

1.

Teddy has filched a bottle of wassail from his da's cellar. He pours it out like it's liquid gold, and we each take a thimble-sized glass.

"To us," he says, smiling at Sol and me. "The three best friends that ever were. To unshakable loyalty and unbreakable bonds. Happy Whitsuntide."

Sol drums the floorboards with his heels, his cheeks glowing.

I love them both so much. I want to stay in this moment forever. The three of us, together and young and happy.

I look threadwise, refocusing my eyes slightly to see the mettle floating around us, silvery strands of life-force. I'm no witch, but I can see mettle, and recognize who or where it came from, in the same way I can track a rabbit or a fox in the woods. The mettle between the three of us is connected—intricately braided together over the years of our friendship. We're inseparable, and that's the way I want it to stay.

They're waiting for me. I clink my glass against each of theirs, careful to make eye contact as I do so.

The wassail is as strong as it always is, all cloves and hyssop, and we each wince and gag, swallowing it like medicine.

Teddy holds out the bottle. "More?"

Sol makes a face. "Ugh, no." "Merry?"

I shake my head. Even that one thimble-sized glass is enough to make me feel warm and a bit blurry around the edges. But Teddy refills his own glass and downs it in one gulp.

We are ensconced in the sitting room in the house where Sol lives with his aunt, surrounded by open chip packets and cans of fizzy drink. We've been playing twlbwrdd—an enchanted Ilium set where the king piece crumbles to dust when he is captured and the maidens stain red if they get captured by a liegeman. We've been here since midafternoon, and Teddy and Sol have filled the air with the musky scent of teenage boy. I get up and open a window, breathing in the sweetness of the night. In the distance, I hear the faint jingling of bells, and the tramping of feet.

Whitsun Eve is *our* night. Our families are always off celebrating, either at the Rose and Crown, or in Da's case at the Frater House with the other Toadmen. It's a night steeped in ancient tradition, and we have our own traditions too. Battered haddock, scampi and scallops with chips and mushy peas from Branwyn's fish shop. Cans of redcurrant fizz and packets of cheese puffs. We play games and just generally flop around and enjoy knowing that school is over and we have the whole glorious summer stretching before us.

"We should go camping," I say. "Up to Dryad's Saddle or farther, to Fish Creek. We could leave the day after tomorrow."

"Watch your king," Sol murmurs to Teddy.

"I can't go until after next Thursday," Teddy says, moving his king piece behind the shield wall.

"Why not?" I slide another maiden into position.

He hesitates for just a moment before answering. "I'm needed at the forge."

Something in his tone is off. Teddy's a terrible liar. I look over at Sol, who is busy studying the board, and I get a sudden, awful feeling that they're hiding something from me.

"I thought Wayland was giving you the whole summer off?"

Teddy shrugs. "It's just a few extra days."

"We can go next Friday," Sol says. "Forecast says it'll rain this weekend anyway. I vote for Dryad's Saddle—we'll see if the damson plum is fruiting this year, and we can explore more of the cave we found behind the falls."

"Sounds good to me."

Teddy turns another of my maidens red, and Sol slips his black raven around the edge of the board where there's a gap in Teddy's shield wall.

The tension leaves my shoulders as I remember last summer,

our lips and fingers stained purple from damson, lazing by the banks of the Mira and falling asleep under the stars.

“You’ll never get through,” Teddy informs me, capturing another maiden. “Admit it, I win.”

I glance at Sol, whose mouth twitches in a suppressed smile.

“Never,” I tell Teddy. “A shield maiden fights to the end.”

He laughs. “Oh, Merry,” he says. “Always so competitive. Is being joint dux of our school not enough for you?”

He leans on the word *joint*, because he knows it rankles. Never before in the history of Candlecott School have there been two duxes. I’m certain that I’m the rightful one, and that Caraway Boswell’s father increased his endowment because he couldn’t stand the idea of his precious son coming second.

