

JUST A SHELL

Brother Bartholomew

So that's them?" hOOt the Bard looked at the shells on the bar dubiously. The raucous sounds of a gather of FALO, the Clan of the Heart, filled the taproom and made it difficult to be heard. His two friends leaned in closer.

"Yes, that's them," replied Rinka Tur with a bit of a grin. "Somehow, even though I'm no longer an official courier, these two called to me, and I knew I had to bring them to you, Bart."

The tall Druid bent over a bit more and pushed at the two shells with his forefinger. "These *are* two of the shells we rescued from the Siren," he said musingly, "along with Starshadow's Muse. I recognize this one, at least." He poked at one of the shells. It was older-looking than the other, very knobbed, and somehow its luster was duller than its counterpart. "And you say you felt compelled to bring these two and no others?"

Rinka Tur nodded her head. "That's right, Bart. Just these two, and I also felt strongly that hOOt should be here as well."

The Bard smiled brightly. "Oh. Well, here I am. Now what?"

"Let me see," said the Druid. Carefully he picked up the brighter of the two shells and held it close to the crystal at the tip of his staff. Under his breath he muttered a prayer to his Goddess and God, asking Their help in analyzing this once-living thing. A pale green light flashed out from the crystal for a moment, bathing the shell in its verdant light. "Hmm. Very interesting. And now for the other." He repeated the process with the second, and once again the Magickal light bathed the shell. Placing them both back on the bar, he looked at his companions and clan-kin.

"From what I can reap, this one," he indicated the brighter and smoother shell, "still contains a Muse, although it is dim and waning. The other appears to be empty, with but a lingering trace that it once contained more than just the mollusk that grew it. I would deem that its owner has passed on from this plane, and the Muse has almost gone with it. hOOt, my friend, do you think you can use your Bardic Voice to sing this remnant to its final sleep?"

"That should be no problem, Bart."

The Druid placed the shell in his companion's hand and folded the Bard's fingers around it. "Then I shall leave this one to your good efforts. This other one, however, needs to be investigated further. I believe, with the proper invocations and blessings, I can Find a Path to its rightful owner, and return it to him – or her, as the case may be." Turning to Rinka Tur, he continued, "and thank you, Rink', for bringing these to us. You have done a good thing here, and helped correct an Imbalance."

The elf woman beamed.

"And now, my friends," continued the portly Druid, throwing his arms across his friends' shoulders, "let us enjoy ourselves. It's Spring!"

* * *

The next day, after bidding his friends "merry part," Brother Bartholomew quickly returned to his home high in the mountains southwest of Toolibric. Once again, silently he thanked his Gods for the blessing of *Root Travel*, which allowed him rapid transportation wherever a continuous forested area existed, for it cut the weeklong trip to a matter of seconds. Exiting from a majestic maple tree close to the hidden Grove, he

quickly made his way through the thorn bush barrier surrounding the god-like Tree of Life and his own home. Absently, he *sensed* the health of the barrier bushes and found them growing well with the quickening of Spring that was infusing the entire forest.

It took the better part of two days to make the necessary preparations for the Ritual he needed. It would have taken less time had he not been delayed by the various wounded plants and animals that needed his tending, but this was an obligation to the forest he had assumed willingly, and he did not begrudge the time.

Towards evening on the second day after his return, he was ready. Wearing his ceremonial robes, the tall man approached the altar, placed equidistant from both the sacred pool and the Tree. On it were a smoldering brazier, small bowls of various powders, the seashell, and his Sacred Sickle. The Druid quickly scribed a circle of warding and protection with the Sickle, enclosing himself and the altar. Murmuring prayers to his Gods all the while, he laid the Sickle aside and tossed a pinch each of two powders onto the brazier. Fragrant plumes of blue and green smoke rose and filled the area inside the wards, stopping at the circle as if hitting a wall. Taking the seashell in his hands, the Druid knelt and, with one more prayer for guidance in his quest, he inhaled the smoke deeply into his lungs. In a moment, he fell over on his side and lay still.

When he awoke, it was fully dark. The clouds of smoke were gone and the brazier was extinguished. Speaking a brief prayer of thanks, the heavysset man slowly got to his feet. He looked down at the seashell in his hand, and knew exactly which way he had to go to deliver it to its true owner. With a small smile, he returned to his home for dinner and preparations for another departure.

The next morning, he arose with the sun. After his morning prayers, he ate a light breakfast and bathed in the outdoor pool he had built for that purpose. Somehow, it always refreshed him more than any other water source, and it was his habit to utilize it at any opportunity, the coldness of the water notwithstanding.

