Opening extract from

The Snow Spider

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CHAPTER ONE
The five gifts

Gwyn's grandmother gave him five gifts for his birthday, his ninth birthday. They were very unusual gifts and if Gwyn had not been the sort of boy he was, he might have been disappointed.

'Happy Birthday!' said his grandmother, turning her basket upside down.

Gwyn stared at the objects on the kitchen floor, none of them wrapped in bright birthday paper: a piece of seaweed, a yellow scarf, a tin whistle, a twisted metal brooch, and a small, broken horse.

'Thank you, Nain!' said Gwyn, calling his grandmother the name she liked best.

'Time to find out if you are a magician, Gwydion Gwyn!' said Nain.

'A magician?' Gwyn inquired.

'Time to remember your ancestors: Math, Lord of Gwynedd, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy!'

'Who?'

'The magicians, boy! They lived here, in these mountains, maybe a thousand years ago, and they could do anything they

wanted, turn men into eagles and soldiers into dust; they could make dreams come true, and so, perhaps could you!'

On special occasions Nain often said peculiar things. Gwyn could not think of a reply.

'There has been an ache in this house since your sister – went,' said Nain, 'the ache of emptiness. You need help. If you have inherited the power of Gwydion you can use it to get your heart's desire.' She turned on her heel. 'I won't stay for tea!'

'We've only just had breakfast, Nain!'

'Nevertheless . . .' She swept away, down the passage and through the open front door, her black hair sparkling in the golden mist that hung over the garden, her dress as gaudy as the autumn flowers crowding by the gate. Then she looked back and sang out, 'Give them to the wind, Gwydion Gwyn, one by one, and you'll see!'

Gwyn took the gifts up to his bedroom and laid them on the windowsill. They looked the most improbable effects for a magician.

'What's she on about now?' He scratched at his uncombed hair. From his tiny attic window he could see Nain's dark head bobbing down the mountain track. 'She travels too fast for a grandmother,' Gwyn muttered. 'If my ancestors were magicians, does that make her a witch?'

His father's voice roared up the stairs, 'Have you done the chickens then, Gwyn? It's Saturday. What about the gate? The sheep will be in the garden again. Was that your grandmother? Why didn't she stay?'

Gwyn answered none of these questions. He gathered

Nain's gifts together, put them in a drawer and went downstairs. His father was outside, shouting at the cows now, as he drove them down the track to pasture.

Gwyn sighed and pulled on his boots. His grandmother had delayed him, but she had remembered his birthday. His father did not wish to remember. There was no rest on Saturday for Gwyn. No time for football matches, no bicycle to ride down to the town. He was the only help his father had on the farm, and weekends were days for catching up with all the work he had missed during the week.

He tried not to think of Bethan, his sister, as he scattered corn to the hens, and searched for eggs in the barn. But when he went to examine the gate, he could not forget.

Beyond the vivid autumn daisies there was a cluster of white flowers nestling beneath the stone wall. Bethan had brought them up from the wood and planted them there, safe against the winds that tore across the mountain. Perhaps, even then, she had known that one day she would be gone, and wanted to leave something for them to remember her by.

'Gwyn, I've something for you.' His mother was leaning out of the kitchen window.

'I've to do the gate, Dad says!'

'Do it later; it's your birthday, Gwyn. Come and see what I've got for you!'

Gwyn dropped his tool box and ran inside.

'I've only just wrapped it,' his mother apologised. 'Did Nain bring you anything?'

'Yes. I thought everyone else had forgotten.'

'Of course not. I was so busy last night, I couldn't find the

paper. Here you are!' His mother held out something very small, wrapped in shiny green paper.

Gwyn took the present, noticing that the paper had gold stars on it.

'I chose the paper specially.' Mrs Griffiths smiled anxiously.

'Wow!' Gwyn had torn off the paper and revealed a black watch in a transparent plastic box. Replacing the numbers, tiny silver moons encircled the dark face of the watch and, as Gwyn moved it, the hands sparkled like shooting stars.

'Oh, thanks, Mam!' Gwyn clasped the box to his chest and flung his free arm round his mother's neck.

'It's from us both, Gwyn. Your dad and me!'

'Yes, Mam,' Gwyn said, though he knew his mother had not spoken the truth. His father did not give him gifts.

'I knew you'd like it; always looking at the stars, you are, you funny boy. Take care of it now!'

'Course I will. It's more the sort of present for a magician. Nain gave me such strange things.'

His mother drew away from him. 'What things? What do you mean, a magician? Has Nain been spouting nonsense again?'

