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ascended to the throne. Ten and a half inches, olive wood, unicorn hair, made in 1592. These three events were of profound import in the formation of what is called Western Civilization."

The wand master stopped the counting and fixed Harry with his stare. "However, Mr. Potter, none of these historical facts have anything to do with the history of Ollivanders. This tale of my family, I must say in all modesty and candor, is of significant import to the world of magic, as we know it today. It starts 385 B.C., three years before our founding date."

Taking a deep breath, Mr. Ollivander began his story in earnest.

At a wide bend in the great river Tameas, known as the Thames today, there was a small but thriving community. The inhabitants were in the process of founding a world famous metropolis, but first they would have to survive the next three years.

It had been a wonderful year for the farming community, and even though there was thriving tradecraft everywhere, farming was the main occupation by far on this island. Today it is called England or Britain or even Old Albion, but at that time, those that lived there just called it Albion, if they called it anything at all. Crop bins were full to bursting, craftsmanship had produced more trade goods than ever before, and more of the folk in surrounding areas were planning to attend the harvest faire than in years past.

This was exciting to the leaders of the community known as Loundon's Town, but their joy from abundance would turn to despair before the faire was over this year.

At this time in our island's history such farming communities formed for several reasons. First and foremost these communities banded together to provide assistance in bringing in each other's crops. By mutual consent the planting of seed would be staggered over a few weeks so that the harvest times would not all be at the same moment.

Secondly, these communities were formed to foster early craftsmanship. Many years earlier Torban Loundon had learned metal-working and talked a number of his friends into migrating to this spot on the Tameas to form their own community. Others with the skills of grain milling, cooperage, clay firing for pots, and board sawing had joined him to start the community.

The third most common reason for such communities to form was for common defense. However, in the case of Loundon's Town, their success as a community made them in some ways an obvious target.

Torban Loundon was a natural leader but some would have followed him anyway. He had a last name. Torban's father was a Keeper of land. Through the iron fist and quick swordsmanship of Torban's Gran-da Loundon, Torban's family owned the land in an entire valley a moon's walk (about one month) north of the Loundon's Town community. Torban's eldest brother would inherit the valley and the next two sons would be captain of the guard and farming manager respectively. Torban's fourth oldest brother would be in charge of anything else that needed oversight; and besides, number four wasn't too bright and had no ambition.

Torban was the fifth son when few had five children survive to adulthood. Torban was by far the brightest and most ambitious, but he quickly learned not to express his ambitions to his brothers. They thought that they had knocked sense into him by his fifth birthday. All they had taught Torban was to keep his own counsel.

Torban went looking all over the valley and into neighboring valleys for men and women of intelligence and similar dissatisfaction with their lot in life. By the time he had reached his twentieth birthday, Torban had gathered a band of like-minded and intelligent people ready to follow him. They formed the nucleus of the village they would establish. Each had been beaten into unwilling silence by those bigger or more powerful than them, be they parent or sibling or whoever. Each had found through Torban the opportunity to make their own way instead of submitting to another's plans.

In those days a boy became a man at seventeen summers, and at sixteen, a girl was a woman. When the youngest of his friends reached their majority, they followed Torban south to warmer weather, lush fields, and a ready water supply. Torban helped each build the home of his dreams.

They had honored Torban by naming their small village Loundon's Town.

Torban had married Meala, a clever woman with a good heart and a sense of fair play. A childhood accident with a hot poker had left Meala with a scar on the right side of her otherwise pretty face, but Torban did not let the scar distract him from her true beauty, or the beauty inside her. Torban, a good judge of character and worth, knew that she would prove to be an excellent companion and a wise advisor.

Meala also had an eye for profitable opportunities. She quickly realized that every one of the craftsmen in Loundon's Town had the materials and abilities to produce more than was needed by those of the village. One summer, Meala convinced every craftsman to produce as many non-perishable goods as they could. At the time just before harvest they would send out word far and wide that a harvest faire would be held. Their own extra goods would be sold then, and one and all could bring to the faire anything they thought they might sell or trade.

The first harvest faire had been a success, and at following harvests each faire was larger than the one before. Everyone from miles around attended. More people with varying skills arrived each spring after the fall's previous harvest faire to join the community. Soon, Loundon's Town was the biggest village within nine days ride on pony cart.

It seems that no good deed goes unpunished. At the faire at the end of the eleventh harvest in which they held faires, three armed men and a fourth smaller man rode into Loundon's Town and announced that no one could leave without paying a protection share for a safe cycle of four seasons to

the next harvest. One part in three of all profits, proceeds would be given to insure their protection. There were over five score strong men and not a few capable women in the crowd. They could have taken the four easily, except for one complication.

The apparent leader of the four was easily the biggest man anyone had ever seen, and the strongest. Torban was a large and strong man but this man nearly dwarfed him. He was the spokesman for the four and it was his booming voice that delivered the proclamation. He declared, "I am Bonderman, and I am now Keeper of this village and the lands all around it."

The fourth unarmed man was a leathery looking little figure in a funny tall pointed hat and a black robe, and he held a relatively straight stick by his side. He used the stick to concentrate the power of his "Touch." The villagers did not know this and therefore were not aware of what was going to happen. They thought the stick might be a back scratcher or pot stirrer.

Only one other person besides Meala had noticed that Bonderman seemed to glance at the little man during his short speech as if seeking advice or approval. At first Meala thought that the little man might be a counselor to the leader of the group.

A small but noticeable number of people on the island of Albion had a form of the "Touch." The Touch was what we think of in the modern era as magic. At the time of our story there were no training schools and no established methods of determining who might have the Touch or what they could do.

Torban Loundon could *feel* how a piece of metal should be used. Quite often the metal would *help* him shape itself into its best use. Bengt the Miller could breathe in certain ways and then push around great baskets of grain that it would normally take three men to move. Pandan the Tiller just *knew* what to plant, how, and when. If you followed his advice you would reap two and sometimes closer to three times the produce on the same field as in the previous year.

Egorn the Potter had figured out how to make clay pots that were especially durable, hard and long-lasting. He knew how to make his pots waterproof with a mixture of fine silt from the river and chicken liver oil, applied before the final firing. And Shulla, Egorn's wife, could fix broken pots and plates (for a small fee) by simply closing her eyes and concentrating.

Several of the men and women in the village could snap their fingers over a small pile of wood chips and see it light. Vanch the Cooper's wife, Taleena, could tell you which chickens were best for laying and which had slowed in laying and should be killed for eating.

When Bonderman made his proclamation to be Keeper of the village and extract his homage, the eleven nearest men of strength and determination looked at each other, nodded in agreement, and advanced on the four. They thought the big man was the threat and felt able to overpower him with their numbers. The real danger came from the least obvious source. The leathery looking little man in the funny tall pointed hat and black robe raised the stick from his side, waved it in their direction, and muttered a few words that none could recognize. A thin green light leaped from the stick and struck the nearest man in the face. The man fell dead in his tracks.

That ended all attempts at resistance.

Then Bonderman repeated his demands and added that they should build a storehouse for the goods that they would give him as tribute. He also said that he and his men would come for portions of it throughout the year and that it had better be there or else the oldest and the youngest members of the village would be killed.

Earlier, as the four men had reached the outskirts of the village, (and before they'd attracted the attention of the crowd), young Willen the orphan had run up to the little man in the funny apparel and asked, "What type of wood is that? There is none around here like it."

The little man in the tall pointed hat, Porto by name, looked at him and was ready to curse the person who wanted to know that fact. It was a secret worth guarding.

But Willen had always been a lucky boy after an odd fashion. He had a lazy eye. Many others agreed this meant he was going to amount to nothing but this lazy eye hid a sharp intelligence and a quick memory. The boy was also hard working. His strange luck continued this day because of a *severe* case of indigestion. At the moment he asked Porto that question Willen was hit by another digestive pang. What Porto saw was a lazy-eyed youth with a stupid look on his face, wood chips in his hair, and branches under his arm.

Porto decided this half-witted wood gatherer was too doltish to understand the importance of the information he had asked for, so Porto said, "It is olive wood from the southern coast of Gaul." After Porto told "the village idiot" this, Willen straightened from his stomach spasms and the look of stupidity was gone. Porto regretted his words as the boy walked away. In fact Willen was heading towards the narrowest of escapes from death and towards his destiny. Willen's Luck.

Porto looked around and saw that his three cohorts were well ahead and could not easily deal with the boy. No villagers were near to see or hear. If he was going to kill the boy he must do it before he got out of range. Willen was about two man lengths away and he was the only one to hear the words, "Avada Kedavra."

But Willen's luck held. At the exact moment that the green light flashed straight for his head, he was seized by yet another stomach cramp. The pain was so dreadful that it nearly caused him to faint. He was down and still for almost a minute before the cramp eased. Willen had seen the green light and it had frightened him into stillness, despite the pain in his stomach. By the time the cramp was gone, the little man was gone as well and unable to see that Willen was still alive. As for Willen, he was left with the memory of the phrase he had just heard Porto speak. What odd words.

The sight of the village idiot lying dead in the mud slipped from Porto's mind not to return for some time. Willen would return to Porto's life in three years time but he would be almost unrecognizable to Porto then. Their future encounter would change the destiny of magic in what we know as the British Isles and even the world.

After he heard the horse clomp away Willen stood on wobbly legs. His curiosity outweighed his fear of the little leathery man with the olive branch.

He made his way to a place where he could better watch the four strangers while safely out of their sight. Willen had plenty of practice in making himself invisible to others. Few liked him or wanted him around. Orphans were unlucky to have lost their parents and who knew if their bad luck might spread. Not everyone felt this way. The place he chose to watch the four strangers just happened to be very near Torban and Meala's daughter, Constantia Loundon. Amazing how Willen always seemed to find himself near her.

Constantia was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. It was an easy statement to make because everyone at the faire was thinking the same thing. She had hair as black as midnight and skin as bright as Egorn the Potter's best plate after firing and glazing. Her eyes were a pale blue that captivated anyone who looked into them. She had a slightly toothy but contagious grin, and a splash of freckles on her nose after the summer sun had its way with her face. She would be considered "pleasingly plump" by today's standards but back then a healthy appetite and available food were things to be prized. Skinny people died more often. Constantia looked like a fully developed young lady who was merely shorter than others. In fact she was but thirteen years old and would grow much taller. Anyone who did not know that Constantia's parents were both taller than average would have assumed that she was already of age, or very soon to be so.

Porto turned his horse to go so Bonderman could make his grand exit when the worst and the best thing that could have happen occurred. Bonderman saw Constantia and lost his heart. He had decided just that morning that after he became recognized Keeper of this third and most prosperous village, he would need a wife.

Bonderman decided to make a pronouncement of his own creation even though Porto was not there to approve and had already started to leave. "And there is one other act of obedience you must perform. The maid there with the hair of coal (thinking he was flattering her) is to be my wife in a fortnight."

Porto turned to say something but Meala spoke first, "But, sire, she is merely a girl of thirteen summers. Though she looks older she will not be of age until three harvests from now."

"What, it cannot be," said Bonderman, wondering if he was being made a fool - a common occurrence it seemed since Porto had been pointing out his stupidity for weeks. "She looks fully grown to me."

"She is my daughter, and there is her father," Meala continued, pointing to Torban. "Knowing we are both taller than most, it becomes plain to see that she still has some growing left to do. She will not be of age until three more harvests." She said this last sentence to Porto who had turned back and come up beside Bonderman. She could see Porto fighting to control his anger and wanted to give him a reason to stop Bonderman.

Porto did see the woman's interference as a good sign. Killing one of eleven men had quelled this large crowd earlier. However, taking a girl might get enough of those gathered to act so that another death or two might not stop them before they laid hands on the four. Porto whispered in Bonderman's ear, and with a stupefied look Bonderman made this grandiloquent pronouncement, "I will wait until she is of age but she will be my wife. Be sure to raise her in an appropriate manner."

As the four riders left Loundon's Town and rounded the turn out of the villagers' sight, Bonderman wonder if it would happen. He did not have long to wait. "Crucio!" Bonderman was hurled by this affliction to the ground and began to writhe in agony. Porto dismounted from his small horse and walked over to him. "*Cess Sate.*"

Bonderman still felt the pain but was aware enough to hear the chilling voice, "If I wanted you to have a bride I would arrange one for you. You do not deserve one so lovely. In fact I was about to arrange a marriage for you in the next village. It is full of ruffians and wastrels and a woman suitably low for you will be ready at hand."

Porto continued in a scathing tone. "But you will stew in your own juices for now. You have twelve seasons to behave yourself and do as I bid. If your performance is just as I command, I may indeed let you marry that lovely. At any time that you do not I will let you experience this agony until your pathetic mind is gone and you bay at the moon with the other dogs. Three harvest faires from now I may reward you or I might just kill you anytime between now and then if you displease me. In the mean time, this will serve as a reminder."

As Bonderman began to half groan-half scream from the re-applied curse, Porto looked at the other two who suddenly felt as though they should be staring at their saddle blankets. They were smaller than Bonderman and about as bright. They were evil enough to gladly do Porto's bidding, but neither could replace Bonderman.

Porto's muttered to himself so none could hear, "We'll see. Perhaps I can conjure up a way to look as imposing as this great lump and install myself as Keeper. I will have to ponder this. The girl is a beauty and I would not mind taking her for myself."

Back at Loundon's Town, the faire was over even though no one else but the four had left. No one spoke other than in hushed tones. Meala was barely able to say a little louder than the others, "What will we do, Torban? How can we protect our daughter from such a strong Touch as the little man's? Bonderman will ask him to kill all of us if we refuse Constantia as his bride."

Constantia was shivering as if the winter winds had come much earlier than usual. She had a look in her eyes like she could see into the future, a horrible future. Her friend Naelly was half holding her from falling yet Naelly quivered as well. Willen could not stand the look on Constantia's face, nor could he bear the thought of Bonderman marrying her.

All thoughts of his stomach cramps were gone. A horrible and wonderful opportunity was before him. He had wandered into this village six moons before and was barely earning his bed in the stable hay and two meals a day. He could gather wood like a beaver but others could gather wood as well. He was not essential but a help to the community. But he was also rather clumsy and a bit accident-prone. Willen's Luck. Because Meala had a kind soul, Willen had not been run off and could keep from starving.

Though strong for his size, Willen was rail thin from lack of proper diet, and had lank flaxen hair. Were it not for his lazy eye he would be a handsome lad, but no one could see beyond that one flaw. No one except Constantia. She was kindness itself. She did not see that she was a beauty. She spent all her time looking for the good in others. She looked right past Willen's eye and treated him well. While Meala felt sorry for

Willen, Constantia saw a man of talent. He had carved a number of small, beautiful figurines and had given them to her in secret. Constantia did not realize that this was not a talent that could earn Willen a household in the community, she simply respected him for his abilities. Alas, at seventeen summers he was a man by age but not a man by the definition of being able to provide for a family.

One more look into Constantia's eyes - the eyes that always saw good in him and could see nothing now but a terrifying future, and Willen gained the courage he thought impossible. He shouted out, surprising even himself, "I know we can fight him. That branch is of olive wood from the south coast of Gaul. It is the secret of his power. He has the Touch for destruction and focuses it with the stick. I will go to Gaul and bring back olive wood branches for all who have the Touch and we will fight them!"

There were murmurs of excitement until Caedric the Fisher spoke out. Willen had accidentally tripped Caedric one day when he had been playing with one of the guard dogs of the village. Caedric was returning from his nets and had dropped a portion of the day's catch because of Willen's antics. He had been furious that day and his fury had subsided little since then. Caedric spoke with all of the derision he could muster, "Dog boy, do you even know where Gaul is?"

Willen blanched at this unknown monumental detail.

"Dog boy, it is over the sea to the land on the eastern shore. That is many day's walk to the sea from here, and then two days hard rowing even if the seas run right. Then the south coast of Gaul is two to three seasons' walk through dangers you cannot imagine. There are giants and dragons and sirens and bands of marauders that will make those four look like plough boys. You will leave and never be seen by this village again. Good riddance as far as I am concerned, but do not give this girl and her family false hope for your return in this lifetime."

Willen shrank from this verbal onslaught. Caedric took too much delight in crushing him, but in truth, Willen had thought that Gaul might be a village on the southern Albion coast just a few fortnights away. This was a journey of at least a cycle of four seasons if everything went perfectly. With Willen's perverse version of luck three years would barely be enough time.

Then Constantia spoke haltingly for the first time since Bonderman's speech. "Willen, I have con... con... confidence in you." She shuddered and continued, "You bring in more firewood than any other man in the village. You create the loveliest of figures in wood, and I will always cherish the horse you carved for me in one afternoon. If you say you will return with olive wood and rescue me I believe you."

There had been hollow and shrill laughter at Caedric's harsh words to Willen. Those few who agreed with Constantia, if there were any, said little. But Willen heard none of their scorn. *She believed in him!* He must not let her down. He must not let down the village. Only a few had taken him in but he now thought of Loundon's Town as his home, because Constantia lived there.

He smiled an odd smile with his lazy eye twitching and that smile somehow seemed to correspond to the one on Constantia's face. And with no other thought he turned to leave for the southern coast of Gaul.

"Willen," he heard Torban say. "You need provisions for your trip. Please come with me." Torban continued as much to the others present as to Willen, "We will discuss our other options as soon as you are ready for your trip, but we must do whatever we can to ensure your successful journey."

At the storeroom behind Torban and Meala's cottage Willen received a new blanket and a water resistant covering. He was given a week's supply of bread and two weeks of dried beef and one of dried pork. Torban gave Willen a cloak that swallowed the youth. Willen was fairly tall now that he had reached his maturity but he still had filling out to do. Torban was over a head taller so Willen's new cloak almost touched the ground. He handed Willen a miniscule bag of gold pebbles to use in trading and wished he had more to give.

Lastly Torban went to his metals shop and took out the largest knife Willen had ever seen, what would be considered a blade for battle. "This blade is the most perfect one I have ever produced. The metal told me how to shape itself for use. It may have the Touch all by itself. You can hunt and chop down a small tree with it. If you must, you should be able to kill with the edge or the point. I do not know if you can bring back a stick like that little man had or if it will help if you do. But the look on your face when my daughter spoke to you tells me that it will take a great effort to kill you to keep you from coming back to us.

"My wife and my daughter have been kind to you but I have not. From now on no one in this village will ever speak ill of you in my hearing. If you return... no. *When* you return, you will be a man of standing in this village and you will be my friend."

With that Torban turned and did not look back. Willen set out with something he had never had before. He had a purpose, a goal, and a dream. He would save Constantia and the village. He would reach the south coast of Gaul and return with olive wood. And he would dream of marrying Constantia every day and every night of his terrifying and magnificent travels.

After Harry and Mr. Ollivander had been working for over two hours, the door chime interrupted the story. The tinkling sound caused the two to look up from their inventory to see Marcie Polkind, a waitress from Florean Fortescue's.

"ere's the refreshments you was a ordering, Mr. Ollivander, sur. Two ice cold pumpkin juices and a tin of nut chocolate biscuits, hot out of the oven. Baked 'em meself, I did. Will ye be wantin' anythin' else, sur?"

"Nothing else, Miss Polkind." Ollivander had quickly risen to his feet and was taking the tray from Marcie before Harry had realized it. "Here is the remuneration and a gratuity."

The girl looked a bit flustered by his words.

Ollivander smiled and said, "This should cover the cost of this snack and your tip. Thank you for bringing it, and please thank your employer for me also."

Marcie Polkind's vocabulary may not have been on the same par as Mr. Ollivander's, but she instantly calculated her share of the money she had received. The delight in her eyes expressed just how generous the older gentleman had been.

"Thankee, sur; thankee most kindly. If you will be needin anythin' else please send word and we will gladly be at your service."

Ollivander and Harry spoke little as they stood and ate, other than to comment on the refreshing taste of the iced pumpkin juice and their mutual appreciation of still warm baked goods.

"Now where were we, Mr. Potter?"

"This row of wands here, sir. We still have a few left in this stack before we go to the next counter. Oh, and thanks for the refreshments..., my throat was pretty dry."

"You are most welcome, Mr. Potter. I thought the chilled pumpkin rather than tea. It is warmer than usual and the dust we have stirred with our rearranging of the wands has parched my throat as well. And yes, we mustn't forget these last few, all from 1901, I believe... no, one from 1943. But I meant where were we in the story?"

Harry smiled. In the last hour he had wondered why he'd ever thought Mr. Ollivander frightening. He was most polite and considerate. Harry had not realized just how thirsty he was until Marcie appeared. Harry let his smile fade as he remembered why he had been uncomfortable the first time he'd met the wand maker. It was the first time anyone had told him anything about Voldemort himself. The idea that his parents had been murdered had been less than a day old when Ollivander had said that Voldemort had done "terrible, yes, but great" things. After two years in the wizarding world, Harry now knew too well that the Dark Wizard had great power and was beyond terrible.

With a slight shudder, that the older gentleman saw but ignored, Harry said, "Willen had just walked out of Loundon's Towne towards the sea, trying to reach the southern coast of Gaul. That *is* France, isn't it, sir?"

Ollivander nodded.

Harry continued, "And I guess Torban is going back to those still at the harvest faire to discuss other ways to defend themselves against Porto and Bonderman."

"Quite right on both counts, Mr. Potter. Let's finish this last stack of wands and move on. We are making good progress, much better than I had managed to do by myself. I am grateful for your help."

Harry smiled a bit shyly. He was glad to help the gray-haired wand master. Once again he was glad he was beyond his initial fears. There was a gentle nature to this man who was a captivating storyteller.

"Well, let's proceed. Seven and three quarter inch birch with a unicorn hair core half way, made in 1943. We were in the middle of the war with Grindelwald. He and his minions were causing troubles everywhere. Disrupting supplies was one of their specialties and we tried to conserve materials wherever possible. None of these ever picked a witch or wizard, or worked very well for that matter. Where was I again...Oh, yes."

On with our tale.

Willen's Luck held. He knew the coast was roughly in the direction that the sun comes up. He knew that in the summer the sun comes up in a different direction than in the winter. He never did remember which way was which so he headed basically in a northeasterly direction. Had Willen followed the Tameas River instead, in four days he would have reached a place where sea-going fishing boats were available. This was perhaps one of the most fortuitous examples of Willen's Luck.

Willen's Luck. Though Willen did not call it by this name yet, he had noticed that quite often, a series of bad, maybe even painful events, usually ended up somehow to his benefit. He was not sure he wanted luck like this but it was better than regular bad luck.

While Willen began his circuitous march to the sea, Torban walked purposely back to the harvest faire.

In the few minutes he had spent outfitting Willen for his journey, many of the crowd had gathered their goods and wares to begin the trip back to their farms and homes. Over fifty people had moved to Loundon's Towne since the last faire. Fewer than twenty would move there this next year. Even that would change, however.

As Torban walked back he heard Egorn the Potter talking. "I say we must prepare to fight them. If we use cunning and stick together we can succeed with only a few losses. It's for the good of the community. I don't want to die any more than anyone else does, but if we stick together and have a plan, we can limit our..." Egan paused as he caught sight of Torban. "And maybe," he continued, "Willen will return with..."

"You fool!" shouted Caedric the Fisher. "You are a fool to hope we would only lose a few. Do you volunteer to be one of those losses? You sit by your wheel and your kiln and walk two hundred paces for your supplies. Few of you know about the state of affairs throughout Albion. You Potters are always too brave for your own good."

That remark made Harry feel both pleased and a bit insulted.

Caedric was just beginning his tirade. "I travel far in my boat, as you know, and I talk to other Fishers who travel all up and down the east coast and even some who go to the west coast of Albion and to the coast of Gaul. People coming in to take over towns and villages, like Bonderman, are often talked about in whispers. Accounts of such stealers of land are causing fear-filled rumors wherever they are told. They are not like Torban's Gran-da Loundon, carving out a Keep to be developed, or like us, peacefully founding a village worth living in. They show up at established communities and take over by threats, death, and destruction.

"I am sorry I never mentioned the deaths from olive sticks. No one ever mentioned what type of wood it was before. I heard a few outlandish claims and dismissed them as the rants of weak women."

Several women in the crowd bristled at this expression, including Meala.

Caedric continued his spiel, unconcerned with whomever he might offend. "And you're a double fool if you expect anything good to come from Willen the Dog Boy. I wasn't overstating the dangers or distances. A traveler, wise in the ways of the world, would do well to get back two harvests from now. We have to survive until then. But that stupid, useless dog boy..."

"Caedric, that is enough about Willen." Torban did not shout but the authority in his voice spoke louder than mere volume. Caedric was not a part of Torban's original band of settlers. His services as a Fisher were valuable and he made a good addition to the economy of the community as well as the benefit of their diets. But Caedric had never quite thought that Torban was a better leader than anyone else, say, himself.

"Torban, you know he's unlucky and useless and always in the way. He's a dreamer if he thinks he can survive such a journey. Why he's nothing but..."

"Caedric!" Torban called sternly. He was now close enough to lean over the Fisher, uncomfortably reminding Caedric that Torban was over a head and a half taller than he was. "Willen has dedicated his life to saving this community and my daughter. You *will not* speak badly of him, either in my presence or out of it." Torban won the short staring match that followed. It was no contest. "Tell me what *you* suggest to help solve this crisis?"

"Well, l...er. That is.... I guess we should construct the storehouse Bonderman demanded. How can we overpower such a killing force?"

"That's how you would have us respond? Acquiescence? I like Willen's plan better." The derision dripped from Torban's words. "At least his response was brave. Even if he never comes back you will respect his sacrifice for all of us."

Torban turned to address the crowd. "Everyone, we need ideas, we need a plan, or plans. Obviously we must prepare to fight them if we can. Perhaps, if we're fortunate, not too many of us will die before we overpower them. Besides Caedric, who else will volunteer to attack first?" The sarcasm was clear.

Meala spoke. "We do need to build the storehouse. But we should also plan to build a fortress of some kind. Porto waited until those of you that advanced on him were very close to kill Feldin, God rest his soul. If he cannot kill at a greater distance, then fortress walls may protect us. Does anyone have any other ideas?"

Someone suggested digging a moat, but with the flooding of the Tameas River on occasions, they did not want to give it a reason to permanently flow into their village. Several others thought that hiring their own ruffians might be a good idea. That was forgotten when Bengt the Miller pointed out that there was nothing to stop the ruffians they hired from taking over as Keepers themselves.

Pandan the Tiller had the only other idea that was considered worth pursuing. "Why don't we fashion bows and make arrows? We could all try the bow to see if we have skill. Such weapons are easily hidden if need be. We could fire them from a distance if Porto has to be close to kill with the Touch. Who would be best at fabricating such things, Vanch the Cooper?"

Vanch spoke out, "The barrels I produce are of soft wood that swell when wet to stop leaks. My jigs and most of my forming tools are not created for such work. Does anyone have experience with hard woods?"

"Willen," said Constantia absentmindedly. She blushed and explained herself. "He was gifted with all types of wood. I never saw him start to make something without making it quickly and beautifully."

Looking directly into Caedric's eyes, Torban said, "Well, I am glad we were so good at discovering how useful he was."

Finally, it was agreed that the idea of making this type of weaponry was worth pursuing. Several would take on chores for Vanch the Cooper to give him extra time to try to discover the proper ways of making bows and arrows. Most would like to help Vanch in any way they could, but knew little about how to do so.

Meala, Torban, and a few others made an effort to personally thank those who had come from far away, and who still lingered, for attending the faire. All were invited back the next year but no one readily agreed.

Willen continued north and east instead of the easier route mostly east along the Tameas River. The extra travel added nearly two fortnights to his trip.

At this point Willen's Luck reared its mischievous head again. When he entered a small village a dog bit him. The dog's owner took pity on Willen because he'd refused to kick at the dog. Willen was given a warm meal and allowed to sleep in the dog owner's barn with the cows during the rain that night. The dog bite became infected and he had a fever in the morning. The farmer's wife took pity on him and fed him and attended his wound. She had a bit of the Touch when it came to healing herbs and was able to stop the infection. Otherwise, Willen might have lost the leg, or even died. The dog's owner told him to ask for Stellan the Fisher if he wanted to go to Gaul. Willen's Luck would really come into play when he met Stellan.

In the summer it grew so hot in the windowless huts of Loundon's Towne that several community fires were kept burning outside all night long so everyone could sleep comfortably *and* have a flame and hot coals to use for cooking first thing in the morning. And so, in the sultry weather only a couple of moons before the harvest faire, Willen had been at work gathering firewood in the forest near Loundon's Towne when he'd had an unusual encounter with a holly tree.

This holly tree had been guarded by bowtruckles, little stick men who were quite shy unless they thought something was threatening a tree under their protection. (Willen had encountered bowtruckles once before, three seasons earlier, also guarding a holly tree. He still had a scar on his thumb from that encounter.)

Willen liked trees, just as much as he liked working with wood. He could often hear the trees speaking to him. The trees seemed fond of Willen as well. He never cut down an unwilling tree. Most trees seemed glad when Willen trimmed their dead or unruly branches, or gathered up the dead wood that had fallen around them. Willen knew that most trees liked to be kept tidy. Trees knew their purposes. There were trees that were willing to be firewood, or boards for building, and many other uses as well. Willen knew that all he had to do was listen.

Willen knew that his ability to converse with trees was not ordinary. He had learned through painful experience not to mention his particular gift to anyone. Willen had noticed that people, unlike trees - who were usually sensible - often reacted strangely to things they didn't understand. Willen knew that most other people thought he was odd. He'd learned not to mind this too much, although he didn't want to be thought of as mad or dangerous. Willen was even more unsettled by the possibility that his strong affinity for trees might get him revered as some sort of visionary. Willen had heard that there were people coming to Albion from the seas who venerated trees, oaks in particular. He had first heard of them from a peddler of water skins in the community where he'd lived before he'd come to Loundon's Towne. More recently, he'd heard Caedric mention the tree-worshippers.

The idea of worshipping oak trees honestly baffled Willen. The oaks he'd known weren't terribly bright, although they were certainly sturdy and hard working. Like animals and humans, trees had faults and weaknesses. Willen thought of trees and people and animals as creations. To Willen, it made sense to worship the higher being, the Creator, rather than a part of creation. He thought creation was made for appreciation rather than adoration.

Lost in thought, Willen almost did not see the bowtruckle-guarded holly tree. He came to a halt a man's length away from it - too close. He could see that the tree had plenty of fallen branches, which would be useful for making fires. But he did not want to be attacked by the vicious little guardians.

This particular holly tree was calling to him. It knew his name, something that had never happened before. (Willen remembered that the first bowtruckle-guarded holly tree had also called to him in a strong voice, telling him that its branches would be very useful. But Willen had not been able to understand exactly *how*. The first holly tree had tried to explain further, but the explanation had sounded like gibberish to Willen. He had been able to gather branches from other trees nearby without angering the bowtruckles, but when he'd got too close to that particular holly tree, the little creatures had swarmed at him.)

Other than knowing his name, this holly tree did not try to say anything specific such as "My branches will start a fire quickly," or "This limb will make a good beam for a fence," or even "Chop me down, I am destined to be a hut poles." It simply called to everything in Willen's being that it was destined to be very useful.

Willen was relieved that the bowtruckles were not attacking him. He noticed that they were massing to eat a mound of wood lice. Curious, he moved closer. Willen's curiosity often got him in nearly as much trouble as Willen's Luck, but this time he was fortunate. He was able to gather several branches and one small log without any interference from the little stick-figure sentries.

As soon as he was out of the forest, Willen began to break up the holly branches for kindling. These branches had been unusually quiet when he'd gathered them, but now they screamed that they were not meant for firewood. Willen did not understand when they tried to tell him what their true purpose should be. Finally, he left the branches at the edge of the forest. He would have put the small log down beside them, but the log insisted that it was its destiny to come with him.

Tired and hot from his walk through the forest, Willen returned to Loundon's Towne and set the small log down near a woodpile off to one side, well away from the firewood stack for the nearest communal fire. Then he stumbled off in search of some supper.

That night Willen heard something call his name in a blood-curdling scream. Hurrying out of the stable, he ran towards the fire. He saw the sufferer, and realized to his dismay that it was the small holly log. In spite of his precautions, it had been tossed into the fire. Now the little log was in agony. Willen burnt his fingers as he pulled it out of the fire. As he rescued the log, he felt grateful that no one else was near to see either his actions or his

sorrow. Caedric wouldn't have been the only one to think him mad.

Willen brought the log back to the stable and put it in a bucket of water. He could hear the log moaning quietly. It asked him to cut off the burnt end. Willen complied. Holly is a hard wood but this piece cleaved easily at the burn, even though Willen was chopping against the grain. It was as if the log had helped him use the ax to cut away the severely damaged part.

Willen tended to the burnt log the same way he tended to his own burns, by soaking it in goat's milk and honey. He was grateful that he still had some goat's milk left from his supper and that he had not eaten the small bit of honeycomb which Meala had given him that evening. He knew that the wood would be all right with a few hours soaking.

Although he could sense no life in the burnt part of the log that he'd cut off, Willen decided against tossing it back into the fire. Out of respect for the log's courage and its suffering, he later buried the burnt piece at the edge of the forest.

The part of the log, which survived was a cross-section of the wood, oval shaped, about longer than his fingers but shorter than his hand in diameter. The end that Willen had cut with his ax was flat. The other end was rounded as if someone had sanded it with a rough stone to create a smooth surface. From the rounded edge to the cut edge, the log measured not quite the length of his finger next to his thumb. All the bark had been burnt away. It was very lightweight, lighter than holly usually was. Willen knew that it was a very special piece of wood.

The piece of holly had an unusual sense of its purpose, even in Willen's understanding. Usually, when a piece of wood that knew it was *meant* for the fire had been used as a board to build with instead, it would just snigger as it rotted away too quickly. And, when a piece of wood that knew it had been *meant* to be a fence beam had been used for firewood, it could be heard chuckling to itself about the foolishness of wasteful humans. The oval of holly wood was different. Willen, who listened to it as its pain began to lessen, did not understand much of what it was trying to tell him. But he distinctly heard it say that it had been "fighting fate to achieve its destiny." That phrase stuck with Willen.

Willen thought that there must be others who understood wood as he did. He'd seen others carve fine wooden figures and fashion other devices. But when he'd asked them about "seeing" the purpose of the wood, he'd been treated as though he'd bayed at the moon. Most people would have found the events of that night very strange indeed. The "conversation" that Willen had had with the small piece of wood was odd, even in the strange world of Albion, and in all of what would eventually come to be known as Europe.

In fact, Willen's talent made him unique in the entire known world.

Willen was thinking about these two experiences with bowtruckles and holly trees as he lay in the hay. The last vestiges of the fever from the dog bite still caused him to shiver from time to time. He had dreamed about the small log burning and calling to him. He brought the cutting of holly wood out of his carrying sack and stared at it. He had seen the "eyes" in the wood the moment he'd first taken it out of the milk and honey. The piece of holly had not spoken to him again since that night, but Willen knew that the eyes would lead him to the wood's purpose in due time. Usually he saw exactly what needed to be whittled away in seconds. But this special piece of wood had had such a traumatic time, and had fought so hard for its destiny, that it must be special. So to Willen it only seemed proper to let the wood take its time to reveal its purpose.

As he sat in the hay the eyes in the wood winked at him and he paid more attention. He felt like he was closer to finding the wood's elusive purpose. Finally the wood smiled at him and showed its rosy cheeks. He missed Constantia. He dozed.

The next day he awoke and looked at the piece of holly wood in his hands. *No wonder it was such a special piece of wood.* Two hours later the carving of her face was almost as perfect as her face was in reality. It was Constantia. Willen was even able to fashion a drilled out hole to allow for a strip of leather to be pushed through. Constantia's likeness now rested around Willen's neck. He now felt he knew the purpose and destiny of the piece of wood. As it happened, he only knew half of it.

Willen finally arrived at the coast and asked for Stellan the Fisher as the dog's owner had suggested.

Stellan the Fisher had turned out to be a thief as well. He took too many of Willen's gold pebbles for passage and decided he wanted all the gold and all of Willen's goods to boot. He gave Willen a nice billet on the lee side of the boat so when he slit his throat, Willen's blood would drain away from the bedding.

Moving slowly and quietly Stellan had the knife almost to Willen's throat when he noticed the design on Willen's blade. Torban had a mark he put on his metal wares and the mark, a "vee" shape, was the same mark on the metal bar that Stellan used to raise the sail on his boat.

During a storm four springs earlier, Stellan had been driven up the Tameas River until he'd reached Loundon's Towne. That feat was amazing in itself because boats in storms usually go aground quickly in rivers. Stellan did not have Willen's Luck. Everything and every talent needed to fix his boat existed at the village.

Vanch the Cooper had just found a new, much larger than usual selection of wood to cut into barrel staves. However, this wood had been perfect for the repairs the boat needed. Several of the women of the settlement had helped with sail repair. Stellan had little metal on his boat but when Torban had seen the methods used to raise the sail, he had designed a capstan and metal bar to help with all the lines and rigging. The metal capstan bar had Torban's "vee" on it and so did Willen's blade.

Stellan had told the villagers that he had no money to pay them, but he'd promised to return with payment within two moons. Everyone in the village had agreed with Torban to accept Stellan's terms, everyone except his fellow Fisher, Caedric. Caedric grumbled that you couldn't trust people who

fish for a living, and it took several moments to realize what was so funny. He quickly added that you couldn't trust those who fish until you got to know them. The people of Loundon's Towne knew Caedric, but they trusted Stellan anyway.

Even though Stellan was a thief, he could not bring himself to cheat the people of the village. There had been something about Torban's trust that he could not bring himself to damage. That debt was the only one he had paid willingly, and the only one he had paid on time.

Now this young fool with more gold than good sense and a number of worthwhile possessions was right here under his blade and he couldn't bring himself to kill him.

"Willen, WILLEN! You were snoring."

Willen roused a bit fearfully. He had been lulled to a deeper sleep than usual by the rocking of the boat and had not remembered where he was. "What, what...what is it? Is everything well?"

"You were dreaming and snoring and shouting, come to think of it. You had drawn this blade halfway out and I did not want you to cut yourself in your sleep. That is a nice blade. Where'd you get it? Steal it off someone?" Stellan hoped he could still make his theft and get away with it.

"This blade was made by Torban Loundon of Loundon's Towne. He outfitted me for this trip." Willen went on to relate everything starting with the harvest faire. Stellan had heard of the harvest faire and had wanted to attend this year. Now, hearing about Porto, he was glad he hadn't. Stellan had heard about these new invaders that took over villages by force and killed with a stick and it frightened him. But as Willen's tale went on, Stellan felt hope.

Perhaps this young lad could do what he said. He seemed forthright enough. Stellan wasn't put off by Willen's lazy eye. His father had had a lazy eye and he had lived to a ripe old age. That was saying something for a Fisher who had sailed on the seas and not the rivers. Stellan had referred to Willen as a fool because he had seemed so gullible at first. But the conviction and passion in his voice about his quest for olive wood was stirring. Perhaps there was hope.

Of course with Willen's Luck he was extremely seasick most of the voyage - and it was the smoothest sea Stellan could remember in all of his years afloat. Stellan took it upon himself to try to educate Willen as to the tricks of dishonest folk. Stellan, being one of them, knew whereas he spoke.

"Willen, you must always take care to sleep where you can hear if someone comes to attack you."

Willen retched over the side for the umpteenth time this morning and muttered incoherently in agreement.

"Put dried leaves or pieces of broken pottery, or something down that will make noise when someone gets near. Better yet, put a trip line out with a slip knot that will release and pull on your leg in warning."

Willen retched again and somehow made Stellan understand that he did not have any rope or line and knew no knots, slip or otherwise.

"I'll teach you."

They were completely becalmed and Willen was even sicker as the boat stilled. He had stopped his dry heaves because there had long been nothing in his gullet. He was nauseous and dizzy and was only able to pay attention to the knot tying lessons by lying down and keeping his head against the deck of the boat. He had stared up at Stellan's hands and had learned the knots from the bottom up. He had paid attention to everything Stellan was telling him. He knew there were many things he did not understand about the world and this journey did have him fearful. He was going to persevere and save Constantia and the village, but he admitted to himself his concerns for what he faced. All of his life Willen had learned things that helped him later. And with Willen's Luck, he needed all of the help he could get.

Stellan chided him for taking the wrong direction from Loundon's Towne to go to Gaul. "Had you followed the Tameas River east, you would have been at a port for a number of seagoing fishing ships. I am glad you have three harvests to get back to Loundon's Towne. Your side trip and illness has lost you nearly three moons."

While becalmed Willen slept during the afternoon and late night. Stellan taught him knots and the ways of disreputable people. He had assured Willen that these calms were rare but common enough for each seagoing ship to carry rations for an extra week at sea beyond what was needed normally.

Three nights in a row Willen stared at the stars. He could do little else with his head on the deck to keep from falling over. Stellan got tired of talking down at him so he had assumed the same position as Willen. This naturally led Stellan to talking about the stars and telling the tales of the different constellations. Three nights in a row, Willen had noticed that all the stars moved across the sky, except one.

Stellan had pointed out the large pot shaped formation with the long handle. Willen had noticed near it was a smaller constellation with a similar shape. Willen pointed this out.

"Stellan, I have been here staring at that these stars for three nights. I have observed that all of the stars and constellations move across the sky except for the bright star at the tip of the little ladle. It never moves."

"Ah, you have noticed, Willen. They are called ladles on shore but we sailors call them dippers. The constellations are very interesting and the stories made up to go with them can be as fascinating as a good storyteller can make them. But the most *useful* thing in the night sky is that one star that never moves. It always points north. And if you always know where north is, then you can always tell where you are going. Keep the direction of the sun in mind with the time of the day, and keep your eye on that one bright star at night, and you can keep from sailing in circles on the sea, and pretty much follow a straight path on land, mountains and rivers permitting."

The winds finally came and a storm arose. Willen's stomach settled for the wild actions of the boat in rough waters. (Willen's Luck would give him an upset stomach on a calm sea and the choppy, more violent the seas, the happier his insides.) Stellan informed Willen that he would sail to the west coast of Gaul to poach the fish from Baldet's coast. The coast along this particular stretch was brimming with fish, so of course the local tyrant did not want anyone fishing it. Stellan loved a challenge and poaching was the next best thing to stealing. Though talking to Willen and thinking about Torban and the good people of Loundon's Towne was causing him to re-evaluate his life, poaching from Baldet, who claimed what was not his, caused Stellan no remorse.

Stellan had told Willen how to avoid Baldet's guards and how to get to the south coast of Gaul. Of course Willen's Luck held up.

Stellan unintentionally dropped him off right in the lap of Baldet's guard detail patrolling the coastal road. As Willen walked up from the shoreline and reached the edge of a wood, he tripped over the spear of a guard who had walked off the path to drop his breeches. (As of yet, no one had figured out that eating a half-cooked pig would make you sick.)

As soon as Willen was brought before Baldet, he began asking about olive trees and telling his story. Baldet was not a bright man. He solved most confusing issues by killing those involved. Thinking too much made Baldet's head hurt, and there was nothing like a good killing to cure a headache. Baldet took a mighty swing at Willen when Willen wasn't looking. Willen, who had noticed Baldet's dog, had been bending down to pat it at just the right moment. Therefore, Baldet's blow did not kill Willen, it only knocked him unconscious. Baldet felt bad about nearly killing a fellow dog lover. He decided to show Willen some mercy and ordered him sent him to the dungeon for the rest of his life instead.

"The boy talked a bit balmy, put him in with the madman. They may get along well enough."

The guards all agreed that Willen had been given a fate worse than death. The madman never shut his mouth without the help of a good clouting. Willen's Luck

Baldet's chief guard immediately took Willen's large blade for himself - he recognized the quality of it. Therefore, they never looked for his small carving knife. No one had two blades. They took his water skin and what little was left of his foodstuffs. They confiscated his blanket and water resistant covering and the chief guard wore Torban's cloak with pride. Perfect fit. Because Willen was drooling down his front and talking incoherently by this time, the guards did not check down the front of his shirt. The carving of Constantia was safe around his neck, as was the small pouch of gold bits.

The madman in the cell of Baldet's dungeon was one of the raving kind of madmen who talked constant nonsense unless he was asleep or had been brained into silence by one of the guards. Willen learned to sleep whenever the raving idiot slept. When he was ranting Willen sat in a dark corner. Of course it was easier to brood in a dark corner. He was sad beyond belief. Here he was, four moons into his quest to save his fair love and his friends, and he had been sentenced to live out his meager life in this dank hole.

Five days past a fortnight into his life-sentence down in the dungeon, Willen took out his smaller blade and carved a quick picture of Constantia's face that he could see in the wood of a crossbeam right in front of the madman. When the guard had brought in their daily gruel - extra chunky gruel today - the old lunatic had pitched a fit and was bludgeoned into unconscious silence. The old man had been chained at his ankles only, and Willen was afraid to get within his grasp. When he slept he might be faking and lunge at Willen. Seeing him clouted into submission gave the young snoop his chance to enter that last unexplored part of their cell.

Willen saw Constantia's face in simple relief and it took only a few minutes to release it from the beam. It had never occurred to him that as soon as the crazy old man awakened he would be face to face with his love. Willen dozed off after he was finished with the likeness.

Not quite an hour after falling asleep he heard a voice calling through his dream of Constantia. "Are you a see-er, boy?"

At first Willen thought that a third prisoner had been brought in during his nap, and was addressing him. No, it was the madman talking coherently.

"No, sir. I have never seen the future. If anything, I probably see what *will not* happen in the future."

"No, boy, not seer," the madman said in exasperation. "A See-ER! Can you see things as they can be in wood or other materials, and then know how to use a blade to bring them out of the wood with little effort?"

"I guess," said Willen. "I have never thought about it. I just do it."

"Have you ever gotten mad at someone and had them fall down or burn themselves in a fire a little later?"

Willen nodded in shame.

"Can you find what no one else can find? Can you occasionally go right to the place and find what you seek even though you have never been there before?" The old man was getting more agitated and louder as he talked. "Can you automatically identify a possible way to do something that others think daft? Do you know instantly what people should be doing if they do not? DO YOU, BOY?"

Willen shrank into himself as he meekly nodded agreement to each of these questions. He had been driven out of numerous villages for seeing and speaking out loud these very types of things. He just thought that no one liked a busybody. That is what the people called him when he stated what was obvious to him but invisible to the others. Little did he know they were almost all embarrassed that this lad who was so young and new to the various communities could see the solution to problems they had cursed for days or even season after season.

"What's your name, boy?" the madman nearly screamed. After Willen told him the madman straightened, lost the wild look, and spoke in a most rational yet irascible voice. "Well, I am glad you finally made it. I have been expecting you but I did not know who would come. My name is Eirran and I am a seer. No, not a see-ER of the things like you see. I foresee things. I saw someone coming to this cell. You are lucky to be a prisoner here."

Cheers!

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communicate, but the second subject would not be introduced for roughly four seasons.

Willen noticed that Eirran taught with a lot of "twos." He started by saying that the two things Willen needed to learn to communicate were reading and writing. Willen confessed that he did not know what reading and writing were. The old Seer exploded with anger but calmed in a moment and explained the concepts.

"Boy, you and I are talking to each other. It would be very difficult for me to teach you anything, or even say, 'Pass the bread,' if we could not talk and understand each other. That is communication - I speak and you understand; you talk and I comprehend. It takes the two. If we spoke different languages, we could speak and listen all day, but with no understanding, so communication needs a common basis of speaking and listening.

"Reading and writing are like speaking and listening across great distances."

Willen looked a little confused at this point but Eirran was unperturbed by his pupil's reaction. He continued.

"Now if you are lying on your pallet and I am sitting at the table, and I want you to come to me, I just say, 'Come here.' But what if you were in another part of the castle or in the next valley? I could tell someone who could go to you and relay the message, but suppose I did not want the messenger to know what we're saying. What could I do?"

Willen shook his head in bewilderment.

Eirran took a quill and dipped it in ink. He brought the feathered part of the quill to his nose while he thought about it. After he sneezed, he drew a square on the scroll before him. A little more than a hand's width away he drew a circle and placed his hand over it.

"Let's say this square represents you. Every time you see one drawn like this in a message from me you know I am talking about you." He placed a hand over the square and revealed the circle. "Now, let's say that this circle represents me. Likewise, every time you see this circle in a message from me, you know I am talking about myself."

He let the scroll come together enough for the square and circle to be partially obscured. He drew an arrow. "Now let's say that this arrow does not represent an actual arrow, but it talks about direction. We use it to say that we want something or someone to go here or there.

He unrolled the scroll enough for his student to see all three symbols. "If I was in the next village over and sent this to you by a messenger, what would I be asking you to do?"

Willen stared for several moments. The square representing Willen had the tail of the arrow by it, and the head of the arrow had been drawn to point at Eirran's circle. He feared seeing the old man's anger again, but that was soon forgotten in the revelation that hit him.

"You are telling me from the next village that you want Willen to go to Eirran. You want me to come to you!" The joy of understanding was beaming on Willen's face for a moment, but before Eirran could finish his smile in return, a cloud covered Willen's grin. "But if we are condemned to live our lives here in this hole, what good will this be to us? If you want me, you need only call."

When he had finished this despairing statement, Willen realized that this was the type of thing that might anger the old man. So be it. Willen decided he could go back to his dark corner and spend his last days in misery, pining for Constantia.

But Eirran's reaction was not what the sad youth had expected, although the old man did not answer Willen's question. The Seer said with a degree of tenderness (for him), "Trust me."

And, even though Willen's question had not been answered, hope began to grow in his heart.

Vanch the Cooper was manufacturing effective arrows in a few days. The children of Loundon's Towne found it easy enough to gather branches of the proper thickness. As to the final straightening needed, (no branch is naturally straight enough for an arrow to remain true in flight), a cooper's work is to force wood into the exact shape needed to produce leak-free barrels. Producing perfectly straight arrows was no test of Vanch's skills at all.

Creating an effective bow was a different matter. Barrels are produced with soft woods that swell with liquids to seal any gaps. A bow must be made with an extremely hard wood for strength, yet it cannot be brittle. When being bent under the burden of setting an arrow to flight, a bow must be very strong and flexible enough, but not too flexible. The knowledge of which woods to use and how to prepare them was beyond Vanch's training and initially beyond his comprehension. He experimented with every type of wood within miles of London's Towne. He almost gave up until he heard Daneel the (board) Cutter talking about using the heart wood boards for the parts of buildings that touched the ground.

Daneel had been not consulted on the bow and arrow project initially. He was mourning the loss of his brother Felden to Porto's olive wood stick, and had already left the Faire with Felden's body when the discussions of "What shall we do to defend ourselves?" occurred.

Daneel and Felden had been twins. They'd never married and had spent their years together sawing boards and completing each other's sentences. Fortunately they had an apprentice or construction in Loundon's Towne would have come to a complete halt after Felden's demise.

The remaining Cutter had been a shell of a man from the harvest faire until early the next spring. His apprentice took him out to work and Daneel meandered to an appropriate log and started cutting boards. He ate what was put in front of him and drank when given drink. The apprentice dealt with those wanting boards, Daneel seemed to always know what to cut and when.

Daneel had rejoined the community, in more than body, in the early spring after his brother's death. One day he walked up to the men working on the fortress wall. People were used to him walking around as if in a daze, sawing and delivering boards, but not talking at all. "How deep did you

sink the foundation beams, Torban?" Daneel asked gruffly.

Hearing his friend, who had not spoken in so many moons, startled Torban so much that he dropped a beam on his foot. Between yelps of pain he expressed his delight to speak to his friend again.

Daneel ignored Torban's welcome. "I asked how deep the foundation beams go? And please tell me you put stones under the beams at their base."

Torban had stopped jumping up and down, but he still held his hurt toes. He said, "They go down about a man's length. No, we did not put stones down there. We hit very hard dirt and thought it would make a good base." He let his foot drop to the ground and winced at the pain.

"How high do you want this wall to go? I guess it is going to be some sort of fortress wall?" Daneel continued.

Torban blushed. He had not even considered how high it would go.

"Well, I am glad we are back," stated Daneel. "Felden and I will help you with this. I am glad you have not done too much. This has to all be torn down. Felden says that when our Da was an apprentice he helped your Gran-Da Loundon build his fortress wall. I never paid that much attention to him when he would talk about it, but be grateful that Felden did.

"We have to tear down all of this but the boards you gathered will be of use later. Felden says that you need heart wood beams twice that big and you need to sink them down at least two man lengths and put stones under them. He also suggests we build it about two and a half man lengths high..."

Daneel froze in place. He had been pacing around Torban as he nursed his foot. The Cutter stared out into the distance and Torban had feared that his friend had gone back to wherever he had been for the last nine moons.

"You are building this to protect us from that unmitigated son of a cow dropping that killed my brother, aren't you?" Daneel did not wait for an answer, but began pacing around Torban at a greater speed in the opposite direction.

"Torban, I am going to need two more apprentices at least, and we will need the help of men in the late afternoon to assemble what we cut. With four of us we can cut the boards we need to build the walls and for everything else. What? ...Oh, yes. Felden says we need six men now that he cannot help. I was thinking about Loundon's Towne as we exist today, but Felden reminded me that we will grow over the next two years, and we need to plan a bigger fortress."

Daneel froze in his tracks again for nearly a minute.

"Felden also suggests that we should decide *how* Loundon's Towne should grow. Our growth thus far has been random. We should not turn away anyone who wants to join us, if they are reputable, but we must intentionally recruit people with the skills we will need for the future. *You* should go out and find those we need and encourage them to come. Felden says that we need to plan to be a bastion against the evil that is coming our way. Funny, he never used to use such big words. Have we heard from Willen, yet?"

Once more Torban and the crowd that had gathered around the one-sided conversation were stunned into silence. Meala had joined them and was heart-warmed by Daneel's recovery and heartbroken by the way he "talked for" his dead brother.

Caedric the Fisher had not gone out that day. There had been storm clouds at first light and even though they had cleared, Caedric had stayed ashore, sticking his nose into the workings of the community. Before anyone else spoke the lazy fisherman butted in. "We have a new madman in our midst and he proves it by asking of the dog-boy, Willen. What does your dead brother tell you, madman, about the unlucky orpha...Ouuff!"

Daneel struck Caedric in the stomach hard enough to knock the wind out of him. He stood over the gasping man and spoke in a cold voice, "I know my brother's dead. I'll take good advice from whatever source. That young man, Willen, had the right idea. You fight fist-to-fist and knife-to-knife. If Willen can bring back olive wood and give us an even chance against that murdering pile of nose snot that killed my brother then I pray for his safe and speedy return.

"Now what are we doing to give *ourselves* an advantage over those evil walking piles of pig dung?"

As Torban lay down on the straw mattress next to his wife that night, he sighed with satisfaction. Daneel had re-energized the community in its fight against Porto and Bonderman. Neither had come to the community since their first appearance. There was a hope, fanned into life by Caedric, that they would not return. Torban figured that if not them, then someone else would come one day with similar demands or worse.

Two young boys of near apprentice age had volunteered to work with Daneel. He knew of two other strong youngsters on a farm not to far away that he intended to visit and invite to be a part of the Loundon's Towne community. Vanch the Cooper had been in an animated discussion with the returned board cutter about bow wood possibilities. There were plenty of volunteers that offered to give the time equal to start of work to morning break, each evening to building the fortress.

"Torban."

"Yes, my lovely Meala?" He turned to her eagerly, hoping to enjoy the delights of his wife.

She chuckled, "You bull, I want to speak to you."

He stopped with his hand on her midriff. Their hut had no windows, but during the dry nights of summer it was customary to leave a portion of the

roof open. There was enough moonlight for Torban to look into Meala's eyes as she spoke.

"Daneel's idea about planning the growth of Loundon's Towne was a good one. People have arrived and we have put them to use but we need to be deliberate in our growth. We never realized what we had in Willen. We could use more than four more apprentices for Daneel if more people begin to arrive. We will need a new Miller for grain and probably a master builder. Oh, and Egorn the Potter is working well into the night to meet the needs of our village. If his wife did not have the Touch for mending pottery we would have a substantial shortage."

"You are right, my beautiful wife." Torban's hand was now moving again, but his actions were a comforting stroke and a part of his thought processes, not an attempt to interest her further. "I have decided to talk to all of our original settlers and a few others about Daneel's planning ideas. There is a war of some kind brewing out there, I can feel it in my bones. We must prepare. We must be *intentional* in our growth."

"And it makes sense to plan even if this struggle were not before us. We have the water, land, and resources to be a great town, not merely a village. What's the word? ...City? That's it. We could be one of those cities if we plan for it."

"However, next week Caedric is leaving on one of his rare long fishing trips. He will be gone a four or five days or more. We will wait for him to leave. Erm... I don't trust that man."

"You are wise, my husband. I hadn't completely thought out my opinion about him, but the truth of what you say is clear."

They both paused in thought.

She giggled, sprang up on her elbow, and kissed his ear wetly. "Was there anything else on your mind before we sleep, my handsome strong husband?"

From his simple example of the usefulness of a written language, Eirran quickly built a foundation for the elements of reading and writing.

He taught Willen by example that a picture-based written language had a number of problems. "Boy, we have used two symbols for ourselves, a square and a circle. If there were a hundred people in a village, or five hundred in a town, you would run out of symbols for each one and they would all be hard to remember." Then he taught Willen how a character-based language, one with an alphabet, could be used to more easily represent words. Of course he also had to explain what a "word" was.

"There is one more obstacle we must overcome in order for me to teach you what you need to know. It's the reason you and I were lead to this cell in the first place. Our present language, what we are speaking now and what most people have spoken to you on your travels thus far, has no reading or writing. It uses a few symbols for rudimentary communications but it will never serve our needs for the future."

The old Seer looked up and off into a distance that he could not see in their cramped confines. He sighed and said, "Boy, our future lies beyond simply talking to those we see each day in our home communities and the few travelers we meet. Those of us with what you call the Touch have a responsibility to lead our nations into the future. Great and wonderful and quite often terrible things will happen over the centuries and millennia to come. We stand between anarchy and order, prosperity and wanton ruin. We must stand between good and evil ourselves."

"We must fight fate to achieve our destinies."

In an instant Willen forgot that he did not know what the words, "nation" and "millennia" meant. It was as if Willen was struck by the idea of fighting fate to achieve his destiny. Eirran was looking away so he did not see Willen draw his hand instantly to the carving of Constantia around his neck. The small piece of holly log had used virtually the same words. "I must fight fate to achieve my destiny." Before Willen could ask about what it meant, Eirran went on.

