Stardust

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Extract

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Chapter One

In Which We Learn of the Village of Wall, and of the Curious Thing That Occurs There Every Nine Years



There was once a young man who wished to gain his Heart's Desire.

And while that is, as beginnings go, not entirely novel (for every tale about every young man there ever was or will be could start in a similar manner) there was much about this young man and what happened to him that was unusual, although even he never knew the whole of it.

The tale started, as many tales have started, in Wall.

The town of Wall stands today as it has stood for six hundred years, on a high jut of granite amidst a small forest woodland. The houses of Wall are square and old, built of grey stone, with dark slate roofs and high chimneys; taking advantage of every inch of space on the rock, the houses lean into each other, are built one upon the next, with here and there a bush or tree growing out of the side of a building.

There is one road from Wall, a winding track rising sharply up from the forest, where it is lined with rocks and small stones. Followed far enough south, out of the forest,

the track becomes a real road, paved with asphalt; followed further the road gets larger, is packed at all hours with cars and lorries rushing from city to city. Eventually the road takes you to London, but London is a whole night's drive from Wall.

The inhabitants of Wall are a taciturn breed, falling into two distinct types: the native Wall-folk, as grey and tall and stocky as the granite outcrop their town was built upon; and the others, who have made Wall their home over the years, and their descendants.

Below Wall on the west is the forest; to the south is a treacherously placid lake served by the streams that drop from the hills behind Wall to the north. There are fields upon the hills, on which sheep graze. To the east is more woodland.

Immediately to the east of Wall is a high grey rock wall, from which the town takes its name. This wall is old, built of rough, square lumps of hewn granite, and it comes from the woods and goes back to the woods once more.

There is only one break in the wall; an opening about six feet in width, a little to the north of the village.

Through the gap in the wall can be seen a large green meadow; beyond the meadow, a stream; and beyond the stream there are trees. From time to time shapes and figures can be seen, amongst the trees, in the distance. Huge shapes and odd shapes and small, glimmering things which flash and glitter and are gone. Although it is perfectly good meadowland, none of the villagers has ever grazed animals on the meadow on the other side of the wall. Nor have they used it for growing crops.

Instead, for hundreds, perhaps for thousands of years, they have posted guards on each side of the opening on the wall, and done their best to put it out of their minds.

Even today, two townsmen stand on either side of the opening, night and day, taking eight-hour shifts. They carry hefty wooden cudgels. They flank the opening on the town side.

Their main function is to prevent the town's children from going through the opening, into the meadow and beyond. Occasionally they are called upon to discourage a solitary rambler, or one of the few visitors to the town, from going through the gateway.

The children they discourage simply with displays of the cudgel. Where ramblers and visitors are concerned, they are more inventive, only using physical force as a last resort if tales of new-planted grass, or a dangerous bull on the loose, are not sufficient.

Very rarely someone comes to Wall knowing what they are looking for, and these people they will sometimes allow through. There is a look in the eyes, and once seen it cannot be mistaken.

There have been no cases of smuggling across the wall in all the Twentieth Century, that the townsfolk know of, and they pride themselves on this.

The guard is relaxed once every nine years, on May Day, when a fair comes to the meadow.

* * *

The events that follow transpired many years ago. Queen Victoria was on the throne of England, but she was not yet the black-clad widow of Windsor: she had apples in her cheeks and the spring in her step, and Lord Melbourne often had cause to upbraid, gently, the young queen for her flightiness. She was, as yet, unmarried, although she was very much in love.

Mr Charles Dickens was serializing his novel *Oliver Twist*; Mr Draper had just taken the first photograph of the moon, freezing her pale face on cold paper; Mr Morse had recently announced a way of transmitting messages down metal wires.

Had you mentioned magic or Faerie to any of them, they would have smiled at you disdainfully, except, perhaps for

Mr Dickens, at the time a young man, and beardless. He would have looked at you wistfully.

People were coming to the British Isles that spring. They came in ones, and they came in twos, and they landed at Dover or in London or in Liverpool: men and women with skins as pale as paper, skins as dark as volcanic rock, skins the colour of cinnamon, speaking in a multitude of tongues. They arrived all through April, and they travelled by steam train, by horse, by caravan or cart, and many of them walked.

At that time Dunstan Thorn was eighteen, and he was not a romantic.

He had nut-brown hair, and nut-brown eyes, and nut-brown freckles. He was middling tall, and slow of speech. He had an easy smile, which illuminated his face from within, and he dreamed, when he daydreamed in his father's meadow, of leaving the village of Wall and all its unpredictable charm, and going to London, or Edinburgh, or Dublin, or some great town where nothing was dependent on which way the wind was blowing. He worked on his father's farm and owned nothing save a small cottage in a far field given to him by his parents.

