unconscious. She had smelled death before, but never was it so powerful. There must be a great tragedy nearby and it smelled like a mass of birds had been killed. Perhaps, she thought, she could help. Gwidi made a sweeping turn and picked up the scent.

Not too far away, she found the origin of the death smell. It was coming from a building about the size of the Farm's barn, but only one story. Gwidi saw a small hammock on the far side of the structure. She found a perch there so she could observe what was happening. Without doing it intentionally, she had landed next to an old crow, who was enjoying an afternoon nap. Looking around, it appeared there was a whole flock of crows waiting for something.

The old crow woke up when Gwidi landed on his branch. He looked at her and said, "Good afternoon, Lady Goose. How does this day find you? Pleasant, I hope."

"I am well. How does your day fare?" Gwidi replied. It was a formal greeting between them.

"I will be better," the old crow responded, "when I have had a decent meal. They seem to be taking their time today."

"What is this place?" Gwidi asked. Before her ebony companion could answer, Gwidi gasped, and a shock ran through her body. There, on the right side of the building, was the red truck she had seen that morning. Most of the cages were still on the truck and two dogs were starting to unload the crates. Gwidi was so shocked, she lost her footing and fell off the branch. She regained her balance just before she hit the ground. The crow flew down beside her.

"Are you Ok? Can I help?" he asked.

"Yes, help me. What is happening here? I smell death everywhere and I see young chickens being led into a building from which the smell is spewing. Are those helpless chickens being slaughtered?" Gwidi was mentally and physically shaken. This cannot be true.

"Oh, my dear child. You are truly from the wild if you do not know what is happening here" the old crow said.

When Gwidi calmed down, the old crow enlightened her. What was before them was a slaughterhouse. Every chicken that lived on the Willow Hills Farms would eventually be brought here and slaughtered for the meat. None would escape. A cage is taken off the truck and the dogs guide each chicken to the little swinging doors. They tell the chicken they are going to

be sprayed with a liquid to protect them from the locust and they should hold their heads up high. The chicken steps on to the moving walkway, holding its head high, they are whisked through the swinging doors. Gwidi could see all this happening before her eyes. Now the shocking information came.

Once inside the swinging doors, a mechanical hand came out and grabbed the chicken by the neck and a blade sliced the bird's head off. A hose dropped down and drained the blood out of the body which was then dipped into a vat of boiling water. As the body came out of the water, a plucking machine stripped the carcass of feathers. Once all the feathers were gone, the intestines were vacuumed out and sent to another area for further processing. The body was carried to a truck for transport to a store to be sold. None escaped death.

While the old crow was talking, a group of crows had gathered around to see what the commotion was. Gwidi sat in stunned disbelief. Slowly the information sunk in. This is why the people fed the chickens. This is why the dogs guarded the chickens and made sure none escaped. It was unnatural. All creatures should be able to enjoy life and death was inevitable for all, but to be raised and slaughtered in the prime of youth was not what Zezek had intended.

Gwidi had to clear her mind. In a very soft voice, she began singing the Song of Grief, lamenting the untimely, tragic, and early death of loved ones who will never be seen again. The crowd of crows grew larger, and when she finished the second verse, one of the crows said, "It's Gwidi from Willow Hills." The assembly of crows cawed and flapped their wings in appreciation. The appreciative noise brought Gwidi to her senses. She realized she had to get ahold of herself.

"Wait, how do you know me?" she asked.

The old crow responded, "We listen to you at every quarter moon, dear. You have inspired many of us. We just stay out of sight because the people shoot us when they stay us."

Gwidi had now regained control of herself. Her maternal instincts kicked in and her thoughts were now about saving her children. She realized she should have known people did not give food to animals without expecting

payment. She had to get back to the Farm and get her chicks out of harm's way before it was too late. Some of them had already talked about fighting the locust plague.

The old crow thanked Gwidi for her inspirational singing and wished her well. He detailed a group of young crows to fly with her to make sure she made it to the Farm safely.