Teddy takes advantage of my brief moment of seething resentment and turns my last maiden red. He lets out a shout of triumph. “Bow before your king!”

I curtsy theatrically. “A mighty show of strength, my lord. Just not quite mighty enough.”

Teddy looks back down at the board as Sol moves his raven into the castle. Teddy swears good-naturedly as his king crumbles into glittering black dust.

“Again?” Sol asks, sweeping the pieces back into the box to reset them.

Teddy leans back and stretches lazily. He’s effortlessly handsome in jeans and a slouchy pullover, square-jawed and hazel-eyed, his golden hair swept over his brow. Something catches in my chest when I look at him. We were seven years old when I made the rule. We swore a blood oath, the three of us, to be best friends forever. And I made Teddy and Sol swear that they would never fall in love with me. I knew that any romance would upset the balance between us—the perfect harmony of three friends. And I was seven, then. Romance was the furthest thing from my mind.

But now I’m seventeen, and Teddy is the leading man in all my nighttime fantasies.

One of the twlbwrdd maidens slips from Sol’s fingers and tumbles to the floor.

“Curses,” he says, picking up the broken pieces. “Why do they make them so fragile?”

“I can fix it,” Teddy says.

He takes the pieces from Sol and frowns at them,

concentrating. I look at him threadwise to see ghostly hands manipulating the mettle of the little stone fragments, pulling them back together, drawing on energy from other things in the room—daffodils in a vase, the rising bubbles from his can of redcurrant fizz, the fingerprints in the clay statue on the mantelpiece. He whispers to himself as he works, muttering song lyrics or a nursery rhyme—there is mettle in oft-repeated words.

The stone maiden clicks together, good as new. Teddy hands it back to Sol and then turns to me, already defensive.

“What?” he says.

I shake my head. “You know what. You should be more careful.”

“I’m not the one who dropped it.”

“Was that a covenant spell?” I ask.

Teddy shrugs.

“*Teddy.*”

There are one hundred legal spells in Anglyon. Covenant magic. All other magic is illegal, unless it’s being done by one of the big magic corporations. But Teddy knows it’s not the legality of magic that upsets me. It’s been four years since Ma died, but it still hurts. Some days the grief is as sharp as if it were yesterday.

Sol puts the piece back in the box. “Probably enough twlbwrdd for one night,” he says brightly. “Shall we play cards?”

Sol is always trying to make peace between Teddy and me. But I’m just so *angry* at Teddy. At how carelessly he flaunts his magic. At how *hungry* he is to experiment, to learn more. When he *knows* how I feel. He knows what happened to Ma. There’s a reason why there are restrictions on magic. It’s dangerous. People die.

“Post and Pair?” Sol says, shuffling a deck of cards with nimble fingers. “Or Bone-Ace?”

Sol can’t see mettle the way I can, but he says he can hear it, strings vibrating at different frequencies, forming complex harmonies as they wind together. These are the secrets we whispered to each other as children, secrets that bound the three of us together. There’s no magic in Candlecott, or at least there isn’t supposed to be. Not since the witches tried to take Mwsogl Hollow and the good people of Candlecott drove them out. Nobody else in town knows what we can do—that I can see mettle, Sol can hear it, and Teddy can use it in his forge. Even

though we're not witches, people might not see us the same way if they knew. That's why the three of us are as close as close, bound by love and secrets.

But soon we won't be three anymore. Sol is heading overseas—he hasn't been home to Habasah to see his sisters since primary school, and then he plans to travel for the rest of the year.

I'll miss Sol, of course. But . . . a little part of me is glad to have some alone time with Teddy. It's different when it's just us. Last time it was just the two of us—when Sol was in Scouller for a school music competition—Teddy kissed me behind Goody Bhreagh's milking shed. We didn't talk about it afterward. Didn't tell Sol. That was two years ago, but my stomach still lurches every time I think of it happening again.

Teddy doesn't exactly look like he wants to kiss me right now. His jaw is still stuck out pugnaciously, ready for the fight that he knows is coming.