Visitors were coming to Wall that April for the fair, and Dunstan resented them. Mr Bromios's inn, the *Seventh Magpie*, normally a warren of empty rooms, had filled a week earlier, and now the strangers had begun to take rooms in the farms and private houses, paying for their lodgings with strange coins, with herbs and spices, and even with gemstones.

As the day of the fair approached the atmosphere of anticipation mounted. People were waking earlier, counting days, counting minutes. The guards on the gate, at the sides of the wall, were restive and nervous. Figures and shadows moved in the trees at the edge of the meadow.

In the *Seventh Magpie*, Bridget Comfrey, who was widely regarded as the most beautiful pot-girl in living memory, was provoking friction between Tommy Forester, with whom she

had been seen to step out over the previous year, and a huge man with dark eyes and a small, chittering monkey. The man spoke little English, but he smiled expressively whenever Bridget came by.

In the pub's taproom the regulars sat in awkward proximity to the visitors, speaking so:

'It's only every nine years.'

'They say in the old days it was every year, at midsummer.'

'Ask Mister Bromios. He'll know.'

Mr Bromios was tall, and his skin was olive; his black hair was curled tightly on his head; his eyes were green. As the girls of the village became women they took notice of Mr Bromios, but he did not return their notice. It was said he had come to the village quite some time ago, a visitor. But he had stayed in the village; and his wine was good, so the locals agreed.

A loud argument broke out in the public lounge between Tommy Forester and the dark-eyed man, whose name appeared to be Alum Bey.

'Stop them! In the name of Heaven! Stop them!' shouted Bridget. 'They're going out the back to fight over me!' And she tossed her head, prettily, so that the light of the oil lamps caught her perfect golden curls.

Nobody moved to stop the men, although a number of people, villagers and newcomers alike, went outside to spectate.

Tommy Forester removed his shirt and raised his fists in front of him. The stranger laughed, and spat on the grass, and then he seized Tommy's right hand and sent him flying onto the ground, chin-first. Tommy clambered to his feet and ran at the stranger. He landed a glancing blow on the man's cheek, before finding himself face-down in the dirt, his face being slammed into the mud, with the wind knocked out of him. Alum Bey sat on top of him and chuckled, and said something in Arabic.

That quickly, and that easily, the fight was over.

Alum Bey climbed off Tommy Forester and he strutted over to Bridget Comfrey, bowed low to her, and grinned with gleaming teeth.

Bridget ignored him, and ran to Tommy. 'Why, whatever has he done to you, my sweet?' she asked, and mopped the mud from his face with her apron and called him all manner of endearments.

Alum Bey went, with the spectators, back into the public rooms of the inn, and he graciously bought Tommy Forester a bottle of Mr Bromios's Chablis when Tommy returned. Neither of them was quite certain who had won, who had lost.

Dunstan Thorn was not in the *Seventh Magpie* that evening: he was a practical lad, who had, for the last six months, been courting Daisy Hempstock, a young woman of similar practicality. They would walk, on fair evenings, around the village, and discuss the theory of crop rotation, and the weather, and other such sensible matters; and on these walks, upon which they were invariably accompanied by Daisy's mother and younger sister walking a healthy six paces behind, they would, from time to time, stare at each other lovingly.

At the door to the Hempstocks' Dunstan would pause, and bow, and take his farewell.

And Daisy Hempstock would walk into her house, and remove her bonnet, and say, 'I *do* so wish Mister Thorn would make up his mind to propose. I am sure Papa would not be averse to it.'

'Indeed, I am sure that he would not,' said Daisy's mama on this evening, as she said on every such evening, and she removed her own bonnet and her gloves and led her daughters to the drawing room, in which a very tall gentleman with a very long black beard was sitting, sorting through his pack. Daisy, and her mama, and her sister, bobbed curtseys to the gentleman (who spoke little English,

and had arrived a few days before). The temporary lodger, in his turn, stood and bowed to them, then returned to his pack of wooden oddments, sorting, arranging and polishing.

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It was chilly that April, with the awkward changeability of English spring.

The visitors came up the narrow road through the forest from the south; they filled the spare-rooms, they bunked out in cow byres and barns. Some of them raised coloured tents, some of them arrived in their own caravans drawn by huge grey horses or by small, shaggy ponies.

In the forest there was a carpet of bluebells.

On the morning of April the 29th Dunstan Thorn drew guard duty on the gap in the wall, with Tommy Forester. They stood on each side of the gap in the wall, and they waited.

Dunstan had done guard duty many times before, but hitherto his task had consisted of simply standing, and, on occasion, shooing away children.

Today he felt important: he held a wooden cudgel, and as each stranger to the village came up to the break in the wall, Dunstan or Tommy would say 'Tomorrow, tomorrow. No one's coming through today, good sirs.'