After Gwidi and her escort departed, the old crow called one of his lieutenants. "Saxon organized a protective detail. My wing feathers tell me something is going to happen, and I want to be on top of it."

Saxon nodded and started barking orders, and a large group of crows assembled.

It was getting dark when Gwidi arrived at the Farm. She thanked the crows for their protection and went into the coop. She did not notice that they did not leave. Instead, they flew to the eastern border of the Farm and perched out of sight and listened.

Chapter: Gwidi leaves the Farm.

Gwidi called Punch to the roof of the coop. Punch, like Gwidi, was numb and sat in stunned silence for a long time. Then, she, like Gwidi, felt her maternal instincts engage. Her first thought was rage, but she knew rage would do nothing to save her chicks.

"What should we do?" she asked Gwidi. The Wild Goose stretched her neck and asked, "Are you ready to leave the Farm?"

"I was ready before you got here," Punch responded.

"Good, get our chicks together. I'm going to find Gerif. We'll need the rats help," she said. Gwidi knew it would take too much time to fly all the chicks to her flock's nesting area. They needed something closer, like the White building.

It was not hard finding Gerif. As soon as Gwidi landed on the roof of the White building, a sentry alerted Gerif. They met in the little room where the bell hung. When Gwidi started to tell Gerif about the slaughterhouse, Gerif stopped her. She knew all about the slaughterhouse and apologized to her

goose friend. It was a subject that never came up. Gerif just assumed that Gwidi knew what happened to farm creatures. She reached up and hugged Gwidi. Then asked how she could help.

Gwidi wanted to bring her chicks, and Punch's chicks to the White building. She could not stand the thought that they could be carried off in that red truck and be so brutally slaughtered, even for another day. Her plan was to bring the chicks to the to stay with the Mischief until day light, then they could all fly to her family's nesting area. It was also imperative for her to act because her flock was preparing to migrate, and she was not sure how she could handle migration with a group of chickens who had just learned to fly.

Gerif said the Mischief would be happy to have the chicks stay with them for one day or one year. They were welcome. She hugged her goose friend again and watched as Gwidi flew towards Willow Hills Farms. She was about to leave the roof when she heard wings flapping behind her. She turned to see Hebrides, the chief of the Kelpies Murder of Crows.

The rats and crows were not exactly enemies, nor were they friends. However, they had a lot in common. Both traded in information, and both were hunted by people, and people often used dogs to do the hunting. So, they shared a dislike of people and dogs. The moonlight outlined the bird in silver and made its eyes glow yellow. To Gerif, he looked like an apparition from Heofon.

"Good evening, Hebrides. I did not know crows were nocturnal. What brings you out on such a brilliant night?" Gerif said.

"Opportunity," the old crow said, "let's get out of the brilliant moonlight before some owl has us for breakfast."

The two moved into the bell chamber, and Gerif was careful not to let the crow get between her and her escape route.

Hebrides began, "I had occasion to meet your friend Gwidi today. She discovered that people kill and eat every chicken they raise. She thought it to be a very ill-mannered practice."

"You have not lost your capacity for sarcasm, Hebrides." Gerif said. She was not going to say anything until she knew what the old bird was up to.

Hebrides grunted and paced back and forth a little. “I am always shocked by the brilliance and ignorance of our wild friends. They know so little about people and how they operate. I’m surprised any of them are still alive.” Hebrides said.

“What do you want Hebrides?” Gerif asked. She did not trust him and wanted to end this conversation as quickly as possible.

Hebrides stopped pacing and became serious. “I want us to join forces and strike back against the dogs and people. I am tired of watching our kind being slaughtered because eat the bounty Zezek provides. They shoot us and poison us. They sick the dogs on us. I smell an opportunity here and I think you also have caught the aroma of revenge for the loss of your Joshua.”

Gerif agreed, and the two left to bring their lieutenants together. They were about to hatch a plan.

Chapter: Gwidi moves the two broods to safety.

