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BENNY'S MYSTICAL FIND

“Morning, Benny,” called a bystander, waving as a shabbily-dressed man walked past on his way to somewhere from somewhere else. Everyone knew Benny Trudge. He was an amusing spectacle, pushing his pram with the wobbly wheels, pots and pans clinking and dangling from the sides. A traveller they called him and he used the pram to carry his personal items like spare clothes and toiletries; plus other things that he collected along the way. These could be anything from a hub cap that had fallen off someone’s car to a teddy bear that a child had dropped. When he came across them he tried to return them to whomsoever had lost them which wasn’t always easy; except when it was a wallet or purse that had an address. If not, he would drop these off at the local police station.

He had no job as such, but he did odds and ends for people like chopping wood and weeding gardens. Sometimes they would pay him money for the work he did; and many would invite him in for a meal, so he was rarely short of a feed. In this regard farms were good for Benny. There was usually plenty of work which paid quite well, and the farmers would give him an assortment of vegetables and fruit that he stacked in his pram for later use.

Benny didn’t have a home, but there were places that he knew of along the way where he could camp overnight. One of his favourites was a nice shady patch of grass near a brook and here was where he stopped that afternoon. Once he had cooked his evening meal of vegetable stew he untied his swag from the pram and rolled it out on the ground. It was really just a bed-roll with a waterproof cover, handy if it happened to rain. Not that this would be an issue for a while because it was the beginning of summer and there was unlikely to be any rain for months. Some might think sleeping on the ground to be uncomfortable; Benny, however, was used to it; and he could lay there listening to the sounds of the night – owls hooting and other creatures scuttling around, and especially the babbling water of the brook. These were, to him, lullabies that sent him into a peaceful slumber.

Not long after he had dozed off he was awakened by something unusual, a kind of singing; only there were no words, merely voices humming a sweet lilting tune. “A choir of angels?” he heard himself whisper; then he dismissed the notion: “No, can’t be.” The sounds seemed to be coming from the road nearby, so Benny climbed out of his swag to take a look. He was only just in time to see a cart or caravan being pulled by a horse. It had already passed by then and he was unable to see the driver. He knew who it was, though, because of the words painted on the back of the cart: **SIRENA ♀ FORTUNE TELLER**. According to the locals she was quite good at telling fortunes; and some claimed she had another talent, a mystical one. Sirena was said to somehow control the weather. Benny figured that was purely fanciful superstition. Weather was weather, and if anyone controlled it, that was Mother Nature.

The caravan continued along the road taking with it the strange sounds, so they must have been coming from there. Very soon they had faded as the cart was swallowed by the darkness. With a shrug and a sigh, Benny went back to his bed. Morning came and it was time to prepare a breakfast of fried potatoes and fried egg before heading off. Benny kept an eye out for

anything worthwhile that he could pick up, but it was mainly rubbish. It didn't matter as the day was pleasantly warm with a light breeze blowing and he was enjoying the walk. After a while he stopped, turning his head from side to side. Was that a sound he could hear drifting on the breeze? Moving down the road a bit further seemed to confirm his suspicions and he recognised the tune from the previous night: the choir singing from Sirena's caravan. Perhaps the fortune teller was up ahead?

A small object on the ground caught his attention and he stopped to pick it up. It was a polished stone and scratched into its surface was a strange symbol of some kind. Slipping it into a pocket he resumed his trudge. The singing got louder for a while, then started to fade as he continued, but there was no sign of the caravan. Leaving his pram at the edge of the road, Benny walked slowly back, listening until the singing was at its loudest. He saw where it was coming from and was surprised he had missed it first time. There, lying on the verge was a small bag like an old-fashioned leather pouch. Some of the contents had spilled out: a few smooth polished stones of varying shapes the same as the single one he'd picked up. Emptying what was left in the pouch there were more of them, each with a different symbol. He looked up and along the road ahead, thinking that the pouch of peculiar stones could have belonged to Sirena. After all, the sounds of the choir seemed to have been originally coming from her van. It was plain what he had to do – return the pouch and the stones to the fortune teller.

Where he would find her was anyone's guess, but he hoped the stones might guide him. They sat on top of the stuff in the pram, still making the humming sounds; and as he walked they grew louder for a while, presumably encouraged as they came closer to Sirena. Then something strange happened and quite suddenly. The warm breeze became very cold and the daylight faded when grey clouds seemed to come from nowhere to blanket the sky. Next, the breeze strengthened to a strong wind bringing with it rain which quickly turned to hail. Despite being summer, it was freezing. A final peculiarity had Benny really puzzled – the stones began a different song, a sad moaning often called a dirge. What were they trying to tell him?

