

Salt

by Bret Nelson

Theresa Sanchez finished tying up the fourth and final box. Packing tape didn't stick to waxed cardboard, so she had to use string. The once-cozy den was now strewn with damp, floppy scraps, but at least this part of the packing was done. She marked off a line on the checklist and called to her sister. "We're going to need more toads."

Theresa's sister, Cassandra Sanchez, sat at the kitchen table nudging a bowl on a digital scale. She was doling out salt in 300-gram portions, then pouring each portion into its own zip-top bag. "What was that?" she said.

“This isn’t going to be enough toads,” Theresa said, carrying the croaking box through the kitchen on her way to the garage. She stopped, resting her load against the chair opposite her sister, waiting for a response.

Cassandra looked over the top of her glasses, first at the box full of wet newspaper and chortling amphibians in her sister’s hands, then through the propped-open door leading to the garage and their van. “There are already three boxes full of toads out there, Theresa,” she said. “It’s more than we need.”

“It’s not enough. Some aren’t going to survive the trip; some will get away once we get them in the circle.”

“You always say that. One time, just once, we were short on toads, and you keep bringing it up.” Cassandra returned to her measures. After a few moments of terse silence, Theresa took the toads into the garage.

As she contorted herself to stack the box with the others, she heard her sister call from the kitchen. “It was 150 years ago,” said Cassandra. “Just put them in the van.”

“I’m doing it.” Another copy of the checklist was on the passenger seat. Theresa did an inventory. “Do you know if Gwen found that hair?”

Cassandra continued tapping out bits of salt, eyeing the scale. “Yes, she called earlier. Three children got haircuts at her salon today, she’s bringing plenty.” On the kitchen table, her cellphone chirped. She tapped it with the back of her knuckle, pausing to appreciate the manicure Gwen gave her the day before. “Hello? You’re on speaker.”

“It’s Martha.” This would be Martha Harcolm’s first gathering at the stones since joining the coven in April.

Hunched over in the cargo area of the van, Theresa polished the silver bobs on the pendulums. She bristled when she heard the 20-year-old's voice. Like all the novices in the coven, Martha wanted Cassandra's approval.

"Hello, Martha. Is something wrong? Were my instructions unclear?" asked Cassandra.

"Oh no, quite clear. Just wanted you to know I'll be there maybe five minutes late."

"That isn't a problem as long as you have everything."

"I'm at my last stop now," said Martha. "Oh, and thanks for the tip about going to Jackson Fabric for the silk, they had all eight colors. Now I'm at the last Pet Cart, then I'm on my way there."

Cassandra looked at her phone. "Pet Cart?"

"Yes, did you know there's three of them in town? I've already been to the first two and now I'm at the last one."

"Why?"

"Theresa said you needed more toads."

"We do," said Theresa, storing the last pendulum.

"No more toads," said Cassandra. "I can't even hear you over all the croaking as it is. If you've got everything else, come straight here."

"Should I try to return the toads?" asked Martha. "There's seventeen of them."

"Just get here. I look forward to seeing you."

"Oh! Me too, I'm looking forward -"

Cassandra's knuckle ended the call. "We're not going to have to open this gate, Theresa," she said. "We can just plague our enemies with these damn toads."

Theresa looked in the rearview mirror, mouthing her sister's words with her nose scrunched up. She noticed a glossy smear of grey-green slime on her cheek. Cassandra must have seen it, but she hadn't said a word. Theresa grabbed a tissue off the dashboard and scraped the goo away.

She sealed the van and hurried through the kitchen. "I'm going to wash up," she said.

"No point in washing up before you deal with that mess you left in the den," said Cassandra.

Theresa changed her course sharply to the den. "I was going to do that, you know."

"I'm sure you were."

The painter's tarp covering the floor in the den managed to contain all the toad-packing remnants. Theresa gathered the corners and rolled it all up. It fit neatly in the trash bag and didn't leak at all on the way out to the cans at the side of the house.

It was quiet outside. Theresa could just see the hilltop in the distance with the moon coming up behind it. They'd be on their way there in an hour.

She knew how this would go.

Cassandra would be primping in the passenger seat, gossiping on her phone with Gwen, while Theresa drove the van. Martha would be in the back making sure nothing shifted.

Martha would likely never stop talking. All the others would meet them at the stones.

After they unloaded the van, the coven would gather around Cassandra to tell her how nice she looked and ask her lots of questions about the incantation so Cassandra could feel like a clever witch.

Theresa would offer to drive the empty van behind the hill and walk back, so it was out of their view. She may not need to offer; she would probably be ordered to do it. And she would take all the extra toads with her, apologizing for the trouble they had caused.

She would park at the crossroads, alone, and retrieve the seven quartz crystals that she hid under the van's spare tire yesterday.

Then, with seven gems and twenty-one toads, under the moon at the crossroads, Theresa Sanchez would dance.

And she would speak her right words.

And make her sister pay.

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