'Come and see!' Gwyn led his mother up to the attic and opened his top drawer. 'There!' He pointed to Nain's gifts.

Mrs Griffiths frowned at the five objects laid in a row on Gwyn's white school shirt. 'Whatever is she on about now? I wish she wouldn't.' She picked up the broken horse and turned it over in her hands.

'It has no ears, Mam,' Gwyn remarked, 'and no tail. Why did she give me a broken horse?'

'Goodness knows!' His mother held the horse closer and peered at a tiny label tied round its neck. 'It's in Welsh,' she said, 'but it's not your grandmother's writing. It's so faint. "*Dim hon*!" I think that's what it says. "Not this!"'

'What does it mean, Mam, "Not this!"? Why did she give it to me if I'm not to use it?'

His mother shook her head. 'I never know why Nain does things.'

'She said it was time to see if I was a magician, like my ancestors.'

'Don't pay too much attention to your grandmother,' Mrs Griffiths said wearily. 'She's getting old and she dreams.'

'Her hair is black,' Gwyn reminded her.

'Her hair is black, but her eyes don't see things the way they used to!' Mam picked up the yellow scarf. 'This too? Did Nain bring this?'

'Yes. It's Bethan's isn't it?'

His mother frowned. 'It disappeared with her. She must have been wearing it the night she went, but the police found nothing next morning, nothing at all. How strange! If Nain found it why didn't she say?' She held the scarf close to her face.

'You can smell the flowers,' said Gwyn. 'D'you remember? She used to dry the roses and put them in her clothes.'

His mother laid the scarf back in the drawer. 'Don't talk of Bethan now, Gwyn,' she said.

'Why not, Mam? We should talk of her. It was on my birthday she left. She might come back . . . if we think of her.'

'She won't come back! Don't you understand Gwyn? We

searched for days. The police searched, not only here, but everywhere. It was four years ago!' His mother turned away, then said more kindly, 'I've asked Alun Lloyd to come up for tea. We'll have a proper tea today, not like your other birthdays. You'd better get on with your work now.'

When Mrs Griffiths had left the room Gwyn lifted the scarf out of the drawer and pressed it to his face. The scent of roses was still strong. Bethan seemed very near. How good she had looked in her yellow scarf, with her dark hair and her red mac, all bright and shining. He remembered now; she had been wearing the scarf that night; the night she had climbed the mountain and never come back. Why had Nain kept it secret all this time, and given it to him now, on his birthday?

'If Bethan left her scarf,' Gwyn exclaimed aloud, 'perhaps she meant to come back.'

He laid the scarf over the broken horse, the seaweed, the whistle and the brooch, and gently closed the drawer. He was humming cheerfully to himself when he went out into the garden again.

Mam kept her word. Alun Lloyd arrived at four o'clock. But he had brought his twin brothers with him, which was not part of the arrangement.

There were nine Lloyds all crammed into a farmhouse only one room larger than the Griffiths', and sometimes Mrs Lloyd, ever eager to acquire a little more space, took it upon herself to send three or four children, where only one had been invited. She was, however, prepared to pay for these few precious hours of peace. Alun, Gareth and Siôn had all

brought a gift and Mrs Griffiths, guessing the outcome of her invitation, had provided tea for seven.

Kneeling on the kitchen floor, Gwyn tore the coloured paper off his presents. A red kite, a pen and a pair of black plastic spectacles with a large pink nose, black eyebrows and a black moustache attached.

'Looks like your dad, doesn't it?' giggled Siôn, and he snatched up the spectacles, put them on and began to prance up and down the room, chest out and fingers tucked behind imaginary braces.

Suddenly it was like other people's birthdays. The way a birthday should be, but Gwyn's never was.

Nain arrived with a box under her arm. 'For your birthday,' she said. 'Records, I don't want them any more.'

'But you've given your presents, Nain,' said Gwyn.

'Don't look a gift-horse in the mouth,' Nain retorted. 'Who are these nice little boys?'

'You know who they are. The Lloyds, Alun and Gareth and Siôn, from Tŷ Llŷr. Don't you ever see your neighbours?' chided Gwyn.

'Not the one with the specs; I don't know that one. Looks like your father,' chuckled Nain. 'Put on some music, Glenys!'

'Well, I don't know . . .' Mrs Griffiths looked worried. 'Ivor put the record-player away; we haven't used it since . . .'

'Time to get it out then,' said Nain.

Somewhat reluctantly, Mrs Griffiths knelt in a corner of the kitchen and, from a small neglected cupboard, withdrew the record-player. She placed it on the kitchen table while the boys gathered round.