I pick up a newspaper from the coffee table and brandish it at him. "Did you see?" I say. "The auditors rounded up another coven of witches in Fishgate. Sent them off to a recovery center. Is that what you want?"

Teddy rolls his eyes. "I'm not a resistance witch," he says. "And there are no auditors in Candlecott."

"Because we don't do magic here."

"*You* do," he says. "Tracking magic with your witch sight."

"It's not *witch sight*," I reply hotly. "Looking threadwise isn't magic. It's just . . . looking."

But I know that isn't true. I know that my ability to see mettle isn't normal. It's all part of the witch's curse that killed my mother. I glance back at the newspaper, at the photo of the witches in grainy black-and-white. They look terrifying to me, unglamoured and raw and full of rage. Only criminals and celebrities have their photos taken. Celebrities because of their natural beauty, and criminals so we can see them as they truly are. A camera can't capture a glamour, so everyone else just has their picture drawn or painted. Even here in Candlecott, where glours are only for extra-special occasions.

"Come on," Sol pleads. "It's Whitsun Eve. Don't fight."

There's a moment of tension as Teddy and I engage in a battle of stubbornness. But then Teddy shrugs.

“I vote for Bone-Ace,” he says.

“Only because I always beat you at Post and Pair,” I reply.

He punches me lightly on the arm, and Sol beams.

A heavy knock at the door makes us all jump. Teddy and Sol both look to me, even though we’re in Sol’s house.

I glance at the clock. It’s eleven-thirty. A bit late for social callers.

“I’ll go, then, shall I?” I say. “Neither of you brave knights wants to step in?”

Sol’s cheeks stain pink, and Teddy shoots me a rueful grin.

“You’re much more threatening than us, Merry,” he says.

He’s not wrong.

I extract myself from the couch and make my way over to the entrance, lifting the latch and stepping back as the door swings toward me.

There’s a monster on the doorstep.

A huge, leering skull stares in at us. Not human, it’s too big and too wide, with gaping eyeholes on either side of the head, amber glinting from within them in the dancing light of a guttering torch held by one of several robed figures standing behind the monster.

It’s a toad.

Nearly seven feet tall, wreathed in a gray shroud that hints at broad, bony shoulders. Scraps of ribbon and lace float from the gray fabric, along with garlands of bells and smaller bits of bone.

I’m not sure why they have come here—is it because of me?

I look at them threadwise and see the familiar strands of Da’s mettle, swirling around one of the figures. I recognize the others too—the usual Toadman crowd. And my stomach twists as I catch a glimpse of a brownish tendril weaving in among it.

I’ve seen this before—glimpses of it around Da when he returns from the Frater House. It’s not silvery bright like regular mettle. I’ve never quite been able to focus properly on it, but I know it’s got something to do with the Toadmen. I can’t ask Da, of course. He doesn’t know I can look threadwise and see mettle.

He doesn’t know that I can recognize a curse when I see it.

Behind me, I hear the scrape of a chair, and Teddy’s voice calling out.

“Do your dammedest, you old devil!”

The creature’s skull swings wildly, the diaphanous robe

floating around it like ghost tatters. Teddy appears at my shoulder, his eyes bright with excitement.

The Toading happens every year on Whitsun Eve. Toadmen going from door to door, exchanging taunts and rhymes. They'll end up at the Rose and Crown, and all the adults will have sore heads tomorrow. It's a Candlecott tradition.

But it isn't *our* tradition.

One of the robed figures bangs a staff against the ground once, twice, three times, and the monster's huge grinning jaws snap in reply. Bells jingle, and from behind the creature, someone starts to play a fiddle.

Two robed figures step forward to flank the monster, each one masked and hooded. The first has sharp horns curving upward from behind its bulging yellow eyes. A black mouth gapes from ear to ear, studded with sharp teeth. The Howling Toad.

A deep male voice emerges from behind the mask.