And the strangers would retreat a little way, and stare through the break in the wall at the unassuming meadow beyond it, at the unexceptional trees that dotted the meadow, at the rather dull forest behind it. Some of them attempted to strike up conversations with Dunstan or Tommy, but the young men, proud of their status as guards, declined to converse, contenting themselves by raising their heads, tightening their lips, and generally looking important.

At lunchtime, Daisy Hempstock brought by a small pot of shepherd's pie for them both, and Bridget Comfrey brought them each a mug of spiced ale.

And, at twilight, another two able-bodied young men of the village arrived to relieve them, carrying a lantern each, and Tommy and Dunstan walked down to the inn where Mr Bromios gave each of them a mug of his best ale – and his best ale was very fine indeed – as their reward for doing guard duty. There was a buzz of excitement in the inn, now crowded beyond believing. It was filled with visitors to the village from every nation in the world, or so it seemed to Dunstan who had no sense of distance beyond the woods that surrounded the village of Wall, so he regarded the tall gentleman in the black top hat at the table beside him, all the way up from London, with as much awe as he regarded the taller ebony-coloured gentleman in the white one-piece robe with whom he was dining.

Dunstan knew that it was rude to stare, and that, as a villager of Wall, he had every right to feel superior to all of the 'furriners.' But he could smell unfamiliar spices on the air, and hear men and women speaking to each other in a hundred tongues, and he gawked and gazed unashamedly.

The man in the black silk top hat noticed that Dunstan was staring at him, and motioned the lad over to him. 'D'you like treacle pudden'?' he asked abruptly, by way of introduction. 'Mutanabbi was called away, and there's more pudden' here than a man can manage on his own.'

Dunstan nodded. The treacle pudding was steaming invitingly on its plate.

'Well then,' said his new friend, 'help yourself.' He passed Dunstan a clean china bowl and a spoon. Dunstan needed no further encouragement, and he began to demolish the pudding.

'Now, young 'un,' said the tall gentleman in the black silk top hat to Dunstan, once their bowls and the pudding-plate were quite empty, 'it'd seem the inn has no more rooms; also that every room in the village has already been let.'

'Is that so?' said Dunstan, unsurprised.

'That it is,' said the gentleman in the top hat. 'And what I

was wondering was, would you know of a house that might have a room?'

Dunstan shrugged. 'All the rooms have gone by now,' he said. 'I remember that when I was a boy of nine, my mother and my father sent me to sleep out in the rafters of the cow byre for a week, and let my room to a lady from the Orient, and her family and servants. She left me a kite, as a thank you, and I flew it from the meadow until one day it snapped its string and flew away into the sky.'

'Where do you live now?' asked the gentleman in the top hat.

'I have a cottage on the edge of my father's land,' Dunstan replied. 'It was our shepherd's cottage, until he died, two years ago last lammas-tide, and my parents gave it to me.'

'Take me to it,' said the gentleman in the hat, and it did not occur to Dunstan to refuse him.

The spring moon was high and bright, and the night was clear. They walked down from the village to the forest beneath it, and they walked the whole way past the Thorn family farm (where the gentleman in the top hat was startled by a cow, sleeping in the meadow, which snorted as it dreamed) until they reached Dunstan's cottage.

It had one room and a fireplace. The stranger nodded. 'I like this well enough,' he said. 'Come, Dunstan Thorn, I'll rent it from you for the next three days.'

'What'll you give me for it?'

'A golden sovereign, a silver sixpence, a copper penny, and a fresh shiny farthing,' said the man.

Now a golden sovereign for two nights was more than a fair rent, in the days when a farm-worker might hope to make fifteen pounds in a good year. Still, Dunstan hesitated. 'If you're here for the market,' he told the tall man, 'then it's miracles and wonders you'll be trading.'

The tall man nodded. 'So, it would be miracles and wonders that you would be after, is it?' He looked around Dunstan's one-room cottage again. It began to rain then, a

gentle pattering on the thatch above them.

'Oh, very well,' said the tall gentleman, a trifle testily, 'a miracle, a wonder. Tomorrow, you shall attain your Heart's Desire. Now, here is your money,' and he took it from Dunstan's ear, with one easy gesture. Dunstan touched it to the iron nail on the cottage door, checking for faerie gold, then he bowed low to the gentleman, and walked off into the rain. He tied the money up in his handkerchief.

Dunstan walked to the cow byre in the pelting rain. He climbed into the hayloft and was soon asleep.

He was aware, in the night, of thunder and of lightning, although he did not wake; and then in the small hours of the morning he was woken by someone treading, awkwardly, on his feet.

'Sorry,' said a voice. 'That is to say, 'scuse me.'

'Who's that? Who's there?' said Dunstan.