"Our common language as it is will not meet the needs of the future. You cannot see it but it's already dying. A new language is coming out of the South, you will probably meet it in your travels. It is called 'Latin.' To my ears Latin sounds barbaric. However, it is a strong and robust language with 'room to grow' for lack of a better way to put it. Latin will dominate the world and be the universal language so to speak for the next two thousand years or more. It will influence if not be the basis for every spoken language in what we call the known world."

Willen noticed that Eirran was speaking in a strange manner. It occurred to him that the Seer must be speaking "as a Seer" - he was foretelling the future. Willen had been paying attention, but now he concentrated even more. He had an excellent memory when he paid attention. Now was the time.

"Learning Latin will provide you with two advantages that are crucial to the future of your home, boy. If many in your community know Latin, it will help them thrive instead of perish in the invasions your land will face over the next 1400 years. But more important, you will use Latin to convert the Touch into Magik."

Eirran started coughing as if choking and Willen moved to his side to pat his back.

"Boy, I was just speaking from a trance wasn't I?"

"Yes, sir. You said that..."

"No! Don't tell me now. Remember it all for the future. I may remember it as well when we need it. Let's get back to Latin, a barbaric language to my ear but a robust language for the future, your future and mine."

Eirran taught Willen a basic vocabulary in Latin. They spoke in short sentences about simplistic things. He used these simple words to introduce

the Latin alphabet. The alphabet became words and words became sentences, and with sentences, Willen learned of the ideas of nouns, and verbs, and other parts of speech.

Willen found he enjoyed learning, if for no other reason that it distracted him away from his depression about never seeing Constantia again. He was a quick study. His dexterity with a blade and precise carving helped him with his quillwork. And his ability to "see" into wood helped him see ahead of time what to write and the meaning of what was written. There was adequate light in their dungeon to read and write a little over eight hours a day. In the evenings Eirran and Willen used what he had learned in actual conversation. At first they had silly little chats because his vocabulary was so limited, but as Willen commanded more words and a better facility of their usage, the two had conversations on a wide range of topics.

Willen learned about the history of the world, philosophy as it had developed to this point in time, and the basic geography of what would eventually be known as Europe. The different peoples and their customs and practices both interested and quite often appalled Willen. One group of people would be warm and loving and friendly to strangers, and then once a year practice human sacrifice. Another tribe would be genuinely excellent neighbors until there was some small offence, and then they would kill every person and head of livestock in the nearby village in the following war.

This contradiction of kindnesses and cruelties perplexed Willen. It frightened him as he thought that he might be meeting such folk on the rest of his travels. And this thought brought back his despair.

He was condemned to this dungeon for the rest of his life. Now that he was being well fed, that life looked to be longer than the year the guard had first mentioned to Willen. (Willen was actually gaining weight and getting a little fat in the cell with its limited opportunity for activity.) However, Willen soon learned to hide his depression because when Eirran saw it he would become angry.

When Willen asked about the future or the people Eirran came from, the old man's fury made Willen wonder if he was a madman after all. So Willen learned to keep his own counsel regarding anything outside their prison walls, regardless of whatever Eirran said or wanted to teach him.

Two winters after Willen had left Loundon's Towne, Eirran began teaching Willen the second subject that he had originally alluded to. In addition to Latin, Eirran taught him how to keep records of the items he manufactured, the materials and products he bought and sold, and who had received what in these transactions. (Eirran did not acknowledge that Willen was without a clue about *why* he should learn this, and the young man remained silent about his ignorance.) This was an early form of bookkeeping. Underlying the actual mechanics of record keeping, Eirran taught Willen about value and worth and the ideas of profit and loss. He kept speaking about fair trade and long term planning to maintain capital.

All of this was at first meaningless to Willen until one day he asked a question about the responsibility of those who had succeeded to foster success among others.

In a flash both Willen and Eirran realized they had been having a very advanced discussion about developing a responsible society and Willen had been an active part of the conversation. *Willen understood it all!*

The two started laughing. They went into hysterics. They were in tears with the joy of the realization that Willen had acquired quite an education in a short period of time. They howled with laughter.

Throughout many parts of the castle servants, soldiers, and others shuddered and touched their medallions or lucky pieces. There were now two madmen in the dungeon.

Daneel had been rushing the last few days to tell anyone who would listen what needed to be done to build a better city and how to plan for the future. He would become extremely agitated when he mentioned Porto. It was Daneel who took Willen's discovery of the species of wood Porto held in his hand and started calling him Porto the Olive Hand, along with every other expletive he knew and could make up.

One day Torban saw from across the center square that Porto and his band of ruffians had returned to Loundon's Towne after their long absence. Before the thought of the potential calamity had entered his mind, he heard Daneel's near hysterical voice.

"Murderer. MURDERER! You evil spawn of a cross-eyed toad and a poxed sow. You killed my brother and I will kil..."

"Avada Kedavra!" and Daneel joined his brother Felden in side-by-side graves.

Porto killed Daneel as he came into range. The verbal assault came so swiftly that Bonderman and his cronies had little time to react. But Bonderman was off of his horse, sword drawn, and roaring at the villagers.

"How dare you attack us! I will kill you all. Where are the leaders of this town? I will start with them. Where are the parents of my bride to be?" The incongruity of this last statement was lost on Bonderman.

Torban was there, and Meala was there. And it was obvious as he turned their way that Bonderman recognized them. But salvation came from an unexpected quarter.

"Great Keeper of the lands near and far!" The one who shouted this address had appeared on his knees in a instant between Bonderman and the rest of the villagers.

"Surely your eyes that see everything recognize the distraught twin brother of the one killed by Porto the Olive Hand at the last harvest faire. He has been a madman ever since and we have kept him with us for pity's sake. Had we known you were coming, Great Keeper, we would have gagged

him and tied him in a hut so as not to disturb your visit."

It was Egorn the Potter kneeling, in the way, temporarily blocking the path between Bonderman and the ones he intended to kill. Had he not called the large armed oaf by such words of honor, Egorn would have been the first of many beheadings.

"Our towne leaders help us produce more so you will have more tribute. Look, they have encouraged us to build a large storehouse for your portion of our crops and goods. It is bigger than you expected, we hope. If you deprive us of their leadership we will be weak lambs, lost, and unable to produce the homage you deserve."

Bonderman liked the sound of this, finally someone recognized *his* important role in this enterprise. The large warrior smiled, curled the ends of his mustache, and looked around to see if the girl of his dreams, Constantia, could see him receiving such acclaim in his powerful position of Keeper.

It was a mercy that Constantia and her friend Naely were out in the woods gathering mushrooms. She would have been petrified by the threat to her parents' lives and might have acted rashly to protect them.

Porto was off of his horse and pushing Bonderman aside to address the kneeling Potter. "You called me Porto the Olive Hand. I have been called that in one other village and they told me that they heard that title in this community. *Where* did you hear of the type of wood I hold?" Porto felt sure that he had only mentioned olive wood to one other person since coming to the island of Albion, and he had killed that miserable boy himself. He knew that he had not used the words "olive wood" in front of his hired thugs.

"But-but, sir...erm...we have heard from many travelers...erm particularly Fishers who come here to sell their catch, of powerful ones like you who come from the sea, who have the Touch, and carry the sticks of olive wood." Egorn did not know that he could be such a quick liar, but he was grateful for this dubious gift. He just hoped it worked.

Porto had had his olive wood stick in his hand as he walked up. He began to slowly raise it. He heard the gasps of the onlookers. He saw the fear *and* bravery in the eyes of the one kneeling before him. He thought he should kill one so willing to stand there and die if need be for the good of his community. Then he realized that that would only draw more attention to the importance of the composition of the stick in his hand.

The realized that the knowledge made little difference; the south coast of Gaul was too far away. Besides, it wasn't just any old olive tree that produced the power concentrators. No one in this village, even this foolishly brave one kneeling before him, would ever consider such a journey or be lucky enough to find the right trees. Then he had another idea, one that would serve him even better than removing the words "olive wood" from every mind present.

Porto shouted, "Yes, I am Porto the Olive Hand. I stand by Bonderman the Keeper to back up his mighty arm with my power. Anyone who serves us well, and any like your leaders who encourage you to greater production and tribute for us, has nothing to fear.

"But cross me and there will be a triplet in the grave beside these two stupid twins." The venom in his voice shook everyone, especially Caedric the Fisher who was hiding behind a stack of firewood.

"This fool's death is doubly foolish. I *am* one of those coming from the sea with powers beyond this olive wood stick in my hand. When you see me or one like me, realize that we cannot be killed. We are of a powerful and mighty race, and the wise ones, the powerful ones that look like me and carry these olive sticks, are impervious to death. I killed him where he stood to prevent startling the horses."

It was a bluff, but he had heard that others of his kind had used it and that it had worked to quell rebellious and murderous crowds. A few claimed that it was indeed true, but Porto never planned to be in a position to test the veracity of the boast. It was a part of his plans to be thought of as all-powerful, but being thought of as *invincible* would also have its advantages.

"You. Stand." Porto addressed Egorn and called out to the crowd, "Where are the other leaders of this towne?"

Torban and Meala came forward and Porto led the three and his ruffians towards the walls of the fortress under construction. Many of those most involved with building this defensive structure followed the seven.

"You are building a fortress wall. You intend to defy your Lord and Keeper, Bonderman. I should kill you where we stand."

Torban moved to stand in front of the others. But this was not a protective move alone.

"Great Olive Hand." Porto noticed that Torban tried a little of the flattery so successful with Bonderman, but as he continued he ceased its use. Such faint praise did not faze Porto. "This is not a defensive structure. The river along here floods and causes damage to our village, particularly in the heart of our towne square. Three springs ago we had to rebuild half of our huts and barns. We build this wall to reroute the direction of flooding."

The floods had occurred, and there was soil erosion from three years ago to confirm Torban's claim. "We are almost finished and have no plans for two other sides to create a fortress."

Porto did not believe this for a minute, but he *had* seen flooding do more damage than this elsewhere. The structure was two-sided, and it was about the length of the towne square on its short end and almost three lengths of the square at its longer end. It was not quite two man lengths high. Though taller than needed, Porto silently conceded that it would redirect any flooding away for the heart of the community.

"Well, if it is not a fortress with four sides, what do you call this...this, thing?"

Meala reacted quickly. "Sir, if it pleases, because there are only two sides we combine the word "dia," for two and the word "gon" for wall. We call it the "Diagon."

Porto stared at her for nearly a minute. *There are too many quick-witted people in this village*, he thought. *They bear closer watching.*

Porto raised his olive wood stick and everyone, including Bonderman, shrank back. But he pointed it at the nearest end beam of the Diagon and muttered something incomprehensible. What looked like green lightning flashed from the end of the Olive Hand and marked a huge burn scar in the wood. The procession followed him to the other end where he repeated the procedure.

Porto turned to proclaim, "The Diagon goes no further." He mounted his horse and left with his followers. While leaving Porto did not bother to act as though Bonderman was the leader.

Egorn, Torban, and Meala all commented after their departure that Porto indeed had to get within about two man lengths range to use the spell he'd cast.

Willen had stopped asking why Eirran was teaching him what he taught. Though he did not go into a rage anymore, Eirran would now stop after such a query and stare at him for almost a minute before he chuckled and went on. The look was an odd combination of amazed disbelief and knowing too well about the future. This bizarre combination of looks made Willen long for the anger or madness. Unknown to Willen until much later, the quickness of his mind and the depth of his understanding had caused Eirran to begin to consider the young man as almost a peer, as he hoped Willen would someday truly be.

At the end of what was two moons beyond a four season cycle in the dungeon, Eirran announced that he had finished teaching Willen what he would need to know about keeping records and about the Latin language. Eirran had patiently answered any question that would help Willen's understanding of the subjects he'd been taught. It had been almost four moons since Willen had asked "why" Eirran was teaching him these subjects in the first place. But such a question was screaming in his brain.

"You now know what you need to know. You may leave and go home to accomplish your destiny."

Had Eirran slapped Willen he could not have been more stunned.

There was a degree of perturbation in his voice. "Eirran, I cannot go home. I have only begun my travels, there is still a great distance I must go. You know nothing of my quest and I know nothing of what I am supposed to manufacture. Why help me be ready for commerce when I have no plans in that direction? How can any of this, except the chance of meeting someone who speaks Latin in my travels, be of assistance on a journey that you do not begin to fathom?"

Willen glowered at Eirran for several moments more and then realized he had been rude to the older gentleman. The Seer, though demanding, had treated him with a growing kindness over the past few seasons. He had ensured that Willen was warm and well fed under horrible circumstances.

"Eirran. I'm sorry. I..."

"You have a quest? I heard nothing of a quest." Eirran used the word 'heard' not in the normal way, but as a Seer hearing the future. "Why have you kept this from me? Well, spit it out. There may be more I need to teach you beyond what I have heard."

All this time Eirran had been teaching Willen what he had *foreseen* to teach. Eirran had assumed that Willen had traveled so far in order to learn. Eirran had imparted a great storehouse of knowledge to the young man in an incredibly short period of time. The youth's ability to absorb his teacher's lessons had convinced Eirran that he was teaching Willen exactly what the boy had been seeking to know. It would remain a mystery to him to his dying day why he had not asked the youth earlier about his reasons for his journey. Even at this early date in Willen's travels, he had gone farther than all but a handful of those born on the island of Albion. And Eirran had not inquired into any of this.

Willen began his tale. He told of his begrudging acceptance in Loundon's Towne, which had been more welcoming than any other community had been before. He told of the kindness of Meala and Constantia. Willen's face lit up when discussing the young girl and the old gent did not have to be a Seer to see what was in his heart. Willen told of that fateful day at the harvest faire. He spoke with conviction of his quest for olive wood. He even told the strange tale of the piece of holly around his neck. He gave examples of the perversities of Willen's Luck. He recounted how he had meandered across the sea with Stellan the Fisher, how he had been delivered to the dungeon where they were sitting, and of his failure to help all those he knew and loved. He punctuated the end of his narrative by hanging his head in despair, frustration, and shame.

Eirran sat still for what seemed an interminable time, but was probably less than three times the time it takes to hard boil an egg. After Willen looked up from his agony and had brought his desire to cry under control, he noticed that Eirran was in some sort of trance, or at least a baffled fog. He had not fallen asleep, and he was not having a seizure. Willen had learned patience after so many disappointments, and this was one more opportunity for the young traveler to practice what was, perhaps, the most difficult of virtues.

The first thing Eirran said when he stirred was, "Willen's Luck." He spoke this phrase and did not speak again for several moments. He then turned to the youth.

"What darkness has meant for ill, providence has turned to good. Had you not been thrown off course and taken passage with Stellan, you would have not ended up in this dungeon. You would have forgone our most propitious meeting. I do believe I "see" a part of your future in this quest. It is different from what I first assumed was your mission." Eirran paused again, turned to pace, then whirled around and said, "This was very providential indeed. This should work out even better! You have been a quick study at Latin and the other concepts I have taught you."

He stared at Willen for a long moment and then said slowly in awe, "You just may be the one!"

Eirran suddenly moved near, his face was within a foot of Willen's. The closest thing to oral hygiene in this era was using twigs to rub the film off of the surface of teeth and out of the gaps between them. Some would chew herbs such as parsley after eating to give a fresh taste to their mouths.

There was nothing in the dungeon to help the smell of Eirran's breath as he blasted these words in Willen's face.

"You must not lose this knowledge! You must take all of these pages with you as well as quills and ink and blank scrolls. You must practice writing and reading! You must speak Latin every day so you will not forget how it sounds or how to sound it out! You will understand why this is vital in due time. You must be prepared!"

Those were the last words Eirran spoke for the rest of that day. Apparently he wanted that message to sink in. In silence they ate the gruel the guard brought because Eirran had not spoken "into the air" and asked for anything better.

Willen came out of the fog of sleep the next morning with a start. Eirran was standing over him, rousing him a bit roughly, and at first Willen feared a beating of some sort.

The guard was standing there with a good breakfast (no more gruel) and a branch from a birch tree. Without a word Eirran took the branch and set it aside. The guard left and they ate. The silence continued from the evening before.

Finally Eirran spoke, "Willen, today we begin to prepare you for your quest. There is not a lot I can teach you, if you are who I suspect you are, ...but I can set you on the path to what you need to know, ...and on the path towards your olive wood."

Eirran was quiet for a few minutes as he cleared the table of food debris and brought the stick and placed it on the table as if on display. Willen used this time to ponder this turn of events.

First of all, Eirran had never called him Willen before, only "Boy." And yesterday Eirran had indicated he was finished instructing him. Now there was more to learn, evidently because of his quest. Willen wanted to ask (but didn't), "Why *did* you teach me Latin, and what did you mean by 'if you are who I suspect you are'?" Throughout the rest of his association with Eirran, he would never receive a straight answer to those questions, but many, many cycles from now he would believe he knew.

"Willen, you have seen people use the Touch, I believe you called it, to start fires and such. Have you ever seen anyone use the Touch to call an object to them?"

Willen tried to recall such an act. "Bengt the Miller can breathe a certain way and then push around huge bales of grain, too large for one man, but I haven't seen any call anything to themselves." He went on to tell the Seer about the various acts of the Touch he had seen.

Eirran pushed the birch branch to the side and placed a quill in the center of the table. From the edge of the table he pointed his open palm towards the quill, closed his eyes, and concentrated. Nothing happened. He moved his hand closer and closer, trying, and finally, when his hand was less than a palm's breadth away, the quill shuddered and moved towards his fingers.

"Now you try, Willen."

Willen sheepishly followed his example, but the quill never moved. Though he had never attempted any examples of the Touch he had ever seen, Willen had not considered that he had any gifting. This was proof. He hung his head. He felt that in some way he had failed his village and Constantia again.

"Don't be disappointed, Willen. The Touch, as you know it, is very specific. You've only seen individuals perform a single, specific feat with the Touch. But let me show you something encouraging."

Eirran placed the quill back in the center of the table and picked up the birch branch. He stripped the twigs and leaves from it so that it was bare. It was not quite as long as his arm and was as thick as his index finger at the thinner end. Grabbing the thicker end he pointed it at the quill. He waved it and nothing happened. He spoke an odd garble of words, "*Grendenee Krandubor!*" Nothing happened.

"No movement, I know, but watch this." Eirran picked at the cuff of his filthy smock and tore it a little further at a frayed spot. He slowly pulled out two thick silvery strands of hair that seemed to glow in the half-light of the dungeon. He carefully tied one hair to the thinner end of the stick and wrapped it tightly around the length of the stick all the way back to within a hand's breadth of the other end. He positioned the thicker end of the stick in his right hand and placed his thumb on the hair, holding it tightly wrapped.

He stood five feet from the quill, pointed the wrapped stick at the quill and repeated, "*Grendenee Krandubor!*"

The quill bounced and then jumped to Eirran's hand.

Willen was wide eyed. Before he could speak, however, the old Seer continued, "That may seem impressive, but let me perform two other demonstrations."

Their dungeon cell was roughly rectangular. It was about an arm length more than a man's length in width and over three man lengths long. The table was in the center of the dank room. Eirran placed the quill at one end of the table and stepped to the other end of the dungeon away from the quill.

"*Grendenee Krandubor!*"

The quill quivered and moved perhaps the width of a finger towards the spell caster, but it stopped in place.

"You will note, Willen, that those words can only pull a quill a short distance. But let me show you something I discovered shortly before I came here to wait for your arrival."

Eirran took the quill to one end of the dungeon and placed it on a narrow outcropping of rock in the wall. He walked to the opposite end of their cell and Willen automatically moved to a wall to allow a clear visual path between the old man and the quill.

"Willen, if I want to command someone to come to me, what word in Latin would I use?"

Without a moment's hesitation Willen said, "Accio, which you could follow by the person's name if he did not know you were talking to him."

"Correct. Now watch this. "Accio Quill!"

Instantly the quill shot straight to Eirran's open palm.

"Eirran!" The amazement was evident on Willen's face. His questions, half-spoken, fell all over each other. "I do not understand. What...? That's not olive wood, it's birch. What type of hair...? Could I fight Porto with...? Is there...."

"All in good time, Willen, all in good time. Though there is not nearly enough that I can tell you. Let's start with what to call all of this.

"What you call the Touch is a display of power that is manifested by those who could do so much more with the proper tools and training, if the tools and training even existed. Do you remember the first time you ever used a blade to carve what you imaged you "saw" in a piece of wood?"

Willen nodded. "It was a small stag. It wasn't very good as I view it now, but it was exciting to me at that early age. I had only seen five summers."

"That illustrates my point perfectly. You had a basic ability. You probably carved better than any other child of your age. Even at that you had the proper tool, the blade you used. *With* the proper tool and practice, and perhaps while watching others carve and asking questions, you took your Touch for carving and developed it into quite a talent.

"The Touch is sort of like that, but it is so much more. You see someone who can start a fire or move a huge burden and to those around this seems like the person's Touch. Each particular Touch is an indicator that that person has much more power they could use, but it lies dormant, untapped, and unavailable. Everyone who has demonstrated a simple use of the Touch is like what you would have been if, after the first time you'd carved that stag, you had never used a blade for carving again. They have a small talent that has never been developed beyond its simple start.

"How do I explain this? Willen, I can use this common birch branch....," the old man dithered in his explanation. "No, it is not olive wood. I have heard of the power of olive wood but it is rare among my kind. However, I have discovered that using this unicorn hair... but I digress.

"Great day in the morning! How do I...? Willen, forget the type of wood and the hair for a moment. It is merely a tool, and really not a very good one, at that. I can use this *tool*, with the right words, to call objects from varying distances depending on their weight. I can start fires. I can open and close doors and gates. I can hurt people if I have a mind to. I can cause others to obey me if I do not ask them to do anything too out of character. Of course I have been coercing the guards and cooks to provide for us without this stick, but I caused that before I allowed myself to be captured."

Willen was distracted briefly by the fact that Eirran had *allowed* himself to be captured. But it was a fleeting thought because the old gent was still speaking.

"I was trained for all of this, and I have developed a tool, this stick and hair, to help me. Porto has had the same training, or similar enough. He and I have never met but I know many, far too many of his kind...."

"In our language... well, let's not discuss that. You need a new word to replace the Touch. You are a forerunner, perhaps *the* forerunner of the New Ones." These last sentences were muttered, for the most part, as Eirran turned to pace again. But Willen heard every word.

Eirran paced for almost a minute and whirled around and dropped into the other chair beside Willen. "Latin it is, so Latin it will be. I have not taught you the Latin word 'magicae.' It is a word loosely similar in meaning to the Touch. Let's shorten it to the simpler word 'magik.' That will work well in Albion if you are the forerun... Well... it will also work elsewhere if...."

Eirran was staring off into nowhere again. This worried Willen. Since he had told Eirran of his quest and the events leading up to it, the Seer had quite often been staring off blankly and talking to either himself or to someone who was not there. The youth hoped he had not said something to bring back the madness.

"Magik it is! There is a lot more to magik than you have ever imagined with the Touch. A person of magik starts with a degree of power. Some will be more powerful than others. It is strong in you, but incredibly untapped as of yet." The old man stopped talking again and stared into Willen's eyes.

Willen barely noticed the stare. He thought, "The Touch, or rather magik, strong in me? I never did any..." Now Willen was thinking in half sentences. "Sure I can carve wood, but I cannot do... But Meala and Bengt and Torban... Even Constantia had more...." Such was the startling nature of this revelation that for the first time, Willen thought of his lady love and did not dwell on her in any way.

"Willen," Eirran said in a quiet and gentle voice. "You stand on the threshold of a new world. You have showed me the carved piece of holly around your neck with Constantia's face on it. You told me the image took longer than any other to appear to you, but when it did, you told me it became your most beautiful work. I agree that I have never seen a more realistic face carved in a piece of wood.

"That piece of wood had to fight the fate of burning to achieve its destiny. You have fought the fate that wanted to kill you that day at the harvest faire. Fate would leave you in this dungeon to die. Fate will try to stop you from achieving your destiny in any other way it can. *You must fight fate to achieve your destiny.*

"I can help you in some ways, but *you* must do most of the work."

Willen pondered this for a moment. "Can you teach me this magik you speak of?"

"I only know the Old Way, the way that you will have to fight before too many more seasons will have passed. Magik is a *new* word for the New Way that *you* must discern and develop. I can only teach you *about* how to fight the Old Way, the way of Porto."

"Is fighting Porto, my destiny?"

Eirran smiled what was a sad smile at first. But it turned into a genuine heartfelt smile. "No, Willen. Porto is a major battle against fate standing astride the path to your destiny. Nothing is assured. You could lose to him. Tomorrow a guard could kill you, for that matter. But by wit and cunning, by learning and hard work, by bravery and strength, you **WILL** defeat fate's attempts to thwart you. You **WILL** fight Porto, and you will probably have to kill him, I am sad to say.

"But I believe in you, Willen. I see in you all that is necessary, and more, to be victorious and achieve a destiny many would envy, and perhaps fear. But I believe in you."

The two were silent for several minutes, deep in their own thoughts.

"I still don't see why you can't teach me magik."

"As I said, magik is new, Willen. It is yours to discover. To be perfectly frank I do not know magik; I cannot do it. I have tried, but other than the *Accio* spell that called the quill, all I have been able to learn is a few useless tricks. I can only teach you *about* what magik should be and some methods that may help you in your explorations. Perhaps you will be able to teach me magik someday."

Willen could not see himself teaching Eirran anything, instead he said, "You say that you know the Old Way that Porto uses to accomplish his evil acts. Can you teach me this Old Way to fight him? I already know the words he used to try to kill me. He also used the same words to kill Felden. He said, 'Avada Kedavra.'"

Eirran gasped and shuddered. "Willen, you would do well to forget those words. Just saying them out loud without using them to kill is bad enough. If you ever kill with them when you find olive wood, you will be forever condemning your soul to be plagued by the use of such evil."

"But you said that I will probably have to kill Porto."

"You probably will. But use the blade Torban gave you, or a club, or strangle him with your bare hands if need be. Just don't use the Killing Curse he used. And to don't even try to develop a curse in Latin that kills. Using the Old Way and using magik to kill will blight your life. Blood on your hands is bad enough, when necessary. Blood on your soul you will never wash away."

It did not even occur to Willen in this bizarre conversation to ask about Torban's blade, which he thought long gone.

"Willen, I could teach you the Old Way, but I do not want you to think like Porto. I cannot say it often enough, magik will create a New Way, a clean and better way of using power for good. For the most part, too much of the Old Way has degenerated into power for selfish use. Though many of us still call for a more beneficial use of our powers.

"I will only teach you enough about the Old Way so you can recognize it, counteract its selfish uses, and fight against it if need be. You'll have to discover how to fight as you develop and understand the power of magik."

"Eirran, you speak of this Old Way with such personal knowledge. Though you do not know Porto, you talk with familiarity about his Killing Curse and his methods. How can this be?"

Gone was the smile from the old man's face. He looked older than Willen had ever seen him. He sighed.

"I know the Old Way of Porto because I am of the Old Way. Porto is a Druid and so am I."

"Mr. Ollivander?" Harry interrupted, "Weren't the Druids a group of witches and wizards who lived in Ireland a long time ago? One of my first Chocolate Frog Cards was of Clodna the Druidess. She was a healer, I think."

"Yes, she was a very good woman who used her magical birds to heal people and who spent her life trying to discover other ways to help those who were ill," Mr. Ollivander said, with a nod. "But the Druids did not live only in Ireland. To understand the Druids, it would help you to know more about the Celts."

Harry grinned. "Seamus Finnegan goes on about Celts sometimes, as if the Irish saved the world."

Mr. Ollivander nodded again. "It could be said that at one time the Irish did save Western civilization... but that is a different story. At one time the Celts covered most of Europe, not just Ireland. They came from northern and central Europe and migrated in several waves, between 600 B.C. and 300 B.C. They were known by different names in different places. In France, in Willen's day, and for many centuries afterward, that country was referred to as Gaul because of its people. In Spain, the Celts were called "Celtiberians", a name that is remembered today only by historians. The Celts even migrated as far as Turkey.

"The histories of the Celts and the Druids are completely intertwined. Though not kings or rulers, the Druids were leaders, teachers, healers, priests, magicians, councilors, and arbitrators among the Celtic tribes, although only those who lived in what would eventually become Great Britain and Ireland were known as Druids.

"And the Celts in Ireland were very different from those in Old Albion. Those Celts that migrated to what we now call England came directly from the

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As they walked up, the door opened for them. "Ah, Mr. Ollivander. It is a true honor and pleasure to have you as our guest again this evening. And I am delighted to see you have brought Mr. Potter for his first of hopefully many visits with us."

The person who greeted them in a rich and melodious basso profundo voice wore perfectly tailored formal robes with a bright red rose in his buttonhole. His shoes were polished to a sparkle, which was visible even in the dim light. In spite of this, his appearance presented a surprising contrast with his voice and his clothing.

This Mr. Greenbee was the seventh generation owner of Greenbees Fine Cuisine, and he was, despite the richness of his voice and the formality of his dress, only eighteen years old. (In fact, Harry thought that the baby-faced young man looked closer to twelve.) It was easy for Harry to remember someone who had the same first name that he did. He remembered Harry Greenbee from Hogwarts. Greenbee had been a seventh year Hufflepuff the previous year, but at first Harry had thought that he was younger. Even now, Greenbee was still shorter than he was, and Harry (Potter) was one of the shortest boys in his year.

Now Harry Greenbee was Harry's host, once removed from Mr. Ollivander. Greenbee almost made it through the greeting and seating of the two in a private room without looking at Harry Potter's forehead - almost. That slip helped Harry feel a little more comfortable with his surroundings.

"Mr. Ollivander, I believe you are here for the night's lamb specialty, as usual?"

"Yes, Mr. Greenbee, I am anxious to hear how you are preparing it tonight, and please tell Mr. Potter of your other specials this evening as well."

"Excellent. Excellent. Tonight we feature the Crushed Fennel Lamb Rack accompanied by bulgur wheat, artichoke stew, and a Brussels sprout emulsion. We also have a delightful Crisp Black Sea Bass served with truffle potatoes and Champagne sauce. From our regular menu I find it most difficult to choose one or two favorites. Everything on the Greenbees menu is of the highest quality and has my personal guarantee of satisfaction."

Here the proprietor leaned in conspiratorially. "But if I were deciding tonight, in addition to the Lamb and Sea Bass, I would also consider the Filet Mignon with Creamy Spinach, Silken Potato, and Spring Onions, and the Chicken Cocoban with slightly steamed broccoli and a wild greens salad with raspberry vinegarette dressing."

Young Potter had been in only two other wizarding eating establishments in his life, the Leaky Cauldron and Floean Fortescue's. The Dursleys had denied him the experience of eating in a restaurant, except for the rushed meal in the hotel restaurant they ate while running from Harry's Hogwarts letter owls.

Because of this, Harry seemed stunned by the descriptions told to him.

Mr. Ollivander of course understood the dilemma and rescued him from indecision and possible embarrassment. "Well, Mr. Potter. Your decision is simple. All of these choices will be a delight. You merely need to choose between lamb, fish, beef, and chicken."

It was a lifeline. From the long litany of food possibilities four clear choices appeared.

"Beef, please." The covert look of relief may have gone unnoticed by Greenbee, but the wandmaster missed nothing.

"And the Crushed Fennel Lamb Rack is much too much for me to resist," added Ollivander. "Thank you, Mr. Greenbee. As always the delights of your culinary offerings are only outweighed by the warmth of your hospitality."

Harry Greenbee actually blushed at the praise rendered. Harry Potter noticed once again the earnestness of wanting to please Mr. Ollivander in particular.

In the two years he had been in the wizarding world, our young hero had heard many discuss the legendary wand-making firm of Ollivanders. There was no other place in Great Britain to buy a wand. But in less than four hours Harry had noticed four different people from four different and diverse business establishments in Diagon Alley *most* delighted with the older gentleman's attention.

That the serving girl, Marcie Polkind, might be affected this way was not unusual. But Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, Eeylops Owl Emporium, and Greenbees Fine Cuisine were all larger and more prosperous *looking* establishments than Ollivanders. Young Harry concluded that it must be the man, his host and temporary employer, who caused this reaction.

Within two minutes of ordering, the drinks were served. Harry was presented with iced pumpkin juice and he watched Mr. Ollivander taste and approve a red wine.

The two were left alone and Mr. Ollivander spoke. "I believe we left young Willen incarcerated in a dungeon with a life sentence, and with what had once appeared to be a madman. Willen now knows Latin, basic economics, and that *he* must discover magik with little help from Eirran the Seer.

"Mr. Potter. Do you think you will be able to understand my telling of this tale *without* the interruptions of calling out wand descriptions?"

Harry smiled and then smiled even more. Mr. Ollivander had told a joke!

"If I miss something, sir, I know you'll be nice enough to explain..." Harry was pleased that he could continue the humor.

"Well, Willen is in the dungeon. He has just been told that Eirran is a Druid, just like Porto."

And now our story continues.

The shock was evident on Willen's face. "But how could you be a Druid?"

Willen, would you want an outsider to judge all of the people of Loundon's Towne by the way Caedric the Fisher treats you?"

The look of shock was replaced by a look of confusion, then contemplation.

"You have told me" Eirran continued, "that there are almost three hundred people living in Loundon's Towne. Of those hundreds there are perhaps a dozen people with the Touch that you know of, perhaps a few more. Even of that dozen there are those that have treated you better than others, correct?"

Willen could not see where the old man was going with this line of thought, but it had distracted him from his confusion. He nodded in agreement.

"Now, imagine people by the thousands, tens of thousands, tens and tens and tens of thousands. My people are the Celts, and those are our numbers. Over two hundred years ago we began spreading out all over the world. We were, and still are, a fierce and proud people who would've liked to move into new lands in peace, but quite often we had to fight to stake our claim to the farmland and water sources we needed.

"Within the large population of Celts there came into prominence a group of us who discovered that we had what you call the Touch. Of course we called it something else, which doesn't matter. We developed our talents and skills and trained in many different manners of helping our people. Those of us recognized with the gift or ability enter into rigorous training at a young age. It takes years of very hard work, and those of us who succeed are rightfully honored and proud. We are known by different names, but Druid will suffice. Any of us within the Celtic nations with the skill and training will answer to that name. I consider it a noble calling to be a Druid. We are teachers and diplomats and we try to help rulers govern wisely. We even help keep the peace when different tribes of Celts find themselves at odds with each other.

"We Celts, like all people, have had both good folk and bad among us. I was raised and trained to believe that a sacred part of our Druidic trust was to temper the excesses and ill-conceived intentions of troublemakers and rulers alike, and to stop it if absolutely necessary.

"It has been over two hundred years since my ancestors left our homelands and moved here to Gaul. I have never been to the lands of our origin, nor do I ever plan to. There have been several waves of Celts leaving our homelands since my forefathers created Gaul out of a few scattered villages. But to me and to others like me, this latest migration is somehow different, somehow not like the rest of us. Rather than going into sparsely populated areas and building townes and cities of size, culture, and economic strength as has been Celtic practice, this new generation of Celts wants the success without the effort. They seem to want to take over established communities and reap the benefits of others' hard work by force rather than merit.

"Fifteen springs ago, roughly one hundred Celts approached my city of Remers and asked about the strength of our force at arms and the prowess in battle of our leaders. There was no subtlety to them. Several of my fellow Druids and I arrived at the city gate to meet with them. They quickly changed their demeanor when they recognized us. As is the practice of hospitality among Celts, we invited the leaders to a banquet that very evening. We wanted to better assess their intentions and any possible threats to our city - we are not hospitable without good reason. We knew a full belly and some of our strongest mead would loosen their tongues. Of course it worked.

"They began to ask about other townes and villages in Gaul that did not have Celtic populations. We told them that all townes, and even most villages of size in Gaul, were of significant Celtic makeup, if not completely Celtic in origin. This information caused them to be agitated. Finally, the quiet one of the five leaders we were entertaining spoke.

"And in the cities and villages, there are Druids such as yourself?"

"The questioner was a sallow pinch-faced man of middle age. He gave his name as Halno, with no title accompanying it. His manner of speech caused me to pay very close attention to his wording. I was the only Druid at the table with the Lord of Remers and our guests. The question was mine to answer. 'There are Druids enough in Gaul to provide our traditional services to each region. We are not spread too thin as to allow our people to go unaided.'

"Before he asked his next question I realized what had initially bothered me about him. The leaders of these new Celts had ridden up to our gates without one of my fellow Druids with them. I would have never been left out of a parlay of such a nature, so I assumed that none of our brothers were with them. Three other of our guests had introduced themselves with their titles. They were leaders of their band of travelers and warriors. The other two would be the senior most of the minor functionaries. But when this one spoke, the other four became most attentive and respectful. There was only one type of person a Celtic Lord would pay such deference to. Halno was a Druid, and did not want us to know it. I struggled to keep my face impassive with this realization, but Halno was too self-assured to notice.

"He next asked, 'And what of the island of Albion? Are any of our brother Celts there, building cities and townes? Have your fellow Druids begun aiding those of that land?'

"Willen, my Uncle Trandin had visited Albion out of curiosity three summers before that spring, so I knew of your land. But I did not know of this Halno's plan or why he was disguised. I told him of my uncle's travels and the fact that there were no cities at all and that there were only small, scattered villages and Keeps in the sparsely inhabited land.

"I finished by saying, 'There is plenty of room for your bands to spread out and begin to farm and populate. In a few generations you will have thriving villages as we had here in Gaul a hundred years ago. We will trade with you if you build a port.'

"He seemed to have either bitten into a bad piece of meat or he did not like what he had heard. Since he was not eating at the moment I assumed he did not like what I had told him. He said nothing more, and after an uncomfortable silence, he looked oddly at his nominal lord. The leader began to ask about hunting in the nearby forests.

"Willen, this attempt at subterfuge was so amateurish that I did not consider this new wave of Celts to be any threat to my city. In less than three days they had hunted a reasonable amount of game from the forests and were on their way back in the direction that they came. We at Remers were, and still are, one of the largest cities in Gaul. When these bunglers left us, we thought, "Good riddance."

"But beginning six cycles ago we began to hear of small bands of heavily armed Celts traveling along the coast to the point nearest Albion. There they had hired or stolen fishing boats and were sailing to Albion. We Celts have never been a seagoing people, though I have heard that our brothers in Iberia have become boat builders and seafarers of some skill. These small bands from our homeland had no such skill at that time, but they sailed on sunny days only when they could see the white cliffs of your country. Now they have some sailing skills and are sending larger groups to your island.

"I did not and do not blame them for leaving our homeland. It is always cold there, I've been told, and difficult to farm. They are only doing what my forefathers did. They are different though. It seemed to me that they did not want to create a land of their own to be proud of, as we are proud of Remers and Gaul. The ones we met wanted to take over established villages and townes and Keeps. This Porto and Bonderman are of the same ilk as Hanlo. Apparently they want to go in and demand homage and payment with no work of their own.

"There must be some with them that are hardworking and properly ambitious, but the only ones we have met are greedy and unscrupulous. Ones like Porto."

"Eirran, if these new invaders are smaller in number than you and your fellow Druids and Celts, then why do you stand for their greed and disruptive ways?"

"There are two reasons. First, they have always been small groups until recently, and they have not come near us. They avoid our strongholds and only attack the smallest of our trading convoys, and that occurred rarely. They have not tried to take one of our villages, but in the last two cycles they have begun attacking individual farms. They ransack and kill everyone in these farms that do not give them what they want instantly. The farms are all Celtic homesteads and it is not in the nature of a Celt, man or woman, to allow freebooters to have their way. So the individual farmers fight and are killed by these roving bands. At first the deaths were the obvious work of sword or axe, but more and more, the deaths we discover have been mysterious to us. The unexplainable deaths show no cause of death on their bodies, they are just dead, usually with either a surprised or upset look on their faces.

"As for the second reason we have not yet forced them to cease their disreputable ways... with the increase of attacks we had heard of the olive wood sticks that concentrates the power of their Touch. We did not know where these sticks came from until you told me. They have turned the small river mouth they use as an embarkation point for Albion into a fortress. We do not know how many have these olive sticks and do not want to face them with the extent of their power unknown to us.

The south of Gaul is far from us. I made great haste traveling through that area on my visit to Etruria and Tusci to learn Latin. In southern Gaul there were plenty of trees of all kinds, most of which you will never see around here, but I do not remember any called olive trees. Of course I was not searching for different types of plants and there could be different names for the same tree.

"On my way south I did notice one tree with what looked like delicious and juicy berries. I popped one in my mouth and could not spit it out fast enough. It was bitterer than twice curdled and soured goat's milk on a hot day. A few days later I rescued a local from a wolf. I did not speak his language, nor he mine, but he and his wife offered me a place by their fire that evening and fed me supper. He pressed a number of those berries and she used the juice to fry food. It does not have the hardy taste of beef or pork fat, so I was not favorably impressed, but they seemed partial to it.

The first harvest faire after Willen left Loundon's Towne had been a success, but not as in previous years. For the first time there had been no increase in attendance. Actually a few less people had visited the faire that season.

Caedric the Fisher had been bemoaning the fact that all those *he* had spoken to were very hesitant to come. Many villages nearby had previously provided a significant number of the faire's attendees. Bonderman had made his demands of obeisance to each of them. The self-styled Keeper of land had "suggested" to all of his villages that attending the faire might not be wise, and many had decided to follow that advice. Those were the types of people Caedric had talked to on his fishing trips.

Caedric was a fearful man. He was a coward who always saw the worst in every situation, and he worked extra hard to prove he was right. Though Caedric's boat was not a seagoing craft, he had ventured up and down the eastern coast of Albion on warmer, fair weather days. Now, he never ventured even to the mouth of the Tameas. Because of his fears he did not even fish as far from Loundon's Towne as he used to. The sizes of his catches suffered from this. Most villages near them were also situated on the Tameas River to ensure a constant water supply. Many of their number did not want to travel far from home in uncertain times, so the number of those fishing near each other went up and the supply of fish went down.

Hard times produce harder times.

One day before the harvest faire began, Stellan the Fisher arrived at their shoreline and tied up his boat. Being a seagoing craft and not a riverboat, it dug a deeper groove in the wet sand than Caedric's riverboat had dug. For no rational reason this deeper groove bothered Caedric. Of course it was not the size of the craft or the depth of the groove. All of those who remembered Stellan from when they had helped him repair his boat greeted him warmly. Torban asked him if he had any fish with him. Stellan produced a three-foot long cod and sold it and the rest of his catch in about the time it took to empty his hold. Caedric had landed an hour before with his third dismal catch in as many days. *This* is what really bothered Caedric.

"Hello, Constantia," said Stellan. "I would recognize you anywhere. You look exactly like you did the last time I saw your face, so beautiful."

The young girl, now fourteen summers old, blushed and was flustered at the same time.

Meala was as confused as her daughter. "Stellan. She was but a little girl when you were here. I kept her away from your boat and the reconstruction for fear of her being in the way and getting hurt. She has come into her growth and is two heads taller now."

"Meala, I saw her likeness three seasons ago. Willen has carved the most remarkable likeness of her in-"

"Willen!" Constantia screamed. "You have seen Willen. How is he? Where is he? Is he safe? Is he...." Constantia stopped and burst into tears.

"So you have met the dog boy, Willen, have you, Stellan?" The bitterness in Caedric's voice dripped like cold bile.

"Yes, I have met Willen. He took passage with me to the coast of Gaul. It was smooth for half the trip and he was seasick. Then a storm arose and he gained his sea legs and became quite the traveler. He should be well on his way to the south of Gaul by now."

"Ha! That useless orphan is probably long rotting in a grave, if those who killed him did the decent thing and buried him. It's doubtful. That lazy-eyed wastrel could no more find his way than flap his arms and fly. He is useless and clumsy, and he has everyone's hopes up for no reason." He turned to the girl. "Do not waste your tears on the likes of that little snotty... Ouuff!"

Constantia had been crying. When Caedric started his tirade about Willen she increased her sobbing. When the irate Fisher turned his venting from Stellan towards her, she seemed horror stricken. At first Stellan thought he had punched Caedric to stop him from further upsetting the girl. But that was not the main reason Stellan had punch Caedric. At that moment Stellan realized that he considered Willen a friend. Stellan was honest enough with himself to admit, only to himself, that he didn't have many friends.

Not only was Willen a friend, Stellan realized that he believed in Willen. He believed in his mission, his quest. Stellan truly hoped the young wood gatherer was going to succeed. Willen was sacrificing years of his life, and perhaps even his life, for this village. Stellan was not going to hear him degraded by this sniveling little excuse for a Fisher.

"Fisher," Stellan addressed the little man who was doubled over trying to catch his breath. He spoke loud enough for others to hear. "I doubt there are many young men named Willen traveling from this village with a lazy eye, so I will thank you to never insult my friend again.

"Come, Torban, come, Constantia. We have business to discuss. I see I have not missed the harvest faire. Good. Meala, do you still bake those small bits of dough sweetened with honey?"

Stellan quietly and unobtrusively enjoyed the faire. In the evenings he could be found at Torban's fire for supper. During the days he was seen talking with many of the founding members of the community. He ate breakfast twice with Egorn the Potter and his wife, Shulla. He lunched with Taleena and Vanch the Cooper one day and with Bengt the Miller another.

The harvest faire had originated and had grown each year based on the barter of excess crafted goods and crops. In the past few years there had been the addition of those who could provide certain services *at* the faire. There was a tanner from a village five days walk away that had attended for the last three years. Graller the Tanner brought with him not only finished leather and leather goods, he also brought the tools of his trade and would repair any item or make anything that was not too complex.

At that first faire of Stellan's, two brothers traveled nine days with their ox cart carrying a contraption that no one could fathom. Part of it looked strangely like an oversized wooden-bladed axe with two extra long handles going one way, and a shorter, differently shaped handle going the opposite way. They arrived early enough to take a space more towards the center of the faire, but they asked to be allowed to set up on the edge of the faire, right next to the only farm field still near the main square area of Londons's Towne.

They sought out Pandan the Tiller and had an extremely animated conversation with him. Pandan went through a range of emotions from scoffing to disbelief to agitated conversation to excitement. But then he was silent and refused to tell anyone, even Torban, of the brothers' inscrutable device.

Janks the Tiller and his brother Barlint the Cooper were twins, but they were not like Feldin and Daneel, the two murdered board cutters. They looked very similar but not identical, and they did not complete each other's sentences. The first day of the faire, which was the least attended, they left their invention covered by a dirty, patched together cloth.

On the second day, in the mid afternoon, the two brothers spoke to Pandan and the three walked towards the device. They did not call to anyone but some around followed them in curiosity. Barlint brought their ox up to the device and ropes were tied between the ox harness and the contraption. The two brothers struggled with the implement while Pandan led the ox to the farm field two lengths of a man away. All of this activity drew quite a crowd.

Barlint lead the ox and Janks grabbed what was assumed to be the two axe handles. The contraption began to dig a straight groove in the field almost two hand lengths deep. It was moving at the pace of the ox, and the groove in the earth was very straight.

Of course the crowd was still unsure of what they had just seen. But Pandan was about to light the fire in their mind's eyes. He walked to the edge of the turned over dirt and pulled a seed bag out from under his cloak. He reached in and brought out a handful of seeds. A few gasps of understanding were joined by many more as Pandan began placing seeds in the opened earth at a quick pace. In a few moments he had placed seed the length of two men along the row of upturned soil, smoothing the soil over the seed as he went. The Tillers in the crowd, and most in Albion were of that occupation, began to cheer. In the time it would take to break up kindling for a fire and get it burning, Pandan had placed more seed in the ground than a good Tiller could plant before mid-morning rest break.

The two brothers broke open a seam in the soil the length of five huts, turned the contraption around, and gouged out a nearly identical seam right beside the first on the way back. As they came back those gathered began applauding the two. When they shyly grinned at the growing acclamation, the two looked more like twins than ever.

Just before reaching their starting point, the wooden blade hit an unseen rock and splintered. There were moans from the crowd, but the brothers looked like they were not disappointed. The crowd burst out in applause once more. The Tillers in attendance immediately moved forward with their questions. In mere moments Janks was in animated conversation with those nearest him.

Barlint the Cooper ambled over to Torban who had watched the demonstration with a keen eye. "Torban, we have heard of you. Can you guess why we bothered to drag our row maker all this way?"

"We can begin working on a metal blade for your row maker as soon as the faire is over," said Torban. "You and your brother will be welcome additions to our community. We are in need of another Cooper and we always welcome more Tillers."

"Petrificus Totalus!" The guard stopped walking, froze in place, and fell sideways onto the floor.

Eirran and Willen ran the two steps to the fallen sentry and examined him closely.

"Well, he has been stopped completely, and none of his limbs are moving at all. He seems to be awake. Look, he is breathing normally."

"Yes, Eirran. For a moment there it crossed my mind that I had turned him to stone like a tree that has petrified. His eyes are open. I wonder...if he were not under your memory grip if he would be able to look around and remember what he sees and hears? One of us will have to try this magik on the other to answer that question. If you can cast it, I will gladly endure it. If not, I will try to make it easy on you. Look, he's coming around."

It had been a few long moments since the magik had been cast and the guard was regaining his mobility. They helped him up and he immediately stood up straight, ready for further orders.

It had been Eirran who had developed the idea of using the word "cast" for what they were doing when they sent out magik. The old Seer loved to fish in the small ponds around his beloved city of Remers. Of course the Fishers who went out with nets every day to provide a significant portion of the city's food stuffs thought him daft, but none of them would say such a thing within his hearing.

"Exactly what was the phrase, Willen?"

"Petrificus Totalus." Willen spoke the words slowly this time after placing the stick and unicorn hair combination down on the table. Releasing the stick and hair before teaching the word was a painful lesson he had learned - his lesson, Eirran's pain.

The first piece of magik they had tried to discover was how to start a fire. This would be a very useful ability each night and each morning while traveling. Willen would not have to carry kindling or other materials need to build each fire he would need to cook with or heat with or both.

When Willen first successfully started a fire with magik he repeated the word he used for Eirran. He spoke the word with the stick and unicorn hair in his hand and pointed at Eirran. The older gent's sleeve caught fire.

Accio, the summoning command in magik came from the Latin word that was pronounced and spelled the exact same way as the phrase in magik. Eirran had discovered that word easily enough by himself. So far, that was the only word he had discovered in the New Way of magik. It would turn out that was the first and only word of magik he would ever discover. Every magik word the Seer learned from then on, and for the rest of his life, Willen would teach him.

"Here, Eirran, let me sit on this chair so I won't fall, and you cast that piece of magik to freeze me in place."

"*Petrifican Totalis!*" The older gent spoke and nothing happened.

"*Petrificans Totali! Petrificaticus Totalani.*"

"Eirran. Let me spell it out for you. If you see how I spell it and then listen to it spoken, you will be able to cast the magik, just like with the fire starting magik."

Willen picked up the quill and spelled out the changes to the words from Latin, speaking each letter as he wrote, "...p-e-t-r-i-f-i-c-u-s and t-o-t-a-l-u-s. Look at it, point your stick and hair at me, and say the words again."

Eirran took the piece of parchment and followed Willen's instructions. "Petrificus Totalus," pronouncing it "PET-rifi-cus TO-tal-us."

"My fault, my fault," the young man said quickly. He could see the mounting frustration in his friend's eyes. "I have to spell it so you can pronounce it also. Now that I can read and write, you are the only one I know that can do the same. So, after we part, if I want to keep in practice I am going to have to write to you. Since you say I will discover more of this magik as I go on with my life, I will have to figure out a way to send you the "sound" of the magik as well as the spelling ---

"Eirran." Willen stopped in place, staring off into the distance. The tables were now turned. Willen was the one lost in thought and Eirran had to wait. Now Willen was the teacher and Eirran was the student. Or more accurately, Willen was the inventor or creator and Eirran was his assistant. This had not occurred to Willen yet, and it never really would in so many words.

"Eirran, we use the word 'magik' for too many things. As we go through all of the different words in Latin to discover the ones that are magik, I have become aware that we have only the one word, 'magik,' and we are using it for everything. Since I am having to spell the exact modifications to the real Latin words, can we call the individual words of magik, 'spells'?"

The old Seer gazed at Willen with a look the young man did not realize was pride. "I have said that magik is yours to discover. You can call things anything that you want, but that is a pretty good idea. The sentence, 'You cast a spell in magik,' makes good sense to you and me, and it will to anyone else when they learn what you have created here. Now how are you going to write to me to tell me how the 'spells' sound?"

I think this will do." Willen took up the quill and wrote 'pe-TRI-fi-cus to-TAH-lus' on the parchment besides the correct spelling.

Eirran raised the parchment to his eyes and looked at it for a moment before smiling. He pointed the stick and hair at Willen who had assumed a position on the chair to hopefully avoid falling when the spell worked, if it worked.

"Petrificus Totalus," Eirran said and Willen froze in place with a look of surprise.

Eirran rushed to him. "Are you well? Does it hurt? Can you see? Can you look around?"

Eirran stopped asking these questions as he saw the look in Willen's eyes go from surprise, to a smile, to a concentrated effort to look in all directions viewable with his head unable to move. In about half of the time that the guard had been frozen by Willen's spell, Willen was released.

"I was able to hear and understand everything you said. I could not move my head but everything in my line of sight and eye moment was clear to me. I was able to breathe easily and even swallow. Can we call that spell the Body Bind?"

Eirran had been convinced that the piece of magik - now a spell - that would stop a person completely would be some combination of the Latin words *adligo* which means "bind" and *corpus* which means "body." Calling the Petrify Totally Spell the Body Bind Spell was a kindness to the old Seer who was unsuccessfully hiding his frustration that he was unable to contribute to the discovery process.

The first time he had failed had been with the fire-starting spell. Eirran had thought for sure it would come from the Latin word *flama*, (fire) or from *cremo*, the verb "to consume with fire." Of course the verb *incendo*, Latin for "to set fire to," was perfectly logical after the fact. It had seemed natural to Willen, and unfathomable to Eirran that the spell should mispronounce *incendo* - but *incendio* worked perfectly.

Eirran had worked himself into an agitated state over the discovery process as it was proceeding. He was the experienced and trained Druid; he should be able to figure out the right words for a spell. That he was the Seer who had proclaimed that magik was Willen's to create seemed lost on him.

Willen had thought that nouns might make good magik as well as verbs. Eirran had been sure that verbs were the only words to produce magik. He felt his discovery of *accio* had proven that. Willen, thinking about the light from a fire, not the heat, had butchered the Latin noun *lumen* for "light" and said *Lumos!* He had not started a fire, but the end of his stick and unicorn hair had shone with a small light.

It was toward the end of the day and the small bit of light had helped them get ready to sleep. But the small light had also been enough to keep them both awake. Eirran had been furiously muttering at the top of his lungs every word he could think of to stop the light. He'd used every word for darkness and blackness he could think of, but to no avail. A few moments after Eirran had lain back down, Willen had said, "Nox," the Latin word for 'night' - no mispronunciation.

The small light went out and Eirran had howled like a wolf in frustration.

All through the castle, the minions of Baldet, and Baldet himself, had shivered at the ill omen of the sounds from the dungeon.

The old Seer rose slowly from the dinner table one evening, and when his back creaked, he groaned.

"Are you ill, Eirran?"

"No, I always feel the change in seasons. When my back makes this noise, I know that the harvest is upon us."

"The harvest? I have lost track of the seasons. Two harvests have come and gone and I have but one more cycle of the seasons to travel through Gaul and back to Albion." Willen was panicking. "I have to go all the way to the south of Gaul and find olive wood and carry back enough... I don't know how much is enough, a stick, a branch, a bundle of sticks? Where do I cross the sea back to Albion? I cannot come back here to Baldet's coastline. How do I get out of this dungeon? I don't..."

"Willen!" Eirran shouted. He had tried several times to calm Willen and had spoken louder each time.

"I can tell you how to travel where you need to go. I am sure the local inhabitants will know where to find an olive tree. They never mentioned it to me, but I never asked. I care nothing for trees. It will take three moons at most to travel to the south of Gaul and three to return. That leaves three to find the olive sticks and three more to cross the sea back to Albion. You have plenty of time."

"But how do we escape from here?"

Eirran walked to the door that the guard *always* unlocked and locked when entering or leaving. He reached out and pushed it open. "We will leave tomorrow after a good breakfast. We will need the rest of today to prepare everything for your trip, and I have a few last things to tell you, and to *TELL* you."

At the first harvest after Willen left Loundon's Towne, Stellan the Fisher was not the only visitor who had come for more than the faire. The same day that Stellan had arrived, Caedric, his fellow Fisher (the comparison was anathema to both of them) had been moaning that attendance was sure to be off that year. Bonderman and Porto had visited each community where Bonderman had declared himself Keeper and had made it clear that they looked unfavorably on anyone from "their" villages going to the harvest faire.

They made this threat to force the good people of Loundon's Towne to be beholden to Bonderman (and thus Porto) for the success of the faire.

Their logic was faulty on two counts. Many people from far outside Bonderman's sphere of domination had heard of harvest faire, the Diagon, and the brave people of Loundon's Towne. The confluence of these three streams of fascination caused many to travel to participate in the faire than might not have done so under other circumstances.

The second event that proved that trying to squelch the faire was a bad idea occurred when it was over. When Bonderman and his cohort received the tribute from the faire, the booty given to the ruffians was half again that of the year before. Porto never said a word, but there would be no more attempts to slow attendance in the next two years.

Loundon's Towne had benefited far greater by the visitors from far away than had been extracted in tribute by the extortionists.

Those hardy and hale enough to travel the extended distances while braving the bands of ruffians, (other than Bonderman and company), were just the type of people wanted as a part of the largest and quickest growing community in Albion.

Stellan had stayed to see the Bonderman and Porto that Willen had described. When they left with all the spoils they could carry, and the promised threat to return soon, Torban invited Stellan to a private supper.

Torban and Stellan left on his boat with first light the next day. Caedric overslept from his drunkenness so he did not go out to fish that day at all. He was drunk again by mid afternoon, rejoicing that Stellan had left. It wasn't until three days after the faire had ended that Caedric realized that Torban was gone also.

"Meala, oww, my head, where is Torban?"

"He's out visiting many of the villages where the new visitors to the faire came from."

"Woman, you do not have to shout. I am standing right here next to you."

She had not shouted, but a three day drunken binge right on the heels of more drunkenness every night during the faire had left Caedric with a head that felt like a hull breaking on a hidden rock.

