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Your main commentary should be focused on TO. Other topics may also be addressed.

Smith reached down and slapped her. It wasn't very hard, and he regretted it instantly. The boys got the flat of his hand and occasionally the length of his belt whenever they deserved it. The trouble with his daughter, though, was not ordinary naughtiness but the infuriating way she had of relentlessly pursuing the thread of an argument long after she should have put it down. It always flustered him.

She burst into tears. Smith stood up, angry and embarrassed at himself, and stumped off to the forge.

There was a loud crack, and a thud.

They found him out cold on the floor. Afterward he always maintained that he'd hit his head on the doorway. Which was odd, because he wasn't very tall and there had always been plenty of room before, but he was certain that whatever happened had nothing to do with the blur of movement from the forge's darkest corner.

Somehow the events set the seal on the day. It became a broken crockery day, a day of people getting under each other's feet and being peevish. Esk's mother dropped a jug that had belonged to her grandmother and a whole box of apples in the loft turned out to be mouldy. In the forge the furnace went sullen and refused to draw.

Jaims, the oldest son, slipped on the packed ice in the road and hurt his arm. The white cat, or possibly one of its descendants, since the cats led a private and complicated life of their own in the hayloft next to the forge, went and climbed up the chimney in the scullery and refused to come down. Even the sky pressed in like an old mattress, and the air felt stuffy, despite the snow.

Frayed nerves and boredom and bad temper made the air hum like thunderstorm weather.

"Right! That's it. That's just about enough!" shouted Esk's mother. "Cern, you and Gulta and Esk can go and see how Granny is and— where's Esk?"

The two youngest boys looked up from where they were halfheartedly fighting under the table.

"She went out to the orchard," said Gulta. "Again."

"Go and fetch her in, then, and be off."

35 "But it's cold!"

"It's going to snow again!"

"It's only a mile and the road is clear enough and who was so keen to be out in it when we had the first snowfall? Go on with you, and don't come back till you're in a better temper."

40 They found Esk sitting in a fork of the big apple tree. The boys didn't like the tree much. For one thing, it was so covered in mistletoe that it looked green even in midwinter, its fruit was small and went from stomach-twisting sourness to wasp-filled rottenness overnight, and although it looked easy enough to climb it had a habit of breaking 45 twigs and dislodging feet at inconvenient moments. Cern once swore that a branch had twisted just to spill him off. But it tolerated Esk, who used to go and sit in it if she was annoyed or fed up or just wanted to be by herself, and the boys sensed that every brother's right to gently torture his sister ended at the foot of its trunk. So they threw a 50 snowball at her. It missed.

"We're going to see old Weatherwax."

"But you don't have to come."

"Because you'll just slow us down and probably cry anyway."

Esk looked down at them solemnly. She didn't cry a lot, it never 55 seemed to achieve much.

"If you don't want me to come then I'll come," she said. This sort of thing passes for logic among siblings.

"Oh, we want you to come," said Gulta quickly.

"Very pleased to hear it," said Esk, dropping on to the packed snow.

60 They had a basket containing smoked sausages, preserved eggs and – because their mother was prudent as well as generous – a large jar of peach preserve that no one in the family liked very much. She still made it every year when the little wild peaches were ripe, anyway.

The people of Bad Ass had learned to live with the long winter 65 snows and the roads out of the village were lined with boards to reduce drifting and, more important, stop travellers from straying.