'I can't remember where to plug it in,' said Mrs Griffiths.

'The light, Mam,' Gwyn explained. 'Look, the plug is for the light.'

'But . . . it's beginning to get dark.' His mother sounded almost afraid.

'Candles! We can have candles!' Gwyn began to feel ridiculously elated. He fetched a box of candles from the larder and began to set them up on saucers and bottles all round the room.

Then they put on one of Nain's records. It was very gay and very loud: a fiddle, a flute, a harp and a singer. The sort of music to send you wild, and the Lloyds went wild. They drummed on the table, jumped on the chairs, stamped on the floor, waved the dishcloths and juggled with the cat. The cat objected and Siôn retired, temporarily, from the merry-making, bloody-eared but unbowed.

Nain began to dance, in her purple dress and black lace stockings, her dark curls bouncing and her coloured beads flying. She wore silver bracelets, too, that jangled when she raised her arms, and a black shawl that swung out and made the candles flicker.

Mae gen i dipyn o dŷ bach twt
A'r gwynt i'r drws bob bore.
Hei di ho, di hei di hei di ho,
A'r gwynt i'r drws bob bore . . .

sang the singers, and so sang Nain, in her high quivering voice.

The Lloyds thought it the funniest thing they had ever seen

and, clutching their sides, they rolled on the floor, gasping and giggling.

Gwyn smiled, but he did not laugh. There was something strange, almost magical, about the tall figure spinning in the candlelight.

Down in the field, Gwyn's father heard the music. For a few moments he paused and listened while his cows, eager to be milked, ambled on up to the farmyard. Mr Griffiths regarded the mountain, rising dark and bare beside the house, and remembered his daughter.

When the boys had breath left neither for dancing nor laughter, Mrs Griffiths tucked the record-player away in its corner, stood up and removed her apron. Then she patted her hair, smoothed her dress and said, rather quiet and coy, 'Tea will be in here today, boys!' and she walked across the passage and opened the door into the front room.

Gwyn was perplexed. Teas, even fairly smart teas with relations, were always in the kitchen these days. He moved uncertainly towards the open door and looked in.

A white cloth had been laid on the long oak table, so white it almost hurt his eyes. And upon the cloth, the best blue china, red napkins, plates piled with brightly wrapped biscuits, with sugar mice and chocolate pigs. There were crisps and popcorn, and cakes with coloured icing on a silver stand. There were crackers too, decorated with gold and silver paper, and in the centre of the table a magnificent green jelly, rising above a sea of ice cream.

The Lloyds crowded into the doorway beside Gwyn and gazed at the splendid spread. Gwyn felt so proud. 'Oh, Mam,' he breathed, 'Oh, Mam!' Then Gareth and Siôn rushed past him and drew out their chairs exclaiming, 'Gwyn! Gwyn, come on, let's start, we're starving!'

'It's the grandest birthday table I've ever seen,' said Alun. 'Our mam has never done anything like that.'

'Nor has his, until today,' said Nain. 'It was about time.'

Gwyn took his place at the head of the table and they began. There was so much chatter, so much laughter, no one heard Mr Griffiths come in from milking and go upstairs. And Mrs Griffiths, happy and gratified, did not notice her husband's boots beside the back door, nor his coat upon the hook, when she went into the kitchen to fetch the birthday cake.

The cake was huge and white, with chocolate windows and silver banners and, on each of the nine towers, a flaming candle.

'Turn out the lights!' cried Gareth, and he sprang to the switch, plunging the party into cosy candlelight again.

'Blow out the candles, Gwyn, and wish!' commanded Siôn.

Gwyn drew a deep breath and then paused. 'Let's cut the cake and leave the candles,' he said, 'they look so good. Let's leave them till they die.'

They were still alight when Mr Griffiths came downstairs again. Crackers were banging, and no one heard feet upon the tiled kitchen floor, tapping in unfamiliar shoes. When the door opened the tiny flames glowed fiercely for a moment, and then died.

Except for a white shirt Mr Griffiths was dressed entirely in black. He stared at the table in cold disbelief.

The shock of the electric light jolted the party out of its homely cheerfulness. The birthday table looked spoiled and untidy; someone had spilt orange juice on the white cloth.

'What's this? Celebrating are we?' Mr Griffiths' mouth was tight, his face white with displeasure.

Siôn was still wearing the spectacle mask and his brothers began to giggle. He did resemble Mr Griffiths.

'It's Gwyn's birthday, Ivor,' Mrs Griffiths explained nervously. 'You're just in time for . . .'