"Torban is away, Caedric. I am not sure when he will return, but I am sure it will be much more than a fortnight from now."

"Well, if you need any help from a big strong man, you know who to call."

She smiled and said, "I certainly do." "Anyone but you," she thought.

He staggered off. She shuddered with outrage and washed her hands, which did not need washing.

It had been well past a moon before Torban returned, and he returned in Stellan's boat, much to the anger and rants of Caedric. In the hull of the fishing craft were all of the family possessions of the twin brothers, Balint the Cooper and Janks the Tiller. They had with them their two wives, seven children between them, all of their equipment for tilling, cooperage, and constructing their row makers, and all of the crops from their old farm that they could carry.

Before Stellan's boat had been securely tied, Torban had disembarked and run to the town center. He kissed Meala passionately, hugged Constantia, and began issuing orders. Caedric finally gave up asking Torban why he had not sailed with him on the trip when Torban said for the third time, with no little impatience, "Not now, Caedric."

The two new families had homes built within ten days. Those building the homes for the twins and their families kept building more huts of standard configuration but varying in size according to a very specific plan in Torban's head.

As the next four huts were being finished the next new settlers of Loundon's Towne arrived. Among these had been one man, Baijan the House Builder. He entered Loundon's Towne with his wife and a nearly grown son. The two men were huge, and the woman was so small that she looked like a little girl until you were close enough to see the maturity in her face. Father and son pulled their cart containing all of their possessions and the mother and wife walked by the elder's side.

Torban greeted them. "I have a temporary hut for you and your family, Baijan. I am sure that first you will want to build a home of your exact desires, but this will provide shelter for you until it is ready. The days are growing colder."

"You are kind, Torban, to provide a home for us, but you are mistaken." It was the woman, Zanta, who spoke. "I will be lucky to have the home I desire within the next cycle. If the number and makeup of the families coming to Loundon's Towne are as you say, Baijan will be building for their families and their manufactories first. Since we have this hut, it will do until the others are provided for."

With that proclamation, Zanta smiled at her blushing husband and leapt up into his arms. "And I love him for his unselfishness."

"She knows me too well, Torban. Is this your wife coming?"

Throughout the fall and into the winter, more families arrived. Tillers came with their families and brought as many foodstuffs as they could transport. Torban traded with nearby communities for all of the extra grain and vegetables needed.

Stellan was now a part of the community. He had no wife or family so there was no one to go bring back, and he found that he did not miss those from the fishing village where he had grown up. He spent half of his time as a part of Loundon's Towne fishing and half of his time sailing off and bringing back new families. Even with this secondary effort, Stellan still delivered more fish to the community than Caedric.

Torban tried to explain to Caedric that as the community had grown, they had already needed new board cutters and a new potter, and plenty of tillers. They were already feeling the affects of reduced fish in their diet precipitated by Caedric's diminishing efforts with his nets.

"We need Stellan's catch as well as yours."

"But he brings in more fish than I do; his boat is bigger. He benefits more in trade goods and golden bits. It is not fair."

"Caedric, he is gone longer than you are. If you worked harder and caught more fish you would reap the rightful compensation of your efforts."

"But the waters around here are fished out. The catch is poor. If I went out more I would reduce their numbers even more."

"Stellan goes to the sea for most of his catch. I know yours is not a seagoing craft, but you could go farther up the Tameas or to its mouth where the sea fish also dwell."

"But I do not want to be gone at night; I like it here."

"Caedric, you make your choices and you benefit from the fruit of your choices. Stellan spends half of his time away transporting families to our towne. He still brings back more and bigger fish. If he receives more reward for producing more than you do, then so be it."

"But Torban, I liked it the way it was. Why do we need all of these people? Before they all came I could provide all of the fish we needed."

Torban was angered at the Fisher's stupidity. "These people did not come first, although we had been adding to or numbers each year. Bonderman and Porto came first. They would have taken their share and we would have had much less than we have now. Because of all of these people and their ideas we are able to produce more and hide the fact that we do not pay all the tribute we ought to. Because we give Bonderman and Porto more and more each year, they are unaware of the fact that they receive only two parts in ten. Your cheating on the tribute gave us the idea. They are not aware of how many fish you actually catch and you give a smaller share.

"Now run on and at least drop a line in the water to catch something. This is the second day this week that you have not gone out."

"But it was raining this morning-"

"Caedric, take your excuses elsewhere. I tire of them."

Of course Caedric knew why this entire calamity had befallen him. It was all that dogboy, Willen's fault.

All of this had happened between the first and second harvest faires after Willen left. No one referred to that particular faire as the one when Bonderman came or the faire when Feldin died. Stellan surveyed the multitude at his second harvest faire. Loundon's Towne was now more than three times larger than it had been when the storm had first dragged him to this shore on the Tameas River. The growth since the last faire had been amazing. When he had taken Torban on his ship to visit the many communities of new attendees, the two had discovered that Bonderman and Porto were not the only band of foreign ruffians that were demanding to take Keepership of a village. The four that had visited Loundon's Towne were actually a small band in size compared to the usual cadre of brigands.

The fame of Loundon's Towne's attempts to resist, and their efforts to grow in spite of the threats of domination, was what drew so many from so far away. The ones that made the pilgrimage were the ones that wanted to resist but did not know how. These strong-willed people were actually encouraged by some communities to leave. Those who wanted to acquiesce with no fight were glad to see their braver members go.

When those desiring to resist, even in some small way, arrived, they found a growing towne - a towne that was in fact already a city. But the strangest thing is that no one could bring themselves to calling it a city. They referred to it as Loundon's Towne long after it became bigger than any city anyone had ever heard of.

Loundon's Towne had a sense of purpose, of industry. Excellence and experimentation could be tasted in the air. The harvest faire visitors saw the row making contrivance and the metal works of Torban. The pots with the glaze that Egorn the Potter had invented were the most beautiful ever seen, and they leaked less. Egorn coined the word "glaze" when he commented on how people could stand and gaze deeply into the finish derived from the fine river silt clay and chicken liver oil mixture. The "clay gaze" became "glaze." The name seemed appropriate somehow.

The phrase "no good deed goes unpunished" was mentioned when Bonderman and Porto had first visited Loundon's Towne two harvest faires before. Stellan looked out to see the band of land pirates riding in. The next instance of the "punishment of success" was about to occur.

Eirran remembered the day that Willen had gone from being convinced he could not discover magik to knowing that he could.

After the Seer had explained how he could be a Druid just like Porto and not like Porto at all, Willen tried Eirran's birch stick with the unicorn hair. He could not make the quill even quiver with the *Accio* Spell. This obviously depressed the boy more than he had been in two moons.

Eirran was perplexed also. How could Willen discover magik or even possibly be "the one" if he could not do even this simple spell? The old man remembered that once he had tried to use the stick and unicorn hair of his neighbor Druid, Clauzan. It had barely worked for him. His head had rung like a barrel that day regardless of his attempt to clear his nostrils, and he had attributed his weakened performance to that. However, when he'd arrived back home, he'd picked up his own stick and hair and had not been limited at all.

Sitting in the cell he pondered this. He remembered that Willen had such faith that olive wood would be the stick of power. An idea hit him. He called for the guard who opened the cell door in due course. Eirran spoke in a whisper and Willen probably thought that he was arranging for lunch.

After lunch, which was rather good, the guard walked in carrying another branch with twigs and leaves still attached.

Willen was back in his corner, facing away from the door, sulking, but he sniffed the air.

"Holly!" he exclaimed.

Eirran had never been able to smell the difference between plants other than flowers, but he had no doubt that Willen could smell the difference. It was indeed a holly branch. He lightly held the branch, offering it to the youth.

Later Willen had told Eirran the combination of thoughts that had flowed through his mind at that moment. While exerting himself to stand from his curled position the carved holly piece around his neck had shifted under his smock. This had instantly caused him to think fondly of Constantia. Willen had also realized that holly probably was his favorite wood.

The effort of standing combined with his deep longing for Constantia and his affinity for holly wood. All this came together and surged inside him.

The branch had popped out of Eirran's hand and jumped the forearm's length to Willen's outstretched hand.

Willen had grabbed it and dropped it in one motion. The look on both of their faces was one of shock, but in that very moment Eirran realized what the explanation must be.

"Willen, I am the one that told you your Touch was for wood, but I assumed it was merely for "seeing" into wood and carving what you see. But it is much more than that. I asked the guard to bring a branch for you. In the past, sticks and unicorn hairs have developed synchronization with its owner over time, so I thought that this stick might have aligned with me more quickly than usual. I thought that's why it didn't work well for you.

"As I suspected, holly seems to work well for you, but it more than that, it's as though holly *likes* you. I have always used birch branches because they are so plentiful. I have never considered that the type of wood might be a factor as well. So it seems that you have the Touch and a strong Touch at that. This should make magik easy for you. I suspect you will have a similar affinity with olive wood, so you will be most formidable."

Eirran was correct with all of his theories except for one.

Now Eirran lay in his corner of the dungeon. His back was sore and he heard the creaks his backbone made as he rolled over. There was a full moon out this night he imagined, or near enough to full. They had seen neither the sun nor the moon in all the time they had been together. But the angle of light sources allowed a little bit of vision in their cell on the nights that a full moon waxed or waned. The old man could barely see the young man's face. He slept peacefully. Willen was so excited when he found out he could leave and that there was still time enough to accomplish his quest.

The two of them had sewn straps to a large covered sack so Willen could carry a larger load more easily than carrying the sack in his hands. Over the seasons they had recorded on scrolls everything of importance that they had discussed. That afternoon they had cut those summary scrolls into sheets. Eirran was glad that he had insisted on compiling the most important points as they went along. Willen would have never waited the weeks needed to compile this information had they not done so earlier. The sheets could be easily stored in this "back sack" as Willen called it. They had tightly rolled a number of new scrolls for Willen to take with him. He wanted to take notes on his discovery and development of magik and other observations from his travels. Soon the young man would need help carrying his accumulated writings, but Eirran knew he would have a method to solve that problem soon enough.

The old Seer felt his age. He would welcome regaining the comfort of his hearth and his wife's arms. He had missed her, but this absence had been important, and she understood - she truly understood after all of these years. Thinking of his wife brought to mind his seven daughters. He had no son. But now he considered Willen as a son after the intense seasons they'd had together. He would like Willen as a husband for one of his daughters, but none of them would accept him because of his lazy eye - none except Plana who was too daft to be a good companion for this lad of destiny.

His destiny.

Was he the one to bring the New Way? Was magik going to be the corrector of the excesses becoming so rampant in the Old Way, or would the New Way have to, in some manner, replace the Old Way? He shuddered when he considered that the most despicable practices of the Old Way would probably never die, not as long as men of greed and no conscience had access to its powers. But he could hope.

He wonder about Willen's insistence, even after the young man had cast spells with a branch and hair, that it was *the wood*, olive wood specifically, that would combat Porto. He had always felt it would be the unicorn hairs. Until Willen, the type of wooden stick had seemed to make no difference.

The unicorn, never that common, were all but gone from their lands because of callous hunting before Eirran's time, before their mystical importance had been understood. He was so sure this hair was the secret to success that he had given Willen one of the last unused unicorn hairs in all of Remers. When he understood the rarity of it, Willen had been opposed to taking it from him. Even though Willen was the discoverer of magik, Eirran showed the young man that he still had a lot to learn about being stubborn. Ah, the wisdom that comes with age.

Eirran went over again in his mind the last conversation they'd had before Willen had fallen asleep. "Life is never easy. Yours so far has been harder than most. Willen, it will get even harder over the next few years."

Willen looked a bit afraid as Eirran continued to speak.

"You will accomplish much, perhaps change the world. You will know great joy and great heartache. Near here you can find a farm that will take you in and give you employment. They have a daughter that you could learn to love. It could be a good life.

"If you take that good life you will avoid all of the hardship your life is now heading towards. I would not blame you if you choose the easier way. But you will never know what happens to Constantia and the people of Loundon's Towne. They will survive, at least most of them. You will never know the greatness that might be yours if you succeed. But all success comes with a cost.

"I have told you before that we must fight fate to achieve our destinies. In the past we have only talked about horrible things that could be fate stopping you, events such as a guard killing you, or Porto killing you. But that is not the only type of fate that can keep you from your destiny."

"That farm girl and the farm she will inherit would be a fine destiny for a young man like you. Let me ask you, besides leaving Constantia and the good people of Loundon's Towne without your help, what is the difference between the life on this farm and your life back in Albion?"

Without thinking Willen opened his mouth to speak and then closed it. He looked into Eirran's eyes across the darkened cell and then looked away perplexed. He stood up and looked down at the old man, and then he lay back down.

"I suppose there is little difference besides the promise I made," he exclaimed as he lay back.

Eirran smiled a crooked smile. "Remember, it is the choices and the decisions and the commitments we make, *and* choose to fulfill, that define us. By choosing to begin your quest you started your destiny towards discovering magik. When you realized how difficult it would be you remained firm in your commitment. You trusted me when it looked like your quest was at an end. Instead you worked hard, hoping that this, which made little sense to you, might help eventually.

"Some believe we have few if any choices in our lives. They either live a meager life stuck in accomplishing nothing, or they choose a greedy self-serving path by taking what they want until they are sated or until someone stronger stops them. As they selfishly take, they justify it by saying something like, 'If it wasn't fated for me to have it, I wouldn't be able to take it.' What a wasted life. Some of my kind live this way. Many in this new migration coming from our homelands appear to believe in this selfish way. Any who are so disdainful of others shame themselves and their people.

"I, like some others of my kind, believe that we are placed here in this world to take all that we are and try to promote the most good for all, ourselves included. Helping others and helping yourself at the same time is fine, even noble. Taking what you want just because you can, is...well, it's a waste of a life."

"Wake up, get up, we have a long day ahead of us and you will need a good breakfast."

Willen noticed that the table displayed a morning feast - poached and boiled eggs, ham, and fresh baked bread with just churned creamery butter. There were apples and a fruit called "grapes," which Willen had never seen or tasted before. There was fresh, cool cow's milk. Willen thought that it had been a long time since he had eaten like this in the morning, but then he realized he had never eaten like this.

"First, Willen, you need to know how to get to the southern coast of Gaul. You told me how Stellan the Fisher taught you to keep your path straight. Walk due south, keeping the sun on your left in the morning and on your right in the afternoon. In five days or so you will pass through a series of hills. After a moon or so, you will miss all but the foothills of the mountains on your left. Many days later, when you see another mountain range coming into view right before you, turn left and walk east and a little south. Soon you will have mountains on your right and your left. You will walk another moon at most before you reach the Middle Sea. When you reach the sea begin to ask where one might find olive trees. Someone you meet will be able to show you what you seek.

"Now, as to surviving your trip, we cannot have you being picked up and put in dungeons every time you encounter a churlish knave like Baldet. You won't arrive back home in time to save Constantia's grandchildren at that pace. You saw me acting like a madman when you first arrived. When anyone approaches you, begin to look mildly mad; if they look threatening in any way act madder but not as mad as I was acting. You don't want to be locked up for being mad, just avoided and left alone. Ask those that give you space as a madman for food, even if you have food already. You can never have too much to eat as a traveler.

"If anyone you meet attempts to harm you or steal from you, go into hysterics as I first acted and call for the birds of the air to strike. The birds won't attack of course, but the ruffians you meet won't know that.

"When you find the olive wood, take two equal sized rods of the wood as thick as your thigh and half again longer than the tallest man you have ever met. Stellan taught you knots you said?" When he saw Willen nod he continued. "Tie crosspieces of the same wood to the main poles until you have a carryall." He stooped to the floor to a sandy spot and drew a simple stick man figure and a carryall. The parchment, quills, and ink had been packed already.

"Ask around for goods to sell that are needed in the northern and western lands. Load up your carryall with these goods. This way no one will know that the most precious cargo you have is the wood, not your trade goods."

"Eirran, what should I gather together to sell?"

"When you find something to sell you will know it. Offer the owner of the goods this coin in payment. He will know it is worth all you can carry and a fortnight's worth of food for the return trip.

"You will be a peddler on your return trip to Albion. Most others on the road let peddlers go unharmed. Hooligans may want to take your wares but do not let them. Try a little bit of the madman approach on them. It won't dissuade them but it will distract them long enough for you to pull your large blade. Wave your blade menacingly and most will leave you alone. Those that do not leave you alone you should try to incapacitate with the Body Bind Spell."

"Eirran. I do not know anything about using a blade in battle. You talk as though I will know how to fight at that time. Will you teach me? I don't even have Torban's blade; the chief of the guard took it before throwing me in here many seasons ago."

"You will know." That was all Eirran ever told him about learning swordplay.

Willen and Eirran walked out of the dungeon and out of the Keep of Baldet. Everyone on guard duty looked the other way when they approached. They reached a crossroads after walking well out of sight of the Keep. Eirran had his stick with the unicorn hair in one hand and a sack with half of what was left from breakfast. The other half of breakfast was in a sack tied to Willen's back sack.

Eirran pointed to the piece of holly stick with the unicorn hair in Willen's hand. "You have my secret to power concentration. You will have olive wood soon enough. One of those should work to help you. Perhaps if you wrap this unicorn hair around a piece of olive wood you will be able to battle Porto and defeat him without killing him with magik.

"Remember, in the heat of battle, even if he has killed someone dear to you, even if he has killed Constantia, do not use magik to kill him. Use the blade from Torban. You will be better able to recover from that. Killing with magik will turn you *into* Porto." With that Eirran reached into his cloak and pulled out Torban's blade and handed it to Willen. He also took from his cloak the water-skin, blanket, water resistant covering, and the cloak Torban had given Willen. The look on the boy's face was one of relief and gratitude. Everything taken from him was in the same condition as it had been before his incarceration. His face changed from gratitude to a bit of fear as he realized they were very soon parting.

"Four last things, Willen. First, you will not only discover and develop magik, you will eventually teach it to all of those with the Touch in Albion. This may seem exciting to you now, but no good deed goes unpunished. Those without the Touch will fear the magik ones in Albion. Not too many cycles after you save Loundon's Towne, some without the Touch will begin to think you are using magik to gain advantage over them. Somehow you must limit those who see the battle, but I do not know how that will be possible.

"As you continue to teach what you know, and as others take over from you the task of teaching, you must also teach discretion and how to hide your powers among normal men. As evil increases in Albion, those without magik will need the help of those they fear, so you must be ready to help without their knowledge. This is not the way of things yet, but after the battle with Porto you will begin to understand what I mean.

"Second, magik should be used to help people and protect them from the greedy and wanton. It should not be used to make men lazy or dependent. Magik ones will owe you a debt. You will also be the one who makes them powerful enough to be feared and powerful enough to be drawn to darkness, even if that is not in their nature at the start. Use the debt they owe you to demand that they rise above avarice and malicious harmfulness.

"Third, your abilities as a See-ER combined with your skills with the small blade will be a significant part of your future. You will be a new type of craftsman never seen before in the world. SEE into the wood before you begin with your small blade. The world of the Old Way must give way to magik.

"That brings me to the final, most wonderful and most horrible thing I must tell you. You will be the most powerful magik one in Albion, perhaps in the whole world, when you arrive back to defend your Constantia. The question is, 'Will you be a magik one for good, or will you become a magik one for evil, for darkness?' Regardless of circumstances and events out of your control, you will always be the one to decide that question. You will have to answer it every day. The only advice I can give you to help you in this is to combine every advance in magik with an increase in your love.

"From what you tell me, loving your Constantia is easy, but even that will become evil if you love her as an object to be acquired and not a person to be cherished. But loving her will not be enough. Even loving the good people of Loundon's Town will not keep you safe. You must try to love the less loveable. Perhaps compassion is a better word than love, but compassion is based in love. But I speak in circles.

"When you face Porto, if you truly care for the good that *could have been* in him, then you need not ever fear going into darkness. To have compassion for him as you face him, and perhaps kill him with Torban's blade, you must practice caring for everyone you meet on this quest of yours-especially the unlovable. But from what you tell me of what you call Willen's Luck, you should be lucky enough to find many unlovable people on your journey."

Eirran said, "Follow that path through the woods until you come out of these woods. When you can clearly see the sun, place it on your left and adjust your direction south. Remember what I said about finding your way to the olive trees."

Willen said a simple word of thanks and walked for twenty paces. He turned back to properly express his gratitude, but Eirran was gone.

Willen acted the madman to various degrees with everyone he met on the way to the olive trees. Those that allowed him to be just a little mad left him alone to observe them. He started every meeting with anyone on the trails with a genuine smile. He did not know that at first most were put off by his lazy eye. However, the good people he met soon changed their opinions when they saw the depth of his smile, and understood the sincerity behind it.

Willen usually had a fire at night by himself. He would go into the woods along the trail and find dry wood for a smokeless fire. There he would read his Latin and look for possible magik words.

Just over a moon later, as he was walking along, Willen heard a scream. He ran towards the sound and found several men, much bigger than he,

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"No one workin' here at Diagon Alley that I've ever talked to remembers none else but *this* Mr. Ollivander workin' there. Some think he's an Alchemist like Nicholas Flamel; some of those more fanciful think he's immortal. Codswallop, say I. He's aged noticeably since I bought me first wand at eleven.

"The story's out there that the last young lad he spent time wiv' such as yourself, other than his sons, woz Albus Dumbledore, hisself, as a young wizard enrolled at Hogwarts."

"Mr. Ollivander is older than Professor Dumbledore?"

"Lor' luv' you, yes. So you see, every one of us remembers goin' to Ollivanders and havin' this Mr. Ollivander fit him or her wiv' their wands. That's part of the deeper than usual respect we hold for him compared to our other fellow shop-owners. You remember that fine day two years ago when he picked out your wand, don't you?"

Harry nodded once again. Because of the wand maker's reference to Voldemort on that day, his experience had not been as delightful as Tom's experience had evidently been, but now that he was spending time with the elder wizard, Harry could see that his first encounter had not been as he'd thought. But that day still held puzzlement for Harry.

Tom continued, "So you're learning 'bout his family, and you now know he's been here at the Alley for as long as any of us can remember. Well, there're two events you need to know about. Before the war wiv' Grindelwald broke out, when it woz mostly a war of words and the occasional riot in the streets on the continent, here in England there woz a group of stiff-necks that wanted to spread Grindelwald's pure-blood beliefs. They formed a parade one day, without the permission of the Ministry of Magic I might add, and started shoutin' their slogans and pushin' people 'round, right here in the Alley.

"Well, stickin' to the methods they'd used to take over in Berlin, the Grindelwald-ers wanted to turn it into a real brawl, usin' stunnin' and breakin' spells, and crackin' heads too. Just as it seemed it would turn really nasty, Mr. Ollivander appeared in the middle of them and had 'em knockin' heads and pointin' their wands at each other, and generally ruined their plans.

"In a few moments Aurors and Magical Law Enforcement Officers woz on the scene and had the ruffians in hand. I woz just a little nipper at the time, but I woz standin' on the steps of Gringotts, hidin' behind a column. I saw the whole thing. Simp-lee eye-mah-zing," he drew out the last two words.

"There never were that many followers of Grindelwald here as there woz on the continent. Active war broke out shortly after that and Professor Dumbledore made sure those few dunderheads here still spouting the Grindelwald nonsense woz properly restrained, like.

"The other event you should know about happened much more recently in the war wiv' You-Know-Who. This woz a much more serious and tragic alter-ca-tion, so to speak. It woz the third year of fightin', five years before you received that." Tom pointed to Harry's forehead. "The war woz escalatin', but there'd been no attacks here at Diagon Alley - yet. On this par-ti-cu-lar day that all changed.

"It woz one of the busier days at the start of Christmas time. All of a sudden there woz more than a dozen Death Eaters all over the Alley stunnin' people, sendin' *Reducto* r Curses into the shop fronts and rippin' up the cobblestones, sendin' 'em off in all di-rec-tions. Many people woz hurt by the flying day-bree. Then a few started in with Cruciatus Curses, and the general fright turned into a major panic.

"I turned to run before I woz hurt when I saw a Death Eater go flyin' by. He hit the wall and went limp. I turned to see what happened and there woz Mr. Ollivander, just as calm as you please, standin' right in the middle of the fracas. In a moment there woz five or six wands floatin' 'round the heads of each Death Eater. They froze on the spot. Ollivander placed a Sonorous Spell on his voice and demanded that they 'cease and dee-sist' or he would help 'em stop." Tom tried to say, "cease and desist" in the same formal tones Mr. Ollivander would have used. It didn't really work, but Harry smiled anyway, which produced a satisfied look on the innkeeper's face.

"Could Mr. Ollivander have used all of those wands at once?" Harry asked.

"Who knows? I believe it woz a bluff, but it woz a successful bluff. Half of 'em Disapparated immediately. The others remained where they woz. The stand off lasted but a minute or two wiv' Mr. Ollivander speaking his threats in his usual calm tone. Then You-Know-Who appeared right before our wandmaker.

"They spoke quietly for just a mo', stepped back from each other likein' a duel would occur. Then more buildings exploded as Lord Thing started in on the shops and Mr. Ollivander sent all sorts of large bits of building flyin' at him and the Death Eaters. You-Know-Who sent a Killin' Curse towards him but he Apparated a few feet out of the way and kept a fightin'. Aurors popped in all over and the You-Know-Who disappeared. Mr. Ollivander Disapparated too. I wondered at the time, if he somehow woz followin' some of 'em, maybe the Dark Lord hisself. Moments later all them fallen wands jumped up and flew back to Ollivanders. Mr. Ollivander spent the rest of the afternoon cleanin' 'em and puttin' 'em back in their boxes. Simp-lee eye-mah-zing."

Tom came to the conclusion of his story. "There is one footnote to that day that adds to our ad-mir-ration of Mr. Ollivander. We do not *know* it woz him, but you'll never convince me otherwise. Wiv' the war on and gettin' fiercer, Gringotts refused to give credit for shop repairs. Two weeks after that day still nothin' had been done to repair many of the shops. I saw Mr. Ollivander walkin' amongst the broken up storefronts one morning before openin' hours. Of course the Cauldron's always open. Mr. Ollivander walked straight down the street to Gringotts. Later that day Goblins from the bank approached every hurting shopkeeper and informed them that credit for rebuildin' had been ay-approved.

"It may be a coincidence that Mr. Ollivander woz there that day, but I'll never believe it." Tom stood. "See here, Mr. Potter. Please don't mention this today when you go back to help him. None of us in the Alley wants to invade on Mr. Ollivander's privacy, so I'm askin' you, please don't say a thing. Er...didn't I hear him say to show up at 9:30 today?"

Harry nodded once again.

"Well, you have five minutes to make your way there. You have time, but you best be leavin' now. Wouldn't do to keep him waitin', now would it?"

As Harry walked quickly to the other end of Diagon Alley, he promised himself to never mention to Mr. Ollivander anything that Tom had told him. But there was one question the young wizard had to ask.

The chime rang as Harry walked through the door. Mr. Ollivander had his arms spread against a wall of wand boxes that were teetering precariously, about to fall. Without need of a word Harry ran to his assistance. He arrived with no time to spare, for briefest moment the wall hung precariously before Harry's slight touch provided just the motion needed to stop the crash.

"Just in the nick of time, Mr. Potter, just in the nick of time. I have this now. Please take a portion of those boxes on the end and place them on that counter." Mr. Ollivander used his head to point in the general direction of the counter right behind him. "That's it, and if you will do the same with a portion from the other end. Right, now, take even amounts alternating from each side, and we will avoid the calamity I almost initiated." There was a little embarrassment in the elder wizard's silvery eyes.

Harry moved ten to fifteen boxes at a time from each side. Two or three more trips would stabilize the wall of wands.

"Last night, Mr. Potter, I interrupted our story when I began my conversation with Tom. I liked the new coat of paint he placed on the walls since last summer. Such a nice pale shade of green."

Tom had indeed been most flattered that Mr. Ollivander had noticed the change. Harry had been unaware of any change in the colors. "As we left our story then, Willen had found a potential source for a replacement unicorn hair, actually a number of unicorn hairs. And it had only cost him a blackened eye. Willen's Luck had come to his aid again, wouldn't you say?" Mr. Ollivander smiled as he warmed to his subject.

And so our story continues.

The young white haired girl believed she understood his resistance to her charms.

"Oo!" the girl exclaimed. "Now ah kno' 'ow you ra-sist mee! The gurl car-ved on your nec-lace, she eez a veela too, no?"

Willen sat up even straighter. "No, that is I do not think so. I do not know what a veela is. You say that you are a veela?"

"Zee car-veen, shee eez a be-a-uu-tiful gurl, ah cannot tell eef shee has white 'air like ah do."

"No, Constantia's hair is very black, though just as shiny as yours, but with more body - less fine and flyaway than yours."

The girl frowned at the "flyaway" comment as her fine hair flew all around her head in the breeze. She evidently decided not to be offended by the young man's statement. "Theen ah must say that your wif ees v-ry be-a-uu-tiful. On-ly a man en lov' with an' mar-reed to a v-ry be-a-uu-tiful girl could ra-ssist a veela. 'ow long hov you been mar-reed?"

"Mar-reed?" Willen was perplexed. "Oh, you mean married. No, we are not married or mar-reed. But I hope to marry her someday. I dream of her every day and most nights."

"It was now the young veela's turn to look confused, but it wasn't that she did not understand his words. She was confused because she *did* understand him.

Willen would come to understand over twenty years later that men who came into close proximity with veela could only resist their wiles if they were happily married.

"O'...she eez no' your wif...O! She must be v-ry powerful een theess mah-gheek you speak ov'. You would no' be ra-ssistin' mee o-thar-wize."

Willen realized he did not want to continue this conversation, or spend any more time than was necessary with this strange girl. But he needed at least one unicorn hair from her so he could cast magik spells and discover more magik - at least until he found olive wood. He did not know how to ask her for what he needed.

"Wat's that een your han'? Eez eet a veela 'air?"

"No. It is a hair of a unicorn. Those men broke it and my holly stick when I caught them,"

"Theen why deed you cotch them?"

"To defend you."

"O!"

They were both lost in thought for a few moments. Their strained conversation was tiring.

Finally her eyes brightened and she became excited. "Zee man who con ra-ssist a veela ees granted one seem-pul weesh. Would you like a veela 'air?"

Willen did not want to hurt her feelings, but he needed unicorn hair. "The hair must come from a magikal creature, the unicorn. I need one at least, but if Snoogins could spare a few more..."

She looked disappointed but agreed to his request. "Ah do no' wont to hurt mi pur Snoogins. She haz soofered much enn birth. Ah soo-pose ah

could pool one 'air..."

"No. No. Do not hurt her. Wait." He pulled his back sack to his side and opened it. He removed his carving blade and handed it to her. "Please cut the hair with this. I do not want the hair badly enough to hurt her."

She smiled a truly warm smile. "You ahr a good man. Most want to take zee oo-ni-corns from us or keel them. You do not wont to hurt her een the leest bet." She took the blade and cut a thick tress of hair from the unicorn, a little thinner than his thumb and as long as his hand and forearm. "ow weel you corry eet?"

His excitement at the amount of hair she had cut for him lessened with the problem of transporting his windfall.

Then it was his turn to smile. He opened his back sack and took out the scroll of parchment he had been writing in. There was about one and a half times the length of the unicorn hair left on this scroll. He unrolled it and, taking the tress of hair from the girl, placed it on the parchment and started to roll it back carefully.

"Wait!" she said. She held the blade up to her head and cut a few strands of her own hair. "Ah ahm a mah-ghee-kahl cra-ture alzo. Wheen you see your Con-stanz-zee-ah again geeve her thees 'airs for her use."

Willen placed her hairs over on the side of the scroll away from the larger group of unicorn hairs. He took a single unicorn hair and set it aside and rolled the scroll up tightly, tied it with a strip of rawhide, and returned it to his sack. He picked up the two pieces of broken holly and examined them.

"Have you seen this type wood? It's holly. Do you know about it?"

She shook her head and looked saddened that she could not help him.

"When it is cold. It has red berries on it. Do you know it?"

"Ah ahm zorry. Ees there any o-thar wood that weel help?"

He looked around and saw a piece of birch wood nearby. He did not bother to stand but crawled a body length to retrieve it and crawled back. Birch worked well for Eirran and had not for Willen, but he knew he had more faith in his abilities now, and Eirran had suspected that *ownership* might produce a bias in a stick for its owner.

He knotted the hair carefully and looped it around the branch after he had cleared it of all twigs and leaves. After the Body Bind Spell (which he was not about to demonstrate on her) the Fire Starting Spell was his most powerful. If any spell would work with this birch stick it would be that one.

He gathered a few leaves into a bare area of dirt. He did not want a fire, just a show of magik. "Incendio!" The flame was nowhere near as powerful as it had been when he had used his holly branch, but the leaves caught fire.

The young veela clapped her hands and giggled with glee. "V-ry, v-ry good! You ahr...you ahr?...You ahr, as you say, mah-ghee-kahl!" She clapped her hands again.

Willen smiled also, though he was not as happy as he would have liked. He would have to look very carefully for a replacement holly stick, maybe several, to use until he found olive wood. He had not seen a holly tree in a number of days.

He did not know to be amazed that he had performed magik with two *different* types of wood.

Vanch the Cooper finally had a bow design he could produce in numbers, a design that any adult could use. Granted, he made it in two sizes, and the distance of arrow flight obviously depended on the strength of the archer, but the design worked. He could personally produce one, sometimes two a week, now that Barlint the Cooper had joined Loudon's Towne, and other changes he had made.

When the second Cooper had arrived the towne on the River Tameas had not been quite big enough for one Cooper. Vanch had spent his spare time helping with any other project around the community and with any work Torban had in mind.

Now there were two Coopers in their community *and* apprentice Coopers. This was very good news indeed.

Of course if either of them had been of the same inclination as Caedric the Fisher, they would have been bemoaning the end of the economy as they knew it. But one Caedric was enough for any village, some thought that one was one too many.

The first secret to keeping two Coopers and more busy turned out to be to produce as many barrels as possible, not only those barrels needed in Loudon's Towne.

The second secret to keeping them all busy turned out to be Stellan the Fisher.

Stellan had been sitting by the fire in Torban's hut one winter's night shortly after the twin brother designers of the row maker had landed at Loudon's Towne and had settled their families in their new huts.

"Torban, my dear husband, how are we going to support a second Cooper? Vanch has spare time now. After the brothers and you solve the breaking blade problem on their row maker, what will occupy his time?" Meala was not prone to worrying, but she was a planner, and planning uncovers problems faster than most activities. Planning also solves more problems before they occur than any other activity. "Two Coopers will produce far too many barrels for our needs."

Stellan had the germ of an idea but Torban spoke first. "Barlint will be occupied for several weeks at least helping Janks and me perfect the metal blade. Then, he needs to help us build several row makers for our Tillers to use this coming season. Did you see how the new blade we tried today cut the soil? The ground was a little frozen in this early cold snap and the ox did not like being out in this weather, but we were able to make rows through that rocky patch of ground we have been using to test new blades. This blade design worked better than the previous designs." Torban was dreaming about new blade configurations yet to be forged and tested.

Meala said, "And Vanch is still trying to perfect his bow. When we have enough bows and row makers, then what shall they do? Does Barlint ever help Janks with tilling?"

Stellan sat up abruptly. His idea had arrived. "We need to produce more barrels not less. We may need another Cooper if we can find one."

Torban and Meala had wide-open hearts and would never turn away anyone, not even another Cooper if he walked into Loundon's Towne tomorrow. But Stellan spoke as though he had joined Caedric in overindulging at the mead barrel this evening.

"Torban, how many times on our trips after the harvest faire did we see people storing water in skins instead of barrels?"

After a moment's reflection Torban said, "We saw few barrels on our travels. Except in the brothers' old village, and they probably feel the shortage of barrels there now that Barlint lives with us. Why do you ask?"

"Vanch sells or trades all of his surplus barrels at the faire each year, doesn't he?"

The two hosts nodded.

"When I leave to go fishing or bring a new family to our community, I usually leave with an empty hold. I could take a dozen or two barrels with me each time and trade them as I go. Should I not sell them all and my hold is filled with a catch or a family's possessions, I could tie them together and float them behind me coming home. But, I doubt I will have to do that often, if at all.

"When preparing for the faire, Vanch produces ten to fifteen barrels a week, depending on size. I may be able to find regular outlets for those excess barrels. We may be able to keep two Coopers busy."

"But, Stellan," said Meala. "What will you trade for?"

Stellan looked from Meala to Torban and back to Meala. He smiled and said, "What do you need?" Then he displayed a much bigger smile and said, "No. What do you *want*?"

Not only had there been a market for selling barrels all along the river and up and down the coast, there was a market for row makers as well. Barlint was still a Cooper but he spent all of his time crafting row makers for sale to communities and larger Keepers of land. Vanch had to stop with the research into bow designs for over three moons to meet the demand for existing types of barrels and to design a new small barrel used for milking cows. He noticed one day that milk leaked from the skins the Milkers used. He thought he could design a barrel just the right size to fit under a cow's udder. The demand for that never-before-thought-of device was quite gratifying. Stellan looked for another Cooper to join their community, but to no avail.

Vanch found the solution to the new problem of *not* having enough Coopers. He took on four apprentices, not the usual one. He started them each with a different specific part of a barrel, and instead of helping each one to produce the entire barrel, each one specialized in his own particular barrel part. One cut and rough shaped the slats. One fine shaped the slats for a particular barrel. One worked on the bottoms. And one created the top cap rings. On the first day, when they reached the point where they had the parts for several barrels ready for assembly, they stopped their separate efforts and gathered around Vanch.

That first day *none* of the parts from the different apprentices fit together. Vanch started to rant and the apprentices quickly moved away from him. When he ran out of swear words and invectives he sent them home and told them all would be right the next day.

They showed up the next morning with fear in their eyes, and found Vanch sleeping on the dirt floor of his Cooper's hut. There were plenty of wood shavings on the normally clean floor. By Vanch's side were a number of jigs none of them had ever seen. Coopers used a series of jigs to form barrels together and hold them in shape during assembly, but none of those jigs looked like these.

In a whirl of all night long cutting and grumbling, Vanch had created a set of jigs for the manufacture of each particular part in a precise and repeatable way. More to the point, each part created by the use of these jigs almost always fit together with the other parts to make a barrel.

At the end of that second day they were able to assemble half of the parts they made into barrels. In seven days they were able to fit all of the parts produced into barrels. Then Vanch had his apprentices trade places and learn to produce a different part. Quality went down, but improved much quicker this time. The next time the apprentices traded positions in four days. The final learning cycle in manufacturing a specific part took only two days to master.

Then they stopped making barrels as their main activity. They spent seven days out of each of the next two moon cycles making barrels. The rest of the days they studied how to make jigs for different types of barrel sizes and shapes. This skill took much longer to acquire. Vanch had only invented the idea when the need occurred.

By spring there were two master Coopers and four journeyman Coopers in London's Towne. It had taken Vanch almost two full cycles to go from apprentice to Journeyman status. The lads were not as gifted as he had been, he admitted to Torban with no false pride. "But they had a better system of learning. Each can produce a barrel as fast as they can using the old method. And their quality is good enough, and improving. And there is one lad I am particularly proud of."

Stellan had discovered the markets and therefore needed to find another Fisher. His time was now spent transporting goods, and he only dropped his nets on direct return voyages without going hunting for schools of fish.

Torban tried to interest Caedric in fishing more. He offered to help build Caedric a new, larger seagoing fishing boat. Caedric wanted the new boat, but not to go out to sea. They argued back and forth and the whole community heard their, er, "discussions." Caedric refused to go out to sea for the bigger, tastier fish it would more easily provide. Torban refused to help Caedric with a new boat to accomplish nothing more than he was already doing.

The first person Caedric told that Torban had reneged on his promise of a new boat, told Torban what was said. That never occurred again in Loundon's Towne.

However, Caedric was still quick to tell anyone who would listen - few would, and none for long - that this expansion would be the ruination of Loundon's Towne and surely would bring more ruffians like Bonderman and Porto to plague them.

More would come, but progress was not the reason.

Willen had been walking for half a moon past the funny berry trees that Eirran had told him of. The reason he was convinced they were the same berries the Seer had mentioned was another small demonstration of the adverse effects of Willen's Curiosity. Not as detrimental or eventually advantageous as Willen's Luck, Willen's Curiosity usually was more embarrassing, and had made Willen wonder if he had been dropped on his head as a babe.

In a fit of self-deleterious curiosity, Willen popped not one, but two of the big green berries in his mouth to confirm that they were the same berries that Eirran had mentioned - surely they could not be as terrible tasting as Eirran had remembered. Willen had listened to these berry trees and they said little he understood other than the fact their berry oil was highly prized by the local inhabitants.

If anything, Eirran had been generous in describing the berry's palatability. Twice curdled and soured milk on a warm day would have been desirable indeed compared to the taste that lingered in Willen's mouth long after he spat out the berries. Willen imaged that dead and half rotten insects *might* compare to their flavor.

During the past half-moon of his travels, Willen had not seen many people, and none of those he had encountered had spoken either his native language or Latin. With several of the people, Willen had tried pointing to a branch from the berry tree he carried and saying "Olive?"

Every time he'd tried this, the only answer he'd received was a look of complete incomprehension. His inability to communicate led Willen to stop asking the question. The first two times he'd kept on repeating "Olive? Olive?" more and more loudly. But then he'd realized that the people weren't deaf, so increased volume would not improve their understanding.

A fortnight after discovering that utterly disgusting taste, Willen noticed an odd looking bird of some sort flying in circles and dipping down below the tree line occasionally. Its actions were not too dissimilar to those of a buzzard attempting to finish off a wounded animal. Willen quickened his pace for no apparent reason, but he felt like he wanted to determine what *was* the victim of this supposed carrion eater.

His quickened pace became a trot, and his trot turned soon into a run. He just *knew* something was wrong, and closer proximity was not reducing his apprehensions. It wasn't a bird. Willen had never seen a creature similar to this flying behemoth he was foolishly approaching, but he knew what it was from stories and lore.

It was a dragon.

Not only was it a dragon, but it was a dragon with a man riding on its back. The man controlled the fear inspiring monster with reins attached to a harness around the dragon's head, not with a bit like a rider would have used with a horse. A bit in this dragon's mouth would eventually be destroyed even if it was made of the finest of Torban's metals, because the beast was flinging bolts of fire from its mouth twenty feet in length or more. The man was directing this fire and hurling curses at the target of the flames. The attackers were after a little man, who appeared at a distance to Willen, to be not quite as old as Eirran. He was running in and out of hiding places in an outcropping of rocks and boulders.

It was a credit to Willen's bravery that he paid no heed to the fears screaming in his head as he ran on to help the poor man escape. It was to his credit that he succeeded beyond all he'd thought possible. And it can be easily guessed that the credit for poor Willen's condition at the end of the confrontation belonged to that perversity known as Willen's Luck.

Willen woke up in another cell. He recognized the bars on the opening in the wall. What was not familiar among the all too familiar surroundings was the voice that greeted him when he moved his head and spoke his first unrecognizable words.

"Wer-ram-ike?" It was Willen's first attempt to ask where he was.

"Oh, you're awake. I'll call my grandfather." The girl's voice penetrated his fogged mind and before his thoughts congealed into coherence, she had left the cell, locking the barred door behind her.

With personal disgust Willen sarcastically congratulated himself for surviving for just over three moons before being jailed again. It then occurred to him that the girl had been speaking in Latin. At least he would be able to communicate with his new captors. These few words had been the first he had understood from anyone he had met in over a moon. He wondered how long he had been in this cell. The last thing he remembered was falling from the dragon...

"*DRAGON!?*"

He sat bolt upright in the bed and barely choked off the scream that rose to his throat. He fell back on the bed. Willen could hardly decide which area of pain in his body to explore first. His head felt like a melon that had been thumped several more times than once-too-often. All of the skin on his left shoulder and arm down halfway to his wrist felt like a badly burned finger, only many times worse. His right arm just hurt - A LOT - between his elbow and its wrist. The rest of his body merely hurt more than ever before, so he gave it little notice compared to the three major pains he had cataloged.

A *dragon*. He'd fought a dragon and was still alive, if you called this alive. Most of it came back to him like the sun breaking through his fog-filled mind.

With no consideration or plan, he had run straight towards the old man in the rocks. Willen could see that he was winded from his vain efforts to escape, and now he appeared to be trying, without success, to pull his trapped foot from a rocky crevice. Willen had drawn out his stick and unicorn hair combination. Only two days before, he had found what was apparently a southern Gaulish holly tree. It looked almost the same as the holly trees Willen was so familiar with in Albion, but the red berries were not quite the right red, and the bark had a familiar but not quite correct color pattern in it. The stick and hair combination had worked properly to concentrate his Touch, or magik rather, but it was not quite as powerful as the previous stick/hair pairing.

Phannel had not heard of holly trees and neither had anyone else he'd met on his way. But one day he was exchanging pleasantries with a huge spruce tree. Just out of curiosity, Willen had asked it where he could find a holly tree. It had not known the name 'holly' but it had said that the agrifoglio tree matched Willen's description. Willen had walked the length of three huts into the woods and had walked out with several of these not quite familiar holly branches. Willen had felt a particular affinity with holly, even this odd holly, but he had discovered he could use the unicorn hair with a number of types of wood to concentrate his magik to various degrees. When he was as far away from the old man being attacked as the width of the square at London's Towne, he had started yelling at the beast, trying to draw it off from its intended victim. He'd picked up a rock and hurled it at the flying menace. The stone had connected with his target but had no effect.

Out of desperation Willen had cast the Body Bind Spell. "Petrificus Totalus!" Only after shouting the words with all of the noise his lungs could produce did he realize that if the dragon had frozen with his magik, it would have fallen on the man he was attempting to rescue. That man had released his foot from its rocky trap, but his limp was obvious to Willen even at this distance.

The spell had not petrified the great hulking monstrosity, but it had evidently felt the spell's effects in some way. The dragon had ceased its attack on the old man after the spell's impact. It now had a new target. Willen had made it to the rocks about the length of ten to twelve men from the little man. But he'd had no time to speak with him. The dragon was returning - for him.

The Body Bind Spell had done nothing but distract the beast at best. Willen doubted that starting a fire would frighten off a fire-breather, and the man on its back had not been within range for any spell to affect. He only had two other new spells to call on that might help him fight the airborne monster.

Ten nights before, Willen had left his pack and two blades at a site in the woods where he was going to build a fire. In the dwindling light he had headed toward the sound of a brook. His water skin had been dry since early afternoon. He'd taken his stick and hair because he'd thought he might need to use *Lumos* to light his way back.

At the edge of the bank, which was not quite twice as high as Willen was tall, he had slipped in mud and fallen into a mass of prickly vines. He'd been ensnared in them up to his chest and not only couldn't his feet gain traction in the mud to push himself up and out, he was being held an arm's length off of the level ground at the water's edge. He'd thrashed about, cutting his hands on the vine barbs, and tearing his clothing. Dozens of points had pierced his flesh. He'd finally drawn his stick and hair - an oak stick he was trying this day - and used the *Incendio* spell to burn away enough vines to fall to the edge of the water. At first this effort started a too large fire he had to put out with his hands. Then, trying to be more precise with the fire he cast, he'd burned his finger several more times.

When he'd finally staggered back to his camp with his filled water skin he was miserable. It was a cold night and the mud was drying on his skin and draining the warmth from his body. His hands shook as he started the fire. He was soon warm but fell asleep before eating. He'd awakened sometime in the middle of the night and had finally consumed his meager meal of dried beef strips, too many days old bread, and a small apple.

The next night had been as comfortable as the previous one had not. At midday Willen had met a farmer who had invited him to his hut. They had not spoken a common language, but the farmer's wife had not only fed him as well as he had eaten since his last meal with Eirran, but she had packed in skins and gourds a number of delicious salted meats, and raw and dried vegetables and fruits. He had two small loaves of the wonderful, crusty bread she had served him at that meal. This bounty would feed him well for several days. She had even darned his torn smock and cloak.

That night he'd sat by a warm fire, sated from the food, and went hunting through the sheets of parchment for possible words for a spell to release him from vines and such if he needed one in the future.

In a time when only one in three men owned a personal blade, Willen owned two. To discover a cutting spell had never crossed his mind before this event. He'd searched for two nights but finally discovered that *diffindo*, the Latin word "to cleave," would cut vines and small branches. He had also cut the cuff of his breeches, which had begun to unravel from previously unseen vine tears from a few days before.

Because the dragon flew at a fairly quick speed when attacking, it had only one chance on a pass to hit Willen with an eruption of fire. On its first pass, the dragon had tried to gore Willen with its horn. The little man had found a place in the rocks that was well hidden, either that or he had fainted. The next assault by the fearful creature ended with the beast flying by at eye level. Willen had shouted his cutting spell at the dragon with no effect - at least not on the monster. The man on its back was a different story.

Willen and the man were within the width of two huts from each other after the cutting spell had no impact on the green scales of dragon's wings. Willen had looked at the dragon rider and he'd seen the hate in the other man's eyes. He'd known that his own death would be the only thing that would satisfy the rider.

Our young hero heard the dragon's passenger shouting and screaming in a tongue he did not understand, but Willen felt they were not his best wishes for a safe journey.

On the next pass, Willen had tried twice to land cutting spells on the beast's body. He believed he had hit where he was aiming, but with no results. He did see a possible place to land a cut that might do damage.

Willen had scrambled to a new location to avoid the flames and still be near the dragon's underside when it passed over. He'd aimed new cuts at its head but he knew he had missed.

Where the airborne leviathan's limbs met its claws the scaly skin ended and there was a band of pink flesh as wide as the length of a man's hand. This was a tiny aiming point indeed, but Willen felt it was his only hope. He shouted *diffindo* four times in quick succession when it was near. One cut had evidently connected because the beast had seemed to nearly stop in flight and flap its wings very hard to escape straight up. This had slowed the dragon and Willen cast two more cutting spells.

The hideous creature bucked like a wild horse and the rider went flying off head first into the rocks. Horrified as he'd watched the man fall, Willen had missed the dragon's next action. But the dragon's next fireball had not completely missed Willen.

Willen's pain had been like nothing he had experienced before, or had heard reference to. He had not known he was beginning to go into shock. However, he had realized one thing.

The dragon had had him in its claws.

Of course the best way to make an effective bow was completely obvious after he had made several dozen failed examples, and then finally succeeded. Vanch had rejected a host of woods that might all make adequate bows once he discovered two important design factors, and after he had settled on ash as his wood of choice.

Ash seemed to be the most flexible and stiff of all the woods he tried. Holly was too flexible, even if he could find a straight enough limb without knots - a near impossibility. Oak had the strength but was too prone to breaking. On and on, wood after wood - too flexible, too stiff, too brittle, too soft, too hard - too not the wood he needed. One night after his apprentices had left for the day, he could not decide whether to scream or cry. He thought for sure that yew would be the wood of choice. But it wasn't.

Lindern jumped up when Vanch finally decided to shout. The smallest of his apprentices, Lindern was a bit clumsy on his feet but quite deft with his hands. If any of his boys would meet and possibly succeed him in coopering skills, it would be this shy little one. Vanch had almost turned him down. But Lindern's father had just died of consumption, and after it was clear that the boy and his mother would not be felled by the same illness, Vanch had made his announcement about taking on apprentices. Lindern had been the first lad to apply, and the last accepted. Vanch had chosen three, and had called Lindern in to break the news of his rejection as gently as possible. Lindern intuitively knew this was going to happen.

But before the master Cooper could say a word, the lad blurted, "But what about Willen?"

This had not been what Vanch had expected the boy to say. "What about Willen?"

Lindern's lower lip quivered, but he took a deep breath and blurted out, "Willen was made fun of by many. Caedric hated him and called him an orphan as if that was a disease or something. Now he is off trying to save us." The boy stopped and snatched a breath before rushing on. "Well, I want to do my part. I am half an orphan and my ma is not as well as she lets on. I am not strong enough to cut boards or build huts or guide an ox pulling a row maker, but I have watched you. I can do what you do if you show me. Please. I'll work ever so hard. I'll be your best boy, I promise."

Vanch agreed to a limited test of one moon's time. Lindern almost didn't make it. He had been the last to learn to make the four main parts of the barrel assembly, and he'd made each part slower than the others. He was almost two summers younger than the next youngest apprentice. Four days before the end of Lindern's test period, they had begun making jigs for barrel parts. Lindern had finished his jig long before the other three, and it was as fine a jig as the first jigs Vanch had made himself. Lindern started making a jig for another part.

It was as if the top holding ring had snapped in place and the loose slats became a tight barrel in the mind of this youngster. Lindern never looked back. He had finished making his jigs for a second sized barrel when the other three had finally completed their first barely usable set of jigs. It was Lindern who had thought and designed the jigs for what he called the rainwater barrel.

Vanch's youngest lad had decided that this new idea would produce a barrel that would be wanted by every woman in Albion, even though none of them had ever heard of such a thing. He promised to show Vanch his first idea for this new barrel design in five days. By this time Lindern was so far ahead of the other three that Vanch agreed to let this apprentice work on his own for the days he requested, just so Vanch could try to bring his other apprentices closer to Lindern's level of competence.

Lindern worked in secret in the small shed in back of his hut. At noon on the fifth day, he brought an odd shaped barrel to his master.

"This is the rainwater barrel," he said

His fellow Coopers in training laughed. Oldeff said, "What good will that barrel do? It has no handle. You will spill water because the mouth is so wide. It looks funny."

The barrel did not look like any barrel the master Cooper had ever seen. It had a base a little wider than the length of a man's hand. The mouth at the top was almost twice that wide. This barrel was not quite as high as the mouth was wide. There was no handle.

Lindern could tell that his master was unable to fathom a use for his creation. "Sir, it catches rainwater easily and fills the base quickly because of the width of the mouth. My mother walks out in the rain in the summer to wash her face. She says rainwater is very gentle and makes her skin feel younger. This barrel will catch the rain easily and allow any woman to use it to wash her own face with rainwater even when it is not raining. In winter my mother won't step out into the rain because it is so cold. Now she can use rainwater even then."

The other boys laughed, but Vanch stopped them. "My wife, Taleena, does the same thing in summer. I will take this home with me and ask her opinion."

Taleena had refused to let Vanch take the rainwater barrel back to his cooperage. She had been that excited. Stellan never returned with women's rainwater barrels and he always asked for more for any community or village where he had showed them.

Just before sleep took him, Vanch speculated whether Lindern had the Touch for Cooperage, if there was such a thing.

When Vanch had shouted out his frustration, Lindern had jumped from behind a stack of wood and knocked most of that wood stack over. Vanch shouted again, this time at the boy, "What are you doing here?"

The growing-in-confidence young Cooper-to-be was once again the timid young lad of fourteen cycles.

"I... I know... you are working on something important. Whatever it is, I want to help. Please, if it is important enough for you to work on when you should be with your family, it is important enough for me to ask to help. Oh! I do not mean that you cannot do whatever it is you are doing without me. I just mean I want to help you. I can clean for you or sharpen your adze or drawknife. Or I could just sit her quietly and learn."

The lad's earnestness was too credible for the older man to crush.

"I do not know what you can do to help, but..."

Before the night was out Vanch had recounted every type of wood and method and attempt he had tried to discover the secret to an effective bow. The lad had no ideas to add, but they both agreed to talk about the subject at lunch the next day.

That chat would lead to the first breakthrough in the bow design that Vanch had achieved.

Willen could not remember for the moment how he had escaped the dragon's claws. He assumed the throbbing in his head and his terribly painful right arm would account for part of what it had cost him. Now that he thought about the various aches wracking his body, he guessed the pain in his ribs probably came from the grip of the powerful beast's talons.

He looked around the cell. Baldet's Keep was the only building he had ever been in other than huts. There he had only seen the guard's room and the dungeon, and the ways in and out. This was a funny looking cell. Other than the bars on the windows and door, it wasn't really like a dungeon cell at all. There was something coating the walls so that he could not tell whether the walls were wood or stone. Though moving caused another sharp pain throughout his torso, he was able to determine that the floor was wooden. As a matter of interest, Willen noticed that there was a cloth of some type positioned to cover the bars at the window and a similar cloth on the door that looked like it could be repositioned to cover the window in the door.

Willen thought that this was a strange cell to be imprisoned in, but they must do things differently here in the south of Gaul.

It occurred to him that his new captors had been nice enough to tend his wounds. If he made a speedy recovery, and then if they were not too close in guarding him, perhaps he could escape before they placed him in a more secure place in the dungeon. The thought just crossed his mind about the dragon rider falling to what was most certainly his death, when the door opened.

"My granddaughter told me you were awake. How does the great Dragonslayer feel this morning? I would wager your head hurts something fierce - and most of the rest of your body."

When the word "Dragonslayer" registered in his mind, Willen rapidly dismissed the delight he had felt to hear Latin spoken. It all came back like a thunderclap.

The dragon had wrapped his claws around his body, squeezing most of the breath out of him, but not all. Most of his left arm had been still on fire. His right hand had still held his odd holly stick and unicorn hair. The dragon was hovering the height of two men over the rocks, drifting out over the ground nearby. The dragon had a look of combined determination and anger on its face. It was as if it was furious that its rider had fallen off. Willen had known the fiery beast was moments from roasting the head off of his body.

In an instant Willen had known his newest and completely untried spell would be his only hope.

For the last few nights, as Willen had sat around his fire, chronicling his travel reflections, and looking through his recorded knowledge scrolls, he had been considering the three men who had beat him when he had gone to the aid of Phannel the veela .

After the girl had run far enough away for the three to not feel the magikal powers, Willen knew of no other words to describe her effect on men other than "mag-ghee-kahl," the men had been in a confused state, not moving and not knowing what to do. Had Willen not been knocked nearly senseless, he could have run away or hit any one of them during those several long moments. As he thought about it, a spell that could cause such confusion might be a convenient spell to add to his capabilities.

The night before the dragon attack, Willen had decided he knew what the confusing spell must be. But he had never tried it. He had seen no one in his travels thus far that day.

As the dragon hovered at the edge of the rocks and ground, it brought its head around and drew back a breath to incinerate its prey. At that moment Willen pointed his stick/hair concentrator at the dragon's face. He further aimed for its eyes, which had to be the most vulnerable part of the dragon. All of these actions Willen took in an instant of time, time that seemed to have slowed. With the last breath that he could squeeze out past the claws that were crushing his ribs, Willen had shouted, "*Confundus!*"

As the dragon flapped off and Willen crashed to the ground, he'd had just enough time to think that a confused dragon really did look confused.

