

Loose Ends

Brother Bartholomew

The sun was just beginning to touch the tops of the trees, adding its coloring to the already bright spring foliage. With a steady, mile-eating stride, the large man in brown robes crested the hill and looked at the road ahead.

Too far to Toolibrie to make it tonight, Old Son, he mused. Best find a place to rest, or give in and use Root Travel. Brother Bartholomew, Druid of the Fellowship of the Great Tree, stood for a moment. He was returning to the city from the memorial services for his old friend, Jomton the Shipwright, held that morning at the Druid's Grove. Jommy had been a sea-faring man; in fact, he and the Druid had been shipmates, of a sort, in by-gone times, and this was the second funeral for the old salt. The first had been at the temple of Lir, God of the Seas, in town. However, in deference to the conversion of his old friend to the Way of the Tree, Jomton had been very generous to the Druids of the local Grove, and they chose to honor his memory with a service to commemorate his passing.

Brother Bartholomew saw no conflict in this, and had even participated in both services. Now, with no pressing business, he was enjoying the spring weather and the burgeoning of Nature with a leisurely stroll into town. The only problem was that, since the Great Cataclysm that had rearranged the continent of E'Atarra some time back, even distances between two familiar places had changed, and it was taking him far longer to walk into town than he had anticipated.

With a sigh, the portly Druid pulled up his belt, which had developed a bad habit of slipping below his paunch, and started off again. He had a bit of time before he would be forced by darkness to find a comfortable tree in which to spend the night, and enough food in his pouch so that he would not go hungry, and he wanted to put as many miles behind him as he could. While he could shorten his trip to mere minutes by using the *powers* granted him by his Gods, the Druids frowned on the immoderate use of the Magical gifts without good reason, and he saw no real need to travel *Through the Roots* merely to save himself from inconvenience. He would be perfectly safe in the woods for the night, and would probably reach Toolibrie well before noon.

However, after rounding the next hill, he saw there would be another choice. There before him lay a large, prosperous-looking farm, with its freshly ploughed fields and green meadows spread on both sides of the road. A small herd of cows was heading back to the barn, except for one that seemed to prefer eating some roadside flowers, and a young boy was trying with no success to get her to move with the others. Bartholomew was soon standing next to them.

Putting a serious look on his face, he said to the lad, "She doesn't seem to want to go, does she?"

"No, but I gotta get her in. Granny said they all have to be milked before I get supper!"

"Perhaps I can help," answered the Druid, with a twinkle in his eye and a smile beginning to appear on his lips. "That is, if you will let me."

"Oh, yes, please! I'd be ever so grateful!" The boy looked up wistfully at the tall man in brown robes standing before him.

Bartholomew fingered his beard. "Hmm, let's see..." Lifting his staff, he gently tapped the cow on her nose. Startled, she looked up, and he quickly took hold of the ring attached through her nose. "Let's go, young lady," he said firmly. "You have an appointment with a pail and a milking stool."

Docilely, the cow followed him into the barn with the boy skipping alongside. He seemed to be about eight or nine years old and chatted happily about the cows under his charge. It seemed that this was the first season that he was considered old enough to handle this responsibility, and he was quite proud of his work. Bartholomew commented gravely and seriously, knowing that the boy would appreciate it.

“Derrie, is there someone with you?” A female voice came through the barn door, followed by a young woman who appeared to be in her mid-thirties. She was dressed in the common clothes of the farm wives of the area – long skirt and blouse, apron crossing over her bodice, and the cloth cap that indicated a married woman. The resemblance to the boy was plain, and Bartholomew had a strange feeling, looking at them, that he had seen them before. Surely not, but somehow they looked familiar.

“Yes, Mam, this man here helped me get Melly into the barn. She was being stubborn again, and she wouldn’t go. I think he’s one of them Druids from down the road in the forest.”

“He has it right, goodwife,” Bart said. “Are you then of the Path?”

“No, good sir, we are not, although we have no dislike of your ways either. But my husband says that hard work and good management help a farmer more than any prayers, beggin’ your pardon, and this farm has supported him and his family very well for six generations.”

“No offense taken, goodwife. And it seems there is truth in your husband’s words, if what you say is correct. But, is he here?”

“Oh, he will be here shortly. He and our older son are working the west field today, and they will be back for dinner. We would have you join us, if it please you. ‘Tis but plain fare, but there is plenty to go around.”

“I would be most pleased, goodwife. And if you please, I will assist your young herder here, so as to help pay for my meal.”

With a bow and a curtsy, they parted; the woman to return to the house and Bartholomew to the chores connected with milking, feeding and bedding down eight cows for the night. He then set himself to splitting some of the large pile of logs he saw on the side of the house. It pleased him that most of it seemed to be windfall or long-dead mature wood. These folk may not worship the Lady and Lord, but they did treat the Mother with respect.