Gwidi stepped off the roof of the White building, relieved she had a safe place for her chicks to sleep tonight. The cool evening air helped clear her mind. Events were moving too fast for Gwidi. She could tell her emotions were still in shock after seeing the slaughterhouse and learning what happened inside. She knew she was not thinking clearly, and she knew when mistakes were made. She was also distracted and that was when geese could become prey. She wished Eddi were with her so they could talk face to face.

An owl circling the area saw the outline of a goose flying towards Willow Hills Farms. She arched her back and prepared to dive. This should be an easy kill. Before she could initiate her attack, she was hit, simultaneously, by three crows. She twisted and looped, and when she was upright, prepared to counterattack. However, she saw that the three were backed up by several more crows. The owl decided to look elsewhere for a meal. The crows resumed their protective flight.

When Gwidi arrived at the Farms, she made a slow pass over the yard, checking to see if there was any unusual activity. She saw the red truck

parked behind the barn and decided to investigate. It was loaded with the cages that were used to transport the chickens to their murder. She shuttered with a great sadness, but could see nothing she could do to the red beast to stop it before morning.

The evening was crisp, a distinct autumn smell hung in the air. The full moon illuminated the entire farmyard. Then something strange caught her eye. All of the dogs were sleeping. She slowed her speed and landed, silently, on the roof of the goose coop. Punch and the chicks immediately joined her.

“Quiet! Punch, did you see that all the dogs are asleep?” Gwid whispered.

Punch spoke quietly. “We could dance the Holly¹ on their heads and they wouldn’t wake up. Gerif’s nurses came over and gave each one of them a special treat. They might wake up tomorrow morning.” Punch could not help giggling.

Gwid gave the chicks their instructions. “I know some of you will be tempted to fly. Do not try it. You have never flown at night, and it is quite different from the flying we have done on the island. You will climb on my back and hold on. Spread your wings. This will make it easier for me to fly. When we land on the roof of the White building, Gerif, or one of her attendants will guide you into the little room where the bell hangs. Wait there for everyone to arrive. When we are all there, I will lead you down into the building. Anyone who does not follow these orders will sleep standing up for the next quarter because they will not be able to sit down. Does everyone understand?” Twelve little heads nodded in the affirmative.

“Gwidi?” Peddi asked. “Why are we doing this?”

Gwidi leaned her head down and very quietly said, “We are doing this because your life is in danger, and we must leave. Now, everyone, give me a big hug.” The chicks did.

One by one, the chicks were taken to the White building. As each was placed into Gerif’s care, Gwidi felt her burden lifting. As she landed to carry

¹ The Holly is a dance many geese perform before an impending storm. In ancient times, it was believed the dance would chase away bad spirits that came with a storm. Now they dance for pure entertainment. The Holly is performed by stamping feet, flapping wings and honking as loud as one can.

the last of the brood, Tryd, she was surprised to find Suzzan, Salom and Shill on the roof.

“Is something wrong?” Gwidi asked as she landed.

The three dames looked embarrassed. They looked from one to the other trying to decide who would speak for them. Finally, Suzzan stepped forward.

“We want to go with you.” She said.

“Do you know where we are going?” Gwidi asked.

“Yes.” Suzzan said. “You and Punch are going back to your flock, and you are taking your broods with you.” Suzzan said. Then she took a step forward, cleared her throat, which is not easy for a goose, and delivered a rehearsed speech. “Gwidi, we have grown to love and admire you. You do with ease what we can only dream of doing. You always step forward when help is needed, and you have raised chicks to be as resilient and reliable as you are. We have watched you teach your chicks how to find food in the wild and live in the wild. We believe we can do it. Let us leave with you.”

Suzzan paused and took another step forward. “We also know that something has upset you greatly and you are leaving in haste. We know this was not planned. Whatever evil you are pursuing, we want to help you fight it.”

Gwidi did not hesitate. “Can you fly at night?” she asked the threesome.

Salom spoke up, “We have never done it, but it is a full moon, and we are willing to chance it.”