"Sir, I am not a Dragonslayer... oh, my shoulder." Willen had tried again to sit up as he corrected the little man he had tried to rescue - evidently succeeded in rescuing, much to his own detriment.

"No, lad, you did not slay that one, but only a Dragonslayer attacks dragons. You were too busy saving me to slay this one. You are very young, you have not been a Slayer long, have you? But I am being a rude host.

"I am Aldertan, father of the Keeper of this land and former Keeper myself. To whom do I owe my life, may I ask?"

Willen sighed with frustration. How would he explain Willen's Luck? "My name is Willen. I am not a Dragonslayer. I had never seen a dragon before that one. I just... I couldn't stand there and let it kill you. I was stupid enough and strangely lucky enough, if you call this luck," he nodded down at his arms, "to cause the dragon to leave us alone. I am glad you are safe, but I must stop trying to foolishly kill myself. I have a quest that must be accomplished."

The little, older man looked at him with a smile that ignored his words. "Then your acts of bravery are even more commendable. You know nothing of dragon slaying? My distant cousin, Kwildas, was a Slayer for many years, now he has become infirm and a bit feeble. His great-grandson, Skall, cares for him and hopes to learn the slaying ways. When you are able to walk we will take you to them. Now tell me of your quest and how you fought off your first..."

"Grand-Poppy."

It was the girl. She was very pretty but she was not Constantia, Willen thought. He closed his eyes for a moment from the pain of nearly failing his ladylove. How many days would he lose recuperating? How many days had he been unconscious since he had been wounded?

"Grand-Poppy, he is not well at all!" She mistook the pain in his voice for physical pain, not the grief of his situation. She rushed to kneel at his side. "My brave Dragonslayer. You nearly died saving my grandfather and now you have my undying love."

Willen groaned and spat through clenched teeth, "I am NOT a Dragonslayer." His head was ringing with pain. "You cannot love me, you don't know me. You are too young to be in love. Besides, I love another, Constantia."

"Oh, Grand-Poppy, he talks foolishness. Surely he will love me as I love him. It must be the pain and the wounds talking. Has not father told me I am the prettiest girl in the land and all men will want to love me?"

Willen and Aldertan exchanged similar worried looks for different reasons.

"No, my sweet Haana, I did not say that every man will want to love you. I said that every man will want you. There is a difference."

"Oh, Poppy, you are home!" The man that the girl Haana ran to looked very much like a younger Aldertan, but taller and a bit broader. His beard had been trimmed close to his face and removed from all but his chin. Willen wondered if a sinister demeanor went with his sinister look.

Turning from perfunctorily hugging his daughter he said, "So this is the Dragonslayer everyone has been talking about. He looks too young to me." He spoke about Willen while looking at him, but he spoke to his father.

"I am not..." Willen was interrupted.

Aldertan placed his hand firmly on Willen's unburned arm. The pain was enough to stop Willen in mid-speech, but not enough to cause him to express his pain. There was a very concerned look in the older man's eyes.

Aldertan said, "You are being too modest." The look he gave Willen turned to one imploring his cooperation. "Willen, let me introduce my son, Aldini, the Keeper of this land and the finest swordsman within five days ride on a swift horse. My son, this is Willen - a Dragonslayer and the man who saved my life and killed the Druid. Be gentle when you greet him, my son, he is still in much pain."

Willen was in pain, but the physical pain he felt was not what caused the look of distress on his face at this moment. He had killed a Druid using magik - the primary warning that Eirran had given him he had not followed.

Aldini spoke. "Slayer of dragons he may be, but I see no dragon carcass. He may have inadvertently caused that Druid's death. But I doubt he fights Druids. For he is a Druid himself!"

"Sir, if I was making a bow I would make it out of this piece of wood." Lindern sounded excited, but Vanch thought he looked a little nervous - not as nervous as when he'd asked to join the apprentice program, but a little nervous nonetheless.

"Why is that piece of wood the piece of wood, in your opinion?" Vanch could see the merit of this particular choice, but he saw one drawback as

well.

"First, you have never tried ash, and it is a tight grained piece of wood that also is not brittle. Second, the bow would be half heartwood and half sapwood. The heartwood would provide strength and the sapwood would provide flexibility."

Now it was Vanch's turn to look uncomfortable. The combination of both parts of the piece of wood had been the reason he would have rejected this particular piece of wood. Now it made perfectly good sense to use the multilayered piece of ash.

He gulped before speaking and tried to look nonplussed. "And which layer would you place outside and which inside?"

Now Lindern looked uncomfortable again. "I do not know. That is why I have a piece this long, we should try both."

Vanch realized that he was training a future master worker of wood, far beyond merely being a Cooper. Perhaps this boy did have the Touch.

Finally Willen spoke, "I am not a Druid." The vehemence in his voice was obvious - it even surprised him to a degree. He had known for several seasons that his dear friend, Eirran could be called a Druid, but his anger for that title was all directed at Porto.

Aldertan spoke earnestly, "But, my son. Why would he risk his life if he were a Druid? He lies here in great pain for rescuing me from a Druid's attack, an attack where he nearly died, an attack where a known Druid did die. How do you explain these facts?"

"Perhaps they planned to befriend you with a much simpler confrontation, and the dragon did not understand the plan. It caused the death of its rider and this one's near death."

"Too much," said Aldertan. "Too complex and too extreme a scenario to befriend an old man. You need more proof than those reasons."

"Ah, but I have not showed you the evidence." He brought out from behind his back the broken holly branch, barely held together by the unicorn hair. As he held it up, the hair snapped and the piece of stick not in Aldini's hand fell to the floor.

Aldertan and Haana both gasped.

The bow worked with the sapwood away from the archer and the heartwood facing the archer. It quickly snapped the other way around.

Vanch and Lindern walked out from the cooperage and towards the nearby woods. They carried the working bow and a number of the arrows Vanch had made over a cycle before. Neither was accurate with the weapon at first, but both did improve. Neither would be able to hit a running man, but with practice they might become fair archers.

The next day Vanch traveled with Stellan to the village in a bay three days sailing north from Loundon's Towne, up the coast. The first day out there were stormy seas and Vanch lost all of his breakfast. By that late afternoon the seas were much calmer, and so was his stomach.

It had been eight days since Vanch and Lindern had used the bow. Later that day the two took the bow and a number of arrows back to the same clearing in the woods where they had been before. Vanch placed an arrow in the rawhide, pulled back, and the bow cracked when he had pulled with just over half the strain he had used before. The wood was brittle, yet it hadn't been brittle at all before. It had been much more supple and still more powerful than any other wood he had tried.

The two stared at each other with open mouths. Sadly they picked up the pieces of bow and the arrows and walked back to the cooperage. The day was ended and they left their burdens in the middle of the dirt floor. Vanch walked towards his home and his wife, Taleena. She would eat with a sullen and grumbling husband that night.

Lindern was at least a hand shorter than usual as he walked slumped over, feeling dejection from their failure. As he walked by Egorn the Potter's pottery hut and looked in the door. The boy had considered asking Egorn to be trained as a Potter, but he did not like the feel of slimy mud. Wood was more to his liking. Egorn was using a horsehair brush to apply the clay-river-silt and chicken liver oil glaze. It was exacting work to coat the unheated pot with an even amount of the substance.

When he finished one careful stroke with the brush, he inspected the coat for evenness compared to the previous coats. "Good evening, Lindern. How goes the Cooper's life?"

"Barrel making is a delightful occupation. Good evening to you, Egorn, sir." He watched the Potter apply the next stroke and then asked during the inspection, "Why are you so careful to apply even brush strokes? They do not look different to me."

"If the strokes are noticeably uneven there will be a difference in the coloring from stroke to stroke." Egorn had begun experimenting with different pigments in the glaze to produce different colored pots and patterns on his pots. "If the coats are very different in thickness, the kiln firing will cause the pot to expand unevenly and the pot will shatter."

"Besides decoration, does the clay glaze perform any function?"

"The glaze coating prevents the liquid in the pots from seeping into the pot and leaking out. If an uncoated pot is used in cooking, water, or whatever the liquid you are heating, can expand inside the pot and crack it. The glaze substantially lengthens the useful life of a pot."

"So the glaze keeps the moisture out of the pot?"

"That's it, son. How's your mother doing?"

The conversation went on for about the time it takes to boil water and then Lindern went home to supper. His mother was concerned as to why he was late.

The next morning Lindern stood by the door to the cooperage with two very different pots on the ground by him and a big grin on his face.

"Lindern, either your mother has started baking the bits of dough with honey in them that you like so well at the harvest faire, or you have a secret you are bursting to tell me."

The gifted apprentice lifted both pots before his eye. The unglazed pot had an earthen coloring and was dripping water. The glazed pot was white and dry on the outside.

"Do you know why Egorn the Potter puts clay-river-silt and chicken liver oil glaze on his pots?"

Vanch returned the lad's smile and gave the obvious answer, "To keep them from leaking?"

"His exact words last night were, '...to keep the moisture from seeping in.' That's why we need to coat our bows."

"To keep the moisture from seeping in?" Vanch was not following the boy's line of reasoning.

"No, sir. To keep the moisture from seeping out!"

A number of craftsmen and women were using various types of glazes and coatings in their work and in experiments to improve their work. It was amazing how a few innovations had galvanized the inventiveness of the good people of Loundon's Towne.

The oldest and youngest Coopers in the community left the three other apprentices in charge of barrel making. Vanch set them a production schedule for the two most requested barrels and left the three to manufacture as many as possible.

A bow the length of a man would not fit in Egorn's kiln for drying. The two Cooper/Bowmakers experimented with different thicknesses of ash to produce a piece the length of a man's hand and forearm that had nearly the same strength and flexibility of the bow they had been satisfied with that one day.

They first tried the same concoction Egorn used on pots and fired the wood sample at the same temperature and time that he used for pots. The two had never seen a more brittle or distorted piece of wood when it had cooled. They experimented with shorter times and eventually less heat as well, but it soon became apparent that Egorn's mixture would not suit their needs.

They tried chicken liver oil alone. They tried egg whites like Lindern's mother used on baked bread. They tried the beeswax used on water resistant skins. Beeswax kept the wood supple but dried out in several days. Also, the amount of wax needed made the bow too difficult to hold properly. When they fired it in the kiln, the beeswax melted off immediately.

They tried the white, powered wash Baijan the House Builder used on boards. It colored the bows, but flaked off almost immediately upon drying. It did nothing to keep moisture in the bow.

One of the other Cooper apprentices, Cinko, entered into the spirit of the hunt for a solution and made a suggestion. He had noticed that when he used a small barrel for flaxseed oil, that it did not have to be soaked in water for a while to swell the gaps to hold water. They tried the plant oil on the bow and it did seal in moisture, but the bow was even more slippery than with the beeswax. The oil ran off in the kiln in the same way as the wax.

Vanch and Lindern, and everyone who knew of their pursuit, had run out of ideas. They decided to go back to making barrels and let their minds rest a while.

"You are one of the stick wielders," accused the Keeper. "Yours must be weaker, or you would not wrap it thus. But you are here with them to drive us off of our lands."

Aldini was in a frantic state. He had a small amount of spittle in the right corner of his mouth and was staring wild-eyed at Willen. But his was not the only seeming madness in the room.

"But, Father, we are in love. We are to marry once he is well. I know he will not betray us to his friends now that he loves me."

Willen looked to the girl's grandfather to see what daft drivel he would produce. He had heard that lunacy ran in families.

Confusion and panic began to creep into Aldertan's voice. "Willen, are you of the Druids? Look me in the eyes and tell me the truth. I'll know if you try to deceive me."

Willen grasped the tenuous hope. "Sir, I am not one of the Druids. I have known two Druids in my lifetime. Eirran the Seer is a Druid and he is the best friend I have ever had. Since I have been an orphan for as long as I remember, he is more like a father to me than any man I have ever known.

"The only other Druid I have met is my sworn enemy. I am from Albion and a Druid named Porto plans to conquer my home village. He used an olive stick to kill one of our community and plans to rule over them just because he's powerful and a murderer. I have traveled here to find the olive wood Porto said came from here. To stop him, I will probably have to fight him and kill him. I dread this action, but he promises to give my beloved to one

of his henchman..."

"NOOOOO! You love me. We aren't even wed as of yet and you are unfaithful to me."

"Quiet, girl. This is but your thirteenth summer and we have not celebrated the day of your birth yet." Aldini paused and a maniacal smile came to his face. "A duel! A duel with swords. I will fight you for toying with the affections of my young daughter, Druid."

"But I do not know how to use a sword..."

The Keeper said, "Father, you have brought a liar into my Keep." Aldini brought out from under his cloak the blade Torban had given Willen. "This is the finest sword blade I have ever seen." He drew his own sword from a sheath at his belt. "It is finer than my own and I am known to own the finest blade in the south of Gaul. What do you say to that, Willen-the-Dragonslayer-Druid-Liar?"

"Willen?" Aldertan looked into the young man's eyes searching even more strongly than he had before.

"Sir, I promise..."

The old man put his hand up to stop Willen from speaking and leaned over to whisper to him, "Demand the Right of Succor." When Willen only looked confused he whispered more adamantly, "Quickly, if you value your life demand the Right of Succor!"

"I demand the Right of Succor!" Willen's head hurt more than it had since he had awakened. He felt as if he might faint soon. But this farce of a rational discussion was not over.

Aldertan proclaimed, "Willen demands the Right of Succor. As Celts we are bound to offer a wounded enemy the requests he makes under this right. He is near swooning. I will ask what aid he seeks." He leaned down to Willen and again whispered, "Just nod at what I say. When I finish speaking and look back at you, say, 'This is what I demand.'"

"First, Willen demands food, quarters, and medical attention in keeping with his status as the opponent of a Keeper of land, and if he wins, the privileges of victory.

"Second, he demands training with the finest swordsman in the Keep to recover his sword skills as he regains use of his arms.

"And third, as a Dragonslayer, he demands the right to confer with the our Dragonslayer, his brother Slayer and our cousin, Kwildas. For Willen promises to slay the dragon that plagues our skies."

Aldertan looked at Willen, who said wanly, "This I demand!" and fainted.

Vanch and Lindern both woke on the same day with the two ideas that would solve the problem of the bow. Vanch decided that they must listen to every idea of a coating solution that anyone had, regardless of the idea's possible application to the bow. Lindern realized that if you could not fire a bow in a kiln or bake it in an oven with the coating applied, why not cook the coating and then apply the coating while it was still hot?

Their discussions with Egorn the Potter revealed that he believed that the pigments he was adding to his clay glaze actually added strength and decreased porosity, if you did not add too much pigmentation.

"I do have a complaint with you fellows, though," the Potter said. "The beeswax melted into the bottom of the kiln and disappeared into the air as water leaves when it boils. The flaxseed oil has hardened into a nearly clear mess in the bottom. I have tried to chip it out but it even resists the metal chisel Torban made for me."

The kiln was too hot at the moment to look at its bottom, but the two bow makers were seen chatting furiously as they walked back to the cooperage.

The finest ground pigment Egorn used was soot from fires. This was the black powdery substance that was swept from the rock backings of the fires used to reflect heat onto the food and into huts. It was so fine it would hardly wash from your hands and had to wear off or soak out. When you left your hands in a stream until they shriveled, the soot might be gone.

Taleena sneezed terribly and yelled at the two of them when they tried to stew a suitable flaxseed oil and soot combination. They had not planned on the stench, but the husband of fifteen cycles had been smart enough to ask Torban for a metal pan to use solely for brewing their coating concoctions.

The first batch cooked too long and hardened in the pan before they could attempt to use it to coat the bow. After three hours with a chisel, the hardened mess had been removed and the pan was loosely similar in shape to the pan Torban had given them. The second batch had not been cooked long enough and had not dried three days later.

The third batch brushed on easily and had been completely dry the next morning. The wood was perfectly sealed to maintain the moisture content. And the piece of wood was so inflexible that the light-weight Lindern could stand on it between two stones and it would hardly flex at all.

In the fourth mixture they added more soot and made sure they brushed on a very thin, even layer. They were able to clean the pan before the concoction had hardened in it. They even were able to clean the horsehair brush with horse urine for use one or two more times. There was one horse in Loundon's Towne, and its owner prospered more from sale of the "solvent" than he did from hiring out the horse for rides. It was a disgusting manufacturing process.

The arms length sample piece of ash flexed very well. They took it outside to show Torban. It was very bright that day. When their eyes adjusted to the light and they showed the coated wood to Torban, the three could see that there were tiny holes in the coating all along the wood. Vanch and Lindern were upset with what they considered a setback.

"Let me ask you," Torban queried. "The rock solid piece of wood showed none of the tiny holes?" When they nodded he continued, "When I need a piece of metal to flex a bit, I punch holes in it, if I cannot make the metal thinner. You cannot make a bow thinner and still deliver an arrow with a killing force at the distances needed, can you?"

"You make good observations, Torban," the elder Cooper said. "Perhaps we need to manufacture bows on an ongoing basis and use the ones as fire wood once they become too brittle. This coating should make them last a moon or so."

"Not necessarily." The apprentice stood over a head shorter than Vanch and over two heads shorter than Torban. Either was old enough to be his father. But he was their peer in this discussion. "The beeswax applies very easily, prevents the bows drying, but is too flexible and slippery. The cooked flaxseed oil is too stiff if coated thick enough to prevent leaking altogether and has these tiny holes if it is coated thin enough to maintain flexibility. Why not use both?"

"We coat the bows with the cooked flaxseed oil and soot just like we have with this sample. Then we apply beeswax and rub it in with a cloth and wipe off the excess. We should be able to handle the bow easily with this limited amount of beeswax and yet this small amount of wax should easily fill in the tiny holes in the cooked flaxseed oil. We could reapply the beeswax on a regular basis, daily if needed, to keep the bow sealed.

"Besides, I believe we need to create a special grip of skin or something like it, to help make it easier to grip...." Lindern stopped speaking with a startled look. He had been lecturing to his master and to Torban Loundon himself.

However, the two were smiling. They both thought that they might be in the presence of the future Bowmaster of the community. Torban spoke, "Well, my young friend, in addition to this excellent idea to solve this problem, how do you propose to solve the problem of the stretching rawhides we use with the bow?"

Lindern looked to Vanch. They had not discussed this because they had been too focused on the drying wood problem, but Vanch nodded that the young lad should express his views if he had any.

"Hemp, carefully, tightly braided hemp of the finest quality. It should stretch little after the initial stretching and it should wear well. We will soak it in hoof-glue and wrap a small strand of hemp around the center to strengthen where the arrow notch will go."

Lindern looked to Vanch who nodded again. "In addition to your metal arrowheads, we need metal notch supports at the tips of the bows to support the string. By necessity the bow tapers there and we could experience cracking without the metal supports. We also need Graller the Tanner to make a set of fingertips to protect the archers' fingers and a pad to go along the bow arm to protect it from the snapping bowstring."

Of course the correct solutions are usually obvious after the expert explains them.

The ancient Dragonslayer, Kwildas, spat out, "You are no Dragonslayer. You do not know the rituals, do not follow the training schedules, have never attended the academy or gatherings, and do not even wear the dragon hides of a Slayer. You are neither a Druid nor a young romantic come to woo Haana. You are merely a young fool who came to the aid of my cousin because you did not know you would be killed, aren't you?"

Willen nodded. At that moment he felt younger than he had before leaving Loundon's Towne.

The grizzly old character roared with laughter. "Well, boy, I must congratulate you. You're bolder and dafter than I am, and I'm known for my bravery and stupidity. It's a pleasure to meet you." And with that, Kwildas grabbed Willen in a bear hug and nearly caused him to pass out because of the combined pain applied to his burnt left arm, his cracked right arm, and his bruised ribs. He laughed all through Willen's pain.

Once Aldini had left and Willen had awakened from his "rest," Aldertan had taken the time to hear in detail from Willen about his experiences with Druids and to explain everything to Willen that had occurred. Haana remained in a corner of the room but heard every word. Quite often she made barely audible exclamations of surprise, fear, delight, and amazement at his tale. Aldertan made no sounds other than to ask clarifying questions, but his eyes expressed the emotions Haana made aloud.

Willen concluded, "And that is what I know about Druids. Eirran told me that Porto is known as a Druid and that he himself could be called a Druid even though he does not go by that title. He said that everyone I would meet would understand and respect the position of a Druid and now you tell me Druids are feared and despised. You also say that it was a Druid that rode the dragon. Oh, my head hurts more than from my fall."

Aldertan said, "Eirran the Seer is known to us by name and reputation, but he did not travel in this region on his trip to learn Latin; I would have heard of his visit if he was anywhere near here. Druid is an old and probably incorrect name for those of the Old Way. Quite unsettling really, we have always called it the Old Way and never considered a New Way might arrive. But these Druids, as they call themselves, that attack us with dragons and want control of our Keep give that old title a bad taste in our mouths. That is why my son uses the title as an insult.

"So it seems, Willen, that this newest migration of Celts are, for the most part accompanied by a particular group of the ones of the Old Way that use the old title Druid. Porto, the ones Eirran met and mistrusts so, and these attacking our Keep all seem to be driven to use their powers for ill-gotten gain. It is a shame that Eirran and the ones we honor might have their good names besmirched by this deceitful band of ruffians and despots.

"However, this small band is not a part of a migration wave in this direction. They are a small but vicious group that are only interested in our aceituna groves. Yet they do not want the oil. They have arrived here every other summer for six summers. This year they have a few more in their

cadre, though still less than ten in number, and they demand the Keep. "They wield what you call 'olive sticks,' and have killed with them. That is why my son reacted as he did to your stick. Aldini's childhood friend was his captain of the guard. He was killed by one of the two Druids wielding such a stick. Between that and the dragon, we, the most fearless Celts of this land, now dread the possibility of being conquered ourselves. My son does not want to be the one who loses his family lands after nine generations of our control."

"Aldertan, your son, and your granddaughter for that matter, are they crazed?" Willen whispered this when Haana seemed to be lost in thought and not listening. "Aldini went from accusing me of being a Druid to being a spoiler of his daughter in moments."

The father and grandfather had a pained look on his face. "My granddaughter, I hope, is only in the delicate stage between easily infatuated youth and maturing young womanhood. I hope."

"Oh, Grand-Poppy! I did not understand that Willen is a brave warrior on a quest to save the fair Constantia from the ugly brute, Bonderman, and the evil Porto. His story is so romantic! We must help him slay our dragon, kill our Druids, find his olive wood sticks, and return to save his ladylove. Oh, Willen, do you have a younger brother who might love me as you love Constantia?"

Willen shook his head; he was speechless from her change of attitude.

With his negative response to her question, Haana made a pouting face, stood, and exclaimed as she walked from the room, "I will go tell the chef to fix a special meal for our new friend and hero."

"Well, you need not fear Haana making more trouble for you, I believe. With the fickleness of youth she now idealizes you as a great romantic hero. She is old enough to feel in her heart the urging and the call for love, but she does not have the sensibilities that come with a few more summers of experience. Perhaps, she just might help mollify her father's feelings of mistrust towards you.

"My son, I am relieved to say, is not moonstruck. He only used Haana's words to place you in a position where he could kill you if he feels he needs to. That sounds ominous, and he is too to be feared if he does choose to fight you. However, Aldini is probably as pleased with your demand for succor as I am. It gives him time to learn more about you and discover if you tell the truth and are worth befriending. This approach will prove more advantageous than his previous attempts at judging the merits of people thrust into his midst.

"He has been playing a dangerous game of dancing between wanting to be prepared to fight anyone and needing allies. I was known from my youth as a discerning leader who could instantly distinguish between friend and foe. Because he is not as capable in this as I was, he immediately considers all he meets an enemy. That way, he is not surprised by a blade in his back. Unfortunately, he will poison his potential allies with his methods. He has fought many duels because of his insistence on not asking for help. I believe he has wounded or killed those he should have trusted. Fortunately, he is an excellent swordsman. And of course he will not listen to his father."

Willen asked, "If he is a killer with his sword, then why did you arrange for me to fight him? I did not even know my blade was a sword. I thought it was a big knife. I have used it only to chop wood."

"How was I to know the one who carried the finest sword I have ever seen did not know how to use it? It is inconceivable. But do not fear. I asked for you to be able to train with the finest swordsman in the land to recover your skills. It will simply take a little longer to recover your skills since you never had any.

"Aldertan, who is the greatest swordsman of the Keep, the one who, because of my demand for the Right of Succor, now has to train with me in this swordplay as you call it?"

"Why our finest swordsman is Aldini. He will be required to bring you to an adequate state of readiness to fight him. And I will take you to my cousin. He will teach you how to kill the dragon."

"Aldertan, why did you say that I would kill the dragon?"

"Because, Willen, it must be killed."

Willen realized he might be wrong about Aldertan. He might be moonstruck also.

Four days later Kwildas said, "That old fool told you that I would teach you to kill a dragon, did he? Well, does he want it dead in five summers? That is how long it takes to become a Dragonslayer. Besides, I am too old and I never was a Master Slayer. They are the only ones allowed to officially train in the art. I have been training my great-grandson, Skall, even though I am not a Master. He will never be a Slayer unless he goes to the academy, but he will know in two more summers all I can teach him and will be able to use our slaying techniques. I would not send him out now with the three cycles of knowledge I have imparted to him. You are dead, my young friend. You should have died in your first confrontation. You will die in the next."

Desperation breeds fear and imagination. Willen asked one creative question out of sheer panic. "If you had to kill a dragon without any of your training or skills, and if your only weapons were your knowledge of dragons and the tools, people, and materials around us, how would you go about doing it?"

Kwildas stared at him for the longest time, just like Eirran used to stare. Then he started laughing even more hysterically than before.

"No. No. No! NO! I do not care. She is my little girl and she will be hidden during the confrontation at the end of the harvest faire. She will have the horse and will ride like the wind to escape if the worst happens. She will NOT be fighting in our ranks!" Torban was shaking with rage and horror.

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I have sold the wands to all the Slytherins presently at Hogwarts; all of the Hufflepuffs, Ravensclaws, and Gryffindors for that matter, for over one hundred and forty years. I usually have a, well a *feeling* regarding which house a new purchaser of one of my wands will go. I am not always correct, but I usually am. In my modest and hopefully subtle way I try to encourage each new wand owner. I told your friend, Miss Granger, that her wand would do well in Charms and Transfiguration work. *She* has proven me correct, I believe."

Harry nodded.

"I had no similar words for you. However, when I said 'great things' I wanted to encourage you in the 'great things' we all expect from you. When I said, 'terrible, yes, but great' I hoped to give you the slightest warning and exhortation that even if you were to become a Slytherin, you could choose your destiny just like Willen is choosing his in our story. Regardless of house or family or history or situation, I wanted you to know you could choose Light instead of Darkness.

"I know you have made a good start as a fighter for what is right and true. Like Willen, you must have as much compassion as possible for all, even the unlovable, to ensure you stay on the path you have chosen. So must we all. Had you been placed in my old house, or any other house for that matter, it is the choices you make and the commitments you keep that determine the character of your very soul."

Mr. Ollivander's shining eyes watched Harry digest this uncharacteristic invocation.

"Well, Mr. Potter, we should finish this inventory before the business day ends. Just now, when the Summersbys entered this shop, we were at the point where a dragon, being ridden by a Druid, was about to attack our Willen. We *must* see whether he survives or not."

The golden horn of the dragon glinted in the light of dawn. There were sparkles of this early light reflecting off the green scales on its body and wings.

The Druid riding on the dragon's back could be seen smiling as he flew towards the young man standing at the edge of the rock outcroppings. He wondered if this was the one who had attempted to slay his dragon and had killed his brother. No, this one was little older than a lad. He couldn't be a Slayer. In seconds he was much closer. No, this lad could not be a Slayer. The Dragonslayers would never take a lad with a lazy eye into their training academy.

And so our story continues.

"Willen, you have described a Golden Horn dragon, cleverly named because of its golden horn." Kwildas smiled at his own sense of humor, saw no reaction from Willen, saw that his great-grandson, Scall, had rolled his eyes in disbelief, and continued. "It likes to try to gore you with its horn on the first pass or two. If it had a rider, and we have the body to prove that, then it had to be raised from a young fledgling to allow a passenger. They may have trained going out of him, which I doubt, but even if they have, you are its particular enemy. It's seen you before, and up close. It's smelled you. If this dragon makes it *personal* that it wants to kill you, it'll revert back to its primal nature and attempt to gore you at first. That's your opportunity. Other than that, you're dead. You should be dead already. I've told you that, haven't I?"

"Yes, Great-Grandfather, many times. You make it no easier on Willen by repeating it."

Willen thought that Scall was a likeable young man only a few years older than himself. Their friendship had been dampened when Kwildas had insisted that Willen face the dragon alone.

Scall had made it perfectly clear that *he* wanted to kill this dragon. It would ensure his acceptance into the Dragonslayer Academy, and he fancied the idea of being a Slayer, not in title but in fact, before arriving for his first days of training. Kwildas insisted Willen go alone and Scall resented it.

The fate of the budding but challenged friendship between Willen and Scall was determined two days later in the northeastern most part of the Aldertani aceituna groves. The events of that day galvanized Willen's resolve. He *was* going to kill the dragon and stop the Druids and their warriors from taking the Aldertan Keep - and hopefully end all future attempts at this seizure by force.

That terrible morning a guard standing duty in the tower had seen something that might have been a dragon dipping and swooping in that northeastern direction. He had shouted his sighting and Aldini called for a mounted force to be formed, and to everyone's surprise, he had insisted Willen join them.

"You have proven yourself brave to the point of stupidity. You have somehow survived a match with a dragon, probably this very same dragon. You might be useful, yet. The worst that will occur is that you might die and save me the additional cost and effort to feed you until I kill you."

Willen had been helped into the saddle and had fallen out immediately. He was told how to sit a horse, helped up again, and fell out again.

"Help him mount behind me," the elder Aldertan shouted. "We cannot wait for him to learn to ride."

When they passed the hut of Kwildas, they found him mounting an old ass. Jackasses are much more surefooted when climbing mountains and rock formations than horses. "Scall headed in the direction of that screeching earlier this day. I'll catch up on this old nag when you reach the hills."

They never reached the hills. They found Scall's body lying right at the edge of the aceituna groves. There were no signs explaining how Scall had died, no marks on his body, he was just dead. Beside him lay an unknown lad of roughly fourteen or fifteen summers. He had been alive when they found him and Aldini wanted to kill him immediately.

"Don't kill him, he may prove useful." Willen had not meant to challenge the Keeper, but he had.

With a flash of the blade in the sunlight, Aldini's sword was at Willen's chest. "Trying to protect your brother Druid. You show your true allegiance." There was a frightening gleam in Aldini's eyes.

"This is not a Druid, my son," Aldertan spoke as he examined the boy. "He dresses like a local, not as a Druid, but this lad is not of our Keep. He must be from this general area based on the style of his leggings. This design has only become popular since the Seamstress from Poldoni's Keep created it a few cycles ago.

"If he is a local boy, he may have information we need, if we keep him alive long enough to tell us. His breath is ragged and his face is a horrible mess." The lad's face bore many small cuts, gouges, and dried and not quite dried blood. The older man pushed the boy's damaged eyelids back to see if his pupils had movement. Both eyes were gone from their sockets.

Aldertan expelled the remains of his morning meal, as did the guard looking on. Aldini and Willen were decidedly paled by the traumatic spectacle of the empty sockets.

"Aldini, whatever caused...whoever did this..." Willen was outraged into incomplete speech.

"Yes, Willen, it is barbaric." These were the first words of civility and agreement between the two.

Kwildas knelt in silence before his sole heir, now the end of his line. Though retired from his service as a Dragonslayer because of his infirmities, he refused help as he somehow gathered the strength and balance to lift his great grandson's body to his jackass. He heaved a sigh of physical relief and the first and only sob anyone ever heard. He turned to his kinsman and spoke, "*We will do what we can* to help this young man kill this dragon and its trainers. I will make my way to the Keep after the funeral pyre burns down."

Conlander was a Metalsmith. He was not as talented as Torban - yet - he did not have Torban's many cycles of experience. Conlander had only seen twenty-two summers. He was tall, barely taller than Torban, and handsome. He had a flaxen mane of hair that most girls envied. He had the most distracting blue eyes, so thought all of the distracted young maidens. Every unmarried female between fourteen and thirty summers wanted to be his choice. Everyone except the one he wanted - not Constantia - Constantia's best friend, Naelly.

The two girls had first become friends when they were two small bundles sharing the same basket while their mothers washed clothes in the Tameas River. When Constantia matured before the number of her summers made it seem possible, Naelly remained on pace or actually slow for the typical schedule for maturity. Besides, Constantia was the beautiful one. Constantia drew everyone's attention. Constantia was tall, raven-haired, dark-eyed, and striking. Naelly rejoiced in her friend's attractiveness. Constantia was the one who lived under the threat of marriage to Bonderman. Naelly reveled in the lack of attention, but she had one secret she deeply regretted.

She loved Willen and could not help but hope he arrived back too late to save Constantia from being taken in marriage by that big pile of a reprehensible man. She hated herself for thinking this way. She tortured herself with guilt in the nighttime. She changed the subject of Willen whenever she could with Constantia, but that was often impossible. He was in her friend's thoughts and words almost always.

The celebration of Naelly's birthing day in her sixteenth summer, marking her passage to womanhood, came a few days after Constantia's. Naelly's maturation marking day was not as highly proclaimed as Constantia's, the daughter of the Loundons, but Naelly preferred her place in her friend's shadow.

Torban brought Conlander to Loundon's Towne because he knew they needed another forger and worker of metal. Conlander had no family, being the only child of two little, old, and relatively unattractive parents who had married very late in life. That he had been born at all had surprised them. His size and good looks surprised everyone. But he had his father's eyes.

Conlander had one imperfection, a slight limp he could not make imperceptible, regardless of his efforts. As a small and beautiful boy, he had been grabbed by a wolf, attempting to drag off an evening meal. Conlander had fought the wolf unsuccessfully until he had been pulled to the wood's edge. The boy had caught a young sapling trunk with one hand and held on long enough to dislodge a rock with his other. One swing of the sharp stone and Conlander had a wolf pelt to use as a small blanket. He also had a badly damaged left ankle.

Despite his parents' marriage of convenience, both of them eventually fell hard in love. Conlander watched them. He knew that love had to do with substance and mutual interests, not just beauty. Conlander wanted a love like his parents had. Torban had told him of his daughter, of her difficult betrothal to the self-proclaimed Keeper, and her nearly irrational insistence that a man long gone on an impossible mission would rescue her and Loundon's Towne.

Conlander walked off Stellan's boat with his tools and his new trade name, Metalsmith, or Smith as some shortened it. Torban had not liked the name from the start, but being a Loundon he would never be called by the name of his craft. The name "Smith," which Conlander liked, was so unusual, so different, and so new. No one had ever heard such a name before. Rather than making it difficult to identify his trade, Conlander used it as a way to explain what he did and why he was so unique.

Torban thought that Conlander could keep the name, it would never become popular.

The day that Stellan, Torban, and Conlander arrived in Loundon's Towne, Naelly was sick. Her nostrils felt as if silty wet cloths had been pushed up them and into her head. She was hacking up the greenness from her insides, and she felt as though a child of two summers was sitting on her chest. Her throat felt like she had swallowed sand and it would not go down or come up. Her eyes felt as though several insects had stung them.

Naelly did not realize that she was being closely watched as Constantia delivered her ultimatum to her father.

"Father. I am of age, now, and I will fight and die before Bonderman or Porto touches me. I will stand with Willen and we will defeat the enemies of our community." Constantia made her pronouncement and strode off with typical Loundon determination.

Dorgelt the Hunter stomped away in disgust when he had observed that Torban had not quelled his daughter's impertinence.

"Torban, who is this lovely young woman?" The voice was wonderfully rich. Naelly turned first to see which young woman was being discussed. She saw no one, so she looked for the owner of the voice to see who he was looking at.

The most handsome man she had ever seen was looking at her.

She thought that he had to be talking about someone else. Had he not seen Constantia?

"This is Naelly, Conlander."

She could hear the smile in Torban's voice but could only see the huge man that possessed such startling eyes.

"I look forward to knowing you better, beautiful Naelly. Please tell your parents that as soon as Torban explains to me this community's rituals of courtship, I will begin the process."

She said nothing, but ran right into the flock of geese trying to escape his stare. Their honking expressed her befuddlement.

All of the way to her hut and then to her bedding in its corner she thought only one thought, "But I love Willen."

For all of the planning and for all of the efforts and discovery needed to arrange every detail of the attempt, the defeat of the dragon and its rider was really rather simple, and its execution took only seconds.

And the creation of a new spell.

The blinded boy awoke from his unconscious state minutes after Kwildas arrived at the Aldertani Keep. The lad drew the attention of everyone concerned with his shouts. "No, NO! Don't hurt her. I will go back; I can go back at least one more time. Just don't send her! DON'T HURT..."

Haana had been there with him, tending his wounds. Her insistence on helping the boy had been stronger than her father's insistence that she shouldn't see such a horrible sight. Haana was the best person in Aldini's Keep at helping the wounded and sick. That this fact was known by all in the Keep, became apparent to Willen by the too soon acquiescence of her father and the immediate obedience by all present to her decisive commands for the boy's care.

Haana had ushered the men to an adjacent room so the boy would not be disturbed by their speculations about him. At the boy's shouts Aldini, Aldertan, Kwildas, and Willen rushed back to the room where the lad had awakened. In those few seconds Haana had worked her charms to ease the boy's immediate fears.

They heard her saying, "There now, you are safe from whoever did this... this to you. My father will protect you." Willen wondered if this girl of only fourteen summers had the Touch for healing or ministrations to the ill, if there was such a Touch.

"But Kailty, where is my sister, Kailty? They will kill her or worse. I can go back again. I can face them one more time. Just lead me to the mounds...."

"Lad, you've had a rough go and a brave fight. Your battle is over. I am Aldini, Keeper of the Aldertani Lands. If you will tell me who Kailty is and where to find her, I promise to do whatever I can to rescue her."

Willen was amazed by the kindness and compassion in Aldini's voice as he too attempted to soothe the traumatized youth. His next words were harsher but they also helped calm the lad's ill ease.

"If whoever did this to you and holds Kailty are the same ones that killed Scall and ride the dragon, they are the sworn enemies of all in this Keep and we will see them finished."

"But she's just a little slip of a girl, my sister, Kailty. They told me that as long as I went back to the mounds they wouldn't hurt her. Now that I'm no longer there..."

"We are a skilled band, and we have a Dragonslayer with us," said Aldertan. "If there is any way to save Kailty, we will do it. I know you are badly hurt, but you must tell us all that you know about those who hold your sister. The more we know, the sooner we can act effectively to save her. But here, the girl that helps you is my granddaughter, Haana. She has some cow's milk for you and a little food, if you desire. Drink and eat and then tell us all you can. Start with your name, lad."

"I am called Reldy, but I... oh, I am thirsty." The milk was gone in a moment and the bread soon followed. The lad ate like a ravenous fox.

"My sister and I are from a village nearly two days walk from here. It's called Jerpanni."

"I've heard of it," said Aldini with a tone attempting to encourage more.

"I have lost count but it could not be five or six days ago that Grang flew over our village."

"Who is Grang, the dragon or its rider?"

"Grang is the dragon. Bordo and Bordan call it by that name and treat it like a pet. It is their pet, but it breathes fire at anyone else who is not careful when they approach it.

"Bordo flew over on Grang and shouted down his curses at us just as Bordan entered Jerpanni with his six warriors. The warriors appeared as you might think, large, strong and well armed, but as fearsome as they looked, they were terrified of Bordo and Bordan. Those two are no larger than I am, and I have only seen fifteen years, yet you would think them giants the way their men cringe at their presence.

"Too well they cringe. They each hold a stick, they call it an olive stick but it looked like a branch of aceituna wood stripped of its leaves and bark. When one of the warriors displeased him, Bordan pointed the olive stick at him and said something I could not understand. Then the man rolled around in agony for the longest time before Bordan released him. The screams were terrible." The boy cringed himself with the memory.

"Go on, Reldy, why did they take you and your sister?"

"They took Pilder also, but he's dead now. The little creatures blinded him, and when he could not go back to the mounds, they killed him." The sadness in the youth's voice was heart chilling. "Pilder was my older brother. We were the only children on the side of the village where they came in. The rest ran. We are only a small village and there aren't many of us, children or grown ones.

"Bordan told the grown ones that the dragon would burn the village and all of us in it if they tried to stop them from taking us. They promised they would bring us back, but I am pretty sure that was a lie." Hopelessness punctuated his story.

"They took us to the aceituna groves near where you probably found me. First they made Pilder run at a mound and jump on it. As he did, one of the warriors took an axe and chopped the branches of the nearest tree to that mound. These little stickmen swarmed out and attacked Pilder first. He started to scream and ran back to us as we watched. They were on his face, cutting at him. They headed towards the warrior next, and he dropped the branches he had cut and ran to us also. He had been watching Pilder and ran before the stickmen got to him. Pilder ran up and Bordo actually helped him clear the creatures off of his face. That's when Bordan took out his olive stick and caused the guard such pain. They are after the aceituna sticks. They used Pilder and now they use me to distract the stickmen, then the warriors bring back as many aceituna branches as they can before they are attacked."

"But, what do they want with the aceituna branches, Reldy?" Haana asked.

"The aceituna branches, that's what they call olive branches. Those branches are what they used to punish the guard. Bordan also used the aceituna branch, that is the olive stick to kill that man, what did you call him, Scall? All of this is to collect aceituna branches to use as weapons."

All in the room were thunder struck - but none more than Willen. He had been walking for half a moon past olive trees and had ended up here facing a dragon and more of Porto's evil brothers. In addition, he would eventually face a sword fight with a master swordsman - all because he had not discovered over a moon ago that the aceituna trees were olive trees.

Willen's Luck.

Lindern had made Constantia's bow specifically for her. She needed a bow at the midpoint between the two standard bow designs they were producing for those with a talent for archery.

The man's sized bow was the correct length for someone of her height, or nearly enough, but most women do not have the same upper body strength that men do. Constantia was taller than all of the women in Loundon's Towne and as tall or taller than half of the men. She helped with the more physical labors that were the lot in life of the females - cleaning clothes, cleaning in general, cooking, caring for children - but these activities did not build strength in the arms and shoulders that men seemed to be able to develop more easily.

The bow designed for young lads and women was too small; her arms were too long. When she held the bow straight out and pulled back with an arrow, the bow attained maximum stretch at an uncomfortable position in her reach. Of course the force and distance of an arrow's flight is controlled by varying the distance an arrow is pulled back and the distance the bow hand is held forward - in addition to actual aiming - but there is still a proper bow size for the physical attributes of each person.

This was the logic that governed bow design in Loundon's Towne as they invented the concepts of citywide defense. One of the two different sizes fit everyone with inclination and talent towards archery in Loundon's Towne, except Constantia.

Not only had Dorgelt the Hunter refused to teach Constantia to use the bow, he had not seemed to know how to use one himself. Lindern had discovered during the time he and Vanch had developed the bow, that he was too small yet to use one in a fight. He still had a major growth coming, everyone said so, but with the age-old impatience of youth he felt as though it would never arrive. His growth would not arrive in time for him to fight in the battle of the coming harvest faire - as an archer.

Lindern felt sure he would be an archer one day, but they would not train him, so he watched and learned, and realized there was little he could learn from Dorgelt other than how *not* to use a bow. He felt it would have to work differently than the way the Hunter was instructing.

Next he turned to the other side of the field where Constantia was working with her bow. He knew she would make a fine archer. She had what appeared to him as a natural form with the bow and arrow, but was frustrated by the improper bow size. By this time she had started to forego parts of the typical dress of women of the community, but she had not settled on what she would one day call her "fighting attire." She still wore the outer

shift all women wore, but she had taken a pair of her father's ruined breeches and cut them to fit her. No women wore belts over their outer clothing. Women wore no belting, men thought, for comfort's sake, but it had the additional advantage of hiding a degree of overeating.

Constantia had taken her father's oldest belt and cut it to where she could wear it over her robe and used it to help hold up her breeches as well.

When practicing with her bow, she drew her robe between her legs, pulled the backside up and tucked it into her belt. This stopped the typical flowing clothing from interfering with her aim. The few other women that were trying their hand at archery thought her daft, but they constantly had their aim thwarted by robes billowing in the wind and catching the edge of the bow.

Dorgelt had refused Constantia a pair of finger guards that morning. It wasn't that Dorgelt the Hunter thought it a bad idea to train women to fight - he *did* feel that way and told everyone, but Torban would not heed his warnings on that matter. No, to a degree Dorgelt had refused to help Constantia because he thought she was too young, but mostly because she was a Loundon. Only older women past the time of raising their children were coming forward in active defense of their community. It was understood that women with mothering responsibilities should find their primary place there. But Dorgelt just *knew*, and said as much, that Torban would not smile on the man who taught his daughter how to join this fight. Dorgelt told any and all that Constantia should not be allowed to be an archer.

Lindern hid one pair of leather finger guards and arm banding and brought them to Constantia when Dorgelt had finished for the day. She was still trying to use an improperly sized bow.

"I held a pair of finger guards back for you, Constantia. I just had a feeling.... Dorgelt really doesn't want you to be an archer, does he?"

She answered this question only with a half angry, half mirthful smile, causing Lindern to chuckle.

It was hot for this early in the summer, and Constantia's activities caused a great deal of perspiration. Her clothes were sticky on her frame and wet strands of her hair fell into her eyes.

Unsuccessfully blowing hairs out of her face she said, "I thank you, Master Bow Maker Lindern. Can you have Graller the Tanner make a hair guard to keep this out of my face?" She had grabbed the offending tresses and pushed them behind her left ear. They would stay in place for only two more sentences. "Ask him to make for me a leather skirt guard and you make me a smaller bow while you are at it."

She chuckled and expected him to join her. He had blushed furiously when she had first called him 'Master Bow Maker.' He had looked around with embarrassment and she had promised not to call him that in front of Vanch, his master in the Coopering trade.

She chuckled and made another comment, expecting him to join her in her jesting. One of the things she enjoyed and she thought he did too, was their sharp-tongued conversations. His quick mind was a perfect foil for her sarcastic tongue. When he did not join in, she looked up. "What? Have I split my clothing somewhere?"

"Would you like a bow made to fit you?"

"But both sizes are either too big or too small, Lindern."

"I am no Master Bow Maker as you jest, but who do you think makes most of the bows while Vanch supervises the cooperage? I make the two sizes that he has determined best suit most, but I can make one just to fit you. I will need to make it at night and I will have to have your help in fitting certain pieces and sizing certain parts of the bow."

For a week Torban wondered where their daughter was between supper and nightfall. Torban had not said anything to Constantia about her attempts with the bow, because Dorgelt had assured him time and again that she had no talent for it. Torban had been married long enough to a woman similar enough to Constantia in temperament to know that he need not waste what little attention she would pay him on a subject that would die through inadequacy.

Lindern worked on her bow. Constantia worked on Graller the Tanner. Graller was older than her father. He was a widower and knew he was too old, but the memory of being a young stallion caused him to make her leather fighting attire to her exact specifications.

The night they took her bow out for a test before coating and finishing, she arrived in her usual outer shift with the legs of a man's breeches underneath. Lindern had not looked closely enough to see they were not those she usually wore. Constantia had insisted on their first night of designing her bow that they keep everything in secret. So when she asked that they go to a more secluded place than the archery field, he did not consider the request for any reason other than the fact that Caedric the Fisher was back from his day on the river.

Lindern placed the quiver on the ground and started to hold out the bow to her. He felt sure he had the design just right and would be able to cook the flaxseed and soot coating for the bow later than evening.

Instead of stepping forward and taking his offered weapon, Constantia stepped back and whipped her outer shift over her head. While Lindern stood in open-mouthed disbelief, she placed the band around her head to hold back her hair. She held out her hand for the bow.

"Lindern. The bow, Lindern. Have you never seen a leather head band before?"

Still slack jawed, he handed her the bow. She drew the string back with her first arrow and released it. Three things became abundantly clear. Lindern had succeeded in making a bow for her size. Her leather fighting attire was perfect for archery.

And she was by far the finest archer in Loundon's Towne.

Aldini asked Reldy, "Son, please tell us why you had to attack the mounds, and everything else you know about Bordo and Bordan."

When Reldy had revealed that "olive" and "aceituna" were different names for the same tree, Haana had insisted that they let Reldy rest for a while. The others had started to protest, but Willen had purposefully marched right out of the room. The other adults had been compelled to follow him.

The Aldertani Keep consisted of the main building with its courtyard, (the Keep itself), the village right around the Keep, outlying huts such as Kwildas', and fields for various farming activities. Far to the south was a small fishing village on the Middle Sea. Large numbers of aceituna/olive trees, arranged in groves, were to the north and east, but these types of trees were also scattered all over the Keep. There was one stately shade-providing olive tree in the courtyard. As the three men followed Willen out into that courtyard, Aldini first realized what Willen intended. As Willen raised his smaller blade to cut a low hanging branch, he heard the distinctive "szling' sound of Aldini drawing his sword.

"You will put down that aceitu-...olive branch, Willen, or I will run you through."

"Aldini, if you are too ox-like not to realize we are allies and even friends in this common fight, then I pity you."

The thought of pity caused Aldini's eyes to flare.

"But I have still not recovered and I am still under the demand of the Rights of Succor. I am your honored enemy, and we are under the bond of training partners. My honor requires me to not cause you any harm knowingly, and to try to aid and assist you in your troubles during the length of the time I am under your acceptance of my Demand.

"So either run me through and face the Druids without a Slayer or let me try to discover a weapon that should help us greatly in this fight."

"You are no Dragonslayer, Willen," stated Aldini.

"Neither am I a Druid or your enemy." And with that, he took the olive branch he had cut and began to prepare it for testing. Willen stripped it of its twigs, leaves, and the bark, the way the Druids apparently prepared theirs. He kicked a few dried leaves into a dirt patch, pointed the stick at it and cast, "Incendio!" Nothing happened.

Aldini had Willen's back sack and other possessions searched when he'd first been brought to the Keep. He had taken Torban's blade and the holly sticks. Willen had discovered he had not bothered the scrolls of parchment - particularly the one with the unicorn and veela hairs.

Willen drew the carving of Constantia from around his neck. He had wrapped a unicorn hair around the carving for just such a time as this. When he had first placed the hair around the bit of holly from Albion, it had spoken to him in simple greeting. He had never had a finished piece of wood, one that had reached its destiny, make contact with him. This piece of holly not only greeted him when he wrapped the wood with the hair, it now "seemed" a little *disappointed* when the hair was removed.

As he carefully wrapped the olive branch with the hair, he could hear Aldini saying, "I told you he was not as powerful as the others, he needs help."

Willen spoke "Incendio," after he stood with his combined power concentrator. The leaves burst into flame, accompanied by the onlookers' gasps of amazement. Willen stamped out the fire and looked up. Aldini's face went from fascination to cynicism.

Willen said, "Helped or not, I will use this hair and olive stick to fight these evil dragon riders and their ruffians."

"You will be able to kill with this hair and stick combination like they do?" Aldini asked.

"I refuse to kill with magik or with this olive stick. Eirran counseled me that I would probably have to kill Porto, but that I should never kill another human being using the Old Way or magik. I will kill with my blade, or my bare hands if need be, but not magik."

"We place our trust in a cowardly Dragonslayer," Aldini said, his voice dripping derision. "You will never face Porto, with your blade or without it. I will kill you when you have recovered your full strength and skill. It is your fate to die here, facing the Druids or facing me."

"I don't believe in fate. I believe in destiny." And with that pronouncement, Aldertan, Kwildas, and a blustering Aldini followed Willen back to the room housing Reldy.

Conlander had never seen a blade able to maintain a sharpened edge as well as Torban's blades did. He was amazed. "You say that the secret to this edge is to add more of the powdered nickel and to heat it more than once and cool it quickly in cold water? Remarkable. This is the sharpest knife I have ever seen."

Torban closed the door to his forge and said, "I have told you of our problems with Porto the Olive Hand and Bonderman."

"Yes, these Olive Hands have not visited my old village as of yet, but they have threatened takeover at a community not far away. I would rather be in Loundon's Towne for this inevitable fight. Were it not for my damaged leg, I would have walked here before Stellan found me."

Torban pulled an object wrapped in oily fabric from behind a stack of forge coal. "I have been close enough to Bonderman and his underlings to observe the quality of their blades. Bonderman carries a blade of some distinction, the others carry poor metal, but none hold a blade to compare to this."

The blade Torban offered Conlander for inspection was dissimilar to any design, at this time, in what would eventually be known as Europe. It was a straight blade that was shorter than Bonderman's or those carried by any Celtic warrior, but not by much. It was roughly a hand longer than the famous Roman short sword design being developed in Etruria at this time. The truly unique part of this design was its handle.

It had a larger than usual guard to prevent an opponent's blade from slipping down and cutting the fingers. Its handle area was more than twice as long as the typical grip.

"But this is not like any other fighting blade I have seen."

"There is no force of law or man that says that a blade has to be like other blades. Take and feel."

Torban held the blade, grip forward, to Conlander. When the young MetalSmith, or Smith, took it they both felt the slightest surge of the Touch. "Conlander, do you have the Touch for metalworking?"

"No. No, I know of the Touch. In my village there was a Weaver and a Potter with the Touch. I often observed their extra skills beyond reason. I had hoped I would see the Touch in my work, but it has never happened. Do you have the Touch?"

"I believe I do. I have always felt it to one degree or another with each piece of metal I have worked. But I never felt it as powerfully as I did when I forged Willen's blade. It was the first of this design. I felt the metal 'tell me' exactly how to make every pound of the hammer. 'It' told me how many times to heat it and reheat it.

"All of the fighting blades I have crafted since then have let me know they were with me in manufacture, but none as strongly as that one. Step over here into this open area and swing it like you would in a fight."

In ten swings of the blade, Conlander demonstrated in form and execution ten excellent cuts, thrusts, and parries with a fighting blade.

"Who trained you in blade fighting? Why did you not tell me of your skill?"

There was confusion on Conlander's face. "I have never held a blade longer than one used in Tanning. What I just did, somehow... well, it just seemed the way to use such a blade."

Torban realized the second, and probably the most important reason why he had known he must persuade Conlander to join Loundon's Towne.

Reldy came to the end of his explanation of the mounds, the stickmen, and the specific aceituna/olive trees.

"Reldy, this is Willen speaking."

"I recognize your voice, Willen."

"The little stickmen, do they look like they were put together with twigs and that they may be cute and friendly until you draw near those particular olive trees? Then, when the warrior starts cutting branches, the little creatures get really vicious and cut you with their two little fingers, is that what they do?"

"Yes," said the boy.

Aldertan said, "Willen, you know these vermin?"

"Yes, they are called bowtruckles in Albion. I don't know what the word is in Latin, or even if there is one. They guard particular trees for some reason I cannot fathom. You cannot see it, Reldy, but I have a scar on one of my fingers from one of their attacks over five summers ago. Bordo and Bordan, they do not want wood from any other olive trees but the four guarded by those mounds?"

"Yes, I heard them talking at night when they didn't know it. They've been here twice before and now they want to own the Aldertan Keep. Pilder tried to tell them of Aldini, the mean Keeper of this Land, the greatest swordsman around, but they laughed at his words. Erm, is Aldini here? I did not mean to insult you, sir. Pilder only wanted to increase their fear of you."

"Reldy, they want olive wood from only those four trees, did they say why?"

"It was never discussed and we feared to ask, but they acted as if the rest of the Keep was useless. They were talking about having me grab some of the creatures and take them to another tree to see if they would protect a new one. It must be important."

"I know how to solve the Druids' problem," said Willen.

"Father, Dorgelt's a master with a spear, Conlander teaches use of the long blade better than any could have hoped. All archers in Loundon's Towne, except for me are hopeless. The purpose of the bow is to hit a target from far away. Why won't you let me teach them?"

"You are my little girl. Bonderman craves you. You saw his looks of desire when he arrived early during last winter to carry off as much tribute as he could. You are more appealing to men now than then, may I be blinded if it would make it untrue, but I retain my ability to see beauty."

"Father, you disbelieve Willen will bring back the olive sticks. Then why don't you at least share with me what I believe is our only hope, a strong

overpowering defense. Porto and three men including Bonderman. I may kill all four of them with my bow before any of them are near enough to use their blades or Porto his olive hand. If there were ten, half as accurate as I am, or twenty perhaps... What if there were twenty half as accurate and a few nearly as capable as I am, how could four men defeat us? Dorgelt trains his twenty. Conlander trains more than twenty. Is all of Lindern and Vanch's work to be naught?"

The first half of Constantia's pleading efforts with her father had been earnest and sincere. The second half had been demanding. Meala moved to intercede between the two, but Torban raised his hand. This was the deciding moment.

"If I let you train your archers, would you consent to a plan of escape for you if the battle seems to turn against us? If it looks as though we will lose the fight, for whatever reason, will you promise me, give me your solemn word, you will escape?"

"But, Father..."

"Listen to me my child. I no longer call you a girl. I know you are not a child, but you will always be *my* child. I want your promise to escape when and if the battle turns against us. I will arrange the plan and buy the horse for your escape. You can train and engage in the fight, but as an archer only; you will stay away from the fighting when spear and blade meet. Look me in the eyes and swear."

Constantia looked him in the eyes with every intention of denying she would run. But the depth of expression she saw in her father's eyes showed her worry and concern that frightened her with its prescience.

All three Loundons were surprised when she said, "I promise, Da," in the same tone she had used as a small child.

It took all morning and most of the afternoon to find wood lice, but late in the day, Willen approached the four olive trees. They all talked to him in Latin; the first time he had noticed tress speaking any language, Latin in particular, other than tree language. All four confirmed that the bad men who tortured the human saplings with the bowtruckles were worthy to be uprooted, but they had not been able to reason with the bowtruckles to stop their attacks. All four told Willen that the youngest human sapling had assaulted the mounds once, but they believed her screams had not been as loud as the others that had thrown themselves on the mounds before.

Willen was relieved. Kailty had probably not been hurt too badly. He turned and explained this to the others while he was looking down, preparing the wood lice. Just as he was about to walk forward with the lice, he noticed that the others were frozen in place and staring at him.

"What's the matter? Aren't you pleased that Kailty has not been severely hurt?"

The guards were backing away, turning to run. Kwildas was on his knees, muttering something about the spirit of the dragon protecting him. Aldini had his sword drawn and was backing away timidly.

