

Rosie watched as the owl, responding to Giles' lecture, reached out its wing and picked up a spoon. To Rosie's amazement, she saw that the owl had a complete set of workable fingers on the end of its wing.

*Hands together with wings?* thought Rosie in confusion. *What's going on?*

"Now that's better Annie," Giles said with approval as the owl proceeded to attack the oatmeal with the spoon.

*Annie!* The name exploded in Rosie's consciousness. *That was the name of the owl in Dad's story!*

Annie kept eating as Rosie tried to grasp this new revelation. *Am I somehow in the story Dad's writing? He said that the animals in it were different, and a bird with hands is sure different. Or am I dreaming? It sure doesn't feel like a dream. Dreams are always kind of weird and not-real feeling. This sure is weird but it also feels really real. Everthing is so solid.*

Thinking about it, she began to notice all the little details around her, details that never turn up in dreams but always occur in the actual world. Smells, for instance. In addition to the oatmeal, Rosie realized that she could smell the tangy bite of pine needles drifting in from the outside. She could also smell a slightly musty odor and finally decided that it came from Giles, just now finishing his portion. *Maybe he doesn't bathe very often,* she thought, smiling inwardly.

"Well, that's done then," Giles announced, breaking into Rosie's thoughts. "An' outstandin' fine it was as well," he added immodestly. "If there's one thing Giles Treeleaper can do, it's cook. Aye, and that's tha truth. An' it looks like yer appetite woke up fast enough, even if ya didn't yerself."

With a start, Rosie realized this was true; Annie had cleaned her bowl of every last bit. She watched as Giles grabbed both empty bowls and dropped them into a basket on the cupboard. "That'll do 'em for now," he said over his shoulder to Annie. "We've got tae be on our way tae tha meetin', eh? It'll be startin' soon."

Giles bounded out of the room and onto a branch as Annie watched. With a swish he disappeared over the edge, his tail waving in the air for an instant before lowering out of sight.

After a few seconds Rosie heard some scrabbling on the bark and Giles' head poked back in. "Well, c'mon, will ya? By all that's holy in the Wood, Annie, don't be more of a ninny than ya have tae be. Move!" He waved a paw imperiously at Annie and once again started down the trunk.

Thus prodded, Annie hopped over to the entryway and, after a quick ruffling of feathers, launched herself off the tree and fluttered down to the ground.

Annie watched patiently as Giles moved down the trunk. Rather than leaping down the remaining few feet, he carefully continued his climb to the very bottom and then deliberately stepped off. Pausing for a moment, he stood up and carefully brushed himself off, ridding his fur of a few tiny pieces of bark. He then twisted his body to bring his tail into view and, satisfied with its condition, gave it a quick shake and then turned back to face Annie.

Rosie noticed that he was a good deal slower and more exacting in his movements than any of the squirrels she remembered seeing leaping from tree to tree in her backyard. Such acrobatics apparently weren't a part of Giles's normal repertoire. *Must be an old squirrel*, she thought to herself. *I wonder why Annie is hanging around with him?*

"Don't stand there gawkin', come along," Giles said tartly, giving Annie a light cuff on the beak. "We've got a ways ahead of us yet tae go." Giles moved off at a deliberate pace, limping just slightly as he went. Annie caught up and then hopped directly in front of Giles, forcing him to come to an abrupt stop.

"I don't remember; where are we going again?" she asked.

Rosie was grateful for the question. She couldn't ask it herself and was dying to know more about what was going on.

Giles shooed Annie out of the way and resumed his

march. “Git, git. Ya can ask while we march, ya know. Of all the featherbrains I’ve ever met, yer the worst, d’ye know that?” Giles demanded. “How many times do I have tae tell ya tae listen tae what’s going on around ya? But ya just diddly doodly along, not a care in tha wide world, paying no mind tae anythin’.”

Giles continued to grumble quietly to himself for a few moments more and then continued. “All right, I’ll tell ya again. An’ this time try an’ pay attention! We’re goin’ tae a Called Council. Someone’s stolen somethin’ from the People of the Trees, somethin’ valuable. We’re all gonna put our heads tagither an’ think of how best tae git it back. They’ve said it affects everyone in tha forest and they don’t call councils without reason. So of course I’m goin’. They’ll be needin’ my advice.”

Rosie smiled inwardly. *I’m sure they’ll get an earful of his advice, whether they want it or not.*

“An I’m bringin’ ya along fer yer education,” Giles continued. “Mebbe it’ll help ya realize that the world isn’t a place tae shilly shally through, that ya need tae think fer yerself if ya want tae survive. Anyway, it’ll let me introduce ya around, let folks know who ya are. That’s important, ya know. Any more questions?”

Annie thought for a few moments before answering, “Will we be eating lunch before or after?”

Giles turned to glare at Annie who, to amuse herself while waiting for Giles’ answer, was now trying to keep pace while hopping on just one foot. “It’s gonna be a long walk,” he sighed under his breath.