“Good!” Gwidi said. “Follow me.” She nodded to Tryd, who jumped on her back and took off. The four geese followed her.

Chapter: **Allies Agree**

The five geese and twelve chicks assembled in the large room of the White Building. Gwidi and Punch were busy getting their broods settled. The three other geese were awestruck to be inside a building this large. Shill remarked that the room was so large a goose could fly inside. Salom pointed to the colored windows where the moonlight was casting rainbows on the floor.

Gerif pulled Gwidi aside and said she needed to talk of her. The two left the big room and went into a small room. There, Gwidi was surprised to find the old crow she had met at the slaughterhouse. There was a younger crow with him.

“Good evening, Gwidi.” Hebrides said. “No doubt you are surprised to see me here.”

Gerif spoke up. “Gwidi, I know you met Hebrides yesterday, but he did not have a chance to properly introduce himself. Also, his aide, Saxon is with him. Our Mischief has been trading information with the crows for a long time.”

The two crows bowed and Gwidi returned the gesture. Gwidi’s head was starting to spin again. Too many things were happening too fast. She thought she had recovered from yesterday afternoon and the slaughterhouse. Then the dames decided to join her, which would be a major commitment for Gwidi. Now a random crow she met shows up in the White building. She was using every feather on her body to hide the fact that her head was spinning.

Gerif was ready to speak, and almost got started when there was a scratching at the outside door. “Enter.” Gerif said.

A large dog with a rat riding on its head entered the room. It was Booger and Oscar. Gwidi recognized Booger, who she thought was dead. This was too much, and she turned, as if to leave the room and fell over. Gerif rushed to her side.

“I’m OK.” Gwidi said and got back to her feet. Gerif insisted on a brief exam, which she did, and agreed with Gwidi that she was Ok.

“Booger!” Gwidi said when Gerif had finished the exam. “We thought you were dead.”

Oscan laughed and said, “He just smells that way.”

Booger joined the laughter. “No,” he said. “I have lived with the Mischief all of my life.” He told Gwidi it was a long story, but he had only joined the Security dogs at the Farm to spy on them, and his loyalty was always to the rats. On the night of the raid, he decided it had become too dangerous to stay at the Farm and made his escape. He told her there was more to the

story but would save it for another time. Gwidi said she would hold him to his promise. The room got quiet, and everyone turned their attention to Gerif.

“Gwidi, now that you have got your and Punch’s broods to safety, have you thought about trying to save the rest of the chickens?” Gerif asked.

The wild goose thought for a moment. She had considered trying to save some of the chickens but could not see how anything could be done. There were only so many she could fly out before the dogs woke up and that would probably be the end of it. She did not see how anything could be done. “Yes, I thought about it, but I cannot see any way to help them.” She said.

Gerif said, “What if I told you we have a plan to set them all free?”

Gwidi thought about it. She said she could not see how it was possible. The chickens had no idea how to survive in the wild. Where would they go? How would they eat? How would they protect themselves from predators?

Gerif responded, “I will grant you that everything you said is true. But ask yourself this. Is it better for all of them to die in a slaughterhouse, or to, at least, have a chance to live a full life?”

Now Gwidi was deep in thought. She tapped her right foot and looked at the ceiling. Silently she called for Eddi and asked for help and guidance. She was surprised when Punch came to her side. She had been listening at the door.

“Gwidi, I don’t see how we cannot help giving them a chance to live. It is what you gave me, and I will be eternally grateful. I didn’t know there was a better life out there.” Punch said.

Although Gwidi knew the events of the day had far outrun her thinking, she agreed that she would do what was necessary to help the chickens escape certain death for a chance at a full life, even if the chickens did not know they wanted a full life.

Gerif told Gwidi the only thing she had to do was sing the Song of Dying at the quarter service in the morning. When she was done singing, she should fly to the safety of the White building. The rats and crows would do the rest.

She then explained the details of the plan. Then everyone set about preparing for the morning.