Only Aldertan stood his ground, but he visibly and audibly trembled as he said, "You are my friend. You are not the Dreaded One who commands the very trees to bend to his will. I trust you. Please do not call down evil on me, oh Great Lord of the Forest." And with those words, he fell on his face.

Willen actually looked behind himself to see whom Aldertan had to be talking to. He realized for the first time, that when the trees bent over to have conversations with him, that others might not see that as normal. Most trees are a little hard of hearing so they leaned over to hear him better, that's all.

Then the realization struck him. "Are the Celts the ones that hold trees sacred?"

Aldertan answered, dread in his voice, "Great Lord of the Forest, I cannot speak for all Celts, beliefs vary and our family has been here nine generations without one from the Old Way to guide us. However, we have never worshiped trees, only the One who made the trees and all there is. That said, since trees are the biggest things in existence, they are a powerful symbol to us for the One who created all. It is ancient among Celts. We do not fear trees. We fear the One who bends trees to his will."

Willen realized this could change the balance in his relationship between all of those of the Aldertani Keep and probably his Druidic enemies here and in Albion. He could use this new fear to demand help and assistance, and homage if need be. He could gather the olive sticks he needed, not face the dragon, and be on his way in a day, perhaps less. He could demand horses and carts and a guard to protect him in his travels.

He considered the battle to come in Loundon's Towne. He could lure Porto and Bonderman near the forest and start up a conversation with a tree. They would run in fear or fall to their faces, and he could stop their efforts to take over Loundon's Towne. Perhaps the fear of him could spread and all of those from the Celtic lands coming to Albion would stay away. Eirran knew about his conversations with trees. Why hadn't he told of the power over men he could use...?

All of this passed through Willen's mind in the time it takes a leaf to fall from the top of a tree. He had been staring unseeing down at the woodlice in his hands. He looked back up to his friends and saw the stark trepidation in their eyes as they cowered before him.

His friends...

He thought of them as his friends and here he was planning to maintain them in these servile positions.

Willen had always thought that his biggest test to determine whether he would follow Darkness or follow Light would come when he faced Bonderman and Porto. Now he knew that this moment, in all probability, would be the bigger test - his first test.

Darkness or Light? Being served in fear or being a servant? His choice.

He knew it would be much easier to rule the fearful. He had been intimidated and dominated all of his life by those he felt more powerful than himself. He envisioned Caedric kneeling before him as he whimpered his puny request for his life.

Now he knew the reasons the darkness drew men to itself.

And Willen turned from Darkness and chose Light.

All of this realization had taken place in the time it would take for a second leaf to fall. He turned to the more difficult yet more honorable path of compassion and service. And remembering Eirran's words, Willen turned to the task of convincing his friends that they had nothing to fear from him.

"Please, Aldini, sheath your sword, you know you could kill me easily, and I do not want to die because that tree bent down to hear me better. It did not bow to me; it must have blight in its ears that makes understanding me difficult. Please do not kill me.

"My friend, Aldertan, for you are my friend, how could you confuse me, not much more than a lad, with your Great Lord of the Forest? Do not say it too loudly, because if that Lord *is* nearby, he will surely want to destroy me for the impertinence of being mistaken for him."

Aldini recovered slowly, but first. He did not want Willen to be the Great Lord of the Forest. The Keeper had not decided if he was going to kill Willen or not, probably not if Willen solved the Druid/dragon problem, but no one would survive a battle with the Tree Lord.

Aldini shouted, "Do not run away, you cowards. My guards must be braver than this, or I will kill you myself. Here, Father, let me help you up. Kwildas, finished your afternoon Slayer prayers? Willen, what assistance do you need to complete this task before night falls?"

Willen was grateful for the understanding. Yes, there was an understanding now between him and the Keeper, an understanding that left unstated that they were peers with powers and responsibilities as leaders with their own challenges.

Willen walked as close to the protected trees as he felt he could without being attacked. He shouted in his conversation and the trees seemed to understand his dilemma, or maybe it was just that he was loud enough to be understood without bending over. Quickly, he asked the questions he had and then turned to his uneasy companions. "This tree wants to be pruned a bit. The others have needs and have made suggestions about how I can help them, but that can wait for now. I am worried that Bordan will send Kailty back to the bowtruckle mounds tomorrow and she will be badly hurt. I will give the little savages this treat and cut a few branches for my use for now."

Back in the courtyard, Willen tested the olive branches. He now held in his hands the object of his quest, of his travels that had covered over nine seasons thus far. He spread a few leaves on the bare ground. "Incendio!" A small spark jumped from the olive wood and a leaf smoldered into flame. None of his companions said anything but Willen thought that they probably noticed this was not any more powerful than his previous stick and hair combination.

He drew out a unicorn hair from around his carving of Constantia. Once again, the two items seemed to him to be disappointed to be parted. He carefully knotted the hair and wrapped it around the olive branch. He had cut several branches from the tree and thought for a minute that trying another might improve his power, but he realized he had been wishing in the wind. The hair was secure around the olive branch.

"Incendio!" The leaves burst into the largest conflagration those in the Keep had seen Willen conjure. They cheered his actions. Willen smiled as they clapped him on the back and invited him into to dinner.

He put on a brave face and began hoping. Willen hoped that someone with the Touch in Loundon's Towne would be more powerful with the olive branches, or even an olive branch and unicorn hair. He knew that the power he felt while starting the fire would be insufficient to fight Porto, who did not have a unicorn hair to add to his concentrating power.

Stellan left on the mission of finding a Fisher he could trust to bring back to join Loundon's Towne. He had a consignment of barrels and row makers for a merchant up the Albion coast, who traded with Gaul. Stellan knew finding a reliable Fisher would be a difficult assignment. Caedric had been correct, there were not that many Fishers Stellan would trust to bring back to join Loundon's Towne and all its secrets of resistance and industry.

Stellan needed a companion seagoing fishing ship. Even with Caedric's find of a very successful series of beds of river fish, the community needed more fish in their diet than the two could provide, even if his wasn't a goods transporting ship more than half the time. There had been a complaint of a fishy smell in the last barrels he had delivered. Those barrels had been in the bottom of the hold and had been sloshed by fish-littered bilge water. This load of barrels had been lashed to the deck and in the top of the hold. The ship's balance was a little precarious but not dangerous. If a major storm arose, he would cut them loose to float behind his seagoing boat.

Stellan, Torban, Baijan the House Builder, and Baijan's huge son, Trotan, had discussed for nearly a moon, the design of a seagoing fishing boat that was not a fishing boat at all. It would be built specifically to transport trade goods from the craftsmen of Loundon's Towne.

The first three times they'd sat around a fire discussing such a craft they had all stopped in frustration when they reached the same point in drawing the lines for such a boat in the dirt. The logical design would be just a man's length longer than two times the size of Stellan's present fishing boat. That was not the problem.

When a fishing boat arrived with its catch, it was low and heavy in the water and was run aground in order to be unloaded. Once the fish were removed, the boat was much lighter and sat easily on the water, barely touching the bottom. Then ropes were used to hold the boat in place so it would not float off before it was manned and ready to leave. But a boat transporting goods would leave Loundon's Towne in a manner opposite that

of a fishing boat. It would be light and empty when it arrived (unless it was carrying goods from elsewhere), and heavy when it departed. A boat filled with trade goods sat low in the water, making it very difficult to launch. Mooring the boat out in deeper water did not help, the deep water made it difficult and time-consuming to carry the goods out to be placed on the ship.

Stellan's current boat only lowered an arm's length when it was loaded. Ropes and an anchor held the boat at a depth, which was not too deep to load by hand. But a boat built according to the proposed new design would drop too deep into the water for this practice to be used.

On the fourth night that the four men had sat discussing the design problem, Trotan, who had not been heard in previous discussions, finally spoke and said, "The problem is not bringing the boat to the shore. The problem is taking the shore to the boat."

The three others knew he was right and they knew just as well that he was a bit daft with his analysis. However, they quickly realized that he was brilliant.

"Stellan, you said this boat will drop just more than a man's length deeper into the water as it goes from empty to full."

"For a normal man," Stellan said with a wry smile in his voice and on his face. "It might not drop higher than from your shoulders down, Trotan."

The four chuckled and Trotan blushed at his size.

The youngest and largest of the four continued, undaunted by their ribbing. "If we build a platform on the land and anchor it deeply like the main beams of the Diagon, and then we build it to extend out over the water to a point where we can load and unload a goods transporting boat without it touching bottom, then we will solve the loading issue. The platform pieces that go under water will have to be designed to prevent it sinking into the muddy bottom. Perhaps we will need to place stones carefully under where it will rest. We construct it so it floats as we place these stones and position the platform. Then, when all is ready, we remove the flotation aids and actually place heavy boulders permanently on the platform to hold it in place on the stones in the riverbed. The beams and boards under water will have to be made with heartwood and perhaps even coated with some of Lindern and Vanch's bow coating concoction. When cooking it smells like old fish, dirty feet, and rotten cabbage all mixed together, but it should help protect from water rot."

This dissertation had been a longer speech than anyone, including his father, had ever heard from the gigantic young apprentice House Builder. But it was obvious in an instant that these well conceived ideas made all of their plans for a transporting vessel viable.

Stellan arrived back in Loundon's Towne with not one Fisher, but four brothers (none twins) who all fished and owned their own seagoing fishing vessels.

Each brother's boat had a log as round as a man and one and a half times a man's height tied to the tops of its mast. There were other limbs attached to the logs. The boats were a bit top heavy in appearance with these rigs, but they sailed true enough, though not quite as efficiently as they could have. Two sideboards had been added to each to maintain way with the top heaviness.

Caedric had been livid at their arrival because Torban had not forewarned him. Stellan told Caedric that the logs helped provide instant anchoring when needed and also helped place the nets farther out from the boats. They had arrived just as Caedric was going out and he did not want to miss this day's payment of the gold bit. He sailed off muttering to himself about madness arriving daily.

As he sailed around a bend in the Tameas River, Torban asked, "Stellan, what are the logs for?"

"Why, Torban, imagine a boatload of these invaders coming up to attack and confiscate your hold full of trade goods. Now imagine as the invaders' boat nearly touches the side of one of those boats, the log is released and the limbs guides it out over the invaders' craft where it drives straight through the deck and the craft's bottom, sinking it in less time than it takes to scramble back from our boat to theirs. These brothers tell me the invaders call themselves Celts, and none of them can swim it seems.

"Now I ask you, Torban, how long do you imagine it will take to find Fishers better than Ludno and his brothers to join us?"

That night everyone enjoyed the welcoming feast for the four brothers and their families, including Caedric. He and Dorgelt had had a verbal contest between them over which was worse -too many Fishers, or a woman teaching hunting and fighting skills. Caedric and Dorgelt had enjoyed the drunkenness they'd achieved, until the next morning.

Reldy appeared to be in good shape physically, other than his eyes. He was a strong lad and told them he had been excellent with a sling. "I could usually hit anything not moving too fast farther away than two huts' length, and I could hit anything closer. I wish I had my sling."

The others looked at each other uncomfortably. Before they could say anything he continued, "I know I probably cannot hit anything but a nearby hut, but I would like to think that I could make some fight."

"Lad, I have a sling for you," said Kwildas. "It is made with dragon heartstrings and a piece of the soft stomach of the dragon. We Slayers carry this as a sign that we have conquered a dragon. It's unlikely we will meet another Slayer this far from the lands where dragons roam freely, but if you see someone riding in with a dragon hide cloak, you may not want to wave that thing.... Oh, Reldy, I'm sorry. I did not mean to mock your blindness."

Reldy actually laughed. "Sir, you are the first one to speak to me like I was normal. I know I'll never be the same again, but I appreciate you speaking that way, and I promise to hide the sling if you say to, and guard it as my own otherwise."

Kwildas handed the sling to the blind lad. The moment Reldy felt the dragon heartstrings, he said, "Is it supposed to be warm to the touch?"

"No, it has never been warmer than anything else." Kwildas took the sling back for a moment and shook his head. He silently offered it to Aldini and

Aldertan who felt nothing unusual. Willen took it and held it for a moment, then with no comment he handed it to Haana.

"Oh, it feels very warm to me," she said.

"It did to me also," agreed Willen.

Haana handed it back to Reldy and by mutual silent consent no one mentioned this again.

Reldy had told them in their conversations that it was Bordan's custom to ride Grang around their encampment and then fly through the mountains to give the dragon its wings for a while.

Willen had been searching his scrolls and had developed the spell he needed to execute the plan he and Kwildas had conceived. The bowtruckle-guarded olive branch and unicorn hair combination gave him slightly more power than the odd holly and hair combination had. It would be enough - barely enough - he hoped.

"So, you report my bride-to-be wears leather men's clothes now, yet you say she is more beautiful and now taller than when I first met..."

"Silence, you oaf! I still have not decided if you will have the girl or not. You have behaved yourself, but there is still nearly a season until the harvest faire." Porto had backhanded Bonderman. The would-be Keeper had not been seriously hurt but he had learned to fall when hit and act hurt. It usually prevented more serious actions on Porto's part.

"So, you say that they prepare for a fight, do they? If a few who are not Hunters carry bows, and a few carry knives too long for their craft, then these stupid towne's folks think they can fight us?"

"I can kill any three men with swords..." started Bonderman.

"I said 'Silence,' you large bag of bear droppings!" Porto's olive stick was in his hand and pointed at Bonderman's head. The big man fell to the floor quivering and pleading.

"SILENCE!"

Finally there was silence other than the rattling of bones in fear.

"You can fight any three but what if they are three *and* three, or thirty-three for that matter? You have the brains of a dead sow and smell like one as well." Porto lowered his olive stick. "We will have to surprise these Loundon's Towne fools. Perhaps it should be Porto Towne. We will visit them in roughly a moon."

The golden horn of the dragon glinted in the light of dawn. There were sparkles of this early light reflecting off of the green scales on its body and wings.

The Druid riding on the dragon's back could be seen smiling as he flew towards the young man fidgeting, not knowing where to run, at the edge of the rocky outcroppings. He wondered if this was the one who had attempted to slay his dragon and *had* killed his brother. No, this one was little older than a lad. He couldn't be a Dragonslayer. In seconds he was much closer. No, this lad could not be a Slayer. The Dragonslayers would never take a lad with a lazy eye into their training academy.

Willen stood there, acting like he was trying to run in two different directions at once. He wanted to look panicked but not go too far from the rope.

In spite of Bordan's commands, Grang resisted the command to breathe fire and lowered its head to gore Willen, the only human to ever survive one of its attacks and the one who had killed the master, Bordo.

Just like Kwildas had said that it would.

Just like it would have to for Willen's only slimmest of chances to survive the next few moments.

"Remulcumium Leviosa!"

It was the heaviest rope Willen could raise to the height of two men. The rope was not strong enough to hold a dragon, but Kwildas said that it did not have to hold but for a moment - just long enough.

The rope had been arranged in a slipknot and then stiffened with hoof glue to help maintain the shape of a loop while being levitated off of the ground.

The dragon noticed the looped rope just before its head went through it. This too helped our hero. The slightest change in direction slowed the beast a bit and cinched the slipknot around its head.

The rope snapped like a string just a moment after it tightened around the dragon's neck.

But the dragon's head was already folding over and down towards the rocks. Its horn caught between two boulders. Its neck broke instantly. Its body followed over and broke its spinal cord in several places on the rocks. Bordan was a dead skin-bag of broken bones a fraction of a moment later.

Willen's Luck must have been on a holiday. Willen stood watching the last faint quivers of the flying lizard's death rattles, and he was completely unscathed.

Bordan had not come back from his morning ride on Grang. The two had never been gone this long. The six heavily armed warriors were uneasy. Actually, they were panicking. They had been collected by the two brothers as a part of this expedition because they were skilled fighters and unimaginative. Now that they had no leaders, their natural reaction was to ravage and kill everything in sight. Only Kailty was in sight.

The nominal leader, the one who could kill the others if he so chose, had always thought that this girl would be... well, would be worth his attentions.

Somehow Reldy had led his friends to the encampment. He moved by feeling the ground's height changes with his feet, and by listening to the sounds of the water from the nearby stream. Aldertan had heard of people who had been blinded, whose other senses, such as hearing, became extra acute, but Reldy's abilities were beyond the meaning of the word "extra."

With Haana's help, Reldy had led Aldini, Aldertan, Willen, and Kwildas up the creek to their enemies' camp. However, the other direction would be the natural avenue of escape, as the warriors saw it, because of the wooded valley in that direction. Reldy and Haana stayed where they were thought to be safe.

Aldini circled to the right. Aldertan and Willen went around to the left. Kwildas hobbled halfway around to the right in the time everyone else made it in place.

Aldini had been helping Willen *recover* the sword fighting skills he'd never had to begin with. Willen was now a decent swordsman, but he thought all six warriors should be better.

The plan had been that Aldini would stand and formally ask for their surrender once all of the rescuers were in place. While they were positioning themselves, a discussion was going on among the leaderless warriors. It finally stirred into an argument, which in moments became a shouting match.

"I want her!"

"No, let's kill her and be gone. If Bordan is dead or gone, and if we are discovered here, what will we do?"

Swords were drawn, and the one who wanted to kill Kailty *afterwards*, the largest and fiercest, faced the two others while he held the slip of a girl forcefully in one hand.

"No! Leave her alone!" The sound of the swords being drawn had startled Kailty's brother. Reldy had probably been correct that the drawn swords meant his sister would die in mere moments.

The largest, still holding the girl by the arm, made the first step towards Reldy and Haana. All of the would be liberators knew he would kill them easily. All felt a similar fear for the two youngsters, but Aldini spoke first.

"You are surrounded! I am Aldini, Keeper of this Land, and I offer to accept your surrender and will not harm you." He was desperate to save his daughter.

In moments Aldertan, Willen, and Kwildas had risen and shouted similar words of warning and challenge.

"Surrender" is not a word that Celts, particularly Celtic warriors, understand. Oh, they understand the meaning of the word. What they do not understand about it is that it is a condition they might accept.

Celts don't surrender.

The only thing shouting the word accomplished was to galvanize all of the warriors into action. They all advanced towards their enemies and began fighting. Almost all of them. Kwildas was the largest and most formidable looking of the band of rescuers. He also was the feeblest. Because he was positioned in the rocks where the least likely means of escape lay, none of the six advanced towards him. He slipped on a few loose pebbles and fell hard on his right hip. He would be able to walk back to the Keep in a few minutes, but he was now out of the ensuing action.

The least powerful warrior advanced towards Aldertan. Though he was old enough to relinquish his position as Keeper to Aldini, he was able to fight this one on even terms for the duration of the short battle. The best swordsman of the six headed towards Aldini. They were evenly matched, though Aldini soon won. However, such fights last a very short period of time that seems like a small eternity to those fighting it. Aldini's fight would consume all of his time in the fracas.

The three remaining unencumbered Celts headed towards Willen. The largest Celtic fighter had his booty from this battle, the girl, and headed towards the blinded boy and young girl. He viewed this direction as his avenue of easiest escape.

Kwildas unsuccessfully fought in nearly tearful frustration to rise with his hurt hip to intercede between Haana and Reldy and the warrior advancing on them. He had the best opportunity to give account of what happened.

Facing three warriors, Willen had no other choice. He stood between them and their best path of escape. He knew that they could bring back others from their homeland to the Aldertani Keep. That he would not allow. He drew Torban's blade.

Willen never truly understood that the sheer beauty and obvious quality of that blade marked him as the great swordsman that he was not. Thus, all three advanced on him instead of offering single combat as was common practice.

However, two seasons before, Willen had stood dully with stick and unicorn hair in hand as the three men who'd chased Phannel the veela had quickly dispatched him with two punches. That was *not* the Willen facing these three this day. When it came to using an axe to fell trees, the former wood gatherer had developed his chopping skills with both hands. So the left-handed Willen held his magnificent blade in his right hand, which the warriors expected, and he held his olive branch and unicorn hair in his left.

Barely blocking the first man's vicious swing, Willen brought up his power concentrator and said, "*Petrificus Totalis!*" Willen stepped around this frozen foe in time to block the swing of the next and cast, "*Incendio!*" This set the clothing of Willen's second assailant on fire.

Willen had thought long and hard about every confrontation he had ever faced and everyone he could imagine he might face. Because he often hesitated in a fight when some unexpected development occurred, he knew that he had been fortunate that no one had killed him thus far. Aldini's training had quickly gone from an attempt to recoup Willen's non-existent sword fighting skills to teaching him *how* to fight with a sword. "You must always imagine what you can do in the next few steps of a fight, Willen. But it is more important to imagine what your opponent can do in those same steps."

Willen and Aldini had discussed sword fighting and the variety of situations he might face in such fights. Later, by himself, Willen had thought through all of the scenarios he could imagine when he would need to use his magik to fight. He had also envisioned fighting with the combination of magik and sword. What if he had to face Porto and Bonderman at the same time? This concern focused his attention quite easily on thinking through possible methods of defense and attack.

After seeing one of his companions petrified and the other set on fire, the third attacker realized that Willen must be a Druid also, even though he wasn't dressed like one. He had an olive stick and he knew how to use it. Under normal circumstances this warrior would have cringed in fear before the wielder of such power, but his fighting fever was up, and he decided in an instant that he would never face the torturing curse again. He would kill this Druid before him or die in the attempt. Therefore, instead of cutting into Willen with the first chop of his sword, he cut the olive branch in half.

This saved Willen's life. And it reduced him to a man without magik, a man who thought himself a poor swordsman. But he was also a man of destiny and a man driven by the same battle lust as the men he faced.

Also, he was only a poor swordsman in comparison to Aldini, the finest swordsman within many days' ride.

The chop and swing was the primary method of fighting used by Celtic warriors. They carried a large heavy blade used to batter an opponent as much as cut. The blade Torban had given Willen had barely worked for cutting wood. Unknown even to Torban at the time of the blade's inception, the blade's design made for an excellent weapon.

Not having his olive stick anymore, Willen took the longer grip in both hands. The Celt he faced considered two hands on a sword a sign of inability and weakness. Aldini had refused to let Willen fight with two hands. Willen demonstrated over the next few seconds why two-handed swordplay held certain advantages. Willen had also not been allowed by Aldini to fight with his natural hand, his left hand, which was also strongest.

"Porto, my old friend, it has been many cycles since I brought you to these shores. I hear that you have subdued perhaps the finest town in this rainy miserable land."

The rain had been pouring for seven days straight and Wollo seemed to always pick the rainy days to land in Albion.

"Wollo, my much esteemed sea captain. I see you prosper from the efforts of our Celtic brothers reaping the dubious bounty available in this land. Is this a new boat? Where did you steal it?"

The nearly visible sarcasm and the looks in their eyes destroyed any appearance of *friendship* or *esteem* between the two. "What news do you bring from my brothers? I thought they would have been with you on this voyage. Do you know of any problems with their recruiting?"

"No, no. If anything your enticements have made recruiting too good. They have been able to gather more of our fine Celtic warriors and of a higher quality than they expected. Portan and Portag send their best wishes and ask that you be patient as they choose the finest fighters to join you on your quest for dominion. They also asked that I tell you that they will arrive with their first contingent in a fortnight, and the rest will be here by harvest time."

"Thank you for your kind assistance in relaying the message," said Porto as he placed a gold bit on the table and hid his purse back under his smock. He resented having to pay for information, but charged dearly for it when requested by others. "Good day, Captain Wollo." Porto resented even that title. He remembered that Wollo had gained the cushy position of boat's captain simply because he had not become ill and lost his last meal the first time they had launched in a boat. Now the big lump of a man was fat from sitting on his boat and charging others to travel back and forth between Albion and the coast of Gaul.

Well, his brothers would arrive with the first of his larger forces in time to visit Loundon's Towne a fortnight before the harvest faire. They would kill the ones he had in mind and then threaten the rest. He knew just which lives to extinguish that would not threaten the success of the faire, but would leave the people of Loundon's Towne docile and subservient. When the larger forces arrived they would enter Loundon's Towne at the faire's end and conquer the people for good. It would be his Keep and he would have four seasons to subdue these unruly and disrespectful natives of that community. The following harvest faire should not suffer from this transition.

He thought he would be killed after the last fight, or maybe he would be killed during the fight to save the trouble of ending the life of the one who had been his Keeper designate. Anything could be arranged. And then the girl that Bonderman desired would be his, Porto's, to break as he pleased.

The largest warrior raiding the Aldertani Keep, Klinfermin, had tired in moments of trying to drag the girl, his spoils of war, out of the battle. She screamed and he hit her with the hilt of his sword, knocking her into momentary passivity.

Kailty's scream had caused Reldy to stand and call her name. Klinfermin saw the lad and recognized him immediately. You saw few blind boys his age. The would-be ravager also saw the older girl stand and try to pull the blinded lad out of the way. She was more to his liking.

He decided to kill this girl in his hand, kill the blind boy - no real sport in that, and then drag away the older girl. He wanted both of the girls but one was proving tough enough. Better one bird in his arms than two slowing his escape. He raised his sword slowly, fighting her increasing struggles. He heard more screams from the direction of his escape. He looked to see, and sure enough, he would have to clout *her* into silence also.

He drew back his sword and realized that his head *really* hurt all of a sudden. He also realized he was having trouble holding up his sword. The last thing he realized was that he was having difficulties realizing anything.

In the eleven years he had remaining, Kwildas, the experienced Dragonslayer and traveler to the lands of dragons and giants, would relish telling again and again how Reldy the Sightless ManSlayer had stood up, pushed Haana into a safe place in the rocks, drew the dragon heartstring sling, and placed a stone in the center of the forehead of the ruffian about to kill his sister.

Aldini finally dispatched his opponent with a thrust-parry-thrust of the point of his sword. The point always beats the edge, and these Celts, though brutal warriors, lacked any finesse in fighting.

He looked and saw the man that had been approaching his daughter was down and on his back. He turned and saw his father winded, nursing a slight cut, but victorious. Finally he turned to see how Willen was faring.

These Celts may have all lacked finesse, but finesse was not needed when the odds were three to one. Aldini started to run to Willen's aid. He would not arrive in time to impact the fight unveiling before him.

Willen went from a right-handed swordsman to a two-handed swordsman favoring his left hand. This was very unfamiliar to the first Celt, the best with the blade facing our hero.

The Celt made three quick chops with his sword from right, left, and then right again. This order was familiar to Willen; Aldini favored it. Willen blocked it easily because of the flexibility and strength he had using two hands. Thus he almost matched the strength of the much larger man he faced. His lazy eye saw that another Celt was coming around to his left to join the fight. Willen started a left-right-left combination that was unfamiliar to the first warrior. The huge man had barely managed to block the first, blocked the second more readily, and prepared for the next left. Willen stopped at left-right- and drove the point through the man's throat.

Willen pulled his blade, received a generous coating of red, and faced the man still smoldering from being on fire.

This man was furious but cautious nonetheless. He moved in a half circle while he faced Willen. This placed the man Willen had petrified at the back of the inventor of magik. This second assailant, the tallest but not broadest of the six Celts, used his long arms to try to strike from out of Willen's reach. The distance made his swings take longer but each swing came in with more speed and force. The tall warrior saw his opponent shudder from the last impact so he reached back farther for a greater, more vicious swing.

Willen walked right into the man's fighting zone, interfered with his swinging arc, and thrust Torban's blade into the meat of his chest, right into his heart.

The huge muscles of this one grabbed Willen's blade in death. Willen struggled, hardly able to pull it out of the man's chest. He finally wrenched the blade from the dead man, a gruesome task, heard the loudest shout he had ever heard, and lunged to his left.

Willen's third attacker, the sole Celt still breathing, had recovered from his paralysis and was furious. His roar warned Willen. He came forward hoping to pierce our hero and keep running away. This last warrior knew another was running up behind him and he could not fight two at once.

Willen's lunge to the left prevented his death and converted the stab in his back to a painful and bloody cut under his right arm. Willen swung his whole body around to his right and embedded his blade in the neck of this last attacker. The blade stuck, the last man grabbed it in his death throes, and the dying man's forward momentum ripped the blade out of Willen's hands.

Willen had no idea how the others were progressing in their fights. Now swordless, Willen dropped to his knees and pulled a spare olive stick out of his cloak. He loosed the unicorn hair from around the carving of Constantia. She would forgive him later of his inattention to her at this moment. Willen had already created a slip-knot in one end to speed the process.

Willen's wound was serious; he was losing blood quickly. He was feeling faint. He could die from the loss if it was not stopped soon. No one realized this was so, except Haana, who had none of her healing tools with her.

Willen slumped to the ground in a near faint. Haana dropped to her knees beside him. Only then did the others understand the danger of his wound.

She took the olive stick and unicorn hair from his hand, tightened the hair, and held it like she had seen Willen hold it. "Willen, I have no tools to help you, how can I use magik for this?"

When Willen and Haana had been watching over the sleeping Reldy, they had discussed the possibility that she might have the Touch for healing. She'd thought he was moonstruck, but Willen had researched the Latin words that might be used for cuts, broken bones, and other maladies. Before this moment they had tried none of them and she had never considered attempting Willen's magik.

Willen spoke as if about to go to sleep, "Try '*Facia*.'" for bandage "

She spoke the command with fear in her voice and nothing happened.

"Say it again, like you really mean it, Haana."

She tried again. "It didn't work, Willen."

"Try '*Percuro*,' to cure completely." Willen felt like a nap would be wonderful but he couldn't because Haana was shouting.

"That didn't work either, Willen. Willen! Help me!"

"Say it like you truly believe."

"Nothing. Willen, don't leave me. I want you to go save Constantia!" Haana was nearly hysterical. The others looked on, dumbfounded. People either died in battle or they didn't, warriors knew little of healing an internal cut such as this.

Her name, Constantia, called Willen back to Haana.

"Haana, what is the word for that strip of leather you use to draw your bag of jewelry shut?"

"'*Stricta*,' I call it a *stricta*, Willen."

"Oh, well try '*Curatio Strictum*.'"

She nodded and opened her mouth to speak but Willen continued.

"And, Haana, when you say it, say it like you're speaking to an older brother that you love dearly. And wake me when it's over." He passed out.

In that moment Haana realized she *did* love Willen like the older brother she'd never had but had always wanted. He had come to mean a lot to her in the moon and a half he had been living in the Aldertani Keep.

That day everyone present came to believe in magik.

"Constantia. It's finished. The first bow worked fine but I thought you needed just a little more reach and a little more pull. But that's not the best part."

Every bow Lindern and Vanch made had a very similar color to that of the raw wood, only shinier from the cooked flaxseed oil. The soot was such a small part of the total volume of the coating that it changed the color of the bows little once dry.

Lindern held a bow out to Constantia that was almost as dark as the leather fighting attire Graller the Tanner had made for her. This bow had not only been made specifically for her, it had been made to go with her outfit. She placed an arrow in the bowstring guard and tested the bow's pull.

"It is similar but not quite. It just "feels" better. Thank you, Lindern. Let's see."

You could not improve her accuracy, but this arrow flew almost three huts farther than usual and hit the tree she had aimed for right in a knothole.

When they arrived back in Loundon's Towne, Lindern was still blushing from the kiss she had planted on his forehead.

Most compared Constantia and Lindern to big sisters and little brothers. Some thought the two looked like owner and pet puppy.

This day Caedric saw the two together and also saw the bow in her hand. One more sober confirmation that the fools in this town were spoiling for a fight.

The fools!

Willen had been gone from the Aldertani Keep for a number of days. His legs and arms were no longer screaming at him at the end of each day of dragging his carryall loaded with dragon hides and other dragon goods.

Kwildas had insisted that as the Slayer of the dragon, Willen had first rights to the bounty of his labor. Aldertan had a cloak made for Willen from the hides. Kwildas had told him that the hides could be cut when intended, but that clothing made from the hide of a dragon you had slain yourself, would form a protective layer for the wearer when in a fight. Under his right arm still ached a bit when he thought about fighting with a sword.

That had been two sword fights ago.

Because of the recuperative powers of the olive stick and unicorn hair in Haana's hand, Willen had been almost completely well from the dangerous wound in only two days. Kwildas had made sure that Willen ate dragon steaks at all three meals and he quickly recovered his strength and stamina.

Much to Willen's chagrin, Aldini insisted that they still had to duel. They spent a fortnight fighting through most of each day. Aldertan had temporarily taken over day-to-day management of the Keep so Aldini could continue preparing Willen for their battle. Aldini no longer insisted that Willen fight with one hand, only, and at that his right hand. He helped Willen discover many ways to battle with either or both hands.

The day of the duel arrived. The courtyard had been cleared. Only Aldini, Aldertan, Kwildas, Haana, Reldy, and Kailty were present.

Aldertan had stepped forward and announced the forthcoming duel as if the courtyard were full of noisy observers. "Aldini, keeper of the Aldertani Keep has challenged Willen the Dragonslayer to a duel. Willen has demanded and received the Right of Succor under our Celtic traditions. All of Willen's demands for assistance, in keeping with his status as an opponent of a Keeper of Land, have been met. There only remains the duel and the awarding of privileges of victory to the vanquisher."

Aldini had worn all black for this solemn occasion. Willen had not received his dragon skin cloak yet, and he would not have been allowed to wear it in the duel if he had. Therefore, Willen had worn the only clothes he had.

The two met in the center of the courtyard. Willen was nervous; Aldini showed no emotions whatsoever.

Willen hoped to put up a good fight, and if he was not wounded too badly, he hoped Aldini would show mercy and release him after his recovery. He stole a glance in Haana's direction and noticed the olive stick and unicorn hair he had given her were not in her hand. He hoped they were nearby.

At Aldertan's command, they raised their swords and touched blades. The older gent quickly raised his sword from underneath their touched swords. With the clashing metal sounds unique to swords, he had pushed their two blades apart. The duel began.

Willen decided to be aggressive and struck first.

Aldini immediately dropped his sword after no effort whatsoever.

Aldertan announced a little quieter, "Willen has defeated Aldini in a fierce battle that we will all speak of in hushed tones for generations to come."

A fly flew into Willen's wide-open mouth and flew out when the stunned victor exhaled.

"Willen the Dragonslayer and inventor of magik, precursor of the New Way to come, is victorious and is awarded the privileges of victory." This last proclamation had been spoken in a normal conversational tone. All present had gathered around the young victor. "So, Willen," Aldertan continued. "What are your demands?"

"I..." Willen gulped and hardly knew what to ask. He was too busy working out what to think. "I don't know. I... That is....Erm, what is the custom among the Celts for the privileges?"

"A victor can demand whatever he wants. Most victors demand the death of the vanquished, perhaps the death of all of his family, and all of his lands and wealth. I, for one, hope you will not be so *demanding*. How may we help you, my son?"

"How may I help you, my fellow Slayer?" said a smiling Kwildas.

"How may I help you, Willen, brother I have never had but have now?" Haana smiled through a few happy tears.

"Willen, I am useless for so many things, but you saved my sister," said Reldy. "She and I would gladly travel with you as your slaves if my bumbling would not slow your journey." Though Reldy still ran into objects in unfamiliar places, he hardly ever slowed anyone down. He had a quick pace and strode as though he saw his way.

Aldini spoke, "I knew if I released you from the duel you would want to leave for Albion immediately. Having seen you fight, I knew that one more fortnight of training would be very important to your future success. You are now twice the swordsman you were in our fight against the six, and I do believe quite my equal - one worthy to wield that magnificent blade of Torban's. So." Aldini took half a step back and proclaimed in his most officious tone, "Willen the DragonSlayer, Willen the Three Slayer, Willen, my brother in battle, how may I and all of Aldertani Keep help you?" Aldini's face showed his pride in his favorite student in arms.

Willen had bribed the bowtruckles with wood lice and the oldest of the olive trees had confessed it had a major limb that needed to be removed. The tree was two-thirds of its original size in foliage when the limb had been removed. Interestingly, the bowtruckles had swarmed to Reldy's feet when he had walked with Haana to the site of the cutting. She had walked away only for a few moments to fetch a water skin for the lad, and no one had seen the bowtruckles near him until it was too late to stop them - but there was nothing to stop. A dozen bowtruckles, the largest Willen had ever seen, had come to Reldy's feet and bowed before him. The boy seemed to know they were there and knelt down.

The largest bowtruckle jumped up into Reldy's arms. The creature was about as tall as a man's hand was long. It positioned itself in Reldy's hands so that he could snap the little creature's neck if he wanted. Reldy called, "Willen, I think this creature wants me to kill it. I do not want to, but if I do not what will happen? Do the trees know?"

Willen asked, and the oldest olive tree assured Willen that nothing would happen either way.

"Reldy, the tree says that he is the king of bowtruckles in these parts. He apologizes for attacking you with his fellow bowtruckles and offers his life in atonement. They didn't know that you were my friend, the friend of the one who talks to trees, and were being forced to assault them."

"Do I have to kill him? I don't want to."

"No, you do not have to. I hope you don't. He makes the offer, but I am sure he would rather live."

Reldy pulled the bowtruckle up from that position and placed it on his knee. He felt for its two-fingered hand and shook it. The little creature jumped to Reldy's neck and hugged him. Then he jumped to Reldy's shoulder and appeared to be speaking into his ear. Reldy whispered to the little creature in turn. This conversation went on for the rest of the time it took to cut the large limb and prepare it for hauling back to the Keep.

Willen kept looking over at the two young people and the bowtruckles. They looked like older children playing with live dolls.

When they were walking back by the cart carrying the olive wood, and everything on the cart proved to be settled, Willen noticed there was a bowtruckle riding on Reldy's shoulder.

"Is that a pet, Reldy?"

"No they are my friends now. They are going to take turns riding on my shoulder and helping me see where I am going. I like Haana being with me... that is... well," the boy blushed, "I appreciate her help but she can't spend all of her time leading me around."

"But, Reldy, I don't mind..."

"No, Haana, your gift of magik and healing - somehow you must develop it, it's too important. I will be around when you're finished for the day to...er...talk, or go for walks." They both blushed.

The Keep had a part time board cutter and he helped Willen prepare the beams of the length and size needed for his carryall.

Willen also had a supply of olive wood cut into strips for experimentation, and a dozen, dozen sticks of the proper size. All of this wood in various forms combined together to look like it was part of the construction of the carryall if no one looked too closely.

The goods for sale he carried in his disguise as a peddler would be dragon hides and other dragon by-products. Willen had been very impressed with the dragon heartstring sling and Reldy's success with it. Willen still felt warmth when he held dragon heartstring. Reldy had been a good sling man before his blinding. With any other sling his aim was, well, was what you would expect from a blind man. However, with the dragon heartstring sling, Reldy was able to hit most still targets the size of a man if they weren't more than a hut away. Killing the warrior about to kill Kailty was still a miracle beyond the miracle of his abilities with Kwildas' special sling.

The amazing thing had been just how much heartstring there was in a dragon. Willen carried enough on reels of light-weight wood to stretch most of the way across the Loundon's Towne main square. There was plenty of dragon skin for Willen and still he donated more than half the skin harvested from Grang to the Aldertani Keep.

Willen and Aldini had an agreement. They both knew it was impossible for them to ever meet again. However, they both knew it was impossible for them to have met in the first place. Aldini agreed to take and use the dragon goods for the good of the Keep without payment to Willen. In return Aldini would store and protect from any harm the wood from the olive tree Willen could not carry with him. Perhaps, at some future time their grandchildren might meet, and they might need olive wood from these particular trees.

There was a sad but joyous parting feast.

There was a sad but joyous parting the next day.

No one's life would ever be the same.

Eight days after leaving Aldertani Keep, Willen rested at midday in the early summer sun. An owl flew nearby, circled, then swooped down and landed not a man's length away from where Willen sat. Our hero had been too stunned to move and knew not whether an owl could or would hurt him.

It kept raising one leg and pointing it towards Willen. He figured it might be hurt or something and moved slowly closer to examine a possible wound. There was a small piece of parchment tied to its leg and it had shifted around so that it was not visible until Willen made a closer inspection.

Making cooing noises he thought might comfort the bird, he untied the parchment. Once untied, the owl hooted in exasperation to *inform* Willen what the sound was that an owl made.

It was the thinnest and lightest parchment Willen had seen, but there was Latin written on it. He was startled when he realized his name appeared at the top of the writing.

Willen,

I feel like a fool doing this but I would be a bigger fool not to try, just for the possibility. If you are reading this then my newpet owl might be a magikal creature. (I made up the word 'magikal' just now because I needed an adjective using the word magik. Hope you don't mind.) If you are not reading this

then I have long ago torn up this parchment, hoping no one saw me do this.

I had written a message one day to send to a friend on the other side of Remers. The lad I use for messages - not too bright but dependable - had taken another message elsewhere.

Well, you probably won't believe this but I sometimes talk to myself out loud. I set the message down and said out loud to myself, "I need that to go to Slangen." This newpet owl jumped off of its perch, grabbed the note, and flew out of the opening in the wall I have to allow sunshine in during the day. I thought that note was gone for good and wrote another one. Then I went to lunch. Slangen arrived in a hurry just as I had finished eating. The owl had delivered the note. We experimented and the owl only seems to deliver to those with the Touch as you called it. Slangen is younger than I and he walked at the start of the day in a direction unknown to me.

I released this owl (my youngest daughter calls him Beemy, silly name) and Beemy flew to Slangen with the note.

So, I am too curious to not try a major test such as this. If you receive this, please write a note back to me telling of your journeys to date. If Beemy seems very tired, do not write a note heavier than this one. As a matter of fact, if he is tired please write a lighter one. I have told him to wait for your reply and this seems to work with others.

I am getting so excited with the possibilities I cannot stand still and write. I close now because it is early morning and Beemy can fly to you sooner if I release him sooner.

If you have read this far then this is a success and I am near faint with the possibilities.

Best wishes for a safe return home and a fine destiny,

Eirran

Willen wrote as small as he could, and as neatly as he could so it could be read. He told of his experiences in clipped fashion and was fearful Beemy would fall out of the air if he wrote more. Beemy had seemed rested and in no way harmed by the long flight, so Willen wrote on a slightly larger piece of parchment. As it was, the reply covered a small fraction of what Willen had seen and done.

He rolled the note up tightly and then had an idea. He unrolled it and the scroll in his back sack hidden in the very bottom. He took a dozen unicorn hairs out of the mass still there and rolled them up in the note to Eirran after he penned an addendum explaining what they were. He had no room to tell how he had acquired them.

He tied the note to Beemy's leg. The owl had been helping itself to this and that of Willen's lunchtime meal.

"Fly back to Eirran. That's a good owl."

Beemy gave Willen a parting look of condescension and flew straight north.

Willen spent the rest of that day and many days to come of his travels wishing he had been able to write and tell more to his oldest and dearest friend and mentor. He also wondered where he might find a pet owl such as Beemy.

Not quite a moon after leaving Aldertani Keep, Willen walked out of Cahors, a Celtic village of the Cadurci tribe, not too distant cousins to the Aldertani. He had been celebrated on his arrival when he told of his friendship with their cousins. He had eaten too big a meal the night before and had stayed up too late. He was leaving still a little early in the morning, but not as early as he usually liked to depart.

A number of the girls in Cahors had already gone out all over the forest trails hunting for mushrooms. He rarely left after this morning activity.

Willen found himself thinking once again about how wonderful it would be if he had an owl like Beemy. He longed to send a message to Constantia to tell of his progress, but he knew no one in Loundon's Towne could read or write and none had ever heard of Latin. How could he communicate with her and tell her at least that he was still alive?

The carved piece of holly around his neck hummed to him and vibrated. He took it out and looked at her face once again. He liked to move her face from one eye to the other. He liked the idea that they both could see her.

Around the next bend Willen *had* a strong impression that he should bear right instead of left. Left was more directly north but he felt like he *needed* to go right for some reason. Fearing Willen's Luck, he brought his sword out from under the dragon hides and made sure the unicorn hair was tight but not too tightly wound around an olive branch.

As he advanced he pondered once more the fact that the olive sticks that gave Porto so much power barely gave him a little more power than holly with a unicorn hair, even with a unicorn hair wrapped around the olive wood. He realized once again that Porto was probably stronger in the Old Way than he was in magik. But maybe some of those with the Touch in Loundon's Towne would be stronger with the magik he could teach them.

Willen was very glad he had trained with Aldini in the sword. If he was not a powerful one with magik, maybe he could be a part of his home's defense with Torban's blade. He would have to kill Porto without magik even if he was powerful in magik, so his training with the blade gave him another possible advantage. Something would work.

A flash of color caught the eye he was not pointing down the trail. He stopped and looked up and a bright scarlet and golden bird swooped right over him. He could have held up the blade and touched it; it had flown that close.

Several feathers fell from it. Willen picked them up to admire them. He transferred all but the largest feather to the hand holding his olive stick. He felt an amazing warmth flood that hand and a few sparks like those blown from a fire, only an unnaturally brighter red, shot from the end.

This startled Willen but he had little time to think of it. The bird swooped down again, flying like it was hurt and called to him with a song both wonderful and encouraging and a bit off key, something Willen thought impossible for a bird.

He started to run towards it. It circled and saw him following. Then it flew in a straight line, circling only to allow Willen to keep it in sight. Willen just knew something was wrong. He sped up and it was remarkable the distance he was covering while still dragging the carryall.

The bird barely cleared a small hill and did not fly up again. A moment later Willen heard a growl and a girl's scream, and several more growls. Dropping the poles to his carryall, Willen turned, drawing his large blade and his olive stick/unicorn hair combination. As he ran over the rise he saw Fiduenta, a young lass from the village of Cahors.

Six wolves circled her.

They were a mere instant from pouncing on her and tearing into her flesh. She screamed again and Willen roared as loudly as he could to distract the deadly beasts from her.

Then he cast, "*Petrificus Totalis!*" and one wolf froze in mid leap, falling past Fiduenta, a claw brushing her arm, drawing blood.

The next "*Petrificus Totalis!*" missed the wolf that swerved out of the path of the spell at the last moment. By this time Willen had run to the young woman, dropped his sword and olive stick combination, picked her, and threw her up into the branches of an oak.

"Do not come down until it is safe, regardless of what happens to me!" Willen looked into her eyes and saw abject fear. Her hysterical tears and cries, while shaking her head like she understood, convinced him she wouldn't do anything foolish.

"Foolish heroics are all mine," Willen thought.

He turned from the girl in the tree as a wolf struck the meaty muscle of his leg just below the knee. Willen wanted to scream but he did not want to give the girl any more reasons to be afraid. He almost laughed at this thought as the girl hysterically screamed louder than he had for someone to help.

He hit the wolf gnawing at his leg with his fist and it yelped, releasing him. Willen grabbed his sword and killed that wolf. He killed a second one with the blade but a third hit his right hand on the sword grip and ruined his two smallest fingers while badly tearing the flesh of the others on that hand. It had the sword in its jaws and dragged it away. Another wolf raced Willen to his olive stick. Fiduenta's screams provided eerie background sounds for the battle. She was getting louder and yet shriller somehow. Willen and the wolf met at the olive branch. He stooped to reach for it and the beast launched most of its body weight behind a claw aimed at Willen's face.

His lazy eye exploded in light and fire and pain beyond all comparison. It hurt more than when the clothing on his shoulder had been on fire and the dragon had been squeezing the life out of him. He suffered more than all of the burns he had ever had working with fires - all put together in one hurt. He had a new definition of pain that he would never be able to express.

He knew he was now blinded in that eye and could not tell if he had lost the eyeball altogether or if it still was in the socket somehow.

Through all of the pain and the even louder, shriller screams of Fiduenta, he knew he could not stop and console himself in his agony.

He picked up the olive branch. The unicorn hair was loose but he had no time, no thoughts, no love or compassion. He only had a cause - defeating the enemy and saving the girl. His whole life seemed to be about saving the girl. Somehow in the half sanity of his pain they all became and had all

been Constantia. He muttered "I love you," and turned to face the wolves.

The one petrified by his first spell was still frozen, but Willen saw with his remaining functional eye that it was moving slightly. He looked over the head of the three he faced and saw the scarlet and gold bird, dropping feathers in a branch too high to be reached.

One less to be saved.

At that moment, Willen heard the trilling of that bird. The tuneless notes thrilled his heart and gave courage where none should endure. The wolves stopped in their tracks. Willen, giggling with delirium in his pain, fancied that he saw looks of confusion and fear on their faces.

"Incendio!" "Incendio!" "Incendio!"

It was the wolves' turn to howl in pain as they loped away on fire from head to tail.

Willen fell to his knees and then to his side from the wracking torture in his head, hand, and leg. Fiduena still screamed and he wondered why. He raised his head and saw the wolf that he had petrified coming slowly towards him. He could not see his olive branch; he had dropped it nearby but had no wherewithal to seek it out.

The wolf ripped a chunk of flesh from his neck. New blinding pain. Willen knew he would bleed to death soon. The girl was hoarsely still trying to scream. Willen hoped she would stay in the tree until the wolf had had its fill of him and left her safe.

"Oh, Constantia," he gurgled. He wanted her name to be the last word he spoke.

The wolf changed the tone of its growl to one of caution. His head still exploding in pain and his life slowly but surely flowing from his neck, Willen opened his one good eye in time to see the scarlet and gold bird crash onto his chest. Feathers dropped from it all around him, and Willen despaired that there would be another unnecessary death this day.

Willen heard the wolf advancing cautiously. The bird leaned over him and dropped several tears on his neck and on his eye. Somehow he did not hurt quite as much.

Then the bird exploded into flame! The wolf yelped and ran, never to return to this spot of dead and wounded wolves. The girl found new strength to scream.

And Willen heard none of it.

~~~~~  
*Thanks for reading and reviewing.*  
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Author's Historical Notes - -

Aceituna - Spanish for "olive."

Etruria - The name for the Italian Peninsula before the time of Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome.

Curatio - from the Latin - "care , attention; especially medical attention, healing."

Strinxi -Strictum - from the Latin - "to tighten , to draw together."

"Curatio Strictum." - This is the oldest known Healing Spell in the history of magical medicine. In honor of the famous first healer of legend, this is the first medicinal spell taught at St. Mungo's Medical School.

"Remulcumium Leviosa!"- A spell to raise a rope into the air - remulcum - from the Latin - "a tow rope," and levo - from the Latin - "to raise up, levitate."

Cahors of the Cadurci - According to Madam Lupinia of the Institut d'Francais d'Gaulish Magikae, Cahors was a Celtic village that did exist in the summer of 382 B.C. Her Institut resides in that village in this day and time. Those of the Cadurci tribe were known for their great hospitality to travelers, their love of peddlers and all commercial venturers, and an irrational and absolute fascination with the Sunbird, dating from this period. Madam Lupinia was also kind enough to inform this researcher of the meaning of the following names, all of Gaulish origin, found in this chapter:

Fiduena - Gaulish for "of the forest."

Ludno - Gaulish name for "weapon."

The Drawing of Constantia the Warrior - Madam Lupinia also sketched Constantia in her leather fighting attire from the writings of this period.

~~~~~



*Aaran St Vines*  
*FanficAuthors.net*



Ollivander stared away and Harry felt compelled to break the darkening mood descending on his temporary employer.

"Sir, Willen is bleeding to death. What happened next?"

"Ah, yes, Mr. Potter. Thank you for reminding me of my place." This time there was a definite smile that moved all the way to Mr. Ollivander's silvery eyes.

*And so our story continues...*

*At that moment, Willen heard the trilling of the bird. The tuneless notes thrilled his heart and gave courage where none should endure. The wolves stopped in their tracks. Willen, giggling with delirium in his pain, fancied that he saw looks of confusion and fear on their lupine faces.*

*"Incendio!" "Incendio!" "Incendio!"*

*It was the three wolves' turn to howl in pain as they loped away, on fire from head to tail.*

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*Then the bird exploded into flame! The wolf yelped and ran, never to return to this spot of dead and wounded wolves. The girl found new strength to scream.*

*And Willen heard none of it.*

~\*~

Willen never thought it would be so sunny after death. Or so windy. Or that it would smell like fresh baked bread.

Or that everything would look so confusing and that he would fall to the ground the second he tried to rise from his prone position.

"Owww! My hand! My leg!"

"Willen! You should have called. Here, let me help you back to bed. How do you feel?"

Everything looked terribly wrong. Everything was so...right there in front of him - closer than close. The face that loomed into his view was so intensely *there!*

He shut his eyes tightly and croaked, "Where am I? Who are you? What is this upsetting place where everything looks so odd?"

"I am Fiduena and you are back in Cahors and recovering nicely. You saved my life; don't you remember?"

Willen could tell that she had her hands on both of his shoulders. He remembered a girl from the village of Cahors named Fiduena. What was it about her?

As the memories came crashing back into his mind he opened his eyes wide, gurgled in pain at the sight, and squeezed them shut again against the discomforting vision and the upsetting memories.

It was so intense! As if two Fiduenas were there right in front of him combined into one. He twisted under her hands, grabbed her wrists and tried to push her away. His eyes were squeezed shut so tightly. He moaned, "Why are you so close yet not close at all? You invade my head through my eyes."

She was very confused by his words but leaned back from him automatically. "Willen. I've pulled away from you and I'm standing back from you a little way. Nothing will hurt you. Open your eyes slowly and try to leave them open for at least a few moments. Please look in the direction of my voice. The sun is behind a cloud for the time being and it is not nearly as bright, and I'm standing away from it. Something has happened... maybe something very good has happened to your eyes, so try to open them and keep them open for at least a little while."

He did notice the sun was not as warm on his cheeks and the brightness was not bothering his eyes as it had been. But what was wrong with his sight?

He opened his eyes gingerly. Fiduena was not close. Her visage was not as close, but even at this distance she was so... vivid! There was so much more to looking at her than he had ever seen while looking at anyone else in his life.

One part of his brain told him that she was the same young woman that had danced by the fire that night before his horrid battle with the wolves. He shut his eyes again and said, "You are all right, aren't you? You weren't hurt by the wolves?"

"No. I will never be the same from the maddening fear of those few moments," she said with a sadness that hurt Willen's heart. "But I am alive and well and the claw scratch I have from that day has all but healed.

"Thank you, Willen." Her voice broke. "Thank you for saving my life. That was the bravest thing I have ever seen, or anyone in Cahors has ever heard of. Willen the Five Wolf Slayer."

More names and titles. He did not want more acknowledgements. The next title might kill him, he thought. This last title had come the closest of any so far. But he said none of this to Fiduena.

"Willen, I think you no longer have a lazy eye."

He opened his eyes and shot bolt upright and they bumped heads. She had sat down on the edge of his bedding a moment before he sat up. Now his hand hurt, his leg hurt, everything looked funny, *and* his head hurt.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"No, no. I sat down without telling you. I should have warned you. You're the one recovering from...." Willen felt her shudder through the bedding.

Willen swallowed and said, "What... what can you tell me of that day?" The events were rather vague to him, particularly the last moments.

"I'll tell you what I was able to piece together."

It was a new voice Willen did not recognize at all. He opened his eyes after turning his head in the direction of the new speaker. In the moment he held his eyes open he saw the face of a man probably near his own age of twenty summers, perhaps a little older. He remembered the man as the one who had danced with Fiduena several times on the night of his welcoming feast. Of course it was hard to be certain because as the man stood still, he looked like he was jumping up and down and side to side, all at the same time. Willen had thought there had been more to the look in their eyes than dancing. But the vision of this speaker was too intense for him to observe for more than a moment.

"This is Belu, Willen. Do you remember him from the feast?" When she saw Willen nod she continued. "Belu, please help me move Willen into the hut. I thought the fresh air and sunlight would agree with you, Willen. But now that you are awake, I believe it is too bright. The darker hut will help you adjust to your new seeing, Willen."

Belu asked, "What do you mean new...?"

"Shhhh. Belu. Just help me."

They grabbed his arms carefully. She took his right arm and first grabbed his forearm just behind his bandaged hand. He had not really noticed the bandage before. His left leg was stiff from the bandages on it and Willen drew in a sharp breath when he tried to put most of his weight on it.

"Lean on me as heavily as you need to, Willen," said Belu. "I have you if you have to be carried in."

Willen thought he remembered Belu as tall and now he realized he was also strong.

They placed him gently on straw bedding. As Belu lowered him the last bit, Fiduena placed a wooden cup of water in his hand.

"Midday meal will be in a little while, Willen. We will leave you here until then and see if you want to join us or have me feed you in here. You've been through much. My family and I will serve you as long as need be 'til you are fully well. Here in the darker hut, try opening your eyes for longer and longer. You will have to get used to this new... well, get used to the way things are now."

She leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. "Thank you, Willen." Her voice cracked slightly with emotion.

As he lay there he opened his eyes and the intensity had lessened to a degree with the relative darkness of the hut. Everything he focused on, if you could call this new vision focused, was extraordinarily rich and colorful and sharp - but too much! He kept his eyes opened for slightly longer time periods each time, but would rest with his eyes closed for much longer. There was an overwhelming animation of inanimate objects. The pan hanging against the rock fire pit in the hut seemed to dance and grow and shrink and vibrate, it just seemed to be so active while it hung there not moving at all.

He had almost finished the water and brought the cup up to his mouth, for the first time with his eyes opened. His hands and the cup coming to his face so startled him that he spilled what remained on the front of his smock and bobbed the cup in his hands. The movement was so graphic, alive, and brimming with energy that he upset the cup in his hands even more and was only able to grasp it firmly when he shut his eyes.

His breathing was ragged and he tried to rest the racing heart in his chest.

"What is the matter with him, Fiduena? His injured eye works, doesn't it? Why did he have such trouble walking? I knew his leg was hurt but...."

"Shhh! He'll hear you, and I'll not have you upsetting him. Nothing is wrong with his eye. That's the problem. He has had a lazy eye all of his life. Now they both look in the same direction. I saw his face after the wolf hit him; the eyeball was barely holding on in his eye socket. It's a most particular

miracle, and we don't see too many miracles in this village."

Willen heard her, and she seemed to answer an unasked question. "Cover your right eye, Belu. Now try looking only with your left. Look at my hand. It is hard to see how close it is, isn't it? Now..."

"Fiduena!"

"Calm yourself. I didn't come near you; it only looked that way. Do you see how, with only one eye, everything looks so flat? Look over at the well with one eye only. You know it is not close to the edge of Prennen's hut, but it looks much closer now, doesn't it?"

As Willen sat listening to her, he was becoming more and more accustomed to the extra liveliness of the room. Everything seemed to be jumping up and down, saying, "look at me," though most of his mind told him that there was no movement. At least he was becoming more stable and did not feel like he was falling. He sat up just a little and the room still seemed to move, but he was not as dizzy as he had been.