*We are the toads o' Deeping
Fen Come to greet you,
gentle friend. The year is
old, the night is deep Wake
him now from listless sleep
The bramble-frog of
Morgendagh He who rises
with the stars.
We'll chase away the spirits
old Let us cross your fine
threshold.*

The Order of Toadmen is supposed to be a secret gentlemen's society, but it's pretty hard to keep secrets in Candlecott. Maybe the other chapters are better at it, in bigger towns and cities. They meet once a week in the Frater House and eat biscuits and play backgammon, and then a few times a year they put on silly costumes and do rituals like this. But they don't usually come here, because Da knows I don't like it. He's been a Toadman practically his whole life, and when I was younger I didn't think much of it at all. I used to love the shiver of fear when the Toadmen would bang on our door on Whitsun Eve, back when Ma was still alive.

But since I learned to see mettle, it feels like maybe the Toad-men are something more than old men playing dress-ups. There's something about those brownish mettle wisps that makes my stomach churn with unease.

Teddy elbows me aside, his cheeks as red as apples. His voice is extra loud, emboldened with wassail.

*Begone, you toads, you slimy
frogs Back to your fens and to
your bogs
Our house is warm and good and
bright It welcomes not beings of
the night.*

I frown at him. Since when did Teddy know Toad rhymes?
Can't he just tell them to bugger off ?

The second robed figure steps forward, and I recognize it as the Ghost Toad, its mask blank white and featureless save for two black holes for eyes.

*About one toad the bards do sing
So bold and brave they made
him king Let us in and tap the
cask
It's cold, and twice you've made us ask.*

I move to close the door, but Teddy elbows his way in front of me.

*Begone, O king of mucky
courts! Your breath does stink
Your face is warts.*

The words come out of his mouth as smooth as butter. Like he's been practicing. Then the monster—the King Toad—steps forward and speaks in a deep voice that is quiet but commanding.

*We are the Toads of Deeping
Fen. And we will not ask you
again.*

The fiddle cuts off abruptly, leaving silence breached only by the sputtering of the torch. The air is suddenly heavy with the threat of the King Toad, the looming malice of it all.

Teddy looks over his shoulder at me. He's beaming, delighted to have played his part in the ritual.

I scowl at him—he knows I don't like the Toadmen. I've told him and Sol about how I think they do secret magic. Illegal magic. Dangerous magic.

I want to slam the door—whatever's going on with Teddy, I don't like it. I hesitate, glancing at the familiar stoop of Da's shoulders, and in that moment Sol steps around me, opening the door wide to welcome them into his house like the traitor he is. I shoot him a murderous glare, and he shrugs.

"It would be rude not to," he murmurs.

Sol has always been too polite for his own good.

The robed figures cross the threshold and the air in Sol's cozy sitting room suddenly feels colder. But then the tension of the moment is broken, and the fiddle starts up again as the Toadmen reach up to remove their hoods and masks. I know them, of course. Harry-the-Bus and Creepy Glen are the two masked toads. There's my lovely da, helping to extricate Gruffydd Thomas from the King Toad costume, laying the papier-mâché skull carefully against the doorframe, its beer-bottle eyes still glinting. And Huw Jones with his fiddle tucked under his chin.

"Sorry, love," Da says under his breath as he comes in. "They insisted on coming here."

His eyes flick to Teddy as he says this, and uneasiness throbs in my gut. I help Sol set out bottles of beer and thimblefuls of wassail, and a platter with speckle bread, stone cakes and gooseberry tarts.

Huw comes over to ask Sol a question about their set list for the fair tomorrow, and Creepy Glen and Gruffydd Thomas usher Teddy over to the window, where they bow their heads and speak in low voices. I desperately want to go over there and find out what they're talking about.

But before I can move, Harry-the-Bus digs me in the ribs. "Heard you'll be off to Staunton come September," he says with a grin.

I feel Da's eyes on me. "I'm not going," I tell him.