'I know what day it is.' Her husband spoke the words slowly, through clenched teeth, as though the taste was bitter. 'There are candles wasting in the kitchen, chairs on the floor, and look at this – litter!' He flung out his hand, indicating the table.

'Sit down, Ivor Griffiths, you miserable man,' said Nain, 'and celebrate your son's birthday!'

'Miserable is it?' Mr Griffiths big red hands were clasped tight across his chest, one hand painfully rubbing and pressing at the other. 'Miserable is it, to be remembering my own daughter who is gone? My daughter who went on this day, four years ago?'

Suddenly Mrs Griffiths stood up. 'Enough! We've had enough, Ivor!' she protested. 'We remember Bethan too. We've mourned her going every year on this day, for four years. But it's Gwyn's birthday, and we've had enough of mourning! Enough! Enough!' She was almost crying.

Gwyn turned his head away. He did not want to look at the

bright colours on the table; did not want to see his friends' faces. He knew that his birthday was over. His mother was talking, but he could not listen to the words. She was taking his friends away, he heard them shuffling into the kitchen, murmuring good-bye, but he could not move. His father was still standing by the table, sad and silent in his black suit.

'How could you do that, Ivor?' Nain reproached her son as the front door slammed.

'How could I? I have done nothing. It was that one!' and he looked at Gwyn. 'She is gone because of him, my Bethan is.'

It was said.

Gwyn felt almost relieved. He got up slowly and pushed his chair neatly back to the table then, without looking at his father, he walked out to the kitchen.

His mother was standing by the sink, waving to the Lloyds through a narrow window. She swung round quickly when she heard her son. 'I'm sorry, Gwyn,' she said quietly. 'So sorry.' She came towards him and hugged him close. Her face was flushed and she had put her apron on again.

'It was a great party, Mam! Thanks!' said Gwyn. 'The other boys liked it too, I know they did.'

'But I wanted your father to . . .'

'It doesn't matter, Mam,' Gwyn interrupted quickly. 'It was grand. I'll always remember it!'

He drew away from his mother and ran up to his room, where he sat on the edge of his bed, smiling at the memory of his party and the way it had been before his father had arrived. Gwyn knew his father could not help the bitterness that burst out of him every now and again, and he had acquired a habit

of distancing himself from the ugly words. He thought hard about the good times, until the bad ceased to exist.

A tiny sound caused him to go to the window. There was a light in the garden, a lantern swaying in the evening breeze.

Gwyn opened the window. 'Who's there?' he called.

He was answered by a high, girlish laugh, and then his grandmother's voice, 'Remember your gifts, Gwydion Gwyn. Remember Math, Lord of Gwynedd, remember Gwydion and Gilfaethwy!'

'Are you being funny, Nain?'

There was a long pause and then the reply, 'It's not a game I'm playing, Gwydion Gwyn. Once in every seven generations the power returns, so they say. Your father never had it, nor did mine. Let's find out who you are!'

The gate clicked shut and the lantern went swinging down the lane, while the words of an old song rose and fell on the freshening wind, and then receded, until the light and the voice faded altogether.

Before he shut the window, Gwyn looked up at the mountain and remembered his fifth birthday. It had been a fine day, like today, but in the middle of the night a storm had broken. The rain had come pouring down the mountainside in torrents, boulders and branches rumbling and groaning in its path. The Griffiths family had awakened, pulled the blankets closer to their heads and fallen asleep again, except for Gwyn. His black sheep was still up on the mountain. He had nursed it as a motherless lamb, himself, tucking it in Mam's old jumper, cosy by the fire. Feeding it with a bottle, five times a day, until it had grown into a fine ewe.

'Please, get her! Please, save her!' Gwyn had shaken his sister awake again.

Bethan had grumbled but because she was older, and because she was kind, she had complied.

The last time Gwyn saw her she had been standing by the back door in her red mac, testing the big outdoor torch. It was the night after Halloween and the pumpkin was still on the windowsill, grimacing with its dark gaping mouth and sorrowful eyes. Bethan had become curiously excited, as though she was going to meet someone very special, not just a lonely black ewe. 'Shut the door tight, when I am gone,' she had whispered, 'or the wind will howl through the house and wake Mam and Dad!' Then, swinging the yellow scarf round her dark hair, she had walked out into the storm. She had never been afraid of anything.

Through the kitchen window, Gwyn had watched the light of the big torch flashing on the mountainside until it disappeared. Then he had fallen asleep on the rug beside the stove.

They never saw Bethan again, though they searched every inch of the mountain. They never found a trace of her perilous climb on that wild night, nor did they find the black ewe. The girl and the animal seemed to have vanished!