After a while, a man and a teenaged boy came up the road, and the young lad ran toward them.

“Da! Lem!” he called. “Look who I met on the road! He’s a Druid, he says, from the ones in the forest, and he helped me bring Melly in to milking, and Mam asked him to stay for dinner with us!” The youngster ran out of breath before he ran out of excitement, but as he gasped for the breath to continue, his father scooped him up and tossed him in the air.

“Derilan, I vow your mouth flies faster than a hawk! Slowly, laddie, and take a breath before you faint from lack of air!” The boy laughed as his father played with him while his older brother looked on with the superiority of some five or six years. He, of course, was far too big for such childish games.

Bart also watched, smiling indulgently. There was a sense of wonder about most children that was infectious to adults. When it was missing, it usually meant there was something seriously wrong in the child’s life, but all signs and portents here indicated that this was a close-knit, loving, and successful family.

The two men and two boys walked to the well at the side of the farmhouse while Derilan continued relating the adventures of his day. In the brief pauses, and while they washed up, the man introduced himself as Cannis and his elder son as Norril, and Bartholomew made himself known as well. As they were walking toward the house, a small wagon turned into the lane leading to the barn.

“Gram!” shouted the small boy, as again he took off at a run, for the wagon and its driver.

“As you have probably figured out,” Cannis said dryly, that is my wife’s mother, returning from the market in Toolibrie. I used to make the trip myself, during the recent troubles, but it’s been over a year since those damned Lyfeyians were seen around here, and she insists on going herself. Strong-minded woman, she

is, but good. Her daughter too. Norril, go take care of Dobbin and the wagon for your Granny. 'Fraid your supper will be a bit late tonight, son."

"Just save me enough for two bowls of Mam's stew, Da, and it'll be fine." The older boy trotted down. As he passed his grandmother and brother, she gave him a big hug and ruffled his hair.

As she approached, Bartholomew saw a big woman – tall and broad, with strong features and a large nose. In her time, she was probably described more as "handsome" than "pretty," but with her full figure, curly hair – now gone gray – and piercing green eyes, she also probably did not lack for suitors. Suddenly, a cold chill went down the Druid's spine, and he felt his knees go wobbly for a moment. Dear Lord and Lady, he thought, she looks just like my mother!

Pulling himself together, he accompanied the family into the house, where the boy's mother and two sisters were waiting. They named themselves as Tiretha, Rosabell and Arletta. The latter two were the daughters, one a late teen and the other a toddler of perhaps three years. Chatting happily about the day's events, the family sat at a large table, with Cannis giving his place at the head to the Druid, over Bartholomew's many protestations. They all bowed their heads while he offered a prayer of thanksgiving for the food before them, praising both Mother Earth and the hard work of the family.

Over the course of the dinner, he had a chance to examine the family. The Grandmother, Berylin by name, bore an uncanny resemblance to his own mother, dead at the hands of slavers so many years ago, and her daughter and grandchildren also bore her a resemblance. Mostly it showed in their build – all big people, and in the unusual green eyes that all save the younger son had.

After the meal and the cleanup came the after-dinner chores. Bartholomew offered to help with all, and would not be denied. While the father and older children went out to the barn, he remained with the three generations of women in the house, drying dishes and helping sweep the floor. Later, while the Grandmother put the younger children to bed, he sat at the table, mending some shoes while Cannis worked on a leather bridle. The grown women worked at two looms, the eldest daughter spun thread, and the teenaged boy played a mandolin. Later, the lad worked at carving pegs while his sister played a flute, and after some time and coaxing they played a duet. In sum, a typical farm evening. Bartholomew sang a hymn and told a story of ancient heroes as his part of the entertainment, and they were greeted with praise.

During the course of the evening and its casual conversation, Bartholomew tried to probe their background.

Cannis' family, it seemed, had owned this tract of land for as far back as anyone could remember, and in the family cemetery beyond the trees there were graves going back at least ten generations. Towards the end of the evening, he learned that Berylin had come to the area as an infant with her widowed mother, who had married one of the local farmers when she was still very young.

"Mother was married to a sailor," she said. "They were only wed a short while when he was lost at sea. Rather than stay in Toolibrie, she decided to leave the memories of her tragedy and seek a new life. When she met the man I called my father, she was blessed by the gods, for he was a father to me in every way."

"I see," said the Druid, "and from what I see, you speak the truth, for you too seem to be blessed in your life."

"It has not always been so easy, Brother, and we have had our share of sadness. I lost my husband and two of my children to the plague several years ago, and my daughter's husband has lost a brother in the Lyfeyian war. But we make do, and we are not complaining. Are we, children?"