Invigorated by his bracing wash, the good Druid quickly went through the familiar steps needed to close down his home for an extended period. Picking up his backpack and staff, he walked toward the thorn wall that surrounded and protected the secret Grove of the Tree. Silently, the thorn bushes moved aside, forming an arched path that allowed the Protector of the Tree an easy exit. Behind him, just as silently, the thorny barrier reformed itself.

Pausing a short walk from the now-hidden Grove, Brother Bartholomew tilted his head back and gave a convincing imitation of a wolf's howl. After two or three such, his efforts were rewarded by an answering series of howls. Before long, the wolf pack of the Boren Dur forest was capering around him, pushing and shoving each other in their eagerness to lick his face as he knelt on the loamy forest floor. With a loud "whuff!" the alpha male, Brindle, ordered his clan to calm down. Slowly and with the dignity of a leader, he made his way to the Druid. He raised one paw and put it into Bart's outstretched hand, greeting him as he had since he was a newly weaned pup. He then raised his head and allowed his human friend to scratch behind his ears.

Murmuring the appropriate prayer, Bartholomew the Druid *spoke* to his old friend. *I am leaving again for a while, pack leader. Once more, I ask you to guard and watch, as you and yours have done.*

Another Long Hunt, man-wolf? This was probably the closest name in the Common tongue to what the wolves called him. Will there be a good kill?

Perhaps, my friend. It is difficult to say. The trail is old and the scent is very faint. When I return, we will hunt together, as before.

That is good replied Brindle with a wag of his tail, *and we will watch the man-trail and stay away from the man-lair. If there are strangers, I will leave the red rock in the night.*

The pack leader referred to the long-established signal by which the wolves warned the humans if strangers appeared in the forest. Brindle would carry a red-painted rock into the village under cover of darkness and leave it at the doorstep of the Mayor of Boren Dur. In return for this and other favors, the wolves received the unwanted parts of any animal the men killed, either of their herds and flocks or of their

hunts. It had taken Bartholomew some time to convince both sides of the value of this Balance, and that the other side could be trusted to keep the bargain, but it had been worth it.

Thank you for your help, the Druid said. *I must be on the trail now. May your hunts be successful until we meet again.*

He rose and dusted off his robes. The wolf pack noisily made its way into the dense forest, the yearling pups clamoring as they played. As they disappeared into the trees, the man took a deep breath and composed himself. Turning towards a majestic Oak tree, he began speaking the prayer that invoked the power of root travel. A green ray flashed from the crystal atop his staff and bathed the tree trunk in its light. Finishing the prayer, the tall man stepped into the solid tree trunk and disappeared from sight. The forest path was as empty as if no one had been there in weeks, the dust motes sparkling in the dappled rays of sunlight.

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In a matter of moments, Bartholomew stepped out of a similar Oak, but the surroundings had changed and the sun was just cresting the eastern horizon. Looking around him, the Druid recognized his location; he was at the edge of the forest closest to the small but bustling coastal town of Cullyport. Turning, he placed a hand on the tree he had just used as a portal, and said a prayer of thanks to both his Gods and the tree itself. Then hitching up his belt, which had a nasty habit of falling below his paunch and threatening to trip him, he started on his way into town.

It was nearly noon when he trudged up the road toward the first inn on the outskirts of the town proper. For the past two hours, he had been walking through farmland. The local people were out, busy working their fields and tending to their growing crops. The sight of so many people, mostly human but with a smattering of half-elves, carefully nurturing the growing life made him smile. At least one area seemed to be recovered from the tribulations of the Great Cataclysm.

He entered the inn and found himself in a cool taproom. Ordering ale, bread and cheese, he took his seat at a table with his back to the wall, facing the door. Old habits die hard, it seems. As it was not a market day, he was the only patron, and before long the innkeeper came over and politely asked if he could join him. On Bart's assent, he seated himself and refilled the Druid's tankard from the pitcher he had brought.

The two men sat and chatted for a while. Bart was grateful for the chance to catch up on the local news; it had been some time since he had been in Cullyport and he was curious as to how things stood. It seemed that his friends Rahne Whitebriar and Rodin Rae d'Cordelia were building a reputation as up-and-coming merchants. There were stories of a disturbance in shipping down the coast in Toolibrie, but word of the Kraken that Bartholomew and his Clankin had taken down the year before seemed not to have reached this far north.

The rest of the local gossip was exactly that, and after a short while the Druid pleaded road-weariness, negotiated a price for a room and a bath, and went upstairs for a refreshing afternoon nap.

