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Just a few hours later, Mother woke me in the dead of night. The lamp hovering above the bed looked like a fiery evening sun. I was certain I was dreaming. All the more confusing was that Mother's voice sounded so real: 'Get up! Get dressed! Keep quiet!'

Our cottage had one big upstairs room under the eaves where we all slept – me and Jem in our little truckle beds, Mother and Abigail on the horsehair mattress they shared.

I'd gone to bed early that evening, still sore with Jem, and he with me. We'd never slept on an argument before, and now everything felt off-kilter and strange. I rolled over, burying my face in the blankets, hoping Mother would go away.

She didn't.

'Quickly now, child!' she whispered. 'We're going on a journey.'

At that, my eyes flew open. I sat up, which let the cold in under the covers.

'Where are we going?' I asked.

Mother put a finger to her lips to stop my questions, then threw me my beloved jerkin, leggings and shirt.

'Just you, mind. Don't disturb the others,' she said, which made me more intrigued because it was clear I'd been singled out. 'Meet me outside.'

Once she'd gone, I slid out from under the covers and dressed, carefully so as not to wake anyone. Jem's short hair stuck out above the blankets. Though I still felt hurt and angry with him, it was all mixed up with love.

'Sleep well, brother,' I whispered.

Jem didn't stir. Abigail looked fast asleep, yet I was pretty sure she was watching me as I went down the stairs.

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Outside, Mother hurried me up the track towards the crossroads. As my eyes grew used to the darkness, I saw the familiar shapes of trees, bushes, then the sharp swing right as we turned inland. With the sea behind us now, we headed uphill towards Nether Stowey, the nearest town, which was where we often went for market day.

'I'm not in trouble still, am I?' I asked warily, for

I supposed Mother's curious behaviour must have something to do with the boat.

'No, you daft girl,' she replied, but not crossly. 'Now stop asking questions.'

Worried she might wish she'd chosen another of her children instead, I kept quiet.

We walked briskly. It was a bitter night, the frost sharp, the stars hard. All memories of my warm bed had long gone: I was wide awake, shivering with energy and desperate to know what this was all about. Were we meeting someone? Buying something? About to smuggle Old Margaret out of gaol?

A couple of chained-up dogs barked when we hit the outskirts of Nether Stowey, but as we followed the main road down the hill, the town slumbered on around us. Everything looked different at night – the pretty church like a dark castle, the bakery a mere barn, and the marketplace, usually buzzing with people, bleak and empty as our footsteps echoed off the stones.

Once we'd left town behind and were on the open road again, Mother finally stopped. Her face was all shadows in the starlight.

'Now then, Fortune, let's have a look at you.' She eyed me critically. 'You're skinny, flat-chested, short-haired,

coarse-mannered. Yes, you'll make a convincing enough boy.'

I stared at her in surprise.

'Why's that a good thing, suddenly?' I asked. At home it was a constant battle to make me wear skirts, though I never actually wanted to *be* a boy. It was more that I didn't see myself as the sort of girl who did sewing and kept her mouth shut and wanted only to find a husband. This new thinking from Mother made me suspicious.

'Where *are* we going?' I asked again.

'Didn't I tell you not to make a fuss?'

'I'm n—'

'No questions, remember?' She took my arm.

We started walking. The trouble was, by now, I was so full of questions I had to press my lips together to stop them flying out. Mother, sensing a rebellion, kept me moving – and moving fast.

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After another few miles downhill, the land flattened into the moors. Every winter they flooded: it was something to do with the land being low-lying and the boggy peat that lay beneath, only that night the cold was so fierce it'd turned the floods to ice. Ahead of us,

the frozen fields glowed temptingly in the starlight.

'Is it thick enough to walk across?' I asked, hoping it was. I'd never seen the moors like this before and was eager for a closer look.

Mother was more cautious. 'We'd best stick to the banks. Don't want you falling through the ice and getting a chill.'

So we clambered up on to the willow banks that ran above the fields. The air smelled not of mud or silt like usual, but of a cold that made my head ache. It was as if the whole world was different, not just Mother and me, and it made me feel jittery and restless.

Mother, meanwhile, kept stopping, finger to her lips. She was sure she could hear something. All I caught were the owls and the rooks roosting in the trees above our heads.

She flapped her hand. 'Shhh! Listen!'

This time I heard it too – the faint thud of hoof beats.

Quick as lightning, Mother pulled a parcel from inside her shawl, urging me to take it. The package was small, wrapped in sackcloth. I didn't recognise any part of it.

'It's yours,' she insisted, thrusting it at me. 'For your travels.'

Confused, I didn't take it. 'But you haven't said where we're going.'

'To Bridgwater,' she replied, not meeting my eye. 'To the hiring fair.'

My jaw dropped to the ground.

'You're not thinking of hiring *me* out, are you?' I gasped.

'I know it doesn't sound much of a plan,' Mother answered quickly. 'But what with Jem having his responsibilities now and you finding that hard . . . it'll be good for you to make your own way in the world . . . and besides, we could always do with the extra coin . . .'

'No, Mother, please!' I interrupted. The hiring fair was like a cattle market, only it wasn't beasts that were bought and sold, but people. I'd gone once with Abigail, and it was a horrid, bustling place, full of housekeepers inspecting people's teeth.

'I'm too young!' I begged. 'Take me home!'

But Mother was listening for the hoof beats, not to me. They were louder now. The thud-thud of a fast trot.

'Quick!' she hissed. 'Keep walking! Don't wait for me. If you pretend to be a boy, you'll get decent work and better pay.'

I was too stunned to move. She'd never mentioned money being short before. Since Old Margaret left

there'd been more work at the dairy than we could manage: some days there'd been so much milk left we'd had to pour it into the ground.

Mother, I realised, was lying. This was about the boat. About me and Jem, and the landowner man seeing us.

'But I've argued with Jem!' I cried, tears in my eyes. 'It'll be ages before I see him again!'

Mother froze. The rider was so close now, I heard creaking leather, the snort of the horse.

'Drat it!' Mother cursed. 'Get down in the ditch.'

I gulped. The ditch in question, running alongside the path, was a drop down of two yards or more. At the bottom of it, the ice looked as hard as marble.

'As soon as it's safe to run, get yourself as far from here as you can.' Mother pressed the parcel at me again. 'Goodbye, daughter, and go well.'

But it felt too final, a parting gift for someone who wouldn't be home again for a very long time.

'I don't want it,' I said.

'Take it!' She was fierce again. 'Get gone or I'll fetch my boot to you!'

She pushed me so hard I stumbled. My feet slipped. I went crashing through brambles, then too much thin air, landing with a wallop in the ditch below.

None of me seemed broken, thankfully. By the time I sat up, the horse had stopped in front of my mother. Shuffling into a crouch, I peered through the tangle of tree roots, at eye level with Mother's worn-down clogs. The man jumped from his horse. He was wearing long leather boots with spurs on them. He barked at Mother to keep still.

Then came the terrible *sshhhh* of a sword leaving its sheath.

My heart beat so fast I thought I was going to faint. But I shifted closer, and made myself keep watching. If this man was about to kill our mother, then I had to see who the scoundrel was.