Her daughter and son-in-law indicated their agreement, and with that the family prepared for bed. Brother Bartholomew was given a pallet and blanket in front of the fireplace, which he accepted with thanks. Truly, he had made do with far worse in the past.

The next morning, he arose with the family before dawn. After a quick breakfast, Cannis and Norril went off to the fields for their day's labor, while the rest of the family spread out in and about the house for their

chores. Finishing his morning prayers, Bartholomew followed Granny Berylin to the yard where she fed the chickens. He stood watching her for a few minutes.

“Your pardon, good Mother, but I had the feeling last night that there was more to your story than you were sharing. It seemed as if you were holding something back.”

She looked at him for a long moment. Then, with a small nod, she said, “Yes. Yes, there is. I don’t know what it is, Sir Druid, but there is something about you that makes you seem... trustworthy.”

“My daughter,” Bartholomew said gravely, “it is the way of my order to offer counsel and succor when needed and asked for, and to share confidences and keep them private. If you wish to talk, I am ready to listen.”

“Well, then, there is not much to tell. My mother was a good woman, who worked hard all her life. She raised me and the three sons she had with my stepfather and loved all of us dearly. She was a good wife to him until he died and helped us all to make good marriages ourselves. But as she grew old, I as the only daughter became the one to take care of her, and before she died, she told me some things. They troubled me then, and still do to this day.”

“And these things were...?”

“She was on her deathbed, Brother, when she told me that she and my father were never wed. He was a sailor, in town for but a brief while, and she was working as a tavern wench. He was young and handsome, she said, and had a way with words. He made up poems for her, she said, and he stole her heart. But he had to leave. And he never came back. Some of the others said he was a pirate, but she never believed that. How could someone like that be a bloodthirsty reaver?”

“And what do you think?”

“That’s it; I don’t know. If my mother chose him, he had to be a good man. She had a way of seeing into people and reading their true hearts.”

“Then why not accept her judgement? He was a sailor, who fell in love with your mother when they were both young, and would have married her if he had the chance. But something interfered. I can think of several things without much effort. Perhaps his ship was sunk, or he had family obligations that kept him away. Perhaps he returned to Toolibrie but your mother had moved away by then. Who knows? But I am sure he wouldn’t have left her if he didn’t have to.”

Berylin stood still for a moment, thinking on his words. Finally, with a look of having come to a decision, she nodded firmly. “Your words make sense, Sir Druid. I thank you. Somehow, that had never occurred to me.”

“You are most welcome, my child. As it is written in my holy book, *The Leaves Of The Great Tree*, ‘as many roots support a giant trunk, burdens shared are more easily borne.’ By the way, what was your mother’s name?”

“Oh. Didn’t I tell you last night? She was named Aleenah. Please, Sir, before you leave, would you be so kind as to visit the family graveyard and say a prayer for her and the others?”

And now Bartholomew nodded. Aleenah. He should have known. And the time period was right, too. Some sixty years ago, and this woman was about that age. Little Aleenah, with the flashing eyes and quirky half-smile and flirting ways. Of course.

“Oh, what? I’m sorry, my child. I was lost in thought for a moment. Of course I will pray over your family for you, both those still here and those who have moved on. But first, please allow me a few moments for my, uh, private devotions.”

Silently he walked across the yard, feeling her eyes still on him. Of course you feel you can trust me, my dear, he thought. ... *for I am your father, and I did love your mother, at least for that moment. I looked all over Toolibrie for her when I returned, some two years after we parted. She was nowhere to be found, nor did anyone in the neighborhood know*

where she went. Most likely, she was too ashamed to face folks with a pirate's bastard child. The poor lass. The Tree alone knows what our futures would have been if I had found her. But that was long ago, and we must deal with the here-and-now.

So what do I do now? Do I let them know that I am their father, grandfather and, by the Lady, great-grandfather? What purpose does it serve? They are happy here, at least as happy as the Balance allows nowadays. Would it help them to know the notorious Black Bart is their ancestor, is still living, and indeed is someone who might as well be immortal, according to their standards? Tree knows I am half again older than she, yet she looks to be my senior. No, no, Old Son. Let it be. It would do no good. They have achieved a Balance in their lives, and it is not for me to upset it. Well enough will it be to keep watch on them from afar, and perhaps in time become a friend of the family.

“Now then, good Mother Berylin. I have finished. If you would be so kind as to take me to your honored dead, I will pray over them, and then be on my way. I have much to do in town, and the day is passing.” And it will take me a bit of time to Bless your family's fields and set up some simple wards around your lands too, my dear child. But I will be back, and we will become friends. By Mother Earth, I vow it!