Chapter: Swan Song

The chickens were out in force, mostly to hear Gwidi sing. There was a rumor that this would be her last performance because she was leaving to join her flock for the migration south. Everyone, even the heretics, wanted to hear this performance.

Just after the service started, a commotion started in the middle of the assembled group. Rats were going through the crowd telling everyone that the dogs had killed all the young chickens who had volunteered to fight the locust plague. They killed them and cut their heads off. Instead of fighting locusts, they were being fed to dogs and people for food. Today, the rats said, the dogs were going to kill everyone in the farmyard.

The disruption spread to the entire farmyard. At that point, Gwidi began singing the Song of Dying.

The Song of Dying gave expression to all the fears creatures had about death. Gwidi sang as loud as possible, and she could see the lyrics were reaching her audience. The chickens were pointing and screaming, some believing, some doubting the sick rumor that had taken over the service. The Song of Dying made the rumor real. Hazzel, at the head of the service, had lost all control. As the sun illuminated the farmyard, the scene was one of total chaos. Then the crows came.

It was like a black cloud passing over the farmyard. Hundreds of crows came each carrying two severed chicken heads from the slaughterhouse. As they passed over the chickens, they dropped the heads onto the screaming chickens. No one would have thought the chickens could scream louder than they were, but as the severed heads hit them, they turned hysterical.

The noise woke the drugged dogs who were totally confused by the screaming and the spooky song the goose was singing. They had trouble standing and were shaking their heads to clear their minds. They were totally unprepared for what happened next.

The doubters among the chickens changed to believers. The entire flock now believe they would be killed by the dogs. The massive blanket of white moved as if it were one body, first surging south, then west, then back to south. Now, with a blood chilling screech, fled south.

A crow, who witnessed the event, told some of his flock mates who were not present, that it looked like an avalanche in the mountains when half of a hillside slid into the valley, except this one was sliding up a gentle slope. Instead of a rumble, the sound was that of a wild beast dying.

There were four dogs in the path of the chickens. They could only duck and hope they would survive. They did survive, but they would never guard chickens again.

Gwidi watched with churning emotions from her position on the little hill. She was horrified that the so many were rushing to what was certain death for some but elated that many would gain freedom for the first time in their lives. It would be a freedom they had never even imagined. As the last of the flock surged over the south fence, Gwidi turned to leave and saw Golygus, Hardy and Allie watching her from one of the limbs of the oak tree.

“I know you want to talk. Let’s go down to the coop.” Gwidi said.

The four of them landed on the roof of the coop and sat in a small circle.

“Do you understand what just happened?” Gwidi asked.

Golygus spoke up. “Yes, we heard Gerif explain the plan. We knew what was coming. We three were elected to come and view the plan execution because we are the best flyers. Also, we know it was the right thing to do. If another creature is in danger, you taught us that we should help them. That is what you did. You knew they were headed for certain death, and you acted to save them.” He paused and looked at his feet.

Gwidi knew something was coming. She waited.

Golygus continued, “Now, we want to help the chickens. They know nothing about living in the Wild, nothing about finding food on their own, and nothing about protecting themselves. We can save so many.....” His voice trailed off. Then he heaved a large sigh and said, “We want your blessing and guidance.”

Gwidi's head was full of reasons why she did not want the chicks to risk their lives to save the other chickens. However, she immediately knew that every reason was based solely on her desire to keep them safe. She had taught them well. They saw a need and were rising to the occasion.

Without hesitation, Gwidi said, "Of course, you will have my blessing, my guidance and support."

The three chicks moved in and hugged their adopted mother. Gwidi folded her wings around them, and the four enjoyed a very warm and pleasant moment.

Chapter: Cui bono?

Georgie was still groggy. He thought it was a food hangover caused by overeating before going to sleep, but it was really from the sweet treat, laced with lavender oil, that one of the rats slipped into his food trough. He had been eating so fast, he did not even notice he had consumed it.