'Just me,' said the voice. 'I'm here for the market. I was sleeping in a hollow tree for the night, but the lightnin' toppled it, cracked it like an egg it did and smashed it like a twig, and the rain got down my neck, and it threatened to get into my baggage, and there's things in there must be kept dry as dust, and I'd kept it safe as houses on all my travellings here, though it was wet as . . .'

'Water?' suggested Dunstan.

'Ever-so,' continued the voice in the darkness. 'So I was wonderin',' it continued, 'if you'd mind me stayin' here under your roof as I'm not very big, and I'd not disturb you or nothing.'

'Just don't tread on me,' sighed Dunstan.

It was then that a flash of lightning illuminated the byre, and in the light, Dunstan saw something small and hairy in the corner, wearing a large floppy hat. And then, darkness.

'I hope I'm not disturbin' you,' said the voice, which certainly sounded rather hairy, now Dunstan thought about it.

'You aren't,' said Dunstan, who was very tired.

'That's good,' said the hairy voice, 'because I wouldn't want to disturb you.'

'Please,' begged Dunstan, 'let me sleep. *Please*.'

There was a snuffling noise, which was replaced by a gentle snoring.

Dunstan rolled over in the hay. The person, whoever, whatever it was, farted, scratched itself, and began to snore once more.

Dunstan listened to the rain on the byre roof, and thought about Daisy Hempstock, and in his thoughts they were walking together, and six steps behind them walked a tall man with a top hat and a small, furry creature whose face Dunstan could not see. They were off to see his Heart's Desire . . .

* * *

There was bright sunlight on his face, and the cow byre was empty. He washed his face, and walked up to the farmhouse.

He put on his very best jacket, and his very best shirt, and his very best britches. He scraped the mud from his boots with his pocketknife. Then he walked into the farm kitchen, and kissed his mother on the cheek, and helped himself to a cottage loaf and a large pat of fresh-churned butter.

And then, with his money tied up in his fine Sunday cambric handkerchief, he walked up to the village of Wall and bade good morning to the guards on the gate.

Through the gap in the wall he could see coloured tents being raised, stalls being erected, coloured flags, and people walking back and forth.

'We're not to let anyone through until midday,' said the guard.

Dunstan shrugged, and went to the pub, where he pondered what he would buy with his savings (the shiny half-crown he had saved, and the lucky sixpence, with a hole drilled through it, on a leather thong around his neck) and

with the additional pocket handkerchief filled with coins. He had, for the moment, quite forgotten there had been anything else promised the night before. At the stroke of midday Dunstan strode up to the wall and, nervously, as if he were breaking the greatest of taboos, he walked through beside, as he realized, the gentleman in the black silk top hat, who nodded to him.

'Ah. My landlord. And how are you today, sir?'

'Very well,' said Dunstan.

'Walk with me,' said the tall man. 'Let us walk together.'

They walked across the meadow, toward the tents.

'Have you been here before?' asked the tall man.

'I went to the last market, nine years ago. I was only a boy,' admitted Dunstan.

'Well,' said his tenant, 'remember to be polite, and take no gifts. Remember that you're a guest. And now, I shall give you the last part of the rent that I owe you. For I swore an oath. And my gifts last a long time. You and your firstborn child and his or her firstborn child . . . It's a gift that will last as long as I live.'

'And what would that be, sir?'

'Your Heart's Desire, remember,' said the gentleman in the top hat. 'Your Heart's Desire.'

Dunstan bowed, and they walked on toward the fair.

'Eyes, eyes! New eyes for old!' shouted a tiny woman in front of a table covered with bottles and jars filled with eyes of every kind and colour.

'Instruments of music from a hundred lands!'

'Penny whistles! Tuppenny hums! Threepenny choral anthems!'

'Try your luck! Step right up! Answer a simple riddle and win a wind-flower!'

'Everlasting lavender! Bluebell cloth!'

'Bottled dreams, a shilling a bottle!'

'Coats of night! Coats of twilight! Coats of dusk!'

'Swords of fortune! Wands of power! Rings of eternity!

Cards of grace! Roll-up, roll-up, step this way!'

'Salves and ointments, philtres and nostrums!'

Dunstan paused in front of a stall covered with tiny crystal ornaments; he examined the miniature animals, pondering getting one for Daisy Hempstock. He picked up a crystal cat, no bigger than his thumb. Sagely it blinked at him, and he dropped it, shocked; it righted itself in midair and, like a real cat, fell on its four paws. Then it stalked over to the corner of the stall and began to wash itself.

Dunstan walked on, through the thronged market.