"But, Fiduena," said Belu. "Are you telling me that Willen sees like this? It must be very difficult."

"No, Belu, it is different now. Take your hand off of that eye quickly and use both again. Did you notice for a moment everything you were looking at seemed to jump out at you? It seemed to be bigger than usual?"

"Maybe a little. Maybe for a moment, or half a moment."

"Well, Willen has never had two eyes pointing in the same direction. He has always seen like you saw with your hand over your eye. He has traveled most of the world, fought dragons and wolves and evil men. He is brilliant at carving. Did you see that bird he carved for little Versta? It is so life like, and he released it from the wood so quickly.

"All of that, and he has never seen as well as we have. *Now*, he sees for the first time like we do and his mind cannot yet adjust quickly enough to the overwhelming burst of increased sight. I believe he will see like the rest of us quickly, but it is a shock to his mind that has been very busy trying to recover from his wounds."

Hearing the girl's theories, Willen's mind was so crowded with thoughts running in all different directions that he squeezed his already closed eyes even tighter.

"But mark my words, Belu. *I will help him*. I will help him as much as is needed; even if I have to guide him back to his Constantia myself!"

*Constantia!*

Willen reached into his smock and it was not there.

"Fiduena! *Fiduena!* **FIDUENA!**"

"I am here, Willen. Are you all right? Do you hurt? What's wrong?" There was concern in her voice matching his desperation.

She approached him so quickly that it seemed to Willen she would collide with him. He closed his eyes and feebly held out his hand. His mind told him that she would not come anywhere near colliding with him, but his eyes were screaming at her rapid approach.

Of course she did not run into him. He opened his eyes and tried to focus very carefully on her. The problem was that she seemed to be too in focus. He closed his formerly lazy eye for one instant and shook his head and forced it back open. That didn't help.

"Please don't move, Fiduena."

"I am not moving hardly at all, but I will be very, very still." She was relieved that it was not pain that called her in. She placed one hand on the bedding and one on the hut beam nearest her. "There, I am braced and will not move."

He stared at her for what seemed to him to be a long time. "Where is the carving of the girl that was around my neck?" His voice quavered with fear.

"I have it over here. It is safe. The leather thong was broken and I cleaned...that is, I tried real hard and I cleaned almost all of the... of the blood off of it. But I did not want to scrub it too hard. Can I move to go get it for you?"

"Please." Willen swallowed in relief, closing his eyes in thanks, not in dizziness.

With deliberate slowness and as smoothly as possible, she walked back and handed it to him.

He ran his hand into hers too hard but she brushed off his apology.

He held the carving with both hands and slowly moved it in his fingers so he could see it. The back of the carving was to him, but the piece of holly was singing louder than it ever had, louder and more joyously than when he had carved it. Louder and more joyously than when he had first placed a unicorn hair round it. Fiduena had replaced the leather strip with a lighter colored and suppler piece of rawhide, but Willen did not notice it.

Finally Constantia's face came around into view - into the view of both eyes at the same time - for the first time.

There was no focus problem. His vision of her face in the holly was not too intense, because gazing on Constantia would never be too much for him in any way.

He looked at Fiduena and said, "Do all faces look like the way this carving feels?"

She looked at him oddly. Then as if in revelation she said, "Yes, Willen. All faces look like the way her face feels to you in the wood. I can't wait for you to see her again with both your eyes at the same time. This is Constantia, isn't it, Willen? She is most beautiful. You carved an image here that is almost alive. You must truly love her."

All Willen said was, "Yes," quietly. But that one word told her, and Belu, of a love they could only aspire to for themselves. Two millennia from that time, when the fairytale love story was invented, those tales would unknowingly follow a pattern laid down by the love story of Constantia and Willen.

Tears streamed down Fideuna's face, but the usually very observant and considerate Willen did not see them. Neither did he hear Belu's single quiet sniff from the doorway.

Fiduena looked at Belu and smiled through her tears at the man she would marry during the next summer solstice.

Willen saw none of this at this moment. He just stared at the face of his ladylove and noticed there was a crease on her left cheek that looked like a small scar. He thought that it might have happened in his fight with the wolves. The beast that had bitten his neck had probably done it.

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"It is nothing, Mother. That huge House Builder, Trotan, is fine with a sword and able to throw a spear even farther than Dorgelt, but I should have never let him try a bow. The second he started to pull back I knew he would break it so I screamed. / startled him into turning my way and releasing the arrow. He barely nicked me."

"He did more than nick you. This will leave a very noticeable scar on your face, right here on your left cheek where it will be so obvious. I don't want your pretty face marred."

"Yes, Mother." She reached out and placed her hand on her beautiful mother's much more obviously burn-scarred face. "And we know no good man will ever want a woman with a scar on her cheek."

Meala smiled demurely and then said, "What do you think Willen will say about this scar?"

Constantia looked off, far away, as if she could see him from where she sat. It was a long moment before she spoke and Meala had almost finished with tending the cut when her daughter finally said, just above a whisper, "Willen has a number of scars of his own. He won't mind this one."

Her mother shivered on that very warm day.

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As the holly woodcarving sang to Willen on the first day he had ever seen it with both eyes pointed in the same direction, the tune of the piece of wood was joined, in harmony, by a distantly-familiar trilling just behind Willen. He slowly turned his head. It was difficult to maintain balance and not over focus, and everything immobile in the hut still seemed to be moving in all directions at once, but he felt like he was gaining control, at least a bit, of his ability to see.

Willen could not imagine how he had not seen what was perched not a man's length away from his pallet.

"Oh, and, Willen," Fideuna said, "he seems to be recovering nicely from his burning. He should be able to fly soon. In all of the stories we had to drag out of you that feast night, you never told us you had a sunbird. How could you keep something as amazing and wonderful as that a secret?"

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Eirran still loved to fish. The Fishers, who went out into the river, and sometimes even the sea, still thought Eirran was a bit daft to do for relaxation what they did for work. Still, they never told him what they thought. Of course they used nets and he used a hook, but that wasn't the only difference in their methods.

They concentrated hard on their work. Fishing, the trade, was not terribly dangerous, but it was dangerous nonetheless for anyone not paying close attention to all of the lines, nets, booms, and spars of the sails and any other hazards that might catch the inattentive unaware on a fishing boat.

Eirran had dropped a hook, line, and worm into the lake on the other side of Remers from the river. He drowned more worms than caught fish. If the occasional fish that did hit the worm didn't immediately pull on the line, Eirran would never know that he had succeeded in his task.

On this particular day, a fish hit his worm and hook and was able to drag the pole out into the lake and eventually release itself from its death trap.

The moment before the fish hit the hook, Eirran dropped the pole, convinced he was finally about to see what really happens when you die. There was a cracking sound like the breaking of a medium sized branch that had been long dried. Eirran was sitting on a boulder at the water's edge and was thinking about dropping down to the ground with his back to the boulder. Sometimes he liked to sit and contemplate, and sometimes he just liked to sit.

The pop occurred, he released the pole, instantly saw to his left what had caused it, fell over to the right side of the boulder, and scrambled rather quickly for one of his age to place the huge rock between himself and the creature that had just appeared before him.



Eirran felt certain it was a phoenix. Most of the Celts would have called it a sunbird because the sun in eclipse appeared to have a bird shaped aura around it, similar to wings. The bird in the sun was associated with the bird that had a scarlet body and wings and golden tail feathers, beak, and talons. Everyone knew it by description. Everyone knew that, on occasion, it would molt like many other birds did. But unlike other birds, it would then burst into flames and then emerge as a young hatchling.

His people called it a sunbird. Those who spoke Latin called it a phoenix, deriving the name from the phonetic spelling of the original Egyptian name of the bird of legend. (Of course the only ones of the Celts that spoke Latin were the ones of the Old Way that Eirran himself had trained.)

Legend. Everyone knew about the sunbird/phoenix and had heard tell of a brother's wife's cousin's great uncle once removed that had seen one - but no one he knew, and Eirran knew many, had ever *actually* seen one.

Eirran couldn't say that anymore. But he feared that he would never say anything ever again. Some thought that the phoenix/sunbird appeared to take you to the great beyond.

After several very long moments, Eirran carefully peeked around the boulder and saw the brightest colored bird he had ever seen, picking through the small clay cup he used to hold his worms. The bird finished its snack, knocked over the clay cup, which rolled off of the rock Eirran had sat it on, and shattered on the rocky soil. The bird then made the sound Eirran assumed was normal for a phoenix and raised its leg to him.

Even though he felt strangely encouraged by this sound, Eirran still ducked back behind his shelter, wondering if a phoenix pointed a talon at its victim before taking him "on beyond...." Then Eirran realized that he had seen, but not initially recognized in his fear, a piece of what looked like parchment attached to its leg.

"Could it be?" he muttered. He smiled and said aloud, "That boy!" He leapt up from behind the boulder, all trepidation gone with the mere thought of the possibility.

"Did Willen send...? Did he...? How did that boy...? No, I must say man now. He is in his twentieth summer and must be fulfilling my Seeing in more ways than one if you are with him now." It never occurred to Eirran that anyone else could be sending him a winged messenger other than Willen. The only others that knew of this discovery were all a part of Remers. Beemy and Plilgen's owl were the only owls that had shown the talent thus far. "But you are a sunbird, a phoenix. How? Well, my feathered mystery, I doubt seriously if you will tell me, but perhaps this note will. Thank you very much."

*.....and so, my dear friend, if you have read this far then this sunbird has succeeded in performing like your owl, Beemy. Willen's Luck delivers me to a better condition after nearly killing me, once again. I have a newset of scars and pains, a sunbird for a friend it seems, and better sight than I ever knew possible, even though I still fall whenever I awaken and open my eyes and have not remembered the intensity of my newsight.*

*It has been two days since leaving Cahors and I am moving slower than I did before, because of my frequent stops to rest my aching leg. My right hand is sore also. Both seem stronger than yesterday so I hope to increase my pace soon.*

*I plan to head a little south and west of Baldet's Keep and try to find a Fisher willing to take me to Albion. I am not sure of when the seeds were planted, but I believe it is well more than two moons until harvest. I wonder if more of Willen's Luck will slowme, but surely if I am to reach my destiny, it needs to come to my aid instead. Fate has lent its helping hand too often.*

*Eirran, I never thanked you properly that day we parted. In the note I wrote to go with Beemy I wrote my thanks, but not to my satisfaction. I would be dead many times over by now if it weren't for you. Therefore, I never will be able to thank you adequately. Instead, I will try to make you proud of me.*

*Perhaps that will be thanks enough - though I doubt it.*

*Gratefully,*

*Willen*

None of his friends would have believed what appeared in Eirran's eyes at that moment.

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"And now that I have placed the wreath of union over your intertwined arms," Torban said, "We place on you an unusual but I believe a wonderful reason. We follow the traditions to join a man and woman as husband and wife, but Conlander wants to stop here for what might become a new tradition. He will explain."

The huge "Smith" cleared his throat and still spoke with the slightest tremble, "My beautiful Naelly, this wreath is not enough for me. I want all to know that this day, this well-known symbol of the wreath of union, goes on in my heart forever more. I have fashioned this small golden wreath for your finger to go with you always and remind you each moment that you look at it, that I am united to you forever. I have one of silver for my finger. Silver for me to tell that I have worth, but gold for you to tell all that you are much more valuable."

While he spoke of his small silver wreath he attempted to place it on his middle finger. He was nervous and his fingers had swollen. Naelly helped him place it on the next smaller finger down from his middle finger, away from his thumb. When Conlander spoke of her golden finger wreath he started to place it on her middle finger. Naelly would not allow it. She redirected his effort to the like finger on her hand. The finger wreaths went on their left hands for practical reasons, they used their right hands for most tasks, both being right-handed.

"Members of Loundon's Towne, and all gathered guests," proclaimed Torban to one and all within the booming of his delighted voice. "I now stand back to allow you to gather around and greet the newest family of our community, Conlander the Smith and his Lady Fair, Naelly."

The first to Naelly's side was Constantia who had stood with her best friend on this important day. "Oh, Naelly. You are the most beautiful bride I have ever seen. I am so happy for you."

If one's objectivity was completely heartless, it might be said that even on this day Constantia was still more beautiful than Naelly, but barely. Naelly had blossomed under Conlander's attentiveness - she bloomed like a most beautiful flower in the loving sun. Constantia never knew why Naelly had hesitated at first to Conlander's heedfulness, but Constantia insisted that her friend allow the courtship to begin. Two visits from Conlander to Naelly's family hearth for evening meals and a slow walk around the square after each meal, and Naelly blushed at the idea of Willen as her love. It was a foolish childhood fancy, and now she prayed each day that the traveler would arrive early enough and with olive sticks or whatever necessary to save her friend Constantia from the boorish Bonderman.

"Constantia, in a little more than a moon, right after the harvest faire and... well, I'll stand with you at your joining to Willen. Standing with each other, it is what we've discussed since we were little girls, do you still wish it?"

"With all my heart, with all the joy I have for you this day, and with almost as much eagerness as I want Willen to walk back into Loundon's Towne and into my life."

They smiled the smile of long familiar friendship on a most wonderful occasion, but Naelly would *not* stand with Constantia on that day they envisioned not too far in their future.

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Willen was skirting a series of rocky outcroppings, not too dissimilar to the rocks where he had battled Grang the Dragon. It was hot, muggy, and rained as he walked, and his dragon skin cloak was on the carryall. Willen did not mind the rain running down his back. It was cooling. At nightfall when the temperature dropped, he would change to another smock and breeches he had under the protective skins on his carryall. Less than two moons ago he had owned only the clothing he wore and had to go naked when he washed or mended it. Now he owned three complete sets of clothing. He wondered if there were more than a handful of people, within ten days in any direction, who could show such prosperity. It wasn't pride. He laughed aloud at the idea that he was prosperous. How many of his previous childhood notions now lay destroyed?

As he dragged his carryall he thought back to that day when he had first fought Grang, and then to the day he had finally defeated the flying leviathan. In that first battle Bordo had died and, when Willen had first awakened from his wounds, he'd chastised himself ruthlessly for having used magik to kill. Just before Willen had become fully mobile from those injuries, he and Aldertan, the wise retired Keeper of Aldertani Keep, had sat by a stream and chatted about this. Willen remembered that conversation as he walked.

"So, in spite of all of Eirran's cautions, the first time I used magik in fighting, I killed. I am doomed."

"Didn't Eirran say that you would become hardhearted and turn toward evil if you killed using magik?"

Willen nodded without looking up.

"Look into my eyes, Willen. Has your heart become hard over this? Does following in Porto's ways appeal to you in any manner?"

"No," he said after a bit of reflection, "The very thought sickens me even now. If anything, my heart feels both hollow and heavy burdened, not hard. I feel like an open sore in many ways." Then he sat up straighter and looked determined. "As to Bordo, I know I did not directly mean to kill him, only to save you. Death was an unforeseen consequence of my actions. Porto kills *people* with the same feelings I have when I kill a roach or rat, just one more inconvenient creature out of the way...."

"I believe you have your answer, Willen. You did not and do not want to kill. You are *not* like those who kill indiscriminately. You suffer in your heart because you had to kill to save lives - for which, let me repeat my gratitude. I believe Eirran would agree with us, as we look at this. As long as you kill sparingly and, how did Eirran say it 'with compassion for what the evil ones might have been,' you will not become like them.

"One day, Willen, at the coming harvest faire, you will face Porto, Bonderman, and the others. You may have to kill all of them yourself, perhaps more. There is no guarantee that Porto will not recruit others to follow him. Each death, by the sword or through magik indirectly, will take a little of your soul. I fought my first battle as a young man before my father died and made me Keeper. I killed then, and in many fights since then, more than I can count, and a day does not pass that I do not think of those I have killed. But the alternative was to have them kill all of this Keep, rape my mother and sisters, and enslave all of those within days of here.

"Willen, I would pick up my sword again and face all of them at once to stop such a thing. You would too. That is why I believe my son, Aldini, needs you as a friend. That is why I believe you two *will* be friends."

After Willen had killed Grang, Bordan, and the three warriors, again Aldertan had sought out Willen in his recovery bed to discuss this same subject.

"Willen, how do you *feel* about the deaths of Bordan and the three others?"

"I wondered if you would approach me on this, my friend. We always talk of this when I lie in *this* bed. Can I move to another?" They chuckled with no mirth. "I...feel... numb... hollow... and unfeeling. I am sorry they had to die but after meeting Reldy and then Kailty, and hearing of their cruel treatment.... Well, it was easier to kill Bordan with magik, indirectly with magik of course, but.... am I becoming like Porto?"

"Did you see any other choice, any way out, *any* other possible course of action, Willen?"

The young man, hurting in body and spirit, pondered this for several moments. "No. The two Druid brothers were the root of this evil, and they had to be rooted out." They both smiled sourly at his pun.

"As for the other three.... Do you know why I fought them, Aldertan? We had Kailty, I saw Reldy's blow to the big one's head. I could've let them go. They would have escaped and most probably would not have bothered us again. Do you know *why* I fought them, all at once, producing the deaths of three I had never met before and whose names we will never know?"

Aldertan concentrated on Willen with earnest intensity. He felt that he would learn a valuable lesson in the next few moments.

"I realized two things. In that instant all was clear. First, those three, together or individually, would have raped, pillaged, and killed their way to their homeland unless someone stopped them. Second, and even more important, if they made it to their homeland, other Druids would want to know where the brothers had found olive sticks. I hope Bordo and Bordan were too greedy to share their knowledge of this location, for your sake. I will be long gone, back to Albion or dead at Aldini's hands before any other Druids of their ilk stumble into this Keep. I hope their secret died with them.

"And that is what chafes me like sand in my collar. I am *glad* that they died to save you and save all they might have attacked on their way out of here. I feel a bit jaded by their deaths. At least I did not kill the three with magik, but doesn't that make me guilty of a hardening heart? I do not grieve like I did at Bordo's demise. Oh, Aldertan, why does it have to be so hard?"

"I can offer faint comfort, but there is comfort in the fact that you struggle with this. Willen, if one of them had killed me or Haana would it have made it better for you?"

"No! Never, of course not, it's just..."

"Willen, you are destined to fight and fight again most probably. You do not defend freedom once and it is over. I have seen nearly fifty summers since reaching the age of maturity, and I have had to fight and kill in nineteen of those cycles. I had to in order to maintain the safety of my family and those who depend on this Keep for their homes and livelihood. Do you think I wish it so, to end the lives of so many? Of course not, and you will never wish anything but peace for yours and yourself.

"You will find peace from time to time, but the peace of the grave will be the only lasting peace you will know. But if you want true peace even then, teach your children and grandchildren, and teach them to teach all they influence, to feel as bothered by this as you do now. And Willen, strive to maintain your uneasiness over this. Never stop hoping for true peace for yourself and your heirs. Hope and pray that I am wrong about the future, but never live in any way that sees you ill prepared to defend your peace and freedom. What peace is there in being slaves to those who conquer, rape, pillage, and kill?"

As he traveled, Willen thought often of these conversations. He usually had to pull out the carving of Constantia's face and concentrate on her to calm the whirlwind in his mind. Love, started and embedded in loving her, and love for all those of Loundon's Towne, including Caedric, gave him the peace and determination he needed to go on.

He knew his destiny lay beyond fighting and killing Porto, and anyone else that had to die.

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Sleep came dearly on the nights that these thoughts crowded his mind.

That very night the fire was down to coals after he had banked it for the evening, and he still stirred. He had not written in his scrolls in several nights so he decided to do so. First he had to bring life back to the flames. He needed light to record his musings and observations. He had been thinking about one idea all during the time he should have been falling asleep - Eirran thought the unicorn hair had been the secret to power concentration. Solely on his observations of Porto who had no such hair, Willen had been convinced that it was the olive wood that was the secret. The thought that plagued him was, which one was right? There was evidence for both.

A thought entered his mind that cinched his inability to sleep: What if they were both right? Porto obviously had power with the olive wood alone that rivaled any combination Willen had seen. Eirran could do nothing with birch sticks alone, but could do any magik Willen discovered with a birch stick *and* a unicorn hair. What if Eirran had both a unicorn hair and an olive stick? The olive stick concentrated power by itself and the hair did the same with any stick apparently. What if Eirran had both?

Then Willen winced. What if Porto had both? That would be truly dangerous. Of course Porto did not have Latin, but the Old Way and a lone olive stick had been deadly enough to kill Felden.

Willen had sat up with this thought, and had leaned against a nearby rock. He'd picked up a stick and was twiddling with it randomly while thinking. At the moment of that last thought about combining the power of the unicorn hair and the olive wood stick, Willen absentmindedly broke the stick in half. His hands were at each end of the stick, which was a little longer than his hand and forearm, and the break occurred in the middle right in front of his face. He did not break it over anything like his knee.

The branch was not completely dried and he had not snapped it in two. The branch had split down its length. The thin heartwood in the branch had parted in one of the pieces. Willen found himself looking into the small trough in the piece of branch where the heartwood had once been, but had vacated.

If lightning had flashed across the sky at that moment and everything was as bright as day, Willen couldn't have seen any more clearly how to make the power concentrator sticks even *MORE* powerful.

Willen dumped all of the wood on the fire that he had gathered at dusk to use for cooking breakfast. He would "Lumos!" two more times this night to gather additional firewood for light.

He examined over twenty of the olive sticks on the carryall to find three that he thought might split properly. He took the first one and used his small blade to try to cut along the length of the stick. Willen was a master carver. He would never admit it, even to himself, but he was the best carver he had ever seen, but he was. However, cutting along the stick was very difficult. Finally, on the third stick, he separated the wood barely adequately. The first two had fallen apart. He frustrated himself even more when the two pieces of the third split stick broke in several places while he tried to gouge out the small strip of heartwood. He practiced stripping out the heartwood on the parts from the first two sticks he had failed to split, but he did not improve at all. These sticks or branches, about the thickness of his thumb, were not cooperating with him, and wood almost always did what he wanted it to do - *if it could*.

The two damaged fingers on his right hand made carving a little difficult, but Willen was left-handed - one more fact that Caedric had made fun of. But Willen only used his right hand to brace what he was carving. The stiff fingers would become more flexible over time, but Willen compensated for them and carved now as well as he had before the fight with the wolves.

He tried three more sticks with similar irritating results and no increase in his skills. He went to his carryall to select three more sticks and then stopped to think things through. At this rate he wondered if he would have ten working power concentrators from the dozen dozen sticks he'd brought with him in the carryall. He thought about all of this while he stared down at the cut strips of olive wood.

The cut strips of olive wood!

Branches are difficult to carve unless you work with the stick's grain, and even then it is hard to accomplish much. To carve whatever *you* want, you must carve with wood cut from logs, or much larger, thicker limbs at least. His holly log carving of Constantia was about as small around a log as you would use for intricate carving.

These cut strips had been sawn from logwood and had a square cross section as long on each side as his middle thumb joint. He took one back to the fire. He examined the grain and chose a side to cut length-wise down the strip. He worked a crease down one side and up the opposite side. He went back over each crease, making each cut deeper, Willen kept checking to ensure the cuts on opposite sides were headed towards each other and would not fracture the wooden strip unevenly. He was tempted to rush the process in his anxious anticipation, but patience won that battle. The last run of the blade down one side of the strip parted the two pieces. They were nearly perfect. He compared the two pieces and determined that they would be able to fit back together again almost seamlessly.

He examined both pieces of the split strip for quite a while and chose the one that *felt* right. Then he cut a small "vee" groove down the center face of the half he'd chosen.

He pulled a bit of inner horse hoof from his back sack. He took a little water from his water skin and worked it into the piece of inner hoof to create a small amount of hoofglue. Working quickly, the glue would dry almost immediately at this thinness, he ran a bit of the glue down the length of the "vee" groove with his fingernail. He placed the unicorn hair in the groove and pulled it tightly from both ends. The hair was coated with the glue and embedded by the glue in the groove. He blew on it to help it dry. He set it by the fire to speed its drying.

Next he worked more water into the inner hoof material and created a bit of paste. The working time for this would be longer but Willen knew he could not rush this. On the piece of strip without the hair in the groove, he worked the paste the entire length of the strip on the blade cut side. He made sure there was no glue near the edge that would seep out. Later, when he began finishing the solidly rejoined strip of wood with increasingly smoother stones, he did not want a coarse seam of glue to show and mar the power concentrator's appearance and feel.

He rejoined the halves and no glue appeared at the edges. In the firelight, it almost looked like it had not been parted. He wrapped several rawhide strips around the creation so a firm bonding would occur. Now the hard part began. The hoofglue dried to the touch in the time it took to boil water. But for the glue to firmly dry throughout, he knew it should sit in the rawhide bindings for a day. By the earliest trails of light of the dawning sun, Willen counted three new power concentrators that he'd fashioned together in this manner. When they had dried throughout he would spend a great deal of time on each, rounding them like sticks and creating a smooth surface.

He lay down exhausted by his dead fire. He covered his eyes with the sleeve of his smock to block out the early morning light. It would be another hot and muggy day. He would sleep until heat or hunger woke him and then he would walk on, dragging his carryall. In the next village he would ask for flaxseed oil. He imagined that flaxseed oil, cooked with some fire soot, should make a fine waterproof coating for the rounded and smoothed wooden strip.

As he dozed off Willen never wondered how he knew all of this would work together. He had picked up the inner horse hoof because it was malleable and he thought he might shape it in some fashion. He had not known at that time how to make hoofglue. He had cut wooden strips in half before but had never glued anything to anything else. He had only smoothed wood with his blade before, not progressively smoother stones.

Coating wood to waterproof it had never occurred to him, and cooking flaxseed oil with soot for a protective coating was being done in only one other place in the known world, or unknown world for that matter.

Willen's Luck?

Willen's Curiosity?

Willen's Wisdom???

---

*Willen!*

*Where did you ever get #}#}Ph{o}l\*x\*#\*#.....*

The words were terribly smudged and only a few characters could be made out. Willen lowered the return message from Eirran and said to the sunbird, "Well, I guess I should have known better than to open this note in the rain." He liked having someone to talk to. "Is that a name? The word is smudged by rainwater and then I tried to brush it off, which made it worse. But I can make out a P-H-O-L-X. Pholx. Is that a name or something? Hold it. Is that *your* name? Did Eirran somehow winkle your name out of you?

"Pholx! Pholx!" Willen spoke it aloud to get his tongue around it.

The sunbird/Phoenix decided to trill at that moment. Maybe it did not like having that word shouted at it. Maybe it was hungry and tried to announce the fact, and Willen did not understand it yet. Maybe the bird decided that it liked that word and answered to it.

Whatever the inscrutable bird meant at that moment, Willen and everyone else called that sunbird Pholx from that moment forward. What Eirran had meant when he'd written that first line would not be cleared up until 376 B.C.

Willen continued reading the letter under a rocky ledge that allowed plenty of light but kept him and Pholx dry.

*I was delighted to read your message and see that Willen's Luck has caused you to prosper without killing you. The unicorn hairs you sent have allowed us to train with power concentrators the very brightest young ones whom we've discovered have what you call the Touch. I have gained tentative permission to begin training them in the principles and theory of magik as well. My brothers do not want to abandon the Old Ways but agree that it has been polluted.*

*They asked me to ask you the near impossible. When you have saved your Constantia and Loundon's Towne (they say "if you save them" but I have confidence in you) - when you save them, would you consider traveling to Remers to consult with us, teach what you have learned, and tell of all your travels and discoveries?*

*You will have traveled farther than all but a tiny number of all humans when you reach home again, and they ask that you embark on a journey nearly as long to come see us. I do long to see you again and to meet the fair Constantia. And my wife and daughters want to meet the legendary Willen - Dragonslayer, Manslayer, Wolfslayer, Inventor of Magik, and my friend.*

*Now, as to your journey yet to be completed. Baldet's Keep has been sacked by the Celts, lately arrived from the homelands - those that go on to Albion. They have their small port but move along the coast south and west seeking a new port, we suspect. The Celtic communities in their path of advance are widely dispersed and are all small. These hooligans ravage and scorch for sport as much as booty. You should head four parts north and one part west instead of straight north. This route will bring you to the coast much sooner but farther from Albion. The ruffian Celts and disreputable Druids still travel only from their one port across from the white cliffs of Albion, so if you find a Fisher willing to risk the journey, which means one you can bribe, run up the coast of Gaul carefully and then cross due north.*

*If you do not hit land in three days sailing, head east. Approach*

*the coast carefully and inquire where you are. If you head east you will probably touch land at Gaul and can head along the coast more and try north again.*

*It is on a dangerous sea route that I send you, because if you head past Albion to the west of it, you might sail off the end of the world. That would ruin your plans for children, not to mention grandchildren.*

*I cannot really explain it, although if you ever meet Pliilgen (I can hope you might visit one day), he will bore you to sleep with his preposterous theory that the world is round! I've never heard of such balderdash. But he says that's why harvest comes earlier the farther north that you are. The fact is that round, flat or whatever, the harvest does come sooner the farther north you are.*

*That's the bad news. Albion is farther north than wherever you are now, therefore the harvest and the harvest faire in Albion will come sooner than the harvest comes to the farmers you speak to today.*

*Do Not Dawdle, Willen!*

*I do have friends where you are going. As you adjust to four parts north and one part west, you will be heading to the area where my friends, Ninato and Nerta live. They have moved to that area for the wide-open fields and the large rocks. They had this wild theory that they could create a way to harmlessly distract ignorant or violent people to leave them alone. It has to do with subtlety and subterfuge and something they call "hiding in plain sight." I accused them of being daft and going to the region for the strong drink. They do grow delicious grapes there that make delightful wines.*

*Anyway, recently they sent word by caravan that they have succeeded. If they have, that means that if you are able to find them, it is because they decide to let you find them - then they can help you find a Fisher to take you home. I will write to them by Beemy and tell them to look for you. Give Ninato a slap for me, and give his lovely wife a hug for me. She is a terrific cook. That is reason enough to try to find them.*

*Discover more magik, save Constantia, save Loundon's Towne, save Albion while you're at it. You're young; that will keep you busy for a while.*

*I am proud of you, son, (What are you staring at?)*

*Eirran*

---

The loudest scream heard to date in Loundon's Towne occurred, unfortunately, when most were not around. Though many missed it, it was fortunate that Caedric was not there either.

Dorgelt, Torban, Stellan, all the Fishers, all of the archers, and all of the blademen seemed to be elsewhere. It would have been comforting to most to have seen the sight, but those present told of the wonder of it.

Egorn the Potter and Vanch the Cooper were the eldest male members of Loundon's Towne present, and they had their apprentices with them. Vanch's four were there and Egorn's three. Torban had never found a Potter willing to come to their community, and none came of their own volition. So Egorn was growing his own Pottery industry by raising his three sons in the trade. All three showed his skill in the craft and all three showed their mother's gift with the Touch in mending broken items of clay.

The scream came from Naelly and it occurred when she heard a popping sound, drawing her attention to a bird the size of a swan, which had appeared right before her. It was scarlet all over except for its golden beak, talons, and tail feathers. It made no advances towards her and remained still once it had appeared. The hut she and Conlander were making into a home was on the opposite side of Towne from Torban's forge.

Conlander and Torban expanded his existing forge rather than build a second one for the younger metalworker. The two men got along very well. Even though Torban was more experienced, and he had the Touch for working metal, Conlander was a quick study. Because of the noise of the grinding wheel he heard no scream and missed the entire event.

Constantia heard the scream and bolted from where she was drawing water. She was not dressed in her fighting attire nor did she have her bow. The items were in the opposite direction of the scream and she did not consider retrieving them. She ran into Rezala's hut, grabbed her bow and arrows without explanation, and ran out - the scream needed no explanation.

Pholx sat through the entire commotion soundlessly.

"Do we try to kill such a bird? It hasn't moved but it is both beautiful and frightening. I was looking right at where it perches and it appeared out of nowhere. It didn't fly in."

"Naelly, it has done nothing but sit there, correct?" When she nodded, Constantia continued. "I hate to destroy such beauty. Have you seen one like it before?"

A crowd of onlookers were gathering, drawn by the scream, but none came near the two, other than Vanch and Egorn, and they had little to offer the discussion.

"No, I haven't, Constantia..."

The second Naelly said her name the bird flapped its wings and reached into the air for flight. It flew towards them but circled before drawing too near. Constantia had an arrow in the bowstring and had it halfway pulled back when the most wonderful sound in the world occurred.

All of those present were soothed by the bird's dulcet tones and lilting trilling.

Constantia's heart swelled to the point that she felt it might burst from her chest and join the bird in flight. Her heart's dream, hope, wish, and desire of nearly three summers felt their first beats of confirmation in the birdsong.

She raised her arm perfectly to receive the bird, even though she had never seen a falconer or any other bird trainer do so. At that moment she breathed out in hope the name, "Willen." Everyone who saw her expression, and within earshot of the bird's song heaved a collective sigh of relief. They too felt the first stirrings of belief in what Constantia had known in her heart all this time.

Constantia reached up with her left hand and untied the small bobbling piece of wood from its talon. She turned it in her hands and saw the same image she saw when she gazed into a pool of still water. It was the handiwork of the man she had loved and believed in all this time, while few others considered it possible.

She saw the scar on the right cheek of the carving. In her childish dreams as a girl of thirteen summers, she had begun to imagine a Willen, tall strong, brave and powerful, arriving in Loundon's Towne just in time to save her from the marital clutches of Bonderman. As she matured, and as she and her parents gained more insight into the powerful little Olive Hand behind the large and brash would be Keeper, Constantia slowly became convinced that it was Porto who would eventually claim her should no one intercept his intentions. This realization had fueled even more of her fantasies of a triumphant Willen changing that outcome. He would be tall and strong and a mighty warrior. He would have olive sticks and whatever else would be needed to defeat Porto and Bonderman.

Confirmation of unproven long held beliefs is, well, it *is* wonderful.

---

Porto sat at the grandest table in the jumped up rickety tavern. It had been less than three summers since it had been built, and it was so ramshackle and in such disrepair, that all Celts said that it proved it was their right to take over existing townes and communities. "If we were fated to be farmers and laborers, we would have been born with the skills of those miserable workers and not the strong arms *and power* to lord over such servants. The high and mighty Celts of Gaul look down their noses at us because they have built their townes and farmsteads. Labor gives proper Celtic warriors and Druids a bad name."

"Did you say something, sir?" asked the scullery wench carrying a large tray of mead. She was a native to Albion and proof of the superiority Porto felt regarding his particular ilk of Celts and Druids.

"No! Blast your eyes," he said half rising and drawing back his hand to hit her.

She lurched away to avoid the blow, dropping the tray of mead she carried to a table beyond him. Porto had been sitting there for most of the afternoon and all others seated in the dilapidated inn had entered since then. He sat back down, satisfied that he had proven once again that he was superior to all.

He sat alone because he chose to. He knew it would be late in the day when his brothers landed at the jetty, if they landed today, blast *Captain* Wollo's eyes also, unreliable boatman that he was.

Porto had demanded the large table and then had sent Bonderman and his two warriors to the jetty to wait. Let this unceasing rain cool his hot stupid temper.

"You ruined our libations, little man," said a Bonderman sized ruffian who had recently arrived and had sat at the table behind him.

Without looking up, Porto sniped over his shoulder, "You'll survive your thirst."

A hand grabbed his outer cloak, the one covering his obvious robes of a Druid. His pointed hat lay drying over the miserable hearth fire.

When the stupid Celtic underlord succeeded in bringing Porto up off of his bench and around into his face, holding the little man a head's height off of the ground, Porto had his olive stick poked up the left nostril of his assailant.

Gasps rang out in two versions: one type of gasp came from those who had known who Porto was, and the second type of inhaled breath came from those who just realized who he was.

The brothers Bordo and Bordan had delivered all of their olive sticks thus far to the very richest and most politically powerful Druids in the homeland. They paid the most. Most of the olive sticks went to those who were never at the forefront of the Celtic advance into Albion; they only went into already conquered areas. All olive sticks ended up in those hands - except for five of the sticks.

After keeping two themselves, Bordo and Bordan had sold the other three -at unheard of reasonable prices- to their childhood friends, Porto and his brothers, Portan and Portag.

The two sets of brothers had grown up together in the same cold fruitless village in the homeland. They had shown remarkable talents in what Willen called the Touch and had succeeded in gaining admission into the Lyceum of the Old Way. Though they were gifted, and Porto felt sure he was the most gifted in a generation, he found out quickly, once he had begun attending, that they had been accepted for one reason alone - the father of Bordo and Bordan had made it a requirement of his continued cooperation as Dragon Master. He had traveled as a young man with those that had stolen several dragon eggs from their nests. He alone of those on that expedition had kept his egg alive long enough to hatch and survive, he alone had trained his dragon, raising it with his children as if it was his offspring also.

Therefore, he *was* the Dragon Master.

Shunned at the Lyceum by those of noble and wealthy birth, and neglected by the more authoritative instructors of the institution of the Old Ways, Porto had led the four others through their education with one purpose in mind - revenge and domination.

The political powers that be of the homeland were a corrupt regime teetering on collapse. Therefore it was at its most grandiloquent and ostentatious. Porto had been ignored by the instructors of prestige and name, thus he became the protege of every instructor slighted and relegated to second class status in the instructional cadre. *These* were, to a man, the more talented of the training staff who had been placed in second class status by the more powerful, yet less *powerful*. These shunned second class instructors turned to cultivating the darkest of talents in the Old Way and also cultivated any student similarly shunned.

They found in Porto a student wanting to overthrow and dominate. They thought that he would end as the rest, hunted and eventually killed as a threat to the stability of the homeland, but not until he had disrupted the pampered lives of those the disgruntled teachers hated.

Unique to Porto was the fact that he understood this scenario. His uncle had died this way. Porto had led his brothers and friends through the Lyceum, served faithfully in every dirty demeaning job he was assigned, and quickly rose as high as he would - to a position where he was essential to keep the vaunted position of a useless functionary afloat. He would never be allowed to leave that position.

Bordo and Bordan inherited the dragon, went south, and came back with olive sticks. All others in their band of raiders had died in the journey, *conveniently*, and they were given charge of their own expeditions to gather more olive sticks.

When a call went out for Druids, a title returning in vogue for those training in the Old Way, Porto's superior was discovered dead in the wrong bed, *conveniently*, and Porto asked to be sent with the new invasion waves heading to Albion. The new functionary wanted his own toady in place to handle the details so Porto gained his permission.

Of all those with olive sticks in the invasion waves, Porto was the only Druid out taking over villages and Keeps. The others, politically powerful enough to acquire an olive stick, had been also politically powerful enough to acquire cushy positions in already invaded areas and already subdued communities.

Most of those with olive sticks could only perform relatively simple feats: starting fires, calling small objects to them, tickling a dancing girl; only a few could actually use an olive stick in a truly compelling way. All of the Old Way could accomplish these simple feats because they were using olive sticks from those four aceituna trees on the Aldertani Keep, and they did have what Willen called the Touch. But only a small percentage were truly powerful with the olive sticks - that is - powerful enough to kill or torture.

Those few discovered that could kill and torture were kept by the politically powerful to use as weapons, or they were eliminated. All five of the two sets of brothers had this capability. Bordo and Bordan used this "talent" without censure because they were the Dragon Masters. Porto and his brothers had to be more subtle.

Because he paid a large tribute to those *officially* over him, Porto's success in taking over Keeps and communities gained him *official* approval and blessing to act alone. Even those vain fops understood the lesson of the fable they had never heard, the fable of the goose that laid golden eggs.

Porto's plan was simple. He had made a list of the names of dozens of dissatisfied Druids held in check by those weaklings in powerful positions over them.

When his brothers arrived with thirty armed men instead of his current three, and when Bordo and Bordan took over the Aldertani Keep and ensured a steady supply of olive sticks, the five would begin his plan to rule the world.

Porto's Plan was simple:

- 1) Consolidate Porto's holdings this summer.



- 2) Take over the heart of Albion over the next two summers.
- 3) Conquer Gaul over the next five summers.
- 4) Storm the homeland the next two summers.
- 5) Demand submission from all Celtic tribes over the next cycle.
- 6) Conquer all Celts who resisted, and the rest of the world over the next ten summers.

Simple.

He would be Emperor of the world at the age of forty-five summers and would have many sons to follow in his glorious rule. Sons given to him by his many wives - the first of which would be Constantia.

Simple.

The underlord froze in place when he realized what was invading his nostril.

Porto said with great satisfaction as he saw how wide the young snotty's eyes were, "Do you know who I am, you young pup?"

To the underlord's credit, or stupidity, he bristled at the 'young pup' comment and responded, "You are a Druid wanting to start a fire in my nose. Do you know who I am?"

"You are Flidag, third son and most spoiled and ill-mannered of the whelps of Krido." Porto knew that Krido, though wealthy, was in terrible disfavor in the capital of the homeland. "Please allow me to complete your education, I am Porto, have you heard of me, boy?"

His derision was tangible and the use of his name effective. Porto was known as the only Druid in Albion who could kill with an olive branch who was not under the thumb of an overlord.

Porto had calculated all possible outcomes and he decided on self-serving mercy. He sloooooowly removed the olive stick from Flidag's nostril, wiped what came with it on the embroidered cloak of the one trembling before him, and said, "You will remember my mercy this day when I or one of my brothers call on your assistance in the future. If your father and I were not *such* good friends, you would not be feeling the dirt being shoveled on your face.

"Barkeep, mead for all of brave young Flidag's friends at my expense. Music! Music, I say!"

The lyre player hesitantly resumed his torture of the badly tuned instrument.

As Porto sat back at his empty largest table, a quiet voice spoke in a tone that carried enough to be heard by all, "Helping with the education of our future leaders I see, brother."

Portan and Portag stood at the edge of the space the largest table commanded. Bonderman was with them. Easily the largest warrior in the room, Bonderman made tiny the two Druid brothers, taller than their older brother.

"Wait outside with the others, Bonderman, you do not want to tax your mind with these discussions." With his final dose of venom tastefully dispensed, Porto greeted his younger siblings. The three locked arms and sat closely at less than half of the table so that they could converse without being overheard.

"You took your own sweet time coming to these warm and sunny shores. Wollo said that you had so many volunteers that it took a long time to pick the thirty you wanted. I thought you needed time to spend all of the golden bits I sent you on your appetites."

Ignoring Porto's sarcasm, Portan said, "We told that witless sailor that to give him some reason to report to you. We did have many volunteers but the thirty meanest and most bloodthirsty were simple enough to cull from the crowds. We had them fight and the moment we had only thirty left unwounded we stopped the fight by killing a few of the wounded with the Killing Curse. That got everyone's attention.

"The real reason we did not come with Wollo in the last moon is that Bordo and Bordan had not returned." Of course Portan did not mention that it *had* taken a while to run out of gold bits buying all of the "delicacies" they desired.

Potag added, "They still had not come back when we left. I fear they have died. They were almost three moons behind schedule and you know how punctual they usually are. Do you suppose Grang turned on them? Who would keep a dragon as a pet?"

"He wasn't a pet, fool, he was a tool. If the beast died they could not have made it back on foot before you left. It is beyond the point. What we must accomplish we can do without them or more olive sticks for the next season or two. They can join us before hard winter.

"Here's what I have planned. Less than a fortnight from here..."

---

The hysterical laugh that echoed through the mansion in the Keep of Remers so startled Glanis that she dropped the clay pot of drinking water she was bringing to her husband.

One of his many eccentricities was bathing - regularly - at least once in seven days - sometimes more - in water - *with* soap. She knew all of that water and soap couldn't possibly be healthy, and he did so with the opening in the wall to outside air flung wide. Fresh air, soap, water; he should have died from it a fortnight of summers ago, but the old Seer lived and was remarkably healthy. Heaven help her, *she* even enjoyed the decadence and ill wisdom of a bath herself at least once for every two times he did. She smiled and blushed and admitted to herself, never to her husband, that

it did make the times of marital closeness more enjoyable. The blush continued. Maybe she should join him....

The screamed laughter occurred; she dropped the clay pot, her husband came running out of the room that contained the large half-barrel he used for bathing. He was howling, dripping soapy water, and had forgotten his clothing.

"Yaaaa-Haaahaha Ha! Would you look at this!"

"Eirran, you old fool! This will kill you. Dry yourself and please clothe yourself before you catch your death."

"But, Glanis, look. Look! Isn't it the most marvelous device you have ever seen or heard of?"

"Congratulations, you daft father of my many daughters - who are coming to dinner soon - so are *you* the inventor of the "carved stick" or does credit for this breakthrough lie with another?"

By this time Glanis knew she would need to cover Eirran if it would occur. When he was in a Seeing trance he was always clothed and sensible. This must be more of the new, what was the Latin word by way of the Greek - *tekhnologi*? Yes that was it. Eirran said that *tekhnologi* is something discovered or invented to improve the way someone does something. Generally, his new tekhnologi turned out to be a device that needed to be cleaned up after.

Glanis wrapped a robe around her husband of thirty-eight summers and said, "Tell me about it, old fool that I love so well."

"I'll do better." He held out a small piece of unrolled parchment. "I will read to you the note from Willen."

"Oh, how is the dear boy? Did he conquer something new? How badly is he hurt this time, and how many young girls' hearts has he conquered?"

"None. Amazingly, Willen's Luck has been quiet lately. Oh, he did indicate that he named his phoenix Pholx. What sort of name is that for a Phoenix? I ask you."

Pholx had popped from the room for bathing into their room for sleeping. The phoenix gave a brief trill and both received a boost of good feelings.

Glanis said, "Ohhh!" with the slightest shiver. "I do love it when he sings even one note. Well, this beauty too seems to like the name. Maybe "Pholx" is a new word in majik, does Willen tell of any new spells he has created?"

"No, he doesn't. Oh! I was going to read to you about this marvelous new instrument of majikcal design and ingenuity. Here, let me read..."

"Eirran,

"Daya, daya. I'll skip to the good part.

*"...so I looked at the empty channel where the heartwood of the branch was and it hit me that I needed to put the unicorn hair inside of the olive stick. Sticks themselves are too hard to cut like needed so I have carved a 'magik stick' I guess you would call it, out of a strip of olive wood. The unicorn hair is inside this stick. I joined the two halves back together with glue, and after shaping, I coated it with a flaxseed and soot mixture to prevent warping from moisture and any other water damage. It works a little bit better for me but I am hoping a truly powerful one with magik will find it stronger than Porto with his olive wood stick.*

"See, my dear. See how beautiful, how sleek, and how efficient. These are marvelous days to be alive. What could possibly be left to invent?"

"A husband that pays attention to what he's doing."

"What, my dear?"

"Nothing, dear. Have you tried it?"

"What?" Eirran had hardly taken his eyes or apparently his mind from his new power concentrator.

"Have you tried it to see if it is *indeed* more powerful? What is the spell you two usually cast to test different things?"

Concentrating on his wife's question, Eirran had lowered the new combined and internalized unicorn hair carved olive stick to his side with it pointed out and away from him. Subconsciously he remembered Willen accidentally setting him on fire one afternoon in the dungeon, but he did not remember the lesson completely.

"What spell? Oh, do you mean the *Incendio* spell?"

The end of the couple's bedding caught on fire and it took several clay pots of bathing water to put it out. Pholx's song was barely able to give Eirran courage and calm Glanis from violence.

Eirran knew there would be no marital closeness tonight.

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Willen sat by the fire finishing and smoothing another power concentrator. The phrase magik stick was shorter but he didn't like it. Power concentrator would not do either. Internalized-unicorn-hair-carved-olive-wood-strip was descriptive but did not roll off of the tongue. Besides, this one had a dragon heartstring in it. He just *knew* a dragon heartstring would be the right magikal concentrator for Torban. Specifically he 'knew' he was making it for a Metal Forger.

It had been an unnerving discovery for the briefest moment, but then, like most discoveries, it seemed perfectly natural after the fact. Everyone knew all the different things you could do with a clay pot, but who had figured out how to make the first clay pot? Now that he had discovered so many aspects of magik, Willen had a much greater appreciation for that first unheralded Potter, forefather in trade to Egorn, the Potter Willen did know.

One night after eating his meal, Willen went to his carryall to remove several strips of olive wood. He'd planned to work on them by the fire before sleeping. He had held the dragon skin cover up at one corner and reached for a wood strip when it slipped from his fingers. He quickly reached down for it, not wanting to have to crawl under the carryall to retrieve it.

Just as he grabbed the strip of olive wood with his fingers, it touched one of the coils of dragon heartstring. The redder than fire sparks Willen had seen somewhere before shot out of the end of the strip of wood. Pholx trilled with great excitement, adding to Willen's sense of well being and his 'knowing' that this was more than just a random event - it had meaning of some sort.

Willen's Curiosity said "what if...?" and there was nothing else to do but break out the dragon heartstring reel and cut a length of heartstring as long as a man. He also took out one of the olive branches.

First he cut one length of the heartstring about as long as a unicorn hair. Then he tied a small knot in the end at the tip of the olive branch. He wrapped the heartstring in the same manner as he had the unicorn hairs for all those seasons, and held the other end with his thumb. There was nothing else to do but point the new combination down at several dried leaves on the floor of the woods.

"Incendio!" The leaves caught fire. The spark was definitely stronger than the olive branch alone and only slightly less powerful for him than the wrapped unicorn hair and olive wood power concentrator. Of course there was nothing else he could possibly do that night except make an olive wood strip concentrator with an internalized dragon heartstring in its center. He had to fashion a deeper groove than needed with a unicorn hair, a heartstring is thicker than twenty unicorn hairs, which is rather thick as far as hairs go.

Willen decided to cut half the depth of the groove on one half of the split olive wood strip and cut the other side of the groove in the joining piece. He didn't want the heartstring to be off center in the olive wood strip, and this would maintain maximum strength in both halves.

The first embedded dragon heartstring and olive wood power concentrator gave Willen problems, gluing the two halves together properly. The grooves had not been quite deep enough and the glued pieces had parted at one end in spite of the rawhide wrappings. The second one he produced to his exacting quality standards, and it proved to be more effective than the wrapped heartstring or unicorn sticks at casting spells. The idea proved to be sound and he now knew of two animals that could be called magikal creatures.

By this time, if Willen thought about his two damaged fingers they seemed stiff, but if he just used them without thinking about the injury, he was as dexterous as he had always been.

Willen would occasionally look at the heartstring power concentrator he'd made for the metal worker in Loundon's Towne, his friend Torban. It still warmed his heart when he thought of Torban telling him on the day he left that he would now consider Willen his friend. The other heartstring concentrator he felt sure was for Egorn the Potter, at least he felt pretty sure. He'd remembered Egorn's wife Shulla had the Touch, and he believed he remembered that Egorn did too. He'd also made a unicorn hair and olive wood magik stick with Shulla in mind.

He thought about how he had acquired quite a number of unicorn hairs and several small reels of dragon heartstring. What else might work? With all of the hairs and heartstrings Willen wondered how many concentrators he would eventually manufacture. He pondered the fact that when he always thought of manufacturing the concentrators, he did not use the words "make" or "craft" or "create." Funny, he had never heard of the word manufacture until he had met Eirran, yet that was the only word he applied to the process of rendering a finished power concentrator.

Willen fell asleep that night wondering if there was a better word, a simpler word to use other than power concentrator, something more elegant than magik stick.

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The sun had barely cleared the lower hills off to the west when Willen had completed his morning efforts. Aldini had warned him after he had healed from fighting the three warriors, that when one does not use his sword fighting abilities for as long as five days, the swordsman loses a little of his skill and reaction time. Longer periods of disuse would cause a greater lessening of skills and agility.

Therefore, every morning since recovering from his battle with the wolves, he'd practiced a varying routine of cuts, thrusts, parries, spells - anything and everything he could think of, in as many different combinations as came to his imagination. While he "fought" using his blade against invisible foes, he imagined a variety of different combinations of enemies - Bonderman, Bonderman and his two underlings all swinging their swords at once and in varied orders, and the combination of Bonderman and Porto. For the last he ducked and rolled quite a bit, imagining dodging the spell that had nearly killed him. He practiced bringing up his sword and then his carved internal unicorn hair olive wood stick, sending out spells to petrify already motionless trees and not setting fire to rocks that he imagined as attackers.

He hoped that Torban realized what a fine sword he had designed and created. If so, then he would have made more, and hopefully there would be those in Loundon's Towne who could use them with some degree of skill.

Each morning he would start his routine and worked up a sweat, then practiced at least twice as long as the time it took for the water to begin to flow from his body. That time took longer and longer so daily his practice times increased.

As he walked around his fire to cool one day (if he didn't at least one muscle would grip him with pain) he noticed Pholx appear and swoop in from a distance. He circled, calling in the tones that always made for a better day, and then alighted on Willen's outstretched arm.

He noticed the sunbird had his carved image of Constantia in holly wood with him. Willen was most grateful to have it back. Having it was like having a little bit of his lady love with him, but he had not been able to think of any other way to communicate that he was alive and making his way to her, other than sending the carving. It was obviously her, and she would definitely recognize his handiwork.

So he was glad the carving had returned, but he worried that Pholx might not have found her.

"Hello, Pholx. Here, have some grain and dried chicken, boy. I know you don't like the flesh of a fellow animal with wings, but it's all I have and you must be hungry after your trip."

Willen untied the carving from the sunbird's talon and it hopped down for the fare set before him. Willen had to find more food soon, this was his last.

He took the carving in his hand. It always sang to him for just a moment when he brought it up to look at, but this time it sang louder and more joyously. Willen just knew all was right with the girl, by now woman, of his dreams.

He felt something unusual on the back of the carving. He turned it around, and there was a thick lock of darker than dark hair tied tightly together at both ends and attached to the carving with glue on the two strips of cloth tying the lock together.

Willen's heart thrilled as if Pholx were two sunbirds singing to him in harmony.

### *Constantia's hair!*

Just a little bit of the one he loved. She had realized that he'd sent the sunbird, and she wanted him to know she was waiting for him to return. If at all possible, Willen's resolve became even more focused. He ate quickly and made his way just a little bit faster that day than the day before. His smile faded very rarely for the next few days following.

The carryall was heavy. Eirran's design made it much easier to drag than carrying the weight of his goods in any other manner, but it was still a load that tired his legs, arms, back, and every part of his body. It even seemed that his clothing was becoming tighter with the effort each day.

A number of peddlers he had met on the way stopped him to ask about markets behind him, but all of them mostly wanted to examine his carryall. How much he could carry was a marvel to each of them.

Willen felt sure that he was approaching the sea much further to the west than where Stellan had landed him many seasons before. The very fact that he headed four parts north and one part west ensured this, but he had visual confirmation when he saw a rock formation to the east, that had been to his west while traveling south.

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In the early afternoon, a fortnight later, he walked out of a copse of woods into a wide field with a series of differently sized stones, standing on end, in what appeared to be a fairly straight line. They ranged in height from waist high to nearly twice as high as a man. The carryall usually announced his approach on rock or sand or gravel, but in this field's lush grass of that summer of 382 B.C., he was making little sound. However, he was obvious to anyone looking his way.

Willen saw two people at a distance. As he approached them he observed that they were concentrating on something that was not apparent from where he was. They were looking up above what looked like a burned down hut. There was no smoke so the fire could not have been too recently, but there was nothing left more than hip high at most, of the remains of the dwelling.

The two were gesticulating oddly. As he approached them Willen noticed more details. The two were a man and a woman, a little younger than Eirran, and it seemed by their animation, that they were arguing. Though it was his practice to call out to those he neared that had not seen him, Willen did not want to interrupt their, er, conversation. He did not like surprises jumping out at him but he wondered, how could he, dragging the carryall and moving at a pace of a normal walk, have possibly gotten this far without being noticed. Soon their words were understandable.

"I still say that someone will become nosey and want to search through the ashes to see what they can salvage."

"That is why it looks so badly burned down. No one will think there could be anything worth having left in this rubble. It isn't even quality rubble."

"You old fool, if there was nothing here to be seen at all, then no one would want to search."

"You are older than I am, woman."

"By three days, besides, I didn't say 'older' I said old. My age is irrelevant. It is the age of the fool I mention... Oh, look, here comes someone. Let's see if he walks past. Don't move."

Now who's the fool? If we are invisible he cannot see us whether we move or not." But they both froze in place. They stopped in the most odd and unnatural position, as if that helped them the more to not be noticed.

As Willen neared to within easy conversational distance he heard, "I think he is going to walk right past."

"Shush! We are invisible, not sound proof."

Willen could not remain in silence. His grin burst into a laugh. "You are neither sound proof nor invisible."

The two relaxed from their odd poses and were about to resume their argument when Willen said, "Are you two Ninato and Nerta?"

The man and woman looked surprised for a moment and then reached into their robes to draw out sticks with unicorn hairs wrapped around them. Willen's reflexes spared him from a painful experience.

He fell to his left into a roll and came up behind a rock standing on its end about as high as his chest. The roll helped him dodge a blue bolt of light from the woman's power concentrator that dissipated into the air about a man's length past him; Willen had noticed it during his roll. He came up with his internal unicorn hair olive branch and shouted as the woman was about to cast another spell. The man was shaking his stick like it was malfunctioning.

"Stop! I mean you no harm. Are your names Ninato and Nerta or am I wrong?"

The woman stopped in mid cast, but held her stick and hair in place. The man raised his like it would finally work but his face looked doubtful.

"Are you a Seer, young man?" said the woman. "Or a fade sent to deceive us?"

"I am neither. If those are your names, Ninato and Nerta, then I have a message for you from my friend Eirran who *is* a Seer."

The two seemed to relax a bit, or maybe it was just curiosity.

"I am Ninato," said the man with more courage on his face than was in his voice. "What is the message?"

Willen decided to tell them rather than show them. "Sir, Eirran said to slap you for him, and to hug your pretty wife. He also said that Nerta's cooking was worth the trip alone."

They placed their power concentrators in their robes and both came forward with their hands extended. "You must be the famous Willen. Please come into our small house. We live not quite a day's journey from here, but this is where we live as we construct our subterfuges. Please join us for supper. Eirran did not exaggerate my wife's cooking skills; there is an excellent eel stew and fresh bread."

Willen had had little eel during his life, but had enjoyed what little he had tasted. His mouth watered; then he became truly excited when he realized that eel is a sea creature. He *must* be near the sea.

But before he asked about his location, he had to ask, "Come in? I see no hut anywhere."

"Show him, my dear," said the woman proudly.

Ninato came forward to Willen's side and touched his shoulder while pointing to the burned hut. He flourished his hand in a particular way and said, "Welcome to our humble hut, Willen, friend of Eirran."