“Sure you are,” Harry-the-Bus says. “A university scholarship like that—it’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

I want to slap the bottle of beer out of his hand, but I manage a polite smile instead. “I’ve made up my mind.”

Sol catches my eye, and I scowl at him. We’ve had this conversation before. It feels like the only thing people want to talk about. Candlecott is my home, and I can’t leave Da all alone. If Ma were still alive, then maybe things would be different.

The Toadmen drink their beer and wassail and eat the speckle bread. Then they sing “Little Saucepan” for us before pulling their costumes back on and heading out the door.

“Ready for tomorrow night?” Gruffydd Thomas says to Teddy as he crosses the threshold.

Teddy glances guiltily at me, but nods.

Da tells me not to wait up. I watch them traipse up the street to harass the next poor unsuspecting household. Then I round on Teddy, and he shrinks away from me, holding up his hands in defense.

“What was all that about?” I demand.

“Just a bit of fun.”

I throw a leftover scallop at him, and he ducks too late. “It’s Whitsun!” he protests, wiping grease from his cheek. “The Toading is traditional.”

“It’s not *our* tradition,” I fume. “Our tradition is to stay home while everyone else goes to the pub and gets drunk. Our tradition is fish and chips and twlbwrdd. Just the three of us.”

“Well, things change.”

Teddy isn’t quite meeting my gaze.

“You’re not . . . joining, are you?” I ask. “I’m thinking about it.”

The uneasy feeling in my gut explodes into anger. I turn to Sol. “Did you know about this?”

His eyes slide from mine, and he nods, abashed.

“I can’t believe you’ve been keeping secrets from me! Both of you!”

Sol’s cheeks go pink. “I said we should tell her,” he mutters to Teddy.

“And I said she’d react exactly like this!” Teddy pours himself another thimble of wassail, and I screw up my nose.

“You *know* how I feel about them. They do magic,” I say as a realization hits me. “That’s why you want to join, isn’t it? You

think they can teach you more magic.”

“What if it is?”

“I’ve *told* you what I can see. The brown shadows on their mettle. I think their magic is cursed. It can’t be legal.”

Teddy snorts. “Since when did you care about *legal*?” he says. “What about when you stole Bill Gaffney’s prize pig and put it in the staff room at school?”

“That’s different. Bill Gaffney got his pig back. It was just for fun.”

“The Toads is just for fun too.”

But I know this isn’t true. I can see it in his eyes. There’s a lot more going on here.

“You think it’s going to be *fun* to wear those silly robes and dance around under every fish moon jingling bells and muttering rhymes? You think it’s *fun* to sit in that fusty damp hall with all those boring old men, eating stale shortbread and playing backgammon?”

“Make up your mind, Merry,” Teddy says. “Is it dangerous magic, or boring old men?”

“It can be both.”

“Your own da is a Toadman,” says Teddy. “Nearly all the men in Candlecott are.”

I can’t talk to Da about any of this. I’ve tried to explain to him the weird feeling I get about the Toads, but it’s hard to explain without telling him about those glimpses of strange mettle. And I promised Ma I wouldn’t tell him that the witch’s curse got me too.

“All Da’s friends are Toads,” I say hotly. “It’s the only social thing he does. But not you! You have us.”

I glance over at Sol to see if he’s willing to chip in, but he’s just watching us, his brow creased. He hates it when we fight.

“Not for long,” Teddy says quietly. “Sol’s going overseas and you’re off to the university. I’ll be left here all on my own. What else am I supposed to do?”

“I’m not going to Staunton, I told you.”

Teddy snorts. “Of course you’ll go. As if you’re going to let Caraway Boswell be the only one from Candlecott to take up that scholarship.”

He knows that any mention of Caraway Boswell will distract me, and he’s right. Horrid Caraway Boswell with his perfect hair

and his equally perfect academic record. Caraway Boswell, who stole my dux glory. Caraway Boswell, the haughty, insufferable snob. And a Toadman to boot. I can see it in his mettle.

“Caraway Boswell,” I start, my voice dripping with disdain, “is *not* from Candlecott. He’s a boarder.”

“He’ll still be the only one going from our school if you don’t,” Teddy says.

I hate the thought of Caraway Boswell beating me. Being the only one to go to Staunton. But I just can’t leave Candlecott and Da . . . and Teddy.

“Don’t let this spoil our night, Merry,” Teddy pleads. “Or our summer.”

He slings an arm over my shoulder, and I duck and wriggle away.

“You stink of cloves,” I tell him.

“It’s the wassail.”

“I hate it.”

“You love it.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me.”

My cheeks grow hot. “Shut up.”

“You’re just cranky because Harry-the-Bus mentioned the *U*word.”

“And here you are mentioning it again!” I retort.

“You know what’s really great?” interrupts Sol desperately. “Ice cream. Ice cream solves everything.”

This kind of logic cannot be argued with, and we head into the kitchen to pile bowls high with creamy scoops of blueberry and honeycomb and pear, drowning them in caramel sauce and Sol’s aunt’s rhubarb syrup.

We end up playing Knave Noddy, and Sol wins every time. Teddy drinks more wassail and eventually falls asleep on the couch, his snores so loud they make the windows rattle.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask Sol, keeping my voice low. “The *Toadmen*?”

Sol shrugs. “It’s what he wants.”

I shake my head. “He doesn’t know what he wants.”

“That’s not fair, Merry,” Sol says. “Teddy is as grown as you are.”

But that’s why it hurts. Teddy knows exactly what he’s doing.

He always does. Which means he knows this will hurt me and has decided to do it anyway.

“Teddy’s feeling like he’s going to get left behind,” Sol says, as calm and sensible as ever. “You and I are leaving.” He catches my warning look and corrects himself. “*Possibly* leaving. And . . . they came asking for him. Telling him how great his smithing skills are. You know how ambitious he is. They’ve promised him things. Opportunities. You’re not the only one who has dreams, you know.”

What kinds of opportunities could they offer him? What promises have they made? “I just wish he weren’t ambitious about magic.”

“Teddy is special.” I can see the fondness in Sol’s eyes as he says it. “It’s not often you get magic talent like that in a man. I think the Toadmen will be able to help him use it safely.”

Sol is always so kind and sensible, it’s impossible to argue with him. I nod, and he nudges me gently.

“Also,” he says, “he’s going to look *great* in those long flowing robes.”

I snicker at the thought of it. “And the little bonnet?” I say. “The one with the frill around the edge?”

“He’ll have to learn the Haycorn Dance,” Sol reminds me. “The one with the bells and the ribbons.”

Teddy lifts his head and looks blearily around. “Whadid I miss?”

Sol and I exchange a look and dissolve into giggles.

Teddy walks me home at around two in the morning. Sol invites me to stay the night, but Da will be out late doing Toad stuff, and I want to be there first thing in the morning to help him get ready for the poultry show. Sol parcels me up some leftover speckle bread for breakfast.

The night is crisp and clear, scented with woodsmoke and night-blooming phlox. Stars carpet the velvety darkness of the sky, and a fingernail of moon glows blue above us. I link my arm through Teddy’s, and we walk in amiable silence through the empty cobbled streets of Candlecott.

We pass the forge on the edge of the village green, and I feel Teddy’s chest swell slightly, and I know he’s thinking about his

apprenticeship, and his dreams of becoming one of the great smiths of history. Tomorrow he will be demonstrating his skills before the whole town at the Whitsun fair, and I know he's going to knock everyone's socks off.

The sound of alcohol-soaked merriment drifts across the green from the Rose and Crown. I hope Ken Lanagan has plenty of his famed hangover dram available tomorrow at the fair. I've never had it, but I've heard it includes pickle juice, coltsfoot and a dash of laundry detergent.