It was bustling with people; all the strangers who had come to Wall in the previous weeks were there, and many of the inhabitants of the town of Wall as well. Mr Bromios had set up a wine-tent and was selling wines and pasties to the village folk, who were often tempted by the foods being sold by the folk from Beyond the Wall but had been told by their grandparents, who had got it from *their* grandparents, that it was deeply, utterly wrong to eat fairy food, to eat fairy fruit, to drink fairy water and sip fairy wine.

For every nine years, the folk from Beyond the Wall and over the hill set up their stalls, and for a day and a night the meadow played host to the Faerie Market; and there was, for one day and one night in nine years, commerce between the nations.

There were wonders for sale, and marvels, and miracles; there were things undreamed-of and objects unimagined (*what need*, Dunstan wondered, *could someone have of the storm-filled eggshells*?). He jingled his money in his pocket handkerchief, and looked for something small and inexpensive with which to amuse Daisy.

He heard a gentle chiming in the air, above the hubbub of the market; and this he walked toward.

He passed a stall in which five huge men were dancing to the music of a lugubrious hurdy-gurdy being played by a mournful-looking black bear; he passed a stall where a balding man in a brightly coloured kimono was smashing

china plates and tossing them into a burning bowl from which coloured smoke was pouring, all the while calling out to the passersby.

The chinkling chiming grew louder.

Reaching the stall from which the sound was emanating, he saw that it was deserted. It was festooned with flowers: blue-bells and foxgloves and harebells and daffodils, but also with violets and lilies, with tiny crimson dog-roses, pale snowdrops, blue forget-me-nots and a profusion of other flowers Dunstan could not name. Each flower was made of glass or crystal, spun or carved, he could not tell: they counterfeited life perfectly. And they chimed and jingled like distant glass bells.

'Hello?' called Dunstan.

'Good morrow to you, on this Market Day,' said the stall holder, clambering down from the painted caravan parked behind the stall, and she smiled widely at him with white teeth in a dusky face. She was one of the folk from Beyond the Wall, he could tell at once from her eyes, and her ears which were visible beneath her curly black hair. Her eyes were a deep violet, while her ears were the ears of a cat, perhaps, gently curved, and dusted with a fine, dark fur. She was quite beautiful.

Dunstan picked up a flower from the stall. 'It's very lovely,' he said. It was a violet, and it chinkled and sang as he held it, making a noise similar to that produced by wetting a finger and rubbing it, gently, around a wineglass. 'How much is it?'

She shrugged, and a delightful shrug it was.

'The cost is never discussed at the outset,' she told him. 'It might be a great deal more than you are prepared to pay; and then you would leave, and we would both be the poorer for it. Let us discuss the merchandise in a more general way.'

Dunstan paused. It was then that the gentleman with the black silk top hat passed by the stall. 'There,' murmured

Dunstan's lodger. 'My debt to you is settled, and my rent is paid in full.'

Dunstan shook his head as if to clear it of a dream, and turned back to the young lady. 'So where do these flowers come from?' he asked.

She smiled knowingly. 'On the side of Mount Calamon a grove of glass flowers grows. The journey there is perilous, and the journey back is more so.'

'And of what purpose are they?' asked Dunstan.

'The use and function of these flowers is chiefly decorative and recreational; they bring pleasure; they can be given to a loved one as a token of admiration and affection, and the sound they make is pleasing to the ear. Also, they catch the light most delightfully.' She held a bluebell up to the light; and Dunstan could not but observe that the colour of sunlight glittering through the purple crystal was inferior in both hue and shade to that of her eyes.

'I see,' said Dunstan.

'They are also used in certain spells and cantrips. If sir is a magician . . .?'

Dunstan shook his head. There was, he noticed, something remarkable about the young lady.

'Ah. Even so, they are delightful things,' she said, and smiled again.

The remarkable thing was a thin silver chain that ran from the young lady's wrist, down to her ankle and into the painted caravan behind her.

Dunstan remarked upon it.

'The chain? It binds me to the stall. I am the personal slave of the witch-woman who owns the stall. She caught me many years ago – as I played by the waterfalls in my father's lands, high in the mountains – luring me on and on in the form of a pretty frog always but a moment out of my reach, until I had left my father's lands, unwittingly, whereupon she resumed her true shape and popped me into a sack.'

'And you are her slave forever?'

'Not forever,' and at that the faerie girl smiled. 'I gain my freedom on the day the moon loses her daughter, if that occurs in a week when two Mondays come together. I await it with patience. And in the meantime I do as I am bid, and also I dream. Will you buy a flower from me now, young master?'

'My name is Dunstan.'

'And an honest name it is, too,' she said with a teasing grin. 'Where are your pincers, Master Dunstan? Will you catch the devil by the nose?'

'And what is your name?' asked Dunstan, blushing a deep red.