Benny donned his wet-weather clothes and true to his name he trudged on, head down pushing his way through the fierce wind which was now driving snow. This was ridiculous – snow in summer, but it was undeniable. Along the road he went and the stones sang their dreary song louder and louder. Sirena must be near, he thought; then not so close when the moaning sounds began to fade. Perhaps he had gone right past the fortune teller, yet he hadn't seen her van. It could have been hidden by the snow storm, or maybe she had turned off somewhere behind him. Benny back-tracked and eventually came across a narrow side road that he must have passed without noticing.

Plodding along what was little more than a track he could feel crunching under his feet, probably gravel, although that was only a guess as it was hidden beneath a carpet of snow. The route seemed to fit, though: he imagined Sirena to be a solitary person who preferred peace and quiet, so she would chose a spot to camp away from people. The stones in the pouch certainly confirmed he was on the right road now, their mournful singing growing louder with each step Benny took. Then he saw it up ahead, the caravan with a dim light glowing from a window.

Taking the bag of stones from under a coating of snow that was covering them he approached the van. Before he had even reached it the door opened and there was Sirena, shivering under the woollen blanket wrapped around her. "Y-you have f-found them," she stuttered gratefully through chattering teeth, "Thank you s-so much." Backing into the van she held the door opened and beckoned to him. "C-come inside out of the s-storm, and if you c-can hand m-me my runes I'll see if I can m-make an end t-to this t-terrible weather."

Benny handed her the pouch. "Runes, did you say? I thought they were just stones."

"Believe me, they are much more than that." Closing the door, Sirena indicated a bench alongside a table. "Sit and I will show you." While Benny sat on the bench, the fortune teller knelt on the floor. Emptying the pouch on the rug she gathered up the runes, cupped her hands around them, shook them a few times before casting them back onto the rug. With open hands

she waved her palms over the runes in a circular motion three times, then tilted her head back to look up at the ceiling. Stretching her arms in the air, Sirena opened her hands, spread her fingers and began uttering a weird chant something similar to the song of the stones. After a few seconds she repeated the ritual twice more.

As far as Benny could tell nothing much had happened. The caravan continued to shudder occasionally when it was buffeted by strong wind gusts. "It doesn't seem to be working," he commented. She scowled at him and he was sorry he'd said anything.

"Let me explain something," she said. "People say I can control the weather. Well, only Mother Nature can do that. I simply ask her, nicely of course, to change it sometimes, especially if it is severe as it is now. The runes may have something to do with it, I don't know; but their singing tells me when bad weather is on the way. I guess they are maybe in better touch with Mother Nature than I am. This time, however, something about them is not right. Their song is never usually this sad."

Benny remembered something and stuffed a hand in his pocket to withdraw the first stone he had found. He passed to Sirena. "Sorry, I forgot about this one. Could it be that the runes are missing their friend?"

The fortune teller's eyes widened as she took the rune and moved it towards the others spread on the rug. The tune changed to something like an audible sigh, a happy one. "Yes-sss!" Sirena hissed. "That's why they were behaving peculiarly – they were incomplete." Placing the stone with the rest, she repeated her former ritual; and as she raised her hands to the heavens a strange lull fell over the caravan.

"The wind seems to have stopped," commented Benny. "Maybe the runes have worked for you this time...?" He slid along the bench and got up with the intention of opening the door to look out. Sirena was there before him. As she stepped out of the van Benny could see she was bathed in sunlight.

Uttering an almost inaudible: "Yes," she turned to face Benny who was still standing in the doorway. "This is a momentous day, and you have saved it Benny Trudge, for me especially. I have no money, but I would like to reward you. I can read your fortune if you would like."

The traveller smiled. "I don't think I want to know what the future holds for me. I've always been happy to take each day as it comes, and whatever I find along the way is reward enough for a simple life." Stepping out of the van he looked up into the sky. "Going to be a fine one. I'd best get going. You have a nice day, Sirena. I know I will."

With that he trudged over to his pram and began pushing it along the track. It was gravel as he had suspected, easy to see now that the carpet of snow had melted. The fortune teller watched him go and shook her head in silent wonder. Murmuring to herself she said quietly: "A truly remarkable man; and happy to be no more nor less than he already is. I guess he was right – his life is its own reward." Looking up she could still see the shabby traveller ambling further along the track. "Good luck to you Benny Trudge," she said, so softly that he would have been too far away to have heard. And yet, without turning he raised a hand in the air and waved. Sirena sighed. "Yes, a truly remarkable man indeed," she repeated as she returned to her caravan.

Pausing in the doorway she took once last look along the track. "It's a pity there aren't more people like you, Benny," she whispered. He was almost out of sight now, but Benny's arm came up and waved a final farewell. Sirena shook her head in wonder and closed the door.