Out in the fresh air, his mind cleared somewhat. He noticed it was a cool morning and strangely quiet. Normally, he did not pay attention to such things, but this morning seemed different. First, he noticed that was no dog on duty. Next, he became aware that the constant chatter of the chickens was missing from the air. Now he was curious.

He walked to the top of the small hill where he could see the chicken coops. The chickens were all gone! Well, that was a surprise. He wondered how they all could have disappeared without him hearing anything. A dog was sitting under the oak tree, just staring off into space. He did not even flinch when Georgie stepped in front of him. Georgie waved his wings.

The dog snapped out of his trance and became aware that the goose was standing in front of him. "You're wanted down at the barn." The dog said.

"What for?" Georgie asked.

"I dun na know. Something about food." The dog said.

Georgie turned and looked at the barn. It was a good distance away, and he thought about flying. However, after flapping his wings a few times, it was clear that he was too heavy to fly, so he walked.

There was no one at the barn when he got there. The only thing he saw was a trail of fresh corn, a treat he rarely got to enjoy. It only took a moment to get to the end of the trail which brought him to a hole in the wall. Inside the hole, he could see a full dish of corn. He stuck his head through the hole.

Georgie never heard the swish of the blade that severed his head from his neck. An hour later his plucked and gutted carcass was cooling in a refrigerator.

Shortly after noon, Ralph was able to get all the dogs together behind the barn and calm them. He told them the chickens had been infected with a brain disease that made them go crazy and flee the farm. Why else, he asked them, would a chicken leave a farm where they were fed every day and had the solid protection of the Willow Hills Farms Security Patrol. All the dogs agreed with Ralph.

He went on to tell them the disease came from the wild goose, and it should have been killed or chased off immediately. Ralph blamed himself for that mistake, noting that he was often too caring. In the future, there will be strict rules regarding such creatures.

Then he surprised everyone with a special treat, a double ration of meat and bones for everyone. He told the pack they should eat, play, and rest because tomorrow, new chickens would be arriving and that meant everyone would have to be alert to keep any from trying to leave. Ralph personally handed out the food.

One of the rats who was spreading the word about the impending killing to the chickens, reported that she saw Hazzel and three of her attendants fleeing to the north of the farm, which was the exact opposite direction the entire flock went. No further information was received.

Chapter: *Acta, non verba.*

All the rest of the chicks and Punch were waiting on the roof of the White building when Gwidi and the three chicks came into view. The nine leaped into the air and flew out to meet them. It was a different experience, all of them flying together. They automatically moved into a "V" formation around Gwidi. They landed on the hard ground where nothing grew beside the White building. It was the place where people left their machines.

Everyone felt it was the end of something special. The chicks were grown and ready to take wing and help the chickens who had fled the farm and were now free. Many would perish, but Gwidi's and Punch's broods would do what they could to save as many as possible. The Goodbye was short. Everyone pressed together for a group hug. Then Ewylly flapped her wings, leapt into the air and the other eleven followed, quickly forming the "V." Gwidi and Punch watched them until they were out of sight.

Suzzan, Shill and Salom joined them on the hard ground. Along with Punch, they wanted to hear about the events of the morning and what had happened to the chickens. News, so far, had been scarce. While Gwidi was describing the Quarterly Service, they heard the rustle of wings behind them. All turned to look and saw Eddi and several other geese land. The dames stared at the gathering mostly because, other than Eddi, all the geese were ganders.

Eddi joined the group and asked, "Are you ladies ready to start learning how to live in the Wild?"

Suzzan was staring at one gander and said, "If the one on the left is my teacher, I am ready." She felt her face go flush and added, "I never looked at Georgie the way I'm looking at him."

Eddi called, "Hockroy, someone wants to meet you."

Hockroy joined the group, and he was followed by several other ganders. The education of the farmyard geese was underway.

Gwidi and Eddi move off to the side. It was afternoon and the sisters had a lot to talk about. They walked to the front of the White building where they met Gerif who said, "I know the two of you will be migrating soon. Will we ever see you again?"