Houses are replaced by fields and furrows, and I look up the hill to Candlecott School. I can see lights on in the dormitory, and my stomach twists as I imagine horrid Caraway Boswell there. Probably studying, even though school is over for the year. Why hasn't he gone home to his mansion in the city, or sauntered off to spend the summer on a yacht somewhere?

I can only imagine how insufferable he'll be at Staunton. The university is probably full of people like him. People from big cities and wealthy families who look down their noses at simple countryfolk like me. There's a part of me that burns to go. To take up the scholarship and show them all how wrong they are. To be the best at everything. To prove that your family's name or how many butlers you have is meaningless. But another part is afraid that I'd become one of them. That I'd return to Candlecott and people would treat me the way we treat people like Caraway.

We turn down the lane that leads to our little farm, and I see the porch light burning cheerfully to welcome me. Out of habit, I glance up to the window where I used to see Ma sitting, waiting for me to come home from Sol's, and for Da to come home from the Frater House. Another Whitsun tradition.

But Ma isn't there, of course.

The hens inside the chicken coop greet me in their creaky, sleepy way. Out of habit, I look threadwise to check for any fox mettle that might be lurking nearby. But all I see is chicken, and little gossamer-thin streaks from moths and other small night creatures. An owl passes overhead, swift and silent, its mettle streaming silver behind it like a shooting star.

We stop outside my front door, and Teddy gently turns me to face him.

"Don't be mad," he says. "About the Toadmen."

I am mad, but I remember what Sol said and bite my tongue.

“Just . . . promise me you’ll be careful,” I say. “And stay away from Creepy Glen. And don’t let it take up any of our time together.”

Teddy flashes me his dimples. “No fear,” he says. “Nothing is going to keep the three of us apart this summer.”

He gives me a hug, and I breathe him in, iron and woodsmoke. My heart beats a little faster.

“Good night,” I murmur, but I don’t turn to go inside.

“Merry.” He keeps his hand on my arm.

It’s going to happen. He’s going to kiss me again. I tilt my chin up to him, and he lays a finger on my cheek. The night around us seems to hold its breath, waiting.

“It’s Whitsuntide,” he says gently. “Your da’s out, so you’re first foot in the door.”

The perfect moment slides away, and I feel a sting of disappointment. “You know I’m not superstitious.”

Teddy frowns. “You want Jenny Greenteeth to snatch you in the night?”

I sigh and rummage in my pockets. “I’ve got a silver coin already. And the speckle bread from Sol.”

“Here.” Teddy passes me a blackened bit of charcoal.

“Where did that come from?”

“I always carry coal,” he says. “Nothing luckier for a blacksmith. You still need salt. And evergreen.”

I snap off a sprig of lavender from the bush that grows by the front door. “Surely that’s enough.”

Teddy shakes his head obstinately. “Salt is the most important one! Protection.”

I snort. “And what exactly do I need to be protected from in Candlecott?”

“You’re not going to stay in Candlecott forever.”

“Says who?” The thought of leaving here . . . I don’t know how Sol is doing it. How can he leave? Where else could possibly be as perfect?

My treacherous mind shows me an image of gray spires and oak-panelled lecture theaters, but I shake it away. “Brutus has a salt lick. In the barn.”

Teddy disappears and returns a moment later with a sliver of salt that he’s chipped off the large block. I slide it into my pocket with the lavender and the bit of charcoal.

“Enough?” I ask.

“A coin for wealth,” Teddy recites. “Bread for nourishment. Salt for protection. Coal for warmth. Evergreen for a long, healthy life. Ideally you’d have whiskey as well, for good cheer. I should have brought the wassail.” He hesitates, like he’s considering running back to get it.

“I get enough good cheer from your breath,” I tell him. “And anyway, I drank some of the wassail, so I’m still carrying it through the door.”

“I suppose so.”

I hesitate on the threshold for a moment longer. Just in case.

“Happy Whitsuntide, Merry,” Teddy says cheerfully over his shoulder as he turns and makes his way back down the garden path.

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