'I no longer have a name. I am a slave, and the name I had was taken from me. I answer to "hey, you!" or to "girl!" or to "foolish slattern!" or to many another imprecation.'

Dunstan noticed how the silken fabric of her robe pressed itself against her body; he was aware of elegant curves, and of her violet eyes upon him, and he swallowed.

Dunstan put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his kerchief. He could no longer look at the woman. He tumbled out his money onto the counter. 'Take enough for this,' he said, picking a pure white snowdrop from the table.

'We do not take money at this stall.' She pushed the coins back toward him.

'No? What will you take?' For by now he was quite agitated, and his only mission was to obtain a flower for . . . for Daisy, Daisy Hempstock . . . to obtain his flower and to depart, for, truth to tell, the young lady was making him exceedingly uncomfortable.

'I could take the colour of your hair,' she said, 'or all of your memories before you were three years of age. I could take the hearing from your left ear – not all of it, just enough that you'd not enjoy music or appreciate the running of a river or the soughing of the wind.'

Dunstan shook his head.

'Or a kiss from you. One kiss, here on my cheek.'

'That I'll pay with goodwill!' said Dunstan, and with that he leaned across the stall, amid the twinkling jingling of the crystal flowers, and planted a chaste kiss on her soft cheek. He smelled the scent of her then, intoxicating, magical; it filled the front of his head and his chest and his mind.

'There, now,' she said, and she passed him his snowdrop. He took it with hands that suddenly seemed to him to be huge and clumsy and not at all small and in every way perfect like the hands of the faerie girl. 'And I'll see you back here tonight, Dunstan Thorn, when the moon goes down. Come here and hoot like a little owl. Can you do that?'

He nodded, and stumbled away from her; he did not need to ask how she knew his surname; she had taken it from him along with certain other things, such as his heart, when he had kissed her.

The snowdrop chimed in his hand.

* * *

'Why, Dunstan Thorn,' said Daisy Hempstock, when he encountered her by Mr Bromios's tent, sitting with her family and Dunstan's parents, eating great brown sausages and drinking porter, 'whatever is the matter?'

'I brought you a gift,' Dunstan muttered, and thrust the chiming snowdrop toward her; it glinted in the afternoon sunlight. She took it from him, puzzled, with fingers still shiny with sausage grease. Impulsively, Dunstan leaned forward and, in front of her mother and father and sister, in front of Bridget Comfrey and Mr Bromios and all, he kissed her on her fair cheek.

The outcry was predictable; but Mr Hempstock, who had not lived on the border of Faerie and the Lands Beyond for fifty-seven years for nothing, exclaimed, 'Hush, now! Look at his eyes. Can't you see the poor boy's dazed in his wits, dazed and confused? He's bespelled, I'll wager you. Hoy! Tommy Forester! Come here; take young Dunstan Thorn

back to the village and keep an eye on him; let him sleep if he wishes, or talk if it's talk he needs . . .'

Tommy walked Dunstan out of the market and back to the village of Wall.

'There, now, Daisy,' said her mother, stroking her hair, 'he's just a little elf-touched, that's all. No need to take on so.' And she pulled a lace kerchief from her capacious bosom, and dabbed at her daughter's cheeks, which had suddenly become covered with tears.

Daisy looked up at her, and seized the handkerchief, and blew her nose upon it, and sniffled into it. And Mrs Hempstock observed, with a certain perplexity, that Daisy appeared to be smiling through her tears.

'But Mother, Dunstan *kissed* me,' said Daisy Hempstock, and she fixed the crystal snowdrop at the front of her bonnet, where it chimed and glistened.

After some time spent searching for it, Mr Hempstock and Dunstan's father found the stall where the crystal flowers were being sold; but the stall was being run by an elderly woman, accompanied by an exotic and very beautiful bird, which was chained to its perch by a thin silver chain. There was no reasoning with the old woman, for when they tried to question her about what had happened to Dunstan, all her talk was of one of the prizes of her collection, given away by a good-for-nothing, and that was what came of ingratitude, and of these sad modern times, and of today's servants.

* * *

In the empty village (for who'd be in the village during the Faerie Market?), Dunstan was taken into the *Seventh Magpie*, and given a wooden settle on which to sit. He rested his forehead on his hand, and stared off into no-one-knows-where and, from time to time, sighed huge sighs, like the wind.

Tommy Forester tried to talk to him, saying 'Now then, old

fellow, buck up, that's the ticket, let's see a smile, eh? How's about something to eat then? Or something to drink? No? My word, you do look queer, Dunstan, old fellow . . .' but gaining no response of any kind, Tommy began to pine after the market himself, where even now (he rubbed his tender jaw) the lovely Bridget was undoubtedly being escorted by some huge and imposing gentleman with exotic clothes and a little monkey that chattered. And, having assured himself that his friend would be safe in the empty inn, Tommy walked back through the village to the gap in the wall.

As Tommy reentered the market, he observed that the place was a hubbub: a wild place of puppet shows, of jugglers and dancing animals, of horses for auction and all kinds of things for sale or barter.

Later, at twilight, a different kind of people came out. There was a crier, who cried news as a modern newspaper prints headlines – '*The Master of Stormhold Suffers a Mysterious Malady!', 'The Hill of Fire Has Moved to the Fastness of Dene!', 'The Squire of Garamond's Only Heir is Transformed into a Gruntling Pig-wiggin!*' – and would for a coin expand further on these stories.

The sun set, and a huge spring moon appeared, high already in the heavens. A chill breeze blew. Now the traders retreated into their tents, and the visitors to the market found themselves whispered at, invited to partake of numerous wonders, each available for a price.

And as the moon came low on the horizon Dunstan Thorn walked quietly down the cobbled streets of the village of Wall. He passed many a merry-maker – visitor or foreigner – although few enough of them observed him as he walked.

He slipped through the gap in the wall – thick it was, the wall – and Dunstan found himself wondering, as his father had before him, what would happen were he to walk along the top of it.

Through the gap and into the meadow, and that night, for the first time in his life, Dunstan entertained thoughts of

continuing on through the meadow, of crossing the stream and vanishing into the trees on its far side. He entertained these thoughts awkwardly, as a man entertains unexpected guests. Then, as he reached his objective, he pushed these thoughts away, as a man apologizes to his guests, and leaves them, muttering something about a prior engagement.

The moon was setting.

Dunstan raised his hands to his mouth and hooted. There was no response; the sky above was a deep colour – blue perhaps, or purple, not black – sprinkled with more stars than the mind could hold.

He hooted once more.

'That,' she said severely in his ear, 'is nothing like a little owl. A snowy owl it could be, a barn owl, even. If my ears were stopped up with twigs perhaps I'd imagine it an eagle-owl. But it's not a little owl.'

Dunstan shrugged, and grinned, a little foolishly. The faerie woman sat down beside him. She intoxicated him: he was breathing her, sensing her through the pores of his skin. She leaned close to him.

'Do you think you are under a spell, pretty Dunstan?'

'I do not know.'

She laughed, and the sound was a clear rill bubbling over rocks and stones.

'You are under no spell, pretty boy, pretty boy.' She lay back in the grass and stared up at the sky. 'Your stars,' she asked. 'What are they like?' Dunstan lay beside her in the cool grass, and stared up at the night sky. There was certainly something odd about the stars: perhaps there was more colour in them, for they glittered like tiny gems; perhaps there was something about the number of tiny stars, the constellations; something was strange and wonderful about the stars. But then . . .

They lay back to back, staring up at the sky.

'What do you want from life?' asked the faerie lass.

'I don't know,' he admitted. 'You, I think.'

'I want my freedom,' she said.

Dunstan reached down to the silver chain that ran from her wrist to her ankle, and off away in the grass. He tugged on it. It was stronger than it looked.

'It was fashioned of cat's breath and fish-scales and moonlight mixed in with the silver,' she told him. 'Unbreakable until the terms of the spell are concluded.'

'Oh.' He moved back onto the grass.

'I should not mind it, for it is a long, long chain; but the knowledge of it irks me, and I miss my father's land. And the witch-woman is not the best of mistresses . . .'

And she was quiet. Dunstan leaned over toward her, reached a hand up to her face, felt something wet and hot splash against his hand.

'Why, you are crying.'

She said nothing. Dunstan pulled her toward him, wiping ineffectually at her face with his big hand; and then he leaned into her sobbing face and, tentatively, uncertain of whether or not he was doing the correct thing given the circumstances, he kissed her, full upon her burning lips.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then her mouth opened against his, and her tongue slid into his mouth, and he was, under the strange stars, utterly, irrevocably, lost.

He had kissed before, with the girls of the village, but he had gone no further.

His hand felt her small breasts through the silk of her dress, touched the hard nubs of her nipples. She clung to him, hard, as if she were drowning, fumbling with his shirt, with his britches.

She was so small; he was scared he would hurt her and break her. He did not. She wriggled and writhed beneath him, gasping and kicking, and guiding him with her hand.

She placed a hundred burning kisses on his face and chest, and then she was above him, straddling him, gasping and laughing, sweating and slippery as a minnow, and he was arching and pushing and exulting, his head full of her

and only her, and had he known her name he would have called it out aloud.

At the end, he would have pulled out, but she held him inside her, wrapped her legs around him, pushed against him so hard that he felt that the two of them occupied the same place in the universe. As if, for one powerful, engulfing moment, they were the same person, giving and receiving, as the stars faded into the predawn sky.

They lay together, side by side.

The faerie woman adjusted her silk robe and was once more decorously covered. Dunstan pulled his britches back up, with regret. He squeezed her small hand in his.

The sweat dried on his skin, and he felt chilled and lonely.

He could see her now, as the sky lightened into a dawn grey. Around them animals were stirring: horses stamped, birds began, waking, to sing the dawn in, and, here and there across the market meadow, those in the tents were beginning to rise and move. 'Now, get along with you,' she said softly, and looked at him, half regretfully, with eyes as violet as the cirrus clouds, high in the dawn sky. And she kissed him, gently, on the mouth, with lips that tasted of crushed blackberries, then she stood up and walked back into the gypsy caravan behind the stall.

Dazed and alone, Dunstan walked through the market, feeling a great deal older than his eighteen years.

He returned to the cow byre, took off his boots, and slept until he woke, when the sun was high in the sky.

On the following day the market finished, although Dunstan did not return to it, and the foreigners left the village and life in Wall returned to normal, which was perhaps slightly less normal than life in most villages (particularly when the wind was in the wrong direction) but was, all things considered, normal enough.

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Two weeks after the market, Tommy Forester proposed marriage to Bridget Comfrey, and she accepted. And the week after that, Mrs Hempstock came to visit Mrs Thorn of a morning. They took tea in the parlour.

'It is a blessing about the Forester boy,' said Mrs Hempstock.

'That it is,' said Mrs Thorn. 'Have another scone, my dear. I expect your Daisy shall be a bridesmaid.'

'I trust she shall,' said Mrs Hempstock, '*if* she should live so long.'

Mrs Thorn looked up, alarmed. 'Why, she is not ill, Mrs Hempstock? Say it is not so.'

'She does not eat, Mrs Thorn. She wastes away. She drinks a little water from time to time.'

'Oh, my!'

Mrs Hempstock went on, 'Last night I finally discovered the cause. It is your Dunstan.'

'Dunstan? He has not . . .' Mrs Thorn raised one hand to her mouth.

'Oh, no,' said Mrs Hempstock, hastily shaking her head and pursing her lips, 'nothing like that. He has ignored her. She has not seen him for days and days. She has taken it into her head that he no longer cares for her, and all she does is hold the snowdrop he gave her, and she sobs.'

Mrs Thorn measured out more tea from the jar into the pot, added hot water. 'Truth to tell,' she admitted, 'we're a little concerned about Dunstan, Thorney and me. He's been *mooning*. That's the only word for it. His work isn't getting done. Thorney was saying that he needs some settling down, that boy. If he'd but settle down, why Thorney was saying he'd settle all the Westward Meadows on the lad.'

Mrs Hempstock nodded slowly. 'Hempstock would certainly not be averse to seeing our Daisy happy. Certain he'd settle a flock of our sheep on the girl.' The Hempstocks' sheep were notoriously the finest for miles around: shaggy-coated and intelligent (for sheep), with curling horns and

sharp hooves. Mrs Hempstock and Mrs Thorn sipped their tea. And so it was settled.

Dunstan Thorn was married in June to Daisy Hempstock. And if the groom seemed a little distracted, well, the bride was as glowing and lovely as ever any bride has been.

Behind them, their fathers discussed the plans for the farmhouse they would build for the newlyweds in the western meadow. Their mothers agreed how lovely Daisy looked, and what a pity it was that Dunstan had stopped Daisy from wearing the snowdrop he had bought for her at the market at the end of April, in her wedding dress.

And it is there we will leave them, in a falling flurry of rose petals, scarlet and yellow and pink and white.

Or almost.

They lived in Dunstan's cottage, while their little farmhouse was erected, and they were certainly happy enough; and the day-to-day business of raising sheep, and herding sheep, and shearing them, and nursing them, slowly took the faraway look from Dunstan's eyes.

First autumn came, then winter. It was at the end of February, in lambing season, when the world was cold, and a bitter wind howled down the moors and through the leafless forest, when icy rains fell from the leaden skies in continual drizzling showers, at six in the evening, after the sun had set and the sky was dark, that a wicker basket was pushed through the space in the wall. The guards, on each side of the gap, at first did not notice the basket. They were facing the wrong way, after all, and it was dark and wet, and they were busy stamping the ground and staring gloomily and longingly at the lights of the village.

And then a high, keening wail began.

It was then that they looked down, and saw the basket at their feet. There was a bundle in the basket: a bundle of oiled silk and woolen blankets, from the top of which protruded a red, bawling face, with screwed-up little eyes and a mouth, open and vocal, and hungry.

And there was, attached to the baby's blanket with a silver pin, a scrap of parchment, upon which was written in an elegant, if slightly archaic, handwriting the following words:

Tristran Thorn