"Yes, I am sure we will meet again. We expect to be back in the Fall. However, if you move, leave us some clues so we can find you." Gwidi said.

The two hugged, as much as a goose and a rat can hug.

Gwidi and Eddi took off and headed for the flock's nesting area. There was a lot to do before the migration started.

Appendix A

Notes on Names and Words

Gwidi: Short for Gwydd which is Welsh for Goose.

Gerif: Geriffa, Wisewoman: A person who provided medical care in medieval Europe. <https://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/4649/what-could-you-call-medical-doctors-in-a-medieval-fantasy-setting>

Eiddew: Welsh for Ivy.

Ivy: As such eiddew was often presented to the bride and groom as symbol of everlasting life, devotion, fidelity, and loyalty. The Greeks also used it to make a crown for Liber the God of fertility as well as poets and other muses.

Heofon: abode of the Gods

Suzzan: A corruption of Zsuzsa, a Hungarian girls name.

Salom: A Hungarian word, in English Shalom, In Hebrew שלום. A Hebrew word meaning peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare, and tranquility and can be used idiomatically to mean both hello and goodbye.

Shill: The name *shillelagh* is the Hiberno-English corruption the of the Irish (Gaelic) form *sail éille*, where *sail* means "willow" or "cudgel" and *éille is genitive iall* meaning "thong", "strap", "leash", and "string", among others.

Punch: Not a goose with whom to trifle. She will punch you.

Chicks that left on second full moon = Chewy, Wyth, and Hardy. When given the choice, these chicks left the brood to play games instead of hunt for their food.

Dechrau = Welsh for Start and Aris = short for arise

Heofon: he meanings fell into two broad categories: heofon as a part of the sky and heofon as the abode of God. However, in some cases the word

also referred specifically to God's power and, in one poem, was possibly miswritten for the word h-eof (lamentation).

Eiddew : Gwid's twin

Gerif: Healer

Gwid's chicks –

Cyn, the first = y cyntaf,

Allie, the second = yr ail

Tryd, The third = y trydydd

Peddi, The fourth = y pedwerydd

Pummy, The fifth = y pumed

Chewy, The sixth = y chweched

Seith, The seventh = y seithfed

Wyth, The eighth = yr wythfed

Bachy, The ninth = unbach

:

Punches hatchlings : Golygus, Hardy, Ewylly, Gally, Cyf, Cry, and Buddy.

From Handsome, beautiful, Willful, Smarter. Quick, Strong, Victory =

Golygus, Hard, Ewyllysgar, Gallach, Cyflym, Cryf, Buddugoliaeth.

Merilee: A corruption of Mary Lee

Hebrides: Islands west of Scotland. Separate but significant.

Saxon: English ethnic group.

Kelpies: Scottish water spirits.

Insill: A corruption of instill.

1. gradually but firmly establish (an idea or attitude, especially a desirable one) in a person's mind. 2. put (a substance) into something in the form of liquid drops.

"She was told how to instill eye drops."

Plantain: This common weed, plantain, has been used for healing for centuries and is known as the "Band-aid plant"! It has a multitude of uses due to its anti-inflammatory and wound healing properties, making it good for healing cuts, bites, stings, and poison ivy rash.

<https://newkingdomwellness.com/the-band-aid-plant/#:~:text=This%20common%20weed%2C%20plantain%2C%20has,stings%2C%20and%20poison%20ivy%20rash.>

Skit

Hockroy: Known to be one who is accomplished at trading goods, a name created for this story. It is a combination of Hock, slang for sell or trade, and roy, meaning king.

Fairy Fire: The bioluminescence created by some species of fungi present in decaying wood. Aka: Fox Fire. This is real stuff.

Facts about geese

<https://www.iowadnr.gov/About-DNR/DNR-News-Releases/ArticleID/2868/8-cool-things-you-should-know-about-Canada-geese#:~:text=Parent%20geese%20teach%20their%20young,with%20the%20adults%20that%20year.>

Map