The taproom was a bit livelier that evening, with a smattering of locals and travelers eating, drinking and smoking to the merry tunes of a young woman and her adolescent girl accompanist on the small stage at the end of the room. They received a fair amount of applause—and coin—for their efforts. Bartholomew kept time with his hand or foot as the mood struck him, and had a most pleasant and entertaining evening. With the help of the Gods, he would remember a few new tunes to bring back to the next gather of FALO.

Since he had limited his drinking to just two mugs of dark ale, the Druid was able to rise early with a clear head. After a quick wash and clean-up, he said his morning prayers and went down to greet the day. A small meal of biscuits, honey, apple slices and tea was a refreshing start, and he left the inn humming a light melody.

Once outside, he walked to an apple tree growing nearby. Reaching into his shoulder bag, he pulled out the small, linen-wrapped shell. Holding it close to the crystal on top of his Staff and resting both on the trunk

of the tree, he murmured a prayer and allowed himself to enter a meditative trance. Calling on his Lord and Lady to guide him, he opened his mind to whatever would be granted him.

Before long, he perceived a calling, urging him to walk into town. With a shake of his head to clear away the fugue of trance, he began walking into Cullyport proper.

The town had not changed much since his last visit. It still had the air of a small, bustling and prosperous seaport, with pretensions of grandeur. The streets in the wealthier part of town were broad, tree-lined and well paved, and even in the poorer districts there was far less squalor than Toolibrie showed. Bart wandered up and down the avenues and alleys, following an invisible aura that his spellwork had detected.

It was early afternoon when he thought he had found his destination. The aura he followed was very faint and easy to lose; in fact, he had gotten off the trail several times and had to backtrack, in a manner of speaking, to find it again. From his memories of this small port town, he must have walked about three-quarters of its streets. Finally just as he was sure he had found the block he was seeking, his concentration was interrupted.

From up ahead came a crashing noise followed by the sounds of a woman screaming at someone. “You little imp! Curse me if you aren’t the reincarnation of your Mother, you miserable no-good! Grandson or no, if I catch you I’ll whip the skin off your little backside, Gods help me if I don’t! Come here, you rascal!” A small boy darted out of a shop just down the street. He ran past the Druid, skillfully dodging around the portly man as if he had long practice at this. The woman kept screeching. “Dranton! Dranton Bisk, you get back here! Oooh, that boy! Wait till I get you, you scamp!”

As the woman exited her shop, Bartholomew was able to get a good look at her. She was short and round, with a head of gray hair carefully done up in what he supposed was the latest style. Her dress also reflected a comfortable lifestyle, as the cut was in the latest fashion and the quality of the material quite good. Her face was red with anger, and she was waving one pointed finger in the boy’s direction.

Seeing the tall Druid in front of her, the woman visibly pulled herself together. With a curtsy and a practiced smile, she greeted him while still trying to catch her breath.

“Your, your pardon, Reverend Sir! I ask your forgiveness for my grandson. He is such a scamp, but boys are like that, aren’t they? I hope he caused you no harm...”

Be at ease, good woman,” he jovially replied. “I’ve raised my share of boys, and I understand.”

Looking at her shop, he saw the sign hanging: *Prellin’s. Fine Silver and Jewelry*. And under it, in smaller gilt letters: *Purveyors to Her Majesty, the Countess d’Whittemere*. The window was glass, which in itself spoke of the prosperity of the shop, and the bars in front of it spoke to the value of the items on display. There were rings, brooches, necklaces and one or two tiaras, all reflecting the highest quality of craftsmanship, and many sporting twinkling jewels.

“And you, I take it, are Madame Prellin?”

“Oh yes, Reverend Sir,” she proudly replied, her smile deepening. “You have heard of me?”

“I believe the Countess d’Whittemere was wearing one of your pieces the last time I saw her.”

The woman could scarcely contain herself. “Oh my,” she twittered, “and you... know her?”

“As well as if I were her own brother,” he replied gravely, noticing the woman’s opinion of him rising with each passing moment.

“W-well, then, Esteemed Sir, do come in to my, that is, our shop and refresh yourself. Perhaps there is something I can show you....” Prattling on, Madame Prellin escorted him into the shop. It was cool and a bit darker than the street, and to one side there was a small table with three upholstered chairs. They were obviously for special customers, and it was there that she ushered the Druid.

She called into the back and a younger woman came out. The proprietress brusquely ordered her to bring light refreshments, all the while favoring Bartholomew with a simpering smile and tales of her most important

customers and their lavish praise of her husband's handiwork. After some lemonade and cookies, she sat back expectantly, waiting for the Druid to speak.

"Madame Prellin," he began softly, "it seems that you are a person of some substance in this city."

The woman smiled widely and preened herself.

"I believe you can be of some great help to me in a quest to correct an old wrong-doing."

If anything, her ample chest expanded even further than before, and she fluttered her lace handkerchief in front of her face. "Oh, Sir, if there is anything I can do; anything at all..."

Bartholomew leaned towards her, and she to him. "I am looking for some person. I don't know if it's a man or a woman, but it must be someone of mature years, who once showed great promise in the arts, but never continued. He or she could have been a painter, a dancer, perhaps a singer..."

At this, the woman drew back, a faint scowl appearing on her face.

"What is this, Sir Druid? Do you mock me?"

Bart's eyebrows shot up and he took her hand in his. "Mock you? No, no, Madam, I assure you, I have been sent here by... higher powers... to seek out this person..."

She drew her hand back. "And you don't know who I am... or was?"

"Why, no, not at all."

Her face hardened. "Well, Sir, it seems that you have found the one you are looking for, although for the life of me, I don't know what good it will do you... or me, for that matter." Madame Prellin drew back into her chair.

"My good woman," he said softly, "I never intended you any pain or harm. Forgive me if I have offended you."

She drew a deep breath. "Oh, it's not you, Sir Druid. It's the memories you have awakened. I thought I had put them behind me, but now they are back to gnaw at me again."

"Madame Prellin, I cannot help but see the stress these memories cause you. Perhaps, if you tell me of them, I can be of some small service."

"You? How could you, a stranger, be of any help to me?"

"Milady, I have been offering guidance and counsel for many years now. It has been my experience that sharing a burden with someone, anyone, can help to lighten its weight on the soul. And the rules under which I live bind me to secrecy and confidentiality of all I am told."

It took all of the good Druid's diplomatic and counseling skills to draw the story out of the angry and upset woman, but with patience he calmed her down and she began to talk.

"When I was a child, I was gifted with a golden voice. 'The Lark of the Morning,' they called me, and the people filled the halls where I sang. My parents grew rich on my talent, and they kept pushing me to sing more and more. I had neither friends nor time to play. It 'took me away from my destiny,' they told me. 'It would be an insult to the Gods not to use their gift,' they told me. And I was too small to understand that things could be different, or to fight back.

"And then came the trip. They had arranged a concert in New Lunden, on the Isle of Long. The money must have been very good, for we left immediately. We took passage on a ship. At first, it was a great adventure, because I had never been to sea before, but on the fourth or fifth day, a great storm arose. The last thing I remember of it was clinging tightly to my mother in our cabin as the ship was tossed back and forth in the tempest.

"The next thing I remember is walking on the beach alone. I was wearing only a simple shift. Some people found me, and took me here to Cullyport, where the Sisters took me in and raised me. I learned to sew and cook, and I vowed to never be poor. When Mr. Prellin took a liking to me, we married. I have been a good wife to him; bore him five children and helped manage his business so he could have the time to make

all the fine jewelry and silver. But I never sang again, nor did I want to. All music ever brought me was sadness.”

She had lowered her head as she spoke, and now she looked up. There was anger in her face, and her eyes were shiny and wet.

“My dear,” Bart said softly, “I quite understand. There is an old hurt in you that never healed. And this, I think, is why the Lord and Lady guided me here. If I could but help restore your talent to you, as an adult you would be free to use it as you choose, not at the behest of others...”

“No! Never! All that music ever brought me was sadness, sadness and disaster. I lost my parents because of my music, don’t you see? I had no childhood because of my so-called ‘talent,’ so I was careful never to allow song in my house again!”

“Permit me to tell you a different story, Madame Prellin. Let me tell you of an evil creature, a Siren, who lived at the bottom of the sea and drew mortals to her with her hypnotic singing. Once her victims were enthralled, she would devour them. I know of another, an Elvin king, who bargained for his life by giving her his musical talent; his Muse, if you will. He is a good friend of mine, and some others and I were able to restore his Muse and possibly destroy the Siren. In the process, we acquired nearly a dozen ‘Muses,’ other people’s talents she stored in magical vessels, and yours was one of them, I am sure.”

He drew the seashell from his pocket, sprinkled a bit of Mistletoe over it and murmured a prayer. A faint green beam of light sprang from the shell and leaped to the woman’s forehead.

“Did you see that? It *is* yours. I am now positive that your parents bargained for your life with the Siren, and she allowed you to live in return for your Muse. Surely they loved you dearly, since they must have known that they would be doomed once she let you go.”

“All right, and what of it? Perhaps they did love me, but all I ever got from music was pain and sorrow. What good will it do me now?”

“Mother Prellin,” he said softly, “have you ever held one of your grandchildren in your arms to sing to her?”

Her head was bowed for a long time. When she finally raised her face, her look was one of anguish.

“Damn you, Druid. Give me back my Muse!”