The burned ruins shimmered and were replaced by a quaint hut of a design unseen in Albion, but very common in Gaul. Willen fell to his knees.

"Very good, my dear," she said. "You have frightened the Dragonslayer Wolfslayer. Now *I'm* impressed."

As they finished eating Willen summarized their explanation, "So, the subtleties are the rocks, randomly placed on end, scattered in ones, twos, and occasionally threes until those interested are led far away from where you don't want them. The subterfuge is to create the massive rock display outside this hut that will capture their fervent thoughts and make them enthralled with that location, which is far from where you have your community. Then you use your illusions and disillusions to hide your buildings and make the place where you do live look undesirable or dangerous, or both. That is the 'hiding in plain sight,' am I right?"

"Yes. That describes the theory succinctly. How we actually do it is very complex, but that expresses it pretty well, don't you think, my dear?"

"Yes, my brilliant husband." Her praise was sincere.

Willen had learned that even though the two could argue like none he had ever heard, in an instant they could be a loving, almost cloyingly sweet, affectionate couple.

He asked, "Could you teach me how to do this? I would love to help Loundon's Towne hide from our enemies. It could help us avoid a lot of bloodshed. I'll kill whoever must be killed, but I'd rather not hurt anyone."

The two had come to admire Willen in the afternoon, evening, and morning they had known each other. Eirran had written them about him in a terse note that Beemy had delivered. Nerta had almost killed the owl for supper. The aerial message delivery method had been discovered after the husband and wife had left Remers. Beemy had hopped around the field from upturned stone to upturned stone where the two had been working, trying to avoid her and gain his attention for the small bit of parchment tied to its leg. Finally the note had been noticed, read, and a return message of greeting had been sent with an update on their progress at deceiving their enemies.

Nerta explained, "Willen, we are developing these ideas and methods as we go. The one thing we can tell you is that we can do nothing individually. We both have to cast every spell as you call them - amazing idea, that. A replacement for the Old Way to fight the misuses and corruption running rampant among this new wave of our despicable brother Celts and Druids..."

"Dear, back to the point."

"Huh? Oh, yes, yes," she said. "Well, we both must do our parts simultaneously. I am not exactly sure what he says, nor he me. To compound that, we find we do and say things differently each time. When we finish this field this afternoon we will have completed the entire planned system of subtleties and subterfuges and will go back to Hirel to record our results and try to codify what we have done. We cannot travel the length of Gaul and now go to Albion to help those under attack. We must spread our knowledge by written word and perhaps some sort of training program or something."

Ninato chimed in, "As it is, we will not leave Hirel and go back to Remers. Eirran did not know that Nerta had been ill in Remers. We are not sure what has been the cause of her improved health - it may be the sunnier weather, the reduced heaviness in the air from being near the sea, or maybe just the longer summer and shorter winters here, but Nerta has bloomed here into the flower I first married. We miss Remers and our friends, but we will not go back to her death."

She sat quietly holding his hand as he rubbed her arm. They were obviously in love in spite of their occasional yelling sessions.

"As it is, the youngsters we brought with us to Hirel, and those Celts nearby that have joined us, are a delight. We both are adored and are able to teach what we know to those who think we are brilliant," she said with the slightest blush. "Ninato is brilliant and I enjoy receiving the portion of acclaim from his brilliance that splashes on me."

"Nonsense, my dear. Who is the one who is ten times more powerful with the unicorn hair power concentrator? I can barely light a fire with mine."

"I *might* be able to help you with that, Ninato." Willen had been so preoccupied during their time together with questions on their protective schemes, that he had not told them a thing about his recent discoveries. They had not realized that his internal unicorn hair carved olive strip was the next step in the advancement of power concentrators. "Please excuse me."

He walked outside to his carryall intending to grab one of the many unicorn and olive stick combinations he had manufactured. But when he pulled up the dragon hide covering, he *felt* one of the olive wood and dragon heartstring combinations tug at his hand. He picked it up with curiosity and heard a very different song come from it. He thought about the lack of abilities that his host had with the unicorn hair he used, particularly in comparison to his wife. When Willen thought of Ninato, the song from the heartstring filled carved stick grew louder.

Willen took that heartstring power concentrator in and one of the many unicorn hair examples. By the time he had walked back in he had decided on a course of action. He was not going to just hand Ninato one of his devices.

"Let's step out back to the patch of ground where your chickens occasionally scratch." They followed him out and he kicked several small piles of dried leaves together. "I want you each to start a fire with your sticks. You first, Ninato."

They were curious about the lengths of carved wood in his hand but had not made the connection yet.

Ninato pointed his unicorn hair wrapped stick towards the first pile. Willen noticed he used the same birch wood that Eirran had said was so common around Remers.

"*Plindabel Doletang!*" he said and a small flame sprung from the leaves that barely caught.

"Please hand your hair and stick to Nerta." And after he did as Willen said, "I want you to learn the fire starting spell in magik. It comes from the Latin Eirran taught me." Willen had the carved concentrators in his cloak. "The spell is 'Incendio!'"

"Magik is the New Way and a spell is...?"

"A spell is a piece of magik."

"Just speak Willen's 'spell,' husband." Both husband and wife were not the most patient, Willen had observed.

"Incendio?"

"That's it. Well said. Now take the hair stick and point it at the next set of leaves and cast the spell."

"Cast? Like when Eirran goes fishing. Did he make up that word?"

"Husband," she pressed him to respond.

"Incendio!" The fire that started this time was much brighter and had a larger flame instantly.

"Now, Nerta, you use your unicorn hair stick and the Old Way words."

They both looked at him as though they did not quite know what he was attempting to accomplish.

She said, "*Plindabel Doletang!*" and a flame erupted that was much larger than her husband's with that spell, and a little brighter than his with the Latin.

"Nerta, now please try the Latin spell."

"It was, " Incendio!" right...?"

The leaves nearest the tip of her stick and hair, a small pile right by her shift, burst into the largest set of flames seen yet and caught her shift on fire.

"I'm sorry, my mistake. I did not make it clear why I wanted you to not have a power concentrator in your hand when you try pronouncing the words. I did the same thing to Eirran's smock in the early days.

"But each time you cast a spell, and by the way, Eirran did provide the word 'cast' for sending out a spell," he said with a grin, "each time one of you casts a spell we see what happens and I am learning how to help people. This is an interesting comparison. Please be patient with me.

"Do you see that small piles of leaves over there?" Willen pointed to the leaf pile just over the two man lengths away. "Please aim at the right one, Nerta, and try to light it using Latin."

She tried with her combined hair stick and nothing happened.

"Now, take this one and try, it uses an olive stick with a unicorn hair embedded in it."

Once again Nerta tried the same spell at that distance and nothing happened.

Willen said, "Hmm. I wasn't expecting that. Use that stick to light this pile right here."

She did and it did not light.

Willen stared at her. "Now I am confused. Erm.... Please hand it to Ninato. You try it at a distance." As Ninato tried and failed, Willen felt the olive wood and dragon heartstring carved

"Ninato, please try the pile at your feet."

" Incendio!" cried Ninato and the fire started. At that event the carved stick in Willen's robe began to sing a bit. Willen remembered that it had insisted on coming with him.

Willen drew out the magik stick in his robe. "Ninato, this is a carved olive wood stick with a core of dragon heartstring..."

"Oh, Willen, that is too valuable to you. I would be afraid to borrow it for even a minute. I'm amazed that you think it will act like a unicorn hair. What makes..."

"Ninato, please try it. It is very important," Willen insisted.

Willen handed it to Ninato, handle first. The second he released it and it was in Ninato's grip alone, the redder than fire sparks flew from the end and Willen heard a song from the wood and heartstring.

Ninato almost dropped it but he was afraid to let it hit the ground. The sparks stopped in a moment.

"Curious, most curious," Willen said. "Did you hear a song just now, either of you?"

Ninato answered slowly. The look on his face was one of stunned amazement. "Um. I heard a small bit of a tune for a moment, barely. Was it my imagination, or your magik?"

"I just don't know. I'm too new at this myself," said Willen, struck with curiosity. "Please point it at the far leaf pile and cast the Latin spell for fire."

Willen's host turned slowly. He looked as if he thought it might bite him at any moment. He pointed it at the distant pile and said with a great degree of concentration, " Incendio!"

Both piles of leaves and a piece of wood two arms length beyond burst into flames! Nerta fell on her face, but Ninato stared at the carved stick in his hand as though he held the key to the world - but only for a few moments.

Ninato shuddered for a moment and then reversed the stick in his hand. He walked to Willen and gave it to him, hand end first.

"Willen, I thank you for letting me see the future, but I do not know if I can be trusted with such power." Saying this he turned to walk back to his wife.

Willen grabbed his arm. "Ninato, did you "See" that you could use the power to bend men to your will?"

The elder man lowered his head and nodded in shame.

Willen asked, "Then were you repulsed by your thoughts and wanted to never wield such power for such evil?"

Ninato raised his head without pride but with determination and nodded to Willen.

"My friend, if I may call you friend, you have proven you can be trusted with such power. The one who delights in what evil he can cause with the power concentrators I manufacture, well, I will have to take it away from him - fight him if need be. Magik is not intended for conquest, but for service and protection of those in need.

"Please take this olive wood and dragon heartstring carved stick. Though I had not met you yet, when I made it, I made it for you. The stick actually told me that. It chose you. Please use it well."

Ninato swallowed, hesitated, and then gingerly took the stick back from Willen. "I will be careful, Willen. I promise you I will use it with all the wisdom I can, and with all of the guidance you can give me before you go on your new way."

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"Constantia! CONSTANTIA! It's Willen's bird. Come, come quickly." Lindern was out of breath. He had run from the half finished boat docking structure to her private archery practice area. Lindern was the only one who knew where that site was.

"Don't try to keep up with me, Lindern. You are exhausted. But I must run now." She turned and ran with the same grace with which she did just about everything.

Lindern walked and ran after her as best he could.

Constantia was winded by the time she made her way through the woods to the water's edge where Stellan, Caedric, Ludno, and his brothers had run their fishing boats aground.

Phox, a name unknown to all there, had suddenly appeared overhead, circled once, and then landed on the main boom of Stellan's fishing boat. The new goods transporting boat was under construction up the river a bit in a small jetty. It was barely close enough to see a little of the progress highest above the water line.

Stellan was feeding Willen's bird strips of raw fish he was hacking off the flank of a cod from his catch. The bird slowly gulped down another strip as Constantia made her way over the gunwale and towards the stern of the boat.

"Hello, my pretty bird, how is Willen? Did you have a good flight? Is Stellan being a good host?"

The trilling tunes in response thrilled everyone there, and once again gave them courage and hope for the future.

"I didn't really know what to do with him or even if he was here to see me. But I sent Lindern, and I see he found you. There seems to be a piece of parchment tied to his talon. I did not try to retrieve it."

She approached the bird confidently but slowly, not wanting to startle it. The parchment was retrieved and Stellan assigned a hesitant mate to continue feeding the bird all it wanted.

There was a flat table-like surface near the capstan where Torban's metal bar raised and lowered the sail and the anchor. They spread out the parchment.

It was an odd drawing that made no sense to them. There were curved lines and several items drawn in different locations. In the upper right side of the parchment there were drawn seven stars in the shape of a ladle or dipper. The star on the end away from the bowl part of the dipper was at the top and there was an arrow drawn straight up, pointing to that star.

In the upper left there was a drawing of a girl, a very pretty girl with dark hair. From the girl there were two wide lines that curved, getting slightly wider apart until midway across the parchment where they split and parted, one going up and one going down. A series of arrow lines went from the girl to the parting point. There a boat was drawn. Arrows were drawn from the boat to a curvy line drawn down the right side of the parchment and parallel to that side for a little less than a third of the way from the top. That line then curved toward the middle of the parchment where it made several shallow curves until it reached the center and two-thirds of the way down.

At that point there was great detail in the curves with a prominent outreaching part of the line. Where it curved back down, there were three small circles arranged in an irregular pattern. The curving line continued down the length of a finger, then curved to the left and formed a bowl like shape with a smaller lip off to the left. The line ended after that.

The arrow lines from the boat went straight to the curved line on the right where a smaller boat was drawn. An arrow left that little boat and crossed the long curved line where an arrowhead pointed to a stick man with what looked like a circle around its neck with a dot on it. A smaller picture of what looked like the same girl was drawn with an arrow pointing from it to the dot on the circle.

Arrowed lines left the stick man and went straight down to the bottom of the parchment, circled, and came back up to the left to the place on the curved line where the odd shaped 'bowl' and small circles were. Where the arrowed lines circled and came back up, there was a small stick man with what looked like a tiny stick in the nub of its hand. Stellan's finger followed the line with the stick man to the odd shaped bowl in the curved line. At that place on the parchment right under the bowl was another stick man with the stick in its hand and the circle and dot around his neck.

The second drawn boat on the upper right of the long curved line had arrowed lines heading along the curved line leading to the same point at the oddly curved bowl. Twice along this arrowed line there was a small drawing of a bird. The arrowed lines from the boat ended at the oddly shaped bowl with the small circles where another small boat was drawn.

Finally, there was an arrow drawn from the final stickman to the last boat drawn in the bowl.

They took several long moments to examine the parchment. Torban arrived and looked on. Constantia and Stellan finally looked up and began talking at once. Stellan finally spoke.

"I think this must be a map - it is a drawing of what the land and the sea of an area looks like if you could see it from a bird's eye in flight, very high up. The only map I have ever seen was of an estuary where there were many hidden rocks and shoal waters. This area is not familiar, and there is



hardly any of the detail I saw on that one map."

"I have heard of a map," said Constantia, "and I think I know what one is, it shows you the way to somewhere, correct?" Stellan nodded and she continued, "I was going to say that the stickman could be Willen. It is his bird."

At that moment Pholx fluttered to the place on the sail boom near where they were. No one knew where it had been hidden on the bird, but he dropped Willen's carving of Constantia on the parchment and it landed on the larger picture of the girl.

The clouds broke and the sunshine of recognition shone through the darkness.

"This large drawing of a girl's face is you here in Loundon's Towne, Constantia. The arrow shows my boat taking Willen to the coast of Gaul."

"Yes, Stellan. The stickman is Willen with this carving around his neck. He went down here to the south of Gaul," her finger traced the route. "And down here he holds a stick... He found the olive sticks!"

She turned and shouted to the crowd that had gathered on the shore, "Willen has the olive sticks and is heading home to us!"

There were a number of cheers and shouts and backslappings going on while Constantia and Stellan turned back to the map. He said, "This must be the coast of Gaul. I have never sailed this far down before, this neck of land extends out and there are several islands here. That should be obvious but it may not be at all. I could sail off the ends of the earth if I go far enough out to the west."

"Look, Stellan. Willen has drawn a bird several places along the way." She turned to the scarlet and gold creature looking on. "Is that you, pretty bird? Has Willen asked you to fly with Stellan and show him the way?"

Pholx gave forth with a song of sheer delight that warmed every heart within earshot, save one.

With a look of Loundon determination Constantia ignored her father and declared, "I'm going with you, Stellan." She stood a little taller than the Fisher and tried to push up on her toes to punch home her demand.

Before Torban could protest, Stellan held up his hand to him and said to her, "It is bad luck to sail a boat with a female aboard."

Constantia snorted a stifled laugh and said, "Stellan, you don't believe that. You have had plenty of women and girls on board bringing them here to Loundon's Towne."

"No, the female I talk of is you. The bad luck will be mine when your mother hears I have taken you with me." Stellan smiled and said, "You may talk with honey in your mouth to your father and succeed, but your mother will not have any mercy on me."

Stellan took a half step back and shouted his orders. "We sail with the morning tide for the longest journey we have ever attempted. Pack the hold with provisions. Gather your weapons of choice. And I'll drop into the sea any man who tries to help Constantia stow away."

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There is a set distance between Loundon's Towne and the Aldertani Keep at the southern coast of Gaul. *Over five times that distance away*, going two parts west for every one part south, and before you sail off of the end of the world, you come to the south and east coast of a huge land mass that none of those alive in Gaul or Albion or Etruria or the Celtic homeland would ever know about. In the same year that Sir Nicholas almost lost his head, Europeans would discover this land.

The people of this coast took in their harvests at the end of each summer, and then prepared to pay for their bounty. Sometimes the storms came before the harvest had been gathered, but usually these storms arrived afterwards.

Some cycles they were blessed and no storms appeared. Some cycles there would be the hint of these storms but they would not arrive. Some cycles one big storm would impact, and others might come nearby. Once in a lifetime several storms would cast their fury on the same part of the coast.

Sometimes a village was badly damaged. Sometimes there would be moderate damage. Sometimes a village would be gone.

Those of this coast tried every manner of appeal to all sorts of deities to end the visits of these storms, but they kept coming.

However, these storms never made their presence felt in Albion and Gaul...

...except just before harvest time in 382 B.C.

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"Well, good morning, my cheery feathered friend of Willen's, I see you have returned to me. Do you bring correction or confirmation to my navigation?"

The sunbird gave out a song of joy for a few moments and Stellan's boat crew was happier than they had been in days. They had been sailing three parts west for one part south during most of this time, *always* keeping the coast in sight. All feared that they would be approaching the end of the world soon. Stellan calmed their fears by pointing out that the seas were not rushing towards an abyss, so the end must still be far away. That settled their concerns but it did nothing for his. Who says there is an abyss? Why not just a massive sea serpent flinging boats off of the edge?

The wonderful trilling of Willen's bird cast all fears aside, and they all bravely set their faces like rock to conquer any sea or sea serpent the day

might bring.

It was the sea that worried Stellan the most - and the weather. The seas were "restless" in Stellan's mind, and appeared to be a bit greener than usual. He could feel that the pressure of the roiling winds seemed "too light" or something like that. The sun seemed ill in the hazy sky. He wondered if this was what the world was like at its end.

Encouraged by the tuneless tune coming from the bird, Stellan continued his conversation with the winged creature, "Well, we have sailed past the protruding tip of land on the parchment map, and now I can see one of the islands on my starboard. Will it be a day, or a week before we see Willen? And how *will* we see him? Do I go close inshore and risk grounding, or do I stay back from the land in safety and sail past him? Do you not know or do you know and keep it a secret?"

The crew worried when their master carried on such one-sided conversations with the bird.

Pholx perched near the tiller in the back of the boat throughout the morning and even hid its head for a while. It appeared to be sleeping. Closer to lunch than supper in the mid afternoon, Willen's bird took wing without any notice and flew off with purpose, flying parallel to the shoreline. Stellan followed that course because it was the course he had been on all day.

About the time Stellan began looking for a place to beach his craft for the night, the bird returned. When he had sailed west on the coast of Gaul farther than he had ever been, he became cautious about sailing at night. When he had sailed past the small port that was as far west as Ludno had been, he became concerned about sailing at night. He started looking for a small river or inlet where he could beach in safety for the night.

They had passed the previous four nights in such small coves or river outlets, and with the sea, wind, and sun behaving as they did, Stellan was not about to sail during this night.

Willen's bird circling convinced him to not stop in the slight indentation in the coast he had spotted, but to sail past the small bit of protruding land ahead. At worst he would beach in the lee of the outcropping.

The bird began to circle the boat, fly on down the coast, fly back, circle the boat again, and then begin the process once more. The bird's trilling gave everyone the courage to push on a little further. Soon the bird reached its farthest distance and circled there, flew back to the boat, circled, and then flew back to that same location and began circling in earnest. It never flew back to the boat but circled over the same spot.

That location was a small river inlet that had no village around it. It would probably be ideal for the night, Stellan thought.

As he turned into the inlet, he saw a solitary figure standing on the western bank and two times the length of the square at Loundon's Towne away. Stellan approached cautiously, what could one man do? And the bank was clear for a long way past the solitary figure, proving there was no trap. But the sailors looked for one anyway.

The boat's master thought the man looked a bit like Willen. Though the lad had passed the age of maturity and had been considered a man when Stellan had met him, many continued to grow after that time, and almost all filled out more. This man had Willen's profile and could be a Willen grown a half a head taller. But Stellan doubted it.

This man had the look of a warrior, a powerful confident leader who was used to respect. He had a battle blade at his side and wore an oddly shimmering green cloak. He was tanned and obviously muscular under his cloak. Then Stellan noticed the clear penetrating eyes, both eyes, staring at him and smiling. No, this could not be Willen, Stellan thought of the lad's lazy eye. Stellan lightly grounded the boat and left it cautiously to greet the man and discover if he had indeed found a place to rest for the night.

As Stellan hopped over the gunwale, he tightened the battle blade Torban had given him around his waist. He had not been in Loundon's Towne long enough at any stretch of time to train with Conlander in swordplay, but he could hack his way with the best of his crew if need be.

The powerful looking young man slowly approached the beached craft, and when he reached the point where he need not shout, he said so all could hear, "Hello, Stellan. I'm glad you made it. My drawing must've worked."

Had the smallest bird landed on Stellan's shoulder he would have fallen over with the imbalance. It *was*...

"Willen? Can that be you...?"

"It is," he said as he moved forward and embraced the boat's captain. They parted and Willen knew he had some explaining to do.

"But...but... your eye? Willen, how...? What...?" He rushed forward and embraced Willen again. "I'm so glad to see you, and to see you are safe and well. Constantia..."

Willen stiffened slightly and interrupted him, "She's well? Bonderman hasn't...?"

"No, Willen. She waits for you and thinks of no one else."

"Nor I, nor I. We've much to tell each other. But first we must hide your boat. A Celtic raider sailed by yesterday at this time. They didn't see this inlet but they could now, if we do not prepare."

"Willen, how could they not see it then but see it now?"

Willen smiled, stepped close to his friend, placed his hand on his shoulder, and turned him upstream of the inlet. "This is how." And a dozen people with landing ropes and cut river rushes appeared out of nowhere.

Stellan fell to his face, as did his crew, who were now able to see that their captain could.

"Willen, are you in league with a devilkin?"

"No, Stellan, I don't know what a devilkin is, but I don't like the sound of it. Regarding what has just appeared before you, have no fear," he said loud enough for the crew to hear.

His bird trilled a few notes and they calmed.

"Thank you, Pholx."

"Is that his name, Pholx? Do you own him? Do you talk to him too? Does he understand? I feel the fool talking to him like he understands, but I cannot stop it."

"Yes, his name is Pholx. I consider him more of a friend; I don't own him. He saved my life and I may have saved his once. I'm not sure. He definitely understands me because you are here, aren't you? I *think* I can understand him. I guess I can feel what he wants me to know. He has to be patient with me.

"But come. Let's hide your boat and walk a little ways to where we are staying tonight. The village is not too far down the coast."

"But, Willen, why didn't they build the village here at the inlet, that would be the obvious thing to do?"

"That's why. Never do the obvious when you are trying to hide in plain sight."

"Hide in plain sight? Willen, what...?"

"We have a *lot* to talk about my friend."

---

"A dragon? A dragon that you faced twice and finally killed. Three huge Celtic warriors at once. Five wolves dead or dying out of six. And now you're an Olive Hand - no! You make olive hands so you're the Olive Hand Maker." Between the information Eirran had written to Nerta and Ninato, and what they had forced out of the reticent Willen, Stellan now knew most of the accomplishments of his young friend.

Willen asked, "Stellan, what is this about an Olive Hand, as if it is a title like Fisher or Potter?"

The Fisher looked at his friend, and then at Ninato and Nerta. They had talked through supper and into the night. Who knew what time it was, even if time systems had been invented yet? Most of the talking had been between Willen and Stellan with the other two adding insights, comments, and questions to round out the conversation and force Willen to tell of his many adventures and misadventures.

Stellan answered Willen's question. "I just thought you would know since it was you who discovered the facts. The title existed before I arrived at Loundon's Towne. They call Porto the Olive Hand because you found out about the olive stick he carries and kills with. They only told me like you had, about your journey to find olive sticks. Now that your bird - you say it is a sunbird or a phoenix and it is named Pholx, correct? Once Pholx brought that carved medallion of Constantia to us, a few have started calling you Willen the Olive Hand - Constantia chief among them. By the time this parchment you drew came to us by way of Pholx, and we discerned its meaning, nearly everyone was referring to you by that name. At least they were when I set sail; it was less than a day after your bird popped in with the map. Of course Olive Hand Maker is too long. People are already shortening such trade names. Metalsmith has become Smith, a name Torban dislikes, but he will always be the Loundon, so no matter.

"I told you, didn't I, Willen, that with all of our growth we have a number of all types of trade names. Baijan the House Builder cannot decide if he wants to be called Houser or Builder. I think he leans toward the latter. A lot has changed since you left. By all accounts Loundon's Towne is almost three times bigger than when you last saw it.

"You know, in a way, you have inspired a lot of it. I myself would not have gone there if we hadn't met. People have from time to time reminded themselves about your sacrifice and your quest and they redouble their efforts. Of course not too many days go by without Constantia reminding someone about how it is going to be after you get back and fight Bonderman and Porto. Some wonder why so many are training to fight if you are going to come back with olive sticks, but if nothing else, they don't want to stand by and let you do all the fighting. You have in large part, directly or indirectly, inspired the increased growth of the largest community in all of Albion."

Willen blushed a bit at these words but he thought back to the description of Constantia.

Tall - nearly up to Willen's eyes. He was glad he had grown some. Stellan had said that she stood straight and fearless. Willen had not been too sure he liked the idea of his future wife being a fighter and dressing the way Stellan had described. But he thought that so much had changed and he should accept whatever he found with gratitude when he made landfall at Loundon's Towne.

He remembered the powerful use of magik that had come from Haana that had saved his life. How could he not want women to find their part in magik? Loundon's Towne was their home too, and they would be savagely treated if the fight went to the brutes like he had fought in the hills of Aldertani Keep.

"Where are you, Willen?" Nerta asked.

He smiled sheepishly. "In the middle of a fight for my life."

"In the past or the future?" Ninato asked.





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Willen did not recognize, broke from the crowd and headed towards them.

The moment Willen had dreamed of, had worked for, and had bled over for three cycles had arrived. Constantia was before him and she was as breathtaking, no, more breathtaking than he had imagined. He'd had such high hopes for this moment, and so had she. But this was not the reunion either had envisioned.

She stood before him mixing tears of joy with tears of misery - she also had dirt smeared on her face in sign of mourning the death of a close family member.

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Four days before Willen's return, it was a typical day if you could call in any way typical the excited preparation less than a fortnight before the harvest faire.

Everybody was preparing their wares, crafts, and extra crops - anything to barter, trade, or sell. There were a number of demonstrations being arranged. Baijan the Houser was aging boards coated and uncoated with the white colored "wash" he used to slow board rot. Vanch and Lindern, and the rest of the Cooper's apprentices had arranged for the prettiest women in Loundon's Towne who used their rainwater barrels to wash their faces and discuss how their skin felt after daily washing their faces in rainwater.

Egorn the Potter and his sons had built special display shelves for their most decorative pots. The eldest boy, Jamin, had discovered a way to make a true red to use to adorn their wares. All other reds came out of the kiln looking like reddish mud. Jamin had experimented with a number of different mixtures and had developed a decorative coating that went on muddy looking and came out red.

Barlint the Cooper, who never made barrels anymore, and his brother Janks the Tiller, who kept few crops, were going to unveil a new row maker that was purported to be much better than their original design.

Meala was coordinating the preparation of various foodstuffs. When anyone first arrived the Towne fed him or her a meal as a matter of hospitality. After that, simple food was available at very reasonable prices, but there had been a resurgence of inventiveness in cooking in Loundon's Towne during the last cycle. Meala had been known for her baked balls of flattened dough sweetened with honey. She had begun adding bits of walnut to these delicacies and the flavor was even more enticing. Numerous other women of the community had developed new ways to prepare vegetables and different meat combinations.

Naelly had created a particular favorite by baking apples with honey, walnuts, and a tiny amount of a spice she had discovered that did not taste sweet at all, but combined well with the rest of the ingredients.

Conlander and Torban had created a new universal use blade. It had a handle with a wooden grip, quite the innovation. This made the blade much easier to use, particularly for long periods of time. They had come up with one more idea that should cause the new blade to be highly prized. They had asked Graller the Tanner to make what he referred to as a belt sheath. It fit the blade tightly and held it in place if you did not turn it upside down. It had a two horizontal cuts in it so that a man could place it on his belt for convenience. Several women had started wearing belts just to have such a blade easily at hand.

However, at this late date Conlander was managing all aspects of the forge and metal works for the upcoming harvest faire, because Torban was having nothing to do with faire preparations.

Torban's frenzied actions had reminded more than one long-term member of the community of Daneel the Board Cutter in his frantic days before being killed by Porto. Torban was obsessed with the defense of the town named for him. He felt sure, and everyone agreed, that it made sense that Porto and Bonderman would arrive after the end of the harvest faire. They would want the maximum tribute that was available after the final tallying from all proceeds derived from *all* the days of the events. With the last two faires, the would-be Keeper and his none too subtle master had arrived after all had departed for home. That would be the case this time, they thought for sure.

But *all* would *not* be like past faires.

It was about mid afternoon, and those who could feel the weather because of bad joints or bones broken years before, or a bit of the Touch, or for whatever reason, had all agreed that a storm was coming. The air felt "odd" somehow. There was a strangely disturbing wind brushing against the cheek. What sunlight showed itself, looked like it had eaten bad food that needed to come back up. The skies might have been said to look leaden, but they looked like lead with yellow ochre mixed in. The combination was impossible, but if one could produce such a concoction, it would look like the skies overhead.

The portent of a storm added to the immediacy of completing everything needed for the harvest faire. Items in place were tied down and protected by old cloth coverings, which were tied down and tied down again. The wind would blow stronger before weakening. All wall openings and roof openings used to allow in light and cooler air in the hot summer days were closed and doubly battened.

At just the right time, that is, at the worst time imaginable, Torban looked up and saw Bonderman and Porto riding in from the west, their usual course of entry. There were more than the usual four of them. Porto was accompanied by two others dressed as he was. The similarities in their appearance did not stop at clothing. Bonderman was finally riding behind the Olive Hand - literally as he had always figuratively. The two dressed like Porto rode on either side of him. There were four warriors riding behind Bonderman.

Most of the Towne founders were there in the square, as were most of those involved in its defense. Weapons had always been stored during the day except when used in defensive practice, and then they were carefully taken to the training grounds dispersed away from town - a walk away that took at least as long as it takes to boil an egg.

It had been assumed by all that the final battle would take place on the day after the faire had ended - on the day of tribute. All had planned and



prepared for that day. There was nothing to use as weapons, other than the daily tools of those there working - hammers, saws, blades for utility use - not a single battle blade, spear, or bow. Torban looked to Dorgelt the Hunter who did not even have his spear with him, not that one spear would accomplish anything but the death of the bearer.

Torban looked to the direction of his forge. Perhaps someone could... But there were two warriors on horseback herding town members from that direction. There was no way to acquire their weapons.

"Lindern!" Torban called urgently.

The apprentice Cooper and unheralded Bow Maker walked quickly to the town leader's side. There was fear under control on the boy's face.

"Lindern, you must go to Constantia's practice field."

The lad looked concerned. Constantia was not supposed to have a practice field of her own, and therefore he was not supposed to know about it.

"I don't care about my daughter's poorly concealed secret. You must go to her. You *must* make her stay away from Loundon's Towne. You know how she is. If she comes back before they are gone she will be fair game. She is already of age and can be taken as a wife according to our customs. They will take her if for no other reason than to ensure our continued cooperation.

"Lindern, if they fight in any way, you know my daughter will begin raining arrows on them. She will not be able to kill them all even though she has the Touch for finding her target. They will be angered by her deadly aim and her death, mark my words, her *death* will come very slowly. When you find her, stop her until one of us comes for the two of you. Hide her.

"STOP her, Lindern. You know how headstrong she is. You must prevail over her. Trip her, knock her out with a stout limb, and tie her to a tree if need be. Just keep her away from here and hidden."

Torban looked in a third direction and saw two more armed invaders riding in on horses. "You may have to slip by more riders. Be careful and wise as a fox. And, Lindern..." Torban's eyes looked a long way off, much farther away than could be seen. "Tell her that I love her. Now off with you, you're her friend and I'll always owe you a debt for this."

Meala had heard her husband's words and had seen the fear on the lad's face, a look that intensified as he went about his mission.

---

Lindern had to hide while two more warriors rode into Loundon's Towne from a fourth direction. He skirted the farm field where he could still be seen from the village and then ran the route Constantia always took to her practice field.

She came out of the woods at the edge of the field where he was about to enter.

"Constantia," the boy huffed from the run, "you are finished. I wanted to see how you have improved since I made that stiffer bowstring for you. Please come show me."

He grabbed her arm and tried to usher her back into the forest. His efforts were a transparently obvious attempt to keep her away from the town. He made it a little ways into the woods before she caught up to him and made him stop.

She stooped to look him in the face and grabbed his arms. "What is the meaning of this, Lindern? You are trying to keep me here. Why?"

He shrugged his arms from her grasp and fell back towards a tree where he tripped over a dried limb. She came to him but did not have to help him up. He had grabbed a limb and used it like a walking stick to help himself up.

She turned her head back to Loundon's Towne. "Is that smoke, Lindern...?"

THWACK!

Lindern agreed with Torban, nothing good would come of Constantia going back while the invaders were there. The boy's words were obviously truth-less; he knew he could not lie to anyone, particularly not her. He did the only thing one so much smaller and weaker could have done.

Lindern had drawn a little blood with his hit. He made sure she was breathing evenly and made her as comfortable as he could. He used a little water to clean the small cut on her head his blow had caused.

She was safe - at least for the moment. And that was all anyone could hope for - that and the soon arrival of Willen and Stellan. That, and the least amount of damage to be done to people and property by the deceitful visitors who probably were causing the smoke billowing from the direction of Loundon's Towne.

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There were nearly three hundred people in the Loundon's Towne Square, where the harvest faire was centered. There was talk of building new homes for those living to the west or south of the square so their present homes could be razed to make way for expansion.

Torban and Meala, Vanch and Taleena, Egorn and Shulla, and many others in leadership in the community naturally migrated towards the Olive Hand and his group. For better or worse, the hope for containing any damage lay in keeping Porto happy.

"Greetings, Porto the Olive Hand. You find us in preparation for the faire. Have you come for the tribute still in your storage building? This year's

faire be so profitable that we may have to build a bigger..."

"Crucio!"

Torban had walked into effective range of Porto's Olive Hand. He was down and in excruciating pain.

Many had gasped and tried to move back and away from the torture, but the warriors had herded the bulk of the crowd into a group they could control with their drawn swords and spears. Some had slipped away, but the message the usurpers were there to deliver would be made plainly enough.

Egorn stepped up and fell on his knees. Before, the Potter had bravely interceded for the leader of Loundon's Towne, and all that had been there had believed the brave little Egorn had saved Torban's life. "Great Olive Hand..."

"Crucio!" and Egorn had joined Torban in pain indescribable.

This time it was Portan who had started the torture.

Portag stepped up and applied the hideous cruelty to Trotan, the largest person in sight. The house builder joined the other two writhing on the ground.

The message was obvious. There were now three Olive Hands to fear.

Meala screamed and moved forward but Conlander transferred his hammer to his left hand and grabbed her around the waist with his right arm. Shulla, Egorn's wife, simply sunk to her knees, and her two eldest sons went to her aid rather than their father's. She grabbed each by the wrist and pulled them close against her. She could be heard forbidding them from going to Egorn's aid. They struggled anyway, and two men who had heard her grabbed their shoulders to assist her. The third and youngest son and apprentice Potter was being held back by two of the taller and stronger women.

"Mercy!" The cry came from the back of the crowd.

"Mercy!" "Mercy!" "Mercy!" More began to beseech the Olive Hands.

The moment after the cries for mercy stopped, Porto nodded to his brothers and all pointed their olive sticks at their victims and said, "*Cess Sate.*"

The torture ended but the three victims were still shaking and needed help to rise.

Egorn's eldest son moved to help his father but was stopped. Baijan the Builder moved to help his son rise. Graller the Tanner helped him. Vanch the Cooper and his apprentice, Cinko, got Egorn back on his feet. Finally, the brother row maker builders, Barlint and Janks, reached Torban with the assistance he needed. Meala moved slowly against Conlander's resistance to be near her husband.

Porto was in a rare mood of black humor. "Welcome citizens of my finest city." Gone was the last shred of pretense that Bonderman was Keeper. Porto smiled almost serenely as he continued, "I wanted to talk to you today to ensure that the harvest faire goes as I wish it to. You have grown your towne in the past by inviting anyone and everyone attending the faire to join you here.

"This will cease. I will direct and control your growth for *my* purposes in the future. Have your faire. Collect your profits. If you do not deliver more tribute than last year you will make up for the lack from what you would normally have kept. I will be adjusting the percentage of your tribute to my favor soon, but if you exceed last year's tribute for this faire, I will wait and make the adjustments later.

"As you can see, I have a larger retinue of warriors, and you will have the privilege of supporting them until we conquer new villages and communities to assist you. These are the much-feared Celtic warriors of legend, so they deserve your respect. Of course the number of my forces will grow, and so will the opportunity to support them and provide for their housing and entertainment."

At this a number of the ruffians Porto had described as legendary warriors chuckled and leered at the women in the crowd. Porto gave them a withering stare and returned to his address.

"Of course some of you of age, and your sons as they reach their maturity, will be drafted into my army as I have need."

The wind was whipping up and he shouted louder and quicker. Rain would start soon and Porto wanted this towne properly cowering before he left it.

"I have been told that you have prepared to resist us. Loundon. Where is your daughter?"

"Great Olive Hand..."

Portan and Portag laughed at this title but it slowed Torban only a moment.

"Great Olive Hand, my daughter is visiting a sick family member in another towne. She returns the day before the faire. May I ask..."

"Crucio!" had Torban on the ground in agony again. Oaths and dread roiled through the assembled crowd.

"*Cess Sate,*" Porto said only a moment later. "No, you may not do anything I have not ordered you to do. All of you! You have only the time it takes to boil an egg to go and gather your bows, arrows, spears, and swords, and bring them over to your monstrosity, the Diagon."

Nobody moved.

Conlander said quickly so his question might save him pain, "We know not what a sword is, Great Olive Hand." Conlander was now a marked one.

"They are foolish and ignorant, Brother," said Portan.

Porto said with exasperation, "The large blades you have made for the sole purpose of fighting me. You," he said to Conlander, "stay here with the woman you hold." He pointed to a number of others. "You stay here as well. The rest of you scatter and bring your weapons."

Porto raised his olive stick into the air and mumbled something that shot green stars into the air.

"NOW! HURRY!" he shouted, and the crowd ran in fear.

The crowd returned in the time it nearly took to boil an egg, but there was egg boiling to watch. Porto had moved his assembled crowd to the nearest end of the Diagon. By that time it was obvious that Porto's men had been busy. The platform being built to accept the larger boat was on fire, as were the fishing boats of three of the four brothers. Ludno's boat and Stellan's were not in. The larger goods transporting boat was being built in a very small estuary just around the bend west of the community. Apparently it had not been discovered.

Perhaps three out of four of the bows in the town were stacked against the wall. Dorgelt had all of the spears thrown on top of them. There had never been that many battle blades, now identified as swords, distributed by Torban and Conlander, but eleven of the fine blades were brought there as well.

"These will not burn, Porto," said Bonderman who had dismounted to supervise the destruction of the weapons. He continued, "They are of excellent quality though I do not like the long grip..."

"We will take them with us," Porto interrupted. "Proceed."

Five skins of strong drink were emptied on the pile of weapons and Portag rode near. He raised his olive stick said "*Plindabel Doletang!*" The weapons stack burst into flames. The Diagon caught fire also at that end.

Porto turned and addressed the town leaders assembled before him, but also loud enough for all to hear, in spite of the increasing wind. The rain started.

"There ends the means of your resistance to my rule. Look behind you. The boats to sink our boats and your river fortification are being destroyed. You, where are the other two boats?"

He addressed Conlander, who still held Meala in his right arm and the hammer of his trade in his left. "They are fishing boats, Great Olive Hand. Yesterday they were here and these three were gone." Conlander lowered his eyes and head, and stooped to lower himself in the evil Druid's presence.

Porto stared him for a long time, but the large handsome man did not look up.

By this time Torban and Egorn were standing alone and had drawn near enough to intercede with the Olive Hand again if need be, whatever the cost to them in doing so.

The rain had started but the wind had lessened a bit, it no longer caused the raindrops to sting the skin.

It was time.

Porto raised his voice even louder. "I will be back after the faire with even more warriors." He pointed to the burning weapons. "Thus ends the tools of your resistance and now I cut off the head."

"Avada Kedavra!" "Avada Kedavra!"

Torban and Egorn fell on their faces without a word.

After the expected gasps and cries, Porto shouted above the turmoil, and the wailing Meala and Shulla, "That ends those who have resisted in the past, and the leaders of your pitiful community." He spat out the last word as if it were a disease. "As I said, I will return after the faire with more warriors and I will remake **Porto's City** into my image. These are my brothers - Druids and Olive Hands in their own right and power. Remember, no one can kill a Druid. We will leave you to bury your dead, but I remind you not to consider any more foolish attempts at thwarting my plans, my men will leave you with several "reminders."

The six warriors on the ground near the remaining town leaders had drawn their swords during the gathering of the weapons. Their swords delivered in mere moments the reminders.

Bonderman struck first and removed Conlander's left hand from his arm. Naelly ran to her husband and a warrior took off her left foot near the ankle. Cinko was struck on the right arm almost exactly between the elbow and wrist. He was drawing his arm away so it was merely cut badly, not removed.

One warrior fancied himself a great swordsman and decided to deliver a precision wound. Vanch no longer had his right ear. Trotan lost three fingers on his left hand; barely missing losing the hand altogether. And with the removal of his foot, Janks the Tiller would limp behind a row maker from then on - if he lived at all.

Except for Conlander, the wounds and choice of those wounded was random and senseless.

That was the point.

Porto wanted all in *his* city to live in fear of the vagaries of fate - a fate he controlled.

---

Lindern was wiping her face with a cloth to remove the raindrops when she awoke. They were under a tree that was providing a little cover from the increasing rain. He had struggled to drag her to the poorly sheltering tree after he had hit her. For a moment, as she awoke, she just smiled up at him, wondering why she was in this position. Then she remembered.

She rolled and sprang to her feet. Lindern, no fool and very well aware of Constantia's temper, moved so the tree now acted as a barrier of sorts between himself and the furious woman.

"I was only obeying your father. He is head of our community. I had to..."

"Silence, little man. Explain quickly." The anger was leaving her face before this sentence was finished. Constantia knew Lindern would die for her without hesitation. There would have to be a *very* good reason for him to have hit her. She straightened and assumed a position that caused the lad to come out from behind the tree. The rain made what normally would have been a soothing sound as it fell on the leaves.

"Torban sent me. Porto and Bonderman were riding into town. There were two more dressed like Porto, and at least six other warriors. They rode in from different directions and were herding everyone into the square. I had to hide to escape and come to you.

"Your father said that I was to do whatever I had to keep you out here. Constantia, we were unarmed, with no hope to get to our weapons. Torban knew something bad was going to happen. He didn't want you there since you are now of age. He also feared you might use your bow and get yourself killed. He was very afraid."

"Lindern," she had calmed but was still upset by the event, and her head hurt fiercely. "How do you know that my father was afraid? He has never..."

"Because..." He did not want to say. He paused but knew it would come out.

"Why, Lindern? Tell me." She was not angry, but there was an increasing mixture of agitation and trepidation in her voice.

"Because..." The lad knew that the reason was not good. "Because he told me to tell you that he loves you!" There was pain in his words.

Constantia turned and began to run. She hardly slowed at all to pick up her bow and quiver of arrows as she sprinted home at top speed.

The smoke had lessened to only a smudge in the rain. Lindern ran as fast as he could in a futile attempt to catch her. The concern on his face multiplied with each step.

---

The wounded had probably saved her sanity. Shulla still raved from time to time, but Meala had seriously injured people to help. Intense consuming work has spared many from lunacy over the ages.

Conlander had been protecting Meala when he'd lost his left hand. She'd acted in the only way she could, and sprang to grab the stump and stem the blood flow. He almost broke her grasp as he screamed and lurched towards his new bride of less than two moons. She had fallen and was gaping at the blood flowing from her leg in a torrent.

Meala's commanding roar galvanized those nearest her, just enough people to accomplish what was necessary. Meala realized in a moment what had to be done - something no one had seen or heard of before.

"Bengt, grab Naelly's leg just behind the cut and squeeze it tightly as you can. Like this. You *must* stop the blood from leaving her body."

The Miller was normally a bit squeamish of the slightest cut or scratch when red showed, but this was not a normal time, and no one disobeyed Meala this day.

"Barlint, can you see this? Did you hear me? Stop Janks' blood from flowing. However hard you squeeze, it will not hurt your brother more than dying will. Taleena, help Vanch hold his hand over his ear."

"BE STILL!" Conlander had been trying to break free to go to Naelly. The shout quelled his efforts for the moment. He kept saying her name in quiet despair.

Pandan the Tiller had been listening and had his hand over the cut on Cinko's arm. Vanch held his head where his ear had been and checked on his apprentices. Baijan held his son, Trotan's hand in a manner that accomplished what Meala was demanding of the others.

Meala saw that her instructions had all been followed, and saw that all eyes turned to her. "We must make our way to the pavilion."

A stand of wood was being erected at the usual focal point of the harvest faire. It was made of boards and anyone could climb up and be seen and heard by all in the square, if they shouted loudly enough. Torban was to speak there, at the start of each day, to welcome all visitors. The boards were smooth, and they had been wet from a drizzling rain in the morning. Baijan had slipped on the surface. He and his son had started a fire and were heating pitch to spread on the boards. They would cover it with sand, just before it cooled and hardened, and the surface would not be

slippery.

Meala shouted, "Don't let the ones who have lost a limb walk. Carry them, but keep the cut up in the air so the blood will not drain." There were enough men nearby, who had snapped out of the shock of the moment, to carry everyone but Conlander. She looked around in desperation. Many stood unmoving, watching the spectacle. They were useless unless she shamed a few into action. She was about to curse, something no one had ever heard her do, when she felt Conlander's body being raised to a position to be carried. Before she could turn to see which men had him, Conlander was moving towards the fire. Meala could not see at first who had him; it was almost as if he was hovering towards the fire unaided.

She had last looked at Torban as he lay face down in the sand. It was only a few moments between his death and the butchery. Conlander had restrained her during that time. She had seen, and could still hear, Shulla by Egorn's still frame. Her two younger sons knelt by her, vainly attempting to console her. At that time, Jamin, Egorn's eldest, had stood over them, looking on.

Jamin was but a boy of fourteen summers, but he stood at about his Potter father's height. He was rail thin, and surely did not have the strength of a man yet. He would reach his seventeenth summer in three more cycles, but after this day, few would call *that* future day his day of maturity.

Conlander was the next biggest man in Loundon's Towne after Trotan, but Jamin had lifted the Smith onto his back and swiftly carried him to the fire. Meala was barely able to keep up with the youth and hold Conlander's arm in the air. This feat of impossible strength startled everyone into the actions Meala had demanded.

Conlander lay on his chest on Jamin's back. Meala wasted no time shoving his stump into to the fire to cauterize it, and then into the pitch pot to seal the wound. Conlander's howl was bestial, and he passed out with the pain. Naelly was already unconscious but she woke just long enough to scream her agony as loudly as her husband had, and returned to her unfeeling state.

Janks was in excruciating pain, and a part of his mind knew his fate would be decided in moments, as his life spilled on the ground. But logic was gone this day, and he viciously fought the process he had seen going on before him. Barlint stopped his struggling brother with one blow of his fist, and through tears, insisted that he perform this lifesaving horror on his twin. Meala had been burned badly on her fingers in the process with Conlander and Naelly, but the pain had not registered in her mind quite yet - like many other pains from this day.

Meala wiped the pouring rain from her face and looked to Vanch. She placed Conlander's blade from his sheath in the edge of the fire and walked to the Cooper.

"Lie down so you won't fall, Vanch."

"But Meala, surely..." As she spoke, still in shock, Taleena still held Vanch's severed ear in her hand.

Through clenched teeth Vanch said, "Stand back, my dear wife. Meala is right. You will help them get me to our hut if I too pass out." He did not feel as calm as he sounded, but Taleena did as he had asked.

Vanch groaned a guttural sound few would have called a man's, but did not faint. The hot knife blade seared the wound shut.

"Please tell me, Meala, that this has stemmed the flow. I do not want to clean pitch out of my hair." The hysteria of the moment produced a macabre humor in some. "Please see to Cinko, Meala. I'm fine." The senior Cooper tried to get up but did not succeed with his first attempt.

Baijan, through tears, succeeded in cauterizing the stubs of his son's three outer fingers on his left hand. As Meala inspected the Builder's work, he said, "He will still be able to swing a hammer and hold a board in place. As to a one handed Smith..."

Meala looked to the motionless husband and wife before turning to the apprentice Cooper.

Cinko was in his sixteenth summer, and a good Cooper in the making. He was not Vanch's favorite, that would always be Lindern, but he was a good barrel maker, and improving with each passing fortnight. It was known that he was not a fearful lad, and he would prove his bravery for decades to come, but this was a hard day for a boy of only sixteen summers.

"You don't have to take my arm, do you? How could I be a Cooper if you...? Please don't...! Please!"

"Quiet. Lad. Its not that bad," said Pandan the Tiller who held his arm wound sealed.

Vanch barely made it to his side. "I will make a special set of jigs for you if the worst should happen, Cinko. You'll be a skilled Cooper to the day you die. But please let Meala see your arm. She'll do what is best for you. I'm here for you, son." The senior Cooper was frantic to be reassuring.

Meala examined the wound. "Cinko, you will keep your arm, and probably regain most of the use of your hand, if not all. You do not need the fire or the pitch, but I must pass the hot blade through the cut. I will do it fast but it must be done."

"I am here, son," said his master. Vanch looked gruesome with his horribly disfigured ear that had been seared moments before. The smells were hideous, but no one noticed.

The lad nodded wordlessly. Meala pulled the blade from the edge of the fire, burning her hand once again but she felt little this day.

Vanch said, "Look away lad, best not to see."

But Cinko shook his head and barely said, "Quickly, please."

It was quick. Meala did not want to prevent the muscles from mending together if possible, so she touched the blade only to skin and flesh around the muscle. He was bandaged soon and on the mend.

The rain was pouring. From the time that the last amputation had been made on Janks, to the time all were over the worst of the immediate danger, was only the time it took for winter river water to come to a boil. But to Meala, it had seemed like a season ago since her husband had died.

*Her husband...*

Before she could cry the tears she so badly needed, she saw her daughter run into the square and make her way to her side. How would she tell Constantia what had happened?

---

*Willen,*

*I had to tell you what happened with the power concentrators you sent. But how rude of me. First, let me thank you on behalf of the magikal community of Remers for your kind gift of three additional concentrators. (I have adopted the word "magikal" to describe those of us with the Touch as you call it. My hope is that we will lean towards magik from the too easily corrupted and corrupting Old Way. I also hate what you tell me the name 'Druid' has become in so many places.) It is amazing the carrying abilities of your Phoenix. I have tried having Beemy carry heavier weights and he can lift more than I had thought.*

*Just to see what would happen as you suggested, I gathered eleven of my closer Druid associates outside of Remers in a dirt area with a number of piles of dried leaves and firewood. I added my magik stick to the experiment. So we had two olive wood and embedded unicorn hair carved sticks, and two with dragon heartstring. (You are right, magik stick and every other name for these marvelous devices of yours will not do.) I added mine to the experiment because I did not experience the surge of power that you described when I began using the one you sent me. I was not going to give it away unless someone was obviously "chosen" by it.*

*When we got to Plilgen, and he picked up one of the dragon heartstring embedded sticks, we saw the red sparks or stars you had described. He obviously was much more powerful than he had been with his unicorn hair wrapped stick and with a unicorn hair embedded stick.*

*Also unusual, was the fact that the first heartstring stick he picked up did not act that way. It was the second one. All three other sticks would light fires, but barely, for him. But he was setting piles of leaves on fire with the fourth stick at distances of three and four man lengths away.*

*These eleven with me that day were all ones I can trust. Three were students who have had family members killed by this new wave of disreputable Celts. The other nine are long time friends that lament with me the changing values among our people. They all committed to never use your sticks with anything but the Latin-based magik you have discovered, not with the Old Way. They have also committed to keep all of this a secret.*

*At the end of the day, Rantapt, one of my students, found that an olive wood - - rather let me say, by the end of the day another of your creations, an olive wood carved stick with an embedded unicorn hair, had chosen Rantapt. It was the first one he picked up, but he tried the other three, and none of them acted as this one had. His stick was the one you first sent me. I gladly gave it to him. I kept the other unicorn hair stick and it has worked as well as the first - that is, it worked a little better than any hair wrapped stick but not at all like the sticks that had chosen Plilgen and Rantapt. Now I am a bit envious. If one of your future creations sings about me.... Well, I am happy things are progressing in the development of magik and your craft of manufacturing power concentrators.*

*What comes for me comes.... Who's to say?*

"Meala, did you notice, the way Porto spoke, someone has... *cough*, someone has been telling him about us..."

"Rest, Conlander. You must sleep and recover, we need you." She choked back a sob. "I'll need your help. You are the only.... Naelly is resting well. You heard her. Her baby is safe, and I believe she should be able to carry the child her full seasons. I will not let anything stop that, but you must be here to raise your child. You must be here to help guide our city and forge strong weapons and devices we all need..." Tears ran down the new widow's face.

"Who ever heard of a Smith with only one hand, better that..."

"Never say that again." There was metal in Meala's voice harder than any Conlander had ever forged. "You can run almost as fast as the fastest of us with your damaged leg. You'll forge new metal products for Loundon's Towne with your stump. If you sleep now, you might be able to help with our defense. You won't be able to fight, but you will be needed."

Conlander looked at Meala. His face showed his embarrassment at his words. "I'm sorry for what I said. It's the pain and not my real thoughts. I will swing a blade on the last day of the faire and fight with Willen and Constantia and you and everyone else." He looked into her eyes. "What is it, Meala?"

"Most are saying they do not want to fight. Dorgelt gave them all of the spears, the easiest weapon for most to carry. Caedric is beside himself wanting to say that he warned us but..."

"Caedric," he said with a start. "I'll wager Caedric is the one who told Porto about our plans to fight. He is always gone and gathering information for us for pay, why couldn't he sell our information to Porto?"

"That's it," shouted Dorgelt. "Caedric must be the traitor. We must hang him now." The Hunter had been standing on the periphery of the hut in a black mood.

Meala had directed that all of the wounded be brought to her home. It was large, and right at the edge of the square. With a will of amazing industry she had thrown the table and chairs and several other items of furniture out of it in the time it took for those she had directed to bring bedding, to come back with the pallets needed. The rain fell hardly at all inside because Pladro the Thatcher had just re-thatched the roof a few days before.

"NO, Dorgelt. Torban did not fully trust Caedric, but the little Fisher would have never betrayed..."

"Well, he *did* betray us, Meala. Who else could it have been? He is gone all of the time. He had the opportunity."

"One in three of our community has been away more than a day in the last season, including yourself. You cannot convict him of treason on a..."

"Well, I'll just have to get a confession out of him." Dorgelt was at the doorway, and Meala was following him. "Gefter, Hallef," shouted the Hunter. "Come with me... Look! The little traitor runs! Quick, lads!"

Caedric was indeed running away. He had been near the wounded's hut, and had heard the discussion. Running just proved the guilt many would believe of him.

Meala heard a groan from Janks and ran back into the hut. "Barlint, is there a problem with your brother?"

"No, he turned in his sleep and bumped his stump. It shows no sign of bleeding. If you want to save Caedric's life, you had better act now. I don't think Dorgelt wants a confession; he wants a death. I will watch your charges and call you if anything changes. Even Conlander sleeps. The strong grain drink Bengt the Miller distills had worked its way."

Meala *had* saved Cedric's life. But not before Dorgelt had beaten him, leaving Caedric in a lot of pain, with a number of cuts and bruises, two black eyes, and at least one broken rib. But Dorgelt had not been able to beat a confession out of the little Fisher. No matter how hard Caedric was struck, he responded only with denials and protestations of innocence. They had beaten him in the rain and the water on their hands made cutting his face easier.

When she had wanted him released, Dorgelt and a small crowd he had stirred had insisted the Fisher be bound and gagged. *He had run*. Most considered that tantamount to a confession.

At the end of the night Meala took stock.

The fight was gone from most of Loundon's Towne. Shulla was sitting under the rain beside her husband's body, which was wrapped for cremation. Her two youngest sons sat in the mud with her, and Jamin stood over them with a waxed cloth cover, attempting to keep them dry. Most of the town's weapons were gone. Her daughter was a driven near-mad woman trying to re-instill courage in a beaten people. Three of the wounded might still die from their amputations, if the green death got to them.

The harvest faire was coming, and they could not postpone it or call it off. There was a formidable fighting force coming to take over forever. They had the probable traitor cornered, and many wanted to kill him immediately if not sooner.

And her husband, the meaning of her life, her first thought upon waking and the dream she always dreamed, was dead.

She wanted to die herself, but too many people needed her.

She stepped out into the howling wind and rain. It instantly soaked through all of her clothing. And she cried through most of the night.

---

The moment Willen had dreamed of, had worked for, and had bled over for three cycles had arrived. Constantia was before him, and she was as breathtaking - no, more breathtaking than he had imagined. He'd had such high hopes for this moment and so had she. But this was not the moment either had envisioned.

She stood before him with tears of joy and tears of misery conjoined - she also had dirt smeared on her face in sign of mourning the death of a close family member.

They were wordless for a moment. "Constantia, the dirt, who...?"

"My father..." She made a sobbing sound, and the tears came in a torrent. Since the attack three days earlier, she had not cried until that moment. It was as if he was the only one she could share her grief with, as all of her closest - at least all who could still stand of her closest friends and relatives, gathered around them.

"Hello, Willen, we've missed you." They were simple words, but Meala spoke them with meaning, even though she had a hollow look in her eyes. "Porto, Bonderman, and others came three days ago and killed Torban and Egorn, and wounded six others. Two lost their feet - one you have not met and the other is Naelly - you remember Naelly, don't you?" She continued, not waiting for any acknowledgement of her words, or even that she was talking. "Naelly's husband lost his hand. You've not met him either.

"Willen, you've much to learn, and I dare say, much to tell. But we must return to the funeral pyres. It has rained too much for the past three days, and we have just found time today..."

Meala stopped speaking, and with the same distant look, she turned to walk back to where she had been standing before the funeral pyre platforms.

Constantia stripped herself from Willen and took her mother's hand, as they returned to the burning farewells.

Willen heard Stellan inquire about the child's pyre, and the response was that it was for the lost hands and feet, Vanch's ear, and the fingers of someone Willen did not know. It was a relief to hear that a child had not been killed.

Willen and Stellan walked right behind the two bereft women. Shulla never left the fire of her husband, and would not acknowledge Willen's return for days. As they walked to the spot of family grieving, Willen scooped up a hand full of dirt and smeared his own face. He felt very close to Torban, and no one would challenge the returned traveler's right to smear his face.

As he walked, he could not help but hear the loudly whispered questions and statements.

"That is the Olive Hand, Willen? He is so young." "That is the boy that left here? He has aged so."

"Why, that is dragon skin he is wearing. I saw it once when I was a lad. Where do you suppose...?"

"He carries one of Torban's battle blades. Why does he need that if he is an Olive Hand?"

He's so young. He's so old. He's so strong. He's so thin. He's so brave. What can he do?

"What happened to his lazy eye?"

The fires only burned for a little while longer in what was the manner of grief. When the burning wood had fallen in, and the flames had died to an expected state, Meala turned and faced the people there. She had intended to go to her hut and check on the injured. Instead she turned and spoke to Willen.

"You know nothing of what has happened. I have to ask you a question without knowing whom you face or who'll help you. My daughter and I will stand with you, but I cannot promise anyone else. They want to take Loundon's Towne and rename it Porto City, and place us under their heels.

"Willen, will you fight like you promised? You do have the Olive Hands, don't you?"

All of what he had seen and experienced and knew of his limitations were of no consequence to the answer.

"I fight for Loundon's Towne. Your husband's name shall never leave this city on the Tameas. You will spit on the grave of Porto the Druid."

Meala looked at him and took his hand. Constantia took the other. The widow said, "I must speak, and try to give courage to the fearful. Please stand with me. They need hope, and you are all I have right now."

"Listen. Listen! LISTEN!" The murmuring all but died, and she continued in her loudest voice that wasn't a shout. "Willen the Olive Hand has returned. He has the olive sticks," she looked to him and he confirmed this with a nod. "We still have some bows and arrows and a few battle blades."



There were "no's" coming from the crowd now and she had a chance. "There is still a chance. Won't you fight for your homes, for your lives, to live as we want to...?"

"It's not our lives. It's our DEATHS!" came a shout.

"Yeah, he's just one man with a stick," shouted another.

"You've lost your husband. Do you want mine dead, too?" Those words were cruel.

"Besides, he's just one man, still a boy really." It was Dorgelt. He did not have a spear since he had given his up on that day, but he had a long pole with a sharpened wooden point. He held it in both hands - not in a menacing manner, but he could act from that position.

The Hunter continued, "I remember the clumsy youth the traitor, Caedric, despised. How is he going to defend us against Druids and Celtic warriors and...?"

Dorgelt spun around from the crowd he was addressing, and lunged at Willen. The lunge had not been serious enough to harm Willen. Perhaps the intent was to strike fear in the returned traveler, and prove he could not defend them against the invaders.

Dorgelt's wooden spear lost its point. It seemed like the sound of the blade in the air was heard only after Willen had drawn it and swung it. In a second flash the wooden spear was cut into two pieces in the Hunter's hands.

Willen spun the blade into the air to catch the light, and kept it there with his right hand. He drew his carved olive stick with his left and raised it to send red sparks into the air. Though the rain had stopped, it was still overcast, and the sparks were very obvious against the leaden skies.

Willen roared, "I am Willen the Olive Hand. Hear ME!"

All there heard him. Those recovering from their wounds heard him in Meala's hut. Caedric heard him in his prison hut.

Willen hated what he was about to say, but he just *knew* that this proud speech would be essential to the survival of the town. It was as important for him to be bold now as it had been for him to be self-deprecating before those who'd feared him at the Aldertani Keep, when the trees had bent to talk to him.

"I am Willen the Olive Hand. In Gaul I am known as Willen the Dragonslayer. I *have* killed a dragon, and I have killed two Druids who were its masters. In Aldertani Keep I am known as Willen the Three Slayer for the three Celtic warriors I killed at one time. In Cahors of the Carduci I am known as Willen the Five Wolfslayer. I will FIGHT!"

He put his blade in his left hand and held up his damaged fingers. "But I bear the scars of these battles. They mark my hand and my neck, and many places on my body. I will face all of your foes, alone if need be, but if I kill only half of them, the other half will step over my dead body and rape and pillage and kill like you can never imagine.

"But if you stand with me, if you fight also, WE CAN WIN!"

Even at this, most of the crowd turned away. But a single screech caught the attention of all those present after the crowd had parted into two distinct groups.

Pholx descended on Willen's arm, and began trilling the longest tune he had ever sung in Willen's presence. Those who were leaving felt a sense of well-being and some felt hope. Those committing to the fight felt their courage soar on eagle's wings.

And one impure heart was struck with fear.

---

Willen had spent the entire day that he had arrived in mourning. He and Constantia had no time together alone. That night he had slept with Stellan on a mat in his hut. They were both so emotionally drained and disheartened with what they had found on their return, that there was nothing to say. But Willen did ask one question.

The hut was neat, but had no sense of a home about it. What was missing was obvious. "Stellan, why have you never married?"

After a long silence Willen had almost given up on an answer. Perhaps Stellan slept soundlessly.

"Because, Willen, the one I love loves another. Good night."

The next day Willen spent time talking to everyone. He started with the founding families of Loundon's Towne, but saved Meala for last. He ate breakfast with Vanch the Cooper who had a smaller bandage on his head than the day before. He spoke with Pandan the Tiller and Bengt the Miller. He lunched with Meala, and afterwards, she and Constantia took him to see the wounded.

That first horrible day Constantia had left his side only when she returned with her mother to the shed behind their hut to sleep. The place where Willen had once bedded down was the nightly resting place of the two women, now that their hut was a makeshift infirmary.

---

Conlander was sitting up; he even rose to his feet when Willen entered and they locked right arms before he nearly fell back to his pallet.

"So you are the lucky man smart enough to see the beauty of Naelly," said Willen with a smile.

Conlander beamed. "I fancy she may have had eyes for you at one time, but I won her heart. She is doing well, but she lost more blood than I did, and then there is the baby..."

"Yes, Constantia told me. Congratulations. Is all well?"

"Meala says that the baby is well, and that Naelly will recover, but I long her the smile that captures me.

"That is the original blade, isn't it?" Conlander nodded to the sword at Willen's side, and received a nod. "Torban told me that it was the first. All of the blades he had made since this one, and all he and I have made together for that matter, sort of 'call' to him, but this one, he said, had sung to him. May I?"

Willen handed it to him and stood back so Conlander could move it around and feel the weight and swing of it. It glowed a bit, and Willen thought he heard a few notes of a tune.

"Conlander, do you have the Touch?"

"No. Torban had the Touch for metalworking, and though I would like to think I have a talent for it, he was always ahead of me with that Touch."

"I am not sure you are right there, Conlander. The Touch is a bit of what I call magik. Magik needs a power concentrator to accomplish all that it can, but the ability to do magik shows itself with the Touch. You do not have the Touch for Smithing, but you have it, I believe, for fighting with a sword, that's the name the Celts give these wonderful blades."

"Yes, I heard them use that name before this." He held out the stump of his hand.

"If you have the Touch for anything," Willen continued, "you probably can do a broad variety of magik. Er...I think a person will probably always be very strong, if not strongest, in the area where the Touch shows itself. There is a young girl in the south of Gaul who was marvelously aware of how to care for the sick. She did not make a bandage out of thin air or stop bleeding with her voice; she just *knew* what to do. When she used an olive stick with a unicorn hair in an emergency, with the proper spell - that is the proper words of magik, she was able to seal a deadly wound and prevent imminent death from bleeding."

"And you saw this happen, Willen?" Conlander asked.

"If I took off my smock and showed you the huge scar on me, you'd know why I am so impressed with her skills."

The wounded Smith looked at him in wonder, and said with a start, "Willen. Could you do a spell on Naelly? I think she will mend, but she is so depressed by the lost of her foot. She used to always dance around our hut, so happy with our life together. I just...you could take my foot and put in on her if..."

"I don't know what can be done, Conlander. I wish Haana was here, that's the girl's name with the Touch for healing. If I could, I would wave my Olive Hand and restore all of you. But Haana and I did a lot of research about restoring what is not there. There is a young man that she loves, and he had lost his eyes - more Druidic cruelty. But that is not fair to say. I should say that my best friend can be considered a Druid. He bemoans the evil of Porto and his generation, but I cannot condemn all those of the title Druid, several of them have helped me a lot..."

Willen stared off for a moment. "Um...where was I? Oh. Haana and I tried every combination of words and spells and anything with a shred of hope, but nothing could restore eyes that were gone. I'm sorry. I cannot say that one wiser than I in magik couldn't...but..."

"Conlander." It was Naelly in a weak and timid voice. "You would give your perfectly good foot for me, and go without a foot or hand?"

Though still a little weak from his wounds, Conlander was making a quick recovery. He had lost less blood than the others who had lost limbs. The Smith almost knocked over Willen, making his way to his wife's side.

"My foot, both legs, and both arms, my very life for you if need be, my beautiful Naelly. How could... why would you doubt it?"

"Oh, Conlander, it's just that...well, that you are so much more handsome, and I am just..."

"Just the most beautiful, sweetest, kindest holder of my heart and my happiness. The sun and the moon and all the stars revolve around you, my Naelly. There is no one else in the world. Tell me who made you believe you were of little worth, and I will strike them dead in a moment. Did I not tell you when I put this gold wreath on your finger that I am of worth, but you are so much more valuable? Saying so was not a clever speech to sell gold and silver finger wreaths to others, it is an eternal truth.

"Please get strong, wife of my dreams, the world needs your presence to make it a better place."

"Oh, Conlander." The tears of joy streamed from her face and his tears joined hers. There was not a dry eye in the hut.

Hope sprang anew in that hut that day. No one present for those words would ever be quite the same. Willen was glad that he was there, and that Constantia was also. They held hands for the first time during Conlander's confession of love to his wife of less than a season.

That afternoon, six days after he lost his hand, Conlander got up off of his sick pallet, and only returned to it to sleep near his wife. He did not return there to recover. He invited Willen and Constantia to Torban's forge. Though it was his as much as Torban's while they forged metal together, and now all his, the forge would be known for generations to come as Torban's Forge.

"Are you sure you should be out and about, Conlander?" asked Constantia. "Mother says that..."

"Your mother has much on her mind. I have one thing on mine - defeating Porto. You feel the same, don't you, Willen?"

"I promised Meala she could spit on his grave. Burning will be too good for him. Let the body of such a man take its time going on." Then Willen thought better. He thought of what Eirran had taught him. "It is a waste and a shame. A man such as Porto with such power - what if he had used it for good, to help people? It's a pity."

He looked up to see the stunned look on his companions' faces.

Constantia started, "I will never think well of the murderer of my father. How can you say that?"

Willen stared at her for a long moment. "Constantia, if my friend, Eirran, rode into Loundon's Towne tomorrow and helped us as I know he would, you would bless the day of his coming. Porto may be even more powerful than Eirran for all I know. Can you not wish that he had come in peace to build rather than subdue?"

"Yes, but he didn't."

"I know as well as you, remember I am the first one he tried to kill, even before Feldin died on that first day--"

"Willen..." started Conlander.

Willen broke in to finish, "Can you understand a little of what I am saying, my dear Constantia?"

"Willen..." said Conlander again.

"I can never like Porto, but I could wish he had been a good man," she conceded.

"That is all I ask. I will spit on his grave right after your mother and you do. He has eaten three cycles of my life, but I am better for it, and I have the scars to prove it." With this he nuzzled the scar on Constantia's left cheek with the knuckle of his left hand. "But mark my words, I will be sad because of what he could have been, even in the frantic moment of battle when I end his life."

"Willen." This time Conlander broke through to them. "You say Porto tried to kill you and failed. Is that true? He says that no one can kill a Druid, but it is rumored that a man a Druid failed to kill can take that Druid's life. That's why they're so careful with the deaths they personally commit."

"Yes, Conlander, that is what they say. I have other friends among the Druids. Two of them, Nerta and Ninato, have told me of this old legend, which this new generation of Druids has been telling everyone. My friends did not know if it is true, but there are some wild tales. But knowing that I can kill Porto under this way of thinking presents a bigger problem."

Finally Constantia asked, "What could be a bigger problem than killing Porto?"

Willen stopped just before the door to the forge that Conlander held open for them. "Why, getting his two brothers to try and fail at killing me. You know I am going to have to kill all three of them, don't you? Oh, and I can't use magik. It would make me like them, or probably worse if I kill all three of them with it."

Constantia had walked in first and turned to look at Willen for his answer. After he spoke, Willen walked through to the forge, leaving his ladylove staring at Conlander. Both of them had cold stones in their stomachs about Willen's casual words of the impossible feats he must accomplish. They were aroused from their trance by Willen's next words.

"Conlander, what did you want to show us?"

On that day, Dorgelt had followed Porto's orders and had retrieved all of the battle blades he could find from the forge. He had turned over all of the spears and the swords of the few who had shown promise with the sword.

Conlander knocked some of the wood off of a pile and almost fainted when he bent over to remove more. Willen jumped to his side with reflexes that surprised even the very agile Constantia. He helped the Smith to a stool and then pushed the wood aside. There was a wooden box buried at ground level, and he opened it. He retrieved ten beautifully finished swords - each a near perfect twin for his blade that Torban had given him three summers before.

"Beautiful work," Willen said. "Yours or Torban's?"

"We worked on each together, so we could say they were ours. This one," he grabbed the one with a black ring around the end of the grip, "is mine."

Conlander stepped back with the blade in his right hand. Rather than being weakened by the effort, it was as if he drew strength from the blade. In a moment that seemed to stand still Conlander gave a brilliant demonstration of most of the fighting swings, thrusts and parries that Aldini had taught Willen over many fortnights. At the end of the impromptu exhibition, Conlander was flushed to a degree, and a little winded, but he also looked refreshed in some ways.

"And no one has trained you in the use of a sword in battle?"

"No, Torban asked me the same question. I just do what seems right to do somehow."

Torban was right to think you have the Touch. That proves it. You must come with me. You too, Constantia, your young admirer, Lindern, says you are a master with the bow, and that you were from the start, even with the wrong sized bow. That also sounds like the Touch. We must gather the others."

Willen had spent most of a day talking to everyone he used to know, and everyone they'd told him to visit. He wanted to learn everything he could about everything, but quickly realized he would need a season, not a day or two, to learn of all the new marvels and all of the interesting new people that now made up Loundon's Towne. These next few days had to be dedicated to the coming battle.

There was one visit he feared. In the shed behind a hut there was one person that had always caused Willen to tremble. He went inside alone, but Constantia waited outside.

The lone figure inside opened and then shut his one good eye against the light. "Who is it?" said a tremulous voice. "Please don't beat me. I didn't mean to spill my food but with my hands...." As a shadow loomed over him he rolled back onto his hands, yelped in pain and somehow scrambled back against the shed wall. "Who are you? Please don't hit me again, I will confess to whatever..."

"Caedric, it is Willen. Who did this to you?"

There was a little relaxation, but not much, from the man on the floor. He looked up against the background light and stared bleary-eyed at his visitor. "Willen is a skinny lazy-eyed wastrel. You cannot be he, sir. He must have died, and you come in his place. They send you to beat me. Please, sir. I won't tell them who you aren't. I'll even confess to whatever you say. No more beatings....pleeezzzz..."

Willen was on his knees and helping Caedric up to a sitting position. He took out his small blade, and as Caedric drew away in fear, he cut the ropes that tore at the cuts in the Fisher's wrists.

"Caedric, I *am* Willen. And I will not let them beat you anymore. Who did this?"

"They come at night. I cannot see as well as I used to, Willen, and with my hurt eye, and the darkness.... But they want me to confess to betraying Torban. I will confess if you promise me they won't beat me. *Cough.*"

Caedric spat a small amount of blood.

"I won't let them beat you. But tell me. I only want the truth. If you did it they won't beat you, and if you didn't, they won't. But I must know the truth. Did you, in fact, betray Torban? Did you betray Loundon's Towne?"

Caedric was crying pitifully out of his one good eye, and who knew what that was coming out of his bad eye. "Willen," Caedric gulped, "Torban gave me a home when no one else would. He wouldn't let them make me leave, even when I made him so angry. I would never...." Caedric's speech degenerated into more pathetic crying.

"Constantia!" She came to the door. "Did you hear? Do you believe him?"

She stared at the pitiable creature on the floor in Willen's arms. "Moments ago, I would have said it was him. He did run when they went after him-"

"I was *afraid!*" Caedric was hysterical. "I heard someone say to hang me. So I ran. Constantia, your father, your mother, they're... they're, my only friends... I wouldn't..."

"God help me, Caedric, but I believe you," Constantia said. "Let's get him out of here. They have left him in his own waste and the cuts are near to the green."

"Oh, No!" cried Caedric.

"They aren't, yet, Caedric. We should be able to stop it. I should have never forgotten about you, and my mother will not be pleased with your treatment. *We* are not barbarians like the Celts and Druids that invade us. Willen, let's take him to our hut. Mother will be there, I think."

Willen had cut the ropes on Caedric's hands and now his legs, and they both helped him try to stand, but he couldn't. One under each of his arms, they walked him slowly out.

As they reached the square to cross it to go to the hut where care was being given, Stellan came running up.

"Have you decided to hang him, Willen? Did he confess? I have never trusted him but Torban did and..."

Willen interrupted him, "And that is why we will treat him better than a rabid dog. He has told me he did not betray us, and I believe him."

"WILLEN!" Stellan shouted. "After the way he treated you, the stories you told... And he ran."

They had stopped with Caedric between them and he whimpered in their arms.

"That was another lifetime and I *choose* to forget it. Torban and Meala took me in when all wanted me kicked out of the village. And even though Caedric was the loudest wanting me to go, Torban chose to let him stay.

"If Caedric did indeed betray us, then there is nothing more he can do to harm us, and I *don't* believe he did it. But if he were Porto himself, I would not want him treated like this. I will kill Porto, but I won't treat him like a diseased animal."

"Well," said Stellan, "you better not treat him in with those people. As long as he is suspect, no one will want him in with wounded innocents. And

mark my words, I believe it's guilty, but if you choose to treat him, take him elsewhere. Oh, take him to my hut. I sleep on board most nights anyway, and I'll not have him bleeding on my boat."

Dorgelt was furious, and so were many others at Caedric's improved status, but Meala was not, nor was anyone that was hurt that day, or their families.

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It was not until the second evening after he'd arrived back home, that Willen was finally able to have a private conversation with Constantia. Before parting to go to sleep, they stood in the dark, out in the center of the square, lit only by one of the summer community fires. A few in the town still stirred. The newly reunited couple were alone in plain view.

"Constantia, we've hardly talked. Oh, there has been plenty of talking but... you know."

"I am glad to see you, Willen. I prayed for your safe return each day. I never let them forget you. I *knew* you'd come back."

"I came close to dying so many times... well, I don't want to think about it." He held his finger up to his neck and pointed to the small scar. "I was bleeding to death in a battle with six wolves, and I would have died had not Pholx landed on me and done... I don't know what, but before I passed out, I think he cried on my neck and eye - the lazy eye - it was destroyed. The tears of that bird stopped me from bleeding to death, and not only saved my eye, but somehow my eye back where it should have been all along, I guess."

She shivered in the evening heat and Willen saw a tear in her eye.

Quickly he said, "I don't tell you this to earn your pity. Willen's Luck has delivered me into terrible situations where I have come out battle scared and much better for it. No, I'm mentioning that fight so I can tell you two things."

"First, the last word I wanted to be on my lips was your name."

A small sob escaped her.

"But happily, when I came to, I was having trouble seeing because my eyes had never looked at the same thing at the same time. It was the carving of you that I was first able to focus on, and for the next few days, as I adjusted to this new way of seeing, it was always you, your carved image, that I could look at and focus on clearly."

"Constantia. I went after olive wood because I was focused on you. I endured prison focused on you. I learned Latin thinking about you. When I thought I could not do magik, it was thinking about you that sprung open the abilities I needed. I fought dragons and Celts and Druids to come back to you. I had to save you from Bonderman and Porto."

"Who did you save me for, Willen?"

He could not look in her eyes. He was losing his courage, and if she did not know.... "I saved you for your father and mother. I saved the most beautiful girl in Loundon's Towne because I knew the towne would go to pieces with you going to those.... I saved you for yourself to be free to choose the life you wanted."

"So, I get to choose. It is all up to me, and you expect everyone to abide by my decision? I can decide on anyone, and you will enforce my decision? You will fight Porto and Bonderman, and all of these Druids and Celtic warriors and whatever, for me to have what I decide on?"

Willen felt this was not going the way he had hoped. He felt like Constantia had someone else in mind, and he was going to have to be her champion, to fight for her to have him. In an instant, he realized he would spend his life in silence about his love for her. Instead, he would serve her and whomever she chose. This would be a destiny he could live with, as long as she was happy and safe.

"Constantia, I will serve you and protect you... and help you have the one you love, whatever it costs me."

She looked at him oddly and then spoke, "Well, besides my father, there has been only man I have loved. He was a boy that left Loundon's Towne a long time ago. I doubt we'll be able to find him."

Willen resigned himself to another quest after fighting the battle at the end of the harvest faire.

"But, Willen, the boy has returned the kindest and most gentle man. He stands before me now, and no woman has ever been as loved. The boy is now a compassionate warrior and a hero that all look up to. He is the only man I have ever loved, ever will love. He has saved my life because I have thought of him always, and I have done what had to be done because I knew that you, Willen, were coming back to me. I became a warrior because you would be one, and I wanted to be worthy of you. I wanted to stand with you as your true partner in life, and fight for *our* future."

Now, Willen had tears in his eyes. The dream that he hardly dared dream, but had dreamed day and night, every day, had come true. She loved him. She wanted him.

She had the slightest hint of irony in her voice as she said, "So, you are at my command to give me what I want, are you? Well, seven days after we finish the fight, I desire that you stand at our union ceremony to become husband and wife. Do you agree to obey this request?"

"With all my heart, my wonderful Constantia."

"Then I agree to love and obey you for the rest of my life."

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As was their practice of only a few days, Willen joined Constantia and Meala at the tiny shack behind their home - now an infirmary. After breakfast the next morning, Willen and Constantia visited those still there, three wounded. Trotan had gone back the night before to his family's large hut. Cinko went home to his family, and Vanch was under Taleena's tender care. The three amputees were still in the hut, but Conlander only slept there to be with Naelly. Meala had stemmed his blood flow quickly, but the other two had lost more. Also, loosing a foot limited movement much more than loosing a hand.

Janks looked much more chipper than the day before, and Barlint was enjoying discussing the special barrel he was going to make to attach to Janks' stump so he could walk behind a row maker. Willen had heard of the wonderful device that increased food production, and he solicited a demonstration from Janks himself, when he was recovered enough to show his invention. The twin brothers were delighted to receive the interest of the returning hero, and immediately went into a brotherly argument about how the walking barrel should be designed.

Next Willen and Constantia went to Naelly's side. She had been moved to the other side of the hut once there was more room, to give the couple a little more privacy.

"Naelly, I fear you are trying to break your promise to me," said Constantia.

Weakly Naelly said, "I would never break a promise I made to anyone, especially you. What promise are you speaking of?"

"I need you to stand with me in seven days after the harvest faire, when I join with Willen. How will you fulfill your promise if you are still here on this pallet?"

It took a moment - maybe a moment and a half. Conlander looked at his wife and hoped. Her eyes opened and she tried to sit up. Conlander put his hand behind her and hid his stump from her view behind his back.

"Constantia. Could I *sit* with you on that day, by your side, in a chair?"

Carefully avoiding her wounded leg, Constantia threw herself into her best friend's arms. "You need to eat cow's meat to restore your energy. You have to try real hard to get better. I cannot have you fainting at my side when I am joined."

"And that is not all," said Naelly shyly. "We want you two to stand by us as family guardians when we present our baby to the community next spring." Only Naelly, Conlander, and Meala had known of the child to be, until now.

It was a joyous morning.

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Later that morning, those that Willen had thought would have the highest possibility of having the Touch, and therefore succeeding with magik, joined him at Constantia's archery field. Those present were Bengt the Miller, Pandan the Tiller, Constantia, Conlander, Stellan, and Meala.

Shulla was still in a shocked state that she would never really leave. She would accomplish her work and love her children, and be a fine grandmother, but she would stare off into the distance for long periods of time, and awaken screaming in the night at least once a fortnight for the rest of her life.

Vanch the Cooper and his wife, Taleena came last and brought with them, Lindern the apprentice Cooper and accomplished bow maker, and Jamin, Egorn's son and apprentice Potter - now the senior Potter in all of Loundon's Towne.

"I told you about these two, Willen," said Vanch. "I don't have the Touch, but these two do. They are too young to fight, but they may be useful in some way. They promised that if I let them come, they would not try to join in the battle, but only do what you say."

Willen was expecting most of the people there to be powerful with magik, particularly with the olive wood power concentrators. These community founders were some of strongest memories he had of people in Albion with the Touch. To confirm this Willen followed the procedures that he and Eirran had developed through their time together, and had refined with their correspondence. They used piles of leaves and sticks at various distances.

No one was remarkable. Jamin was rather powerful with an olive wood and heartstring power concentrator, but he was shaking in fear when he tried. Conlander was the strongest with a dragon heartstring carved stick. But he was still weak from his wound, and just a little bit of magik weakened him further.

Some were obviously better with dragon heartstring and some with unicorn hair. At first, Constantia was weakest of any them, and with both types of cores, but her determination drove her to do better on the third or fourth attempts. All of them were able to produce a small blaze with most of the sticks at very close range, except for Stellan. Absolutely nothing happened for him with any version of Willen's creations.

Stellan was not surprised. "I've never believed I had any aspect of the Touch, and no one has ever thought so. Thank you for including me in this, Willen, but I told you as much last night."

Nothing went as Willen had hoped, and he stopped early. He had planned to teach them a few spells that might help in battle, such as the Body Bind Spell, but he was discouraged, and stopped then and there. But he still took the opportunity to try to embolden them in the midst of his discouragement.

"Now that I have seen your abilities, I will have to plan what spells you can use. We will have to fight with regular weapons anyway. Magik will help

us, but we cannot use magik as a weapon. We *will* not kill with magik; it would poison our souls and make us as evil as Porto and his brothers. Magik is stronger than the Old Way of Porto, but it seems that as individuals, Porto is stronger than we are.

"In spite of this we can still win. But we must decide, those of us right here. I am going to fight them. But you do not have to. I am an outsider as far as they are concerned. If I kill a number of them, including one or all of the Druids, perhaps they will not take their revenge on the town. You can tell them that I am unknown to you, and that my attack was as much a surprise to you as it was to them."

"Willen..." Vanch tried to speak but Willen raised his hand.

"Before you speak, please listen. This city is destined to be great. You do not have to risk death. It will be hard at first, but in a generation things will ease, and in three generations you will be one people. I fight because my destiny is beyond the battle with Porto. I must fight fate to achieve my destiny."

Lindern asked, "What is the difference between fate and destiny?"

"Fate wants to decide your future. Others want to decide your future. Your destiny is the best you can possibly be to serve your loved ones, your neighbors, your community, and yourself. Fate would have me die at Porto's hand. Or fate would make killing Porto my goal. Then I would be a killer or perhaps even a murderer. It will be with sadness that I will kill Porto, wishing he had come to do us good. But kill him I will, if nothing else that day. My destiny lies beyond killing him."

Constantia had been standing by Willen, holding his hand all of this time. She spoke up, "It is my destiny to stand by Willen for the rest of my life. I embrace that destiny whether it is for many summers to come or whether it ends... sooner. It is the finest life I could ever want."

"It's fate that wants my child to live under the rule of a man like Porto and these selfish Celts," said Conlander as he walked to Willen's side and locked arms with him. "He or she will be born free, even if I can't be here to see it."

Jamin's voice cracked with emotion. "Fate has made my mother less than she was. I'll fight, or do whatever I can to prevent that from happening to anyone else's mother... or father." A tear came to more than one eye at that moment.

All came forward solemnly and hugged Willen or locked arms with him.

"What do we do, Willen?" asked Vanch. "How do we prepare?"

"Go talk to all that have trained with bow, blade, or spear. Go quietly. I do not think Caedric betrayed us, but someone did. I don't want the archers to talk to the swordsmen, and I don't want them to talk to the spearmen - at least not at this point. We will bring them together as late as possible. We will postpone meeting as a large group until the night the faire ends, if possible. Don't let anyone know how many are prepared and equipped to fight. It may be only a few, but if anything gets back to Porto I want it to be that we are few in number. I want him overly confident. He'll make more mistakes that way.

"We still have to prepare for the harvest faire. That has to go on for the good of Loundon's Towne and the people coming to the faire. Conlander, you have the few swords hidden that you showed me. I do not want anyone facing a Celtic warrior with a blade unless they've had some training. Talk to those you have trained with and see who is still willing.

"Make sure they know it is a choice, everyone we talk to about fighting has to know they have a choice and they'll not be asked to leave if they don't fight." "Do we give swords or spears to those who have not been trained, if they want one?" "No, I would rather have a Tiller wield his familiar pitchfork than an unfamiliar spear. Also, Conlander, how many spear heads can you make between now and then, and still be prepared for the faire?"

"I believe ten or twelve, more if I don't sleep much."

"No, you're still recovering. I know how important sleep is at this stage. You're eating as much rare cow meat as you can, aren't you?"

"I never thought I would say this, but I'm almost sick of it eating it. It's all I have been given since this." He held up his left arm. "I'll keep eating it, though."

"Good," said Willen. "Who makes spear poles?"

"We do," said Vanch, advancing with Lindern. "Twelve poles will be half a day's work. We have the wood. What about bows? My lads can make plenty of arrows in the time we have and prepare for the faire, but a bow takes time, with the coating and drying and wax applications."

"What happens if you do not coat them?"

"They dry out, but... wait, we could probably produce several additional bows if we do not coat the last ones we make. They will dry out, but they won't for several days if we prepare them properly. We could also give them a coat of wax to slow that process. They'll be good for the fight, but too brittle a couple of days afterward."

Willen said, "Make what you can properly, and then as time draws near, make the short life bows. We will plan and prepare later for the future battles after this one. I guess you are using ash wood, half heartwood and half sapwood, with the heartwood facing the archer? Then you coat it with heated flaxseed oil and soot, correct? Perhaps beeswax with soot after that, and every so often?"

"Yes, Willen. You have examined one of the bows, then?"

"No, it's just what I would have picked after thinking about it."

Willen did not see the look of amazement, and a little frustration, that passed between Lindern and Vanch. They had spent so much time finding the proper combination. Constantia had always said that Willen would've known what materials to use and how to do it.

Willen said, "Constantia, please approach all of your archers and ask the same questions that Conlander is asking the swordsmen. No one here has actually fought in a battle, have they?"

"I believe Dorgelt has as a young man," said Meala. "What do you want the rest of us to do?" Several nodded with her.

"To start, you can make sure the faire goes well, it is important to Loundon's Towne. Try to take some of the load off of Conlander and our Coopers if you can, so they can prepare weapons.

"I will talk to you after you find out who is still willing to fight. I am not a trained warrior, but I have lived through a number of battles, and have had training in swordplay and battle tactics from the view of the blade. I will find Dorgelt and talk to him. Please tell me if you have ideas or observations that we have not discussed about the way the Celts and Druids have come and gone, and attacked.

"I am going to take a day or two to sit and think, and probably try to develop a new spell that will help us fight. We can't just wait for them to come; we have to prepare to try to distract them. They want gold and women, but we cannot tempt them with that. The only Druids I met on my travels were only after.... Ahhh."

"What is it, Willen?"

"I think I know how to distract Porto and his brothers at the proper moment, maybe two different moments.... Well, if I haven't been by to see each of you during each day, please come look for me. I'm staying in Stellan's hut with Caedric."

"Yes, and I can't believe you trust him," said Stellan. "He could slit your throat as you sleep."

Willen said, "Only one person has ever tried to slit my throat in my sleep, and I trust him like a brother, now."

Stellan looked stunned. He swallowed, hung his head, and gulped out, "You knew?"

"I did not know then, and I didn't know for sure until just now, Stellan. But when you walk alone, all day long, for a number of seasons, you ponder on everything that has ever happened in your life." He looked the Fisher in the eyes until he returned the gaze timidly. Stellan was obviously embarrassed to have this conversation before all of those he most respected in Loundon's Towne.

"You had only known me for half a day when you tried to take my goods and my life. Over the days that followed you more than made up for it by teaching me to find my way by the stars. You came here and have become a trusted member of this community. You braved your fears of sailing off of the end of the earth when you came to get me."

He turned to address everyone present. "Who here does not have something in their lives that they are ashamed of? I know I don't want everyone to know all I have done. I don't believe Caedric betrayed us, but I may be wrong. Regardless, he's too timid to attack me and too afraid of me, and most of you, to do anything to damage our efforts. At worst he will sneak off and tell them we plan to fight. So be it. But I don't think so. He is barely able to walk after his beatings."

It was a quiet reflective group of people who slowly made their way back to Loundon's Towne to complete their various preparations.

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Willen believed he could trust all seven of the archers that still wanted to fight. Constantia believed in them, and that was enough. Conlander had six with him that he had trained with the sword, but Willen knew they were poorer skilled than the three Celts he had fought. He had encouraged all of them to fight in twos and not leave their partners.

Dorgelt had refused to canvass his spearmen to find those willing to fight. The Hunter believed it was foolish to resist, and said so loudly and often. Vanch, Stellan, and Willen had finally approached him three days before the faire and had asked him to stop expressing his views. He wasn't seen after that.

So, Conlander talked to Trotan, who had trained under the Hunter with the spear. Trotan's father, Baijan, had chosen to be called the Houser, but Trotan, who had passed his apprenticeship training the summer before and was now a journeyman, wanted to be known as Trotan the Houseman. The young Houseman told of their training with the Hunter.

"The first day, Dorgelt showed us how to hold a spear to jab and how to throw it. After that all we did was throw at targets until our arms were tired, and thrust at each other. Dorgelt told us there wasn't much else to the spear."

No one knew what else could be done with a spear either. Trotan found nine people who had trained with Dorgelt who were interested in fighting, but he felt like the fear spread by the Hunter might have influenced their reliabilities. Willen hadn't seen Dorgelt for several days before the harvest faire, but he was so busy that he could have easily been missed. The Hunter had never had any part of the faire, all of his foodstuffs and skins provided by his traps and spear, had been gratefully consumed by the Loundon's Towne community.

The early afternoon of the day before the harvest faire started, the old Hunter came to Stellan's hut. Caedric saw him first and whimpered as he hid in the back of the hut. Willen greeted Dorgelt at the door and walked around to the sun-shaded side of the hut to talk. "I haven't seen you for several days, Dorgelt."

"Willen, I owe you an apology for not supporting your efforts. I traveled out into the woods, a day's walk, to a favorite spot for deer. The entire day



that I waited, not one came by. I had a lot of time to think, and I couldn't escape the fact that I should be helping you. This is my town and even though the Celts could use a good Hunter, I don't want them over me. If it is not too late, I will join you in this fight. I never taught the spearmen how to fight in a battle, just how to throw a spear and thrust with it. If you want I could teach them, or I will just stand in their ranks."

Willen smiled. "Why don't you meet with the spearmen to tell them what you know? Trotan has been working with them, but he is also helping his father with harvest faire preparations. He'll tell you who wants to fight, and you can meet with them."

Dorgelt said, "The spear fighting tactics are not that complicated, but they work well. I could go to each person separately, and discuss it with them, when they have time, Willen. Telling of the simple tactics will only take about half as much time as it takes to eat lunch. The best spearmen I had are likely the ones very busy on this last day. I have nothing to do for the faire and can meet with them at their convenience."

Willen and Dorgelt chatted for a few more long moments, and then the Hunter went looking for Trotan. Willen went back into the hut.

"Willen, is he gone?" Caedric spoke in a hissed whisper.

"Yes, Caedric. You can come out. Did you hear the good news, Dorgelt is with us in this..."

"Willen!" Caedric still whispered. He was so fearful from his beatings that Willen had wondered if he'd been addled by the punishment like Shulla had been by her husband's death. "You asked me once who it was that came to me at night and beat me to get me to confess that I had betrayed Torban. I am not positive, but I am pretty sure it was Dorgelt."

Willen looked at the cowering little Fisher with pity. Perhaps his mind *had* gone a bit. "Caedric, he was angry for a long time after I insisted we still fight. You were a part of that anger. He's changed his mind and wants to help. I have to believe you no longer need fear him, IF he was the one to treat you this way. Just stay away from him, and we'll sort this out after the faire and the battle."

---

After giving his initial orders for battle preparation, during the days before the faire began, Willen tried to spend as much time as possible sitting in the woods with his Latin scrolls and a unicorn hair embedded carved olive wood stick. (He still thought there had to be a better, shorter name for them. Everyone else called them olive hands.) He'd kept searching for possible spells that might be used by the weak wielders of the Touch in Loundon's Towne without involving them in too much danger. He'd always chuckled at that last thought. Just being alive in Loundon's Towne over the days to come was going to be dangerous enough to lead to their possible deaths.

Eirran's owl, Beemy, found him poring over his writings one day.

*Willen,*

*Your fight draws near, and I wish I were there to stand with you. Instead, I can only send you information - and I cannot guess how it will help you, but it seems important.*

*Some from the new wave of Celts from the homeland have started "visiting" us again. We do not like it and are very careful with what we let them see. One old Druid, Klanger by name, came alone with only one young lad as his assistant. We greeted him and dined him and spoke of inconsequential matters - irritating old fool - but not a complete fool. Finally, almost as an after thought while preparing to go, he asked about our source for olive wood sticks. He did not seem to know about the embedded carved sticks or even our use of a wrapped unicorn hair stick, but he knew we had at least a few olive sticks. This tells me that they have spies here in Remers, but not too close to the group of us learning of magik.*

*I write you because he let slip that their source for olive wood sticks had ended. Apparently he believed the suppliers might have died in their travels to an exotic land that he was unaware of. I asked him if he owned an olive stick. He said he did but that he was not a killer just a, well, he used a word in the Old Way that means a kind of weaker one with the Touch.*

*Perhaps only a few are as powerful as Porto. Perhaps their numbers are limited just like only a few are really powerful here with your magik sticks. (You are right, I hate that name for these devices.) Perhaps you have ended the lives of the only ones providing power concentrators to these that besmirch the name of Celt and Druid.*

*We have our spies also, and we work to find out who they are. If the olive wood stick killers are few in number, we will act to stop them.*

*I am not sure how you can use this information, if at all, but I offer it in hopes that it might be of some small help.*

*Fulfill your destiny, I want to tell my grandchildren tales of your victories and exploits into my dotage,*

*Eirran*

Willen found himself wishing he could ask Eirran about the types of fighting spells known in the Old Way. He did not want to use them, but he needed to know what types there were, so he could discover or create spells in magik that did the same things or similar.

Shulla, in her grief, had risen and taken over all aspects of preparing the pottery goods for the faire. She had insisted on doing everything herself. Her two youngest sons stayed with her, but Jamin sought out Willen whenever the Olive Hander was in the village.

Willen felt odd being called that, but he liked the title better than Dragonslayer, or the other names that spoke of deaths he had caused.

That title, in the model of Miller, one who mills grains, Tiller, one who tills the soil, and Houser, one who builds homes; Willen was called the Olive Hander - one who makes olive hands. Willen did not know if it was a trade that could support a family, but he would have plenty of time to explore the possibilities - or not.

Jamin was about as powerful as anyone with one of the olive hands. He made a good test subject to try out spells. He was able to perform the Fire

Starting spell from almost a man's length away. He could do the Body Bind Spell if he was right in front of Willen, but the temporary petrification lasted only a few moments. But in battle, a few moments could be a lifetime. How close Jamin had to be to cast the spell worried Willen much more than the short time of immobilization.

Perhaps the best spell in Jamin's list of skills was a simple tripping spell. The boy could cast it confidently and fairly accurately up to a man's length away.

The night before the harvest faire started, Willen spoke with the different battle groups. He still held them in separate groups, and told them they would meet together the night the faire ended. Porto always arrived on the day after that for his tribute. It had been reported that Porto and Bonderman were infesting a disreputable village a little over a day's hard walk from Loundon's Towne. Whoever had betrayed them would be able to relay to the invaders a full account of the fighting assets if they all met any sooner.

He told each one basically the same message. "We will divide into fight groups with an even number of swordsmen, archers, and spearmen in each. We will arrange ourselves to protect as many people as possible by drawing the attackers to us, and away from everyone else. Hopefully, almost everyone will be able to leave early in the morning and hide in the woods, and up and down the river.

"Stay away from the Druids. Meala tells me Porto and his brothers still dress like he first did three harvest faires ago. They wear robes not unlike my dragon skin robe, but they are black instead of the green. They also wear those pointed hats. They should be easy to spot, so stay away. They kill within the distance of just less than two man lengths. They also use that spell that tortures people from about the same distance, we think.

Archers, aim for them once if you get a chance, just to see if the legend that they cannot be killed is false. If you cannot kill them maybe you can wound them, but do not send your arrows to them one after another. I don't want them coming after you specifically." Willen said this with Constantia in mind in particular.

Each group asked how Willen planned to fight the Druids himself when they could not die. His answer gave them no comfort. Those listening were actually more upset afterwards. "They *can* be killed by someone they have already tried to kill and failed to do so. Porto tried to kill me that first day he rode into our town, and obviously failed. I will get his brothers to try also so I can kill them."

One in each group asked in some way, "You will use your olive hand to kill them?"

"No, I cannot use magik to kill, it would make me like them."

All three groups degenerated into a sputtering bunch of hopeless mutterers. Willen personally talked to each of them to give them hope over the days of the faire, but that night he was angry and upset.

Constantia said, "I could have strangled Yergoin in that group of spearmen, he helped our enemy this day. I am just glad Dorgelt tried to settle them, even in his half-hearted way. Willen, why are you so bothered? I am angry but you are upset."

"Because I failed them, I failed *you* tonight. I had hoped to give them courage, they would not have to face the Olive Hand killers, only the Celts who will be bad enough, but instead they think I will fail in killing the three. And besides, why do I think I can do it anyway? I have never fought Druids with olive sticks."

"You will win, Willen, and do you know why I know you will?"

He looked hesitantly into the eyes he loved so well.

"I know because I know it is my destiny to live a long and happy but difficult life, *as your wife*. I believe in you, Willen. That is as sure as the sun comes up tomorrow, even if the clouds block the view. Mother has a supper waiting for us. Please come, eat, you need your strength, as do all those you lead."

He was quiet through most of supper. He thought about her last words. He thought of men like Torban and Stellan as leaders, not himself. But then it occurred to him that he had been acting like the leader, and people were following him. He guessed that the simplest definition of a leader was someone with followers. He decided to think about that later.

Willen went back to Stellan's hut late that night. He'd stayed at Meala's with the mother and daughter until long after most were probably asleep. After eating they went out and sat by the summer community fire right outside their hut. All of the wounded had returned to their own homes. Conlander and Naelly had moved in with her parents so they could help the two continue their recovery. Janks the Tiller's wife was spoiling him with all of his favorite foods, and the Herdsman, Dailet, kept all those who had lost so much blood supplied with free, fresh cow's meat each day.

Willen, Meala, and Constantia had talked about Torban that night at the fire's edge. They had been given a wide berth out of respect by any others wanting to sit as they were. They were good memories that they shared, happy memories. Meala told of how Torban had proposed to her. Constantia told of a walk in the woods she and her father had made in her tenth summer. Willen shared of the few moments he had spent with Torban as the city father had outfitted him for his travels, and had given him words of encouragement that had helped sustain Willen through the hard times.

Willen walked to Stellan's hut with a torch. He needed to sort out a few items from his travels. He thought there might be things he could sell or trade among all he had collected along his way, particularly the clothing that no longer fit him.

He greeted Caedric who still slept in the same hut. Stellan was at peace with the little Fisher, but still slept on his boat. Pholx alighted on his wall opening and Willen spoke to him. The sunbird had been gone for two days and Willen always wondered where he went on such occasions.

Willen leaned over the bundles and stacks of items from his travels. He told himself once again he would arrange things more orderly after... well,

afterwards. He pushed some of the dragon hides over to a pile of goods he might trade. He thought of the scroll of his most precious items.

He unrolled it. There were the unicorn hairs, which were not leaving his possession. There were the phoenix feathers from before Pholx's burning. He held one in his hand. He picked up the original olive stick that Willen had used from the trees guarded by bowtruckles in Aldertani Keep. As he leaned over, his holly wood carving of Constantia fell out of his smock. Willen tried several times to put it back but it kept falling out, so he took it off.

He held the carving of holly in his left hand with the largest Phoenix feather he had. He held the olive stick in his right hand. A light breeze entered the hut and caused one of the veela hairs to drift up off of the unrolled parchment. Willen reached for it with his less occupied right hand. The olive wood and veela hair touched in a similar way like the phoenix feather and holly wood touched.

Flash! The torch on the holder flared to light up the hut like the noonday sun. Caedric pulled back in fear for an instant, and then Pholx began the most complex and beautiful song Willen ever heard from the bird - if he heard it at all.

Constantia was almost asleep but she was awake in a moment. Lindern, Taleena, Pandan, Conlander, Bengt, and Meala all sat up in their beddings and knew they needed to make their way to Willen immediately. Something wonderful was happening.

Shulla sat up, looked Jamin in the eyes, and said with a very rare smile, "Go to him."

Stellan was awake on his boat and suddenly looked in the direction of his hut when something caught the edge of his eye. The light did not look quite like fire, and he knew he needed to go at once. He jumped over the gunwale and ran as fast as he could. He saw Caedric's back as he ran towards the fields. He saw Conlander running towards the light source as he saw Constantia enter the painfully lit hut. Others were running that way. Everyone felt great courage because of Pholx's song.

They saw Willen standing in the midst of a cloud of the red sparks, similar to those that occasionally came from the end of a power concentrator. All crowded in the edge of the doorway and looked in through the two wall openings not used by Pholx.

Stellan said over the song, "Should we... Do you think he is in danger?"

"No, Stellan," said Constantia. "I can't explain, but something wonderful is happening."

In spite of the splendor of the song, and the brighter than bright light, no one but Stellan and those Willen thought had the Touch for magik were there to witness this moment that none of them would forget, and that none them could explain.

After a time too wonderful and enthralling for any of them to measure, the red sparks dimmed and died. Willen slowly sank to his pallet, fast asleep, as if it was the most natural thing to do. Stellan tried to speak but all of the others held their fingers to their lips and ushered him out of the hut. They went to their beddings. Stellan stood guard at the hut entrance in joy and confusion for most of the rest of the night.

---

The next morning Stellan woke with the first rays of sun. What woke him was Willen. "Good morning, Stellan. Did you sleep there last night? I bet your back hurts. What are you going to do during the harvest faire today?"

Willen kept talking as he strode purposefully out of the door. Stellan jumped to his feet, and nearly fell. His back did hurt, and his left foot was asleep. He limped, bent to the side, trying to catch Willen.

"What happened last night? You were surrounded by red sparks like... well, like nothing I've ever seen - unless, those were the same sparks that shoot out of your olive hands when you test them. Willen! Slow down. Tell me, please, what happened last night?"

"I am not sure, Stellan, but I have to do something today that may... well, it may mean nothing, but it may mean everything. You can go with me if you like, it will be boring for you probably. I am going to make two new power concentrators."

*Aaran St Vines*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

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## Chapter Seven - Final Battle and Epilogue (part 2)

"Is that the most important thing you can do today? Don't you have...?"

"It might be the most important thing I do in my life," he said quietly.

"What?"

"Nothing, Stellan. Would you do something for me? Would you please tell Lindern that I'll want to talk to him a little later? And ask Vanch to try to find a way to release Lindern to help me during the next day or so."

"Yes, Willen, of course."

---

It was as if he had been there yesterday, and not, in some ways, in a previous life - the Willen of three summers before. He stared at it for the longest time. It was waving at him and calling him, but Willen only waved back and then went on a search.

Fortunately, this didn't take all day. In twice the time it took to boil water, Willen found a fallen tree with wood lice infesting the trunk where it had split from a lightning strike.

He walked right up to the mound of bowtruckles and called out to the tree. He heard the tree louder than he had ever heard a tree. It was singing with joy, reaching out. The carved piece of wood around his neck was singing back.

It was a homecoming - for both the piece of wood and for Willen. It had all started right here. Yesterday evening he would have said that it had started when Constantia had trembled at Bonderman's advances. Or he would have said that it had started when Porto had tried to kill him, or when Willen had asked the Druid what type of wood was in his hand.

But now he *knew* that it had all started when he'd found the small log of holly after the bowtruckles gorged themselves on wood lice.

The bowtruckles were sated, and Willen found another fallen branch, as wide around as the piece he had cut the carved piece from. This log was about as long as his arm and hand. It was perfect. The grain would split perfectly and carve well. Some other time he promised himself to try to discover why this holly was different from other holly trees, and why the bowtruckles guarded this particular tree, but there was not time today.

He had a short conversation with the holly tree, and they enjoyed getting to know each other better. The tree had bent over to talk to him, but there was no one there to be upset. There was a song in the woods that day, and Willen heard it. He even hummed along with the piece of wood around his neck and the tree.

Lindern was waiting for him when he came out of the woods. Lindern had such a look of expectation that Willen laughed at the puzzlement on the boy's face when he saw only the small log. They went to the Cooperage. Lindern took a saw and cut off the rough ends. Willen sharpened his small blade and stripped the bark from the log. Lindern took the drawknife and halved and quartered the log very quickly but very carefully. Willen agreed in his mind that Vanch had been right about Lindern having the Touch for cooperage.

Lindern's face showed nothing but varying degrees of amazement for the rest of the time Willen spent working in silence.

Willen studied each quartered piece carefully and chose one. He shaped its cross section into roughly a circle. It was perfectly straight. Willen split it lengthwise and then cut a groove in each half.

When Aldertan, the retired Keeper of the Aldertani Keep, had Willen's dragon cloak made, the seamstress had included a marvelous new innovation in its design. She had taken an extra piece of thinner dragon skin and had placed it on the inside of the cloak. She had then sewn it to the inside of the cloak on the bottom and on both sides. The top remained un-sewn so that in this attached inner sack as she called it, you could place items for safekeeping - items you did not want to carry in your hands or in a regular sack. This attached inner sack was on the inside left of the cloak, and when Willen had seen it, he had asked that she place a long and thin version of the inner sack on the inside right of his cloak. This was where he kept his carved unicorn hair embedded olive stick. But it would never reside there again after one more day.

Willen reached into the larger inner sack and drew out two phoenix feathers. He placed the largest feather, the one he had held during the previous night, on the worktable. He took the second one and held it in his left hand with the chosen split quarter piece of holly wood. He closed his eyes for several long moments and then used his small blade to cut along the shaft of the feather on each side, removing the flat vanes of barbs.

He then held the stripped shaft in his left hand with the split pieces of holly. He closed his eyes again and began to smile after only a moment.

He looked at Lindern and said with the same smile, "Good, I don't know how I would have done this if that had not worked." Lindern did not ask any of the dozens of questions on his face. "Lindern, I need a strong glue. I use horse hoofglue. What do you use?"

"Horse hoofglue is the strongest. It is what we always use."

"But it takes too long to dry. I wrap my rejoined strips of wood with rawhide strips and then they take a day and a night to dry completely."

"You use too thick a paste, I would wager," said Lindern. "A coating of the hoofglue, a little more thinned with water and heated before applying it, will dry right after lunch for coating. You have to place the pieces together quickly for bonding, but you should have enough time. You are going to

coat it, aren't you?"

"Yes, Lindern. I use heated flaxseed oil and soot. I understand you are a master at preparing such a concoction."

Lindern was pleased that Willen thought so, and knew it was Constantia who had told him, which added to his delight at the compliment.

As Lindern prepared the mixture from ready supplies, and added wood to the small metal fire holder Torban had built for the bow makers to heat their coatings, he asked, "Willen, how many different coatings did you try before you discovered heated flaxseed oil and soot?"

"Oh, that was the only coating I tried. It just seemed right. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason."

Lindern watched him take an already rounded, smoothed, and split strip of olive wood from his inner cloak sack. Willen said to Lindern, but actually to no one in particular, "I prepared this stick over a season ago. I knew it would be special, but I never knew why I had to stop manufacturing it when I did, or who it would be for until last night."

Willen then took a small bit of wood with a bright white hair wrapped around it out of his inner cloak sack.

"Is that a unicorn hair, Willen?"

"No. It's a veela hair."

"What's a veela?"

"That's a long story." About the time the olive wood and veela hair combination had been glued and wrapped in rawhide Willen had finished telling Lindern of his experiences with the young veela.

"Sun and Moon, Willen, has anyone led as exciting a life as you?"

"I hope not. This life has almost killed me, one, two... four... seven, eight times so far, I think. And it's not done trying yet. Don't envy me my fights and my experiences. Learn from my mistakes and the few things I have done right, but don't envy me." Willen stopped and looked at the young lad for several moments.

Lindern shivered slightly in the hot cooperage.

Willen said very seriously, "You will have enough of your own chances for fate to try to keep you from your destiny."

Lindern stared into his eyes and seemed to muster his courage. "Willen. I need a weapon. I promise to do whatever you say. I'll stay away from the battle if you wish, or go wherever you need me to help you, but I... well, I can't swing a battle blade and I cannot pull back a bowstring far enough yet. I can use the tripping spell you developed but I can't do anything else. Please, how can I...? What more can I do to help?"

Willen understood and felt like he owed this lad much for all the help he had given Constantia in the many past seasons, and for preventing her from being at the town when Porto had come recently. Again he reached into his mysterious sack attached to the inside of his cloak and pulled out an odd bit of green skin wrapped in some sort of green string. "Do you know what a sling is, Lindern?"

The boy shook his head, and Willen unraveled the dragon heartstring and dragon stomach hide sling Kwildas the Dragonslayer had insisted be made for Willen the Dragonslayer.

"Let me show you how it works." They walked out in back of the cooperage, and Willen picked up a small stone. He placed it in the piece of stomach skin and held the two straps in his left hand. He pointed off to the west, swung the sling around two complete revolutions, and let the stone fly. The stone hit a rock about the size of a person's head, five man lengths away.

"Excellent shot, Willen! I'm impressed."

Willen turned red and said, "I was aiming for the boulder." The boulder was the size of a large dog and was nearly two man lengths to the right of the stone he had hit. Willen offered the sling to Lindern.

The boy swallowed his embarrassment for Willen's poor performance and took the proffered sling.

He got an odd look on his face. "It's hot, Willen."

"That's a good sign. Take a stone and try to hit something with it."

Lindern chose a stone. He placed it in the center pouch of the sling and swung it like Willen had. He hit the same small rock.

"Is that what you aimed at, Lindern?" When the boy nodded, open-mouthed, Willen said, "Well, I'm through teaching you about that. You'll want to practice with the sling when you can, but you obviously have a Touch for that as well. I've seen it before. I once saw a blind lad about your age use a dragon sling to hit a Celtic warrior in the forehead. Killed the big brute about to kill the lad's sister. So do practice, but it should be enjoyable because you'll hit most everything you aim at.

"But for now, I'm hungry, and I'd wager you are too. Let's go see how the faire is going and get something to eat. Does Meala still make those baked bits of dough sweetened with honey?"

That afternoon, after Willen had finished carving the rejoined embedded sticks into their final shapes, and had smoothed them with stones, he and Lindern coated them with the heated flaxseed oil and soot.

The next morning, before the faire started, Constantia, Lindern, and Willen went out to her private archery field. They came back after the faire was underway. Now it looked like Constantia *and* Willen had a younger brother tagging along after them - either a younger brother or a puppy dog. All three were extremely happy.

Lindern received permission from Vanch to work with Willen for most of the rest of the day. Jamin received similar permission from his mother at the pottery display.

Willen had finally discovered the basic understanding of what designates a tree that can donate a piece of wood to be made into a power concentrator, how it needed to be combined with magical core materials, and how he *might* be able to feel or tell ahead of time, in some cases, who, or what type of person, might be chosen by the magik stick he had manufactured.

Willen had also realized he *indeed* had one more weapon to use against the wicked Druid brothers.

The day ended with ever increasing hope and increasing fear for others - for Caedric had not been seen since he had run out of the hut.

---

At lunchtime on the third and final day of the faire, Ludno's haphazardly repaired boat sailed up the Tameas River and grounded on shore. The boats of his three brothers had been burned by the Celts. When Ludno had not returned, he was feared lost in the terrible storm that had delivered Stellan and Willen to Loundon's Towne in such a quick passage.

Ludno's boat had been damaged and barely run aground on a barren coast for repairs. They had trouble finding the needed materials for the most minimal repairs to go back to sea. The boat could eventually be repaired to full seagoing shape, but most important to their return: Ludno had delivered another entire crew that had blades and weapons for fighting, and they were not afraid to use them. They had no training in land battle tactics, but they had experience in fighting, something most of those ready to fight in the community, save Willen, did not have.

The bulk of the numbers of those willing to fight the Celts were from the boat crews of the three burned and two surviving fishing boats, and quite a few Tillers with their pitchforks, and wood cutters with their axes.

As the faire ended, everyone began to prepare their minds for the fight the next day. Willen was about to send everyone to a quick dinner and then regroup for a meeting. But then there was a shout from a distance. Everyone looked that way.

One man was running in an exhausted manner across a field into the towne. He fell and got up, and ran on with a slight limp.

It was Caedric.

He was shouting Willen's name hoarsely, and as he approached, Dorgelt stepped out of the crowd and punched Caedric in the stomach. The Hunter shouted, "Traitor!" as loud as he could and raised his spear to pin the little Fisher to the ground. Caedric had the breath knocked out of him by the punch, and he struggled vainly to avoid being killed.

Dorgelt raised his spear and a pile of leaves nearby burst into flames. Willen had cast the *Incendio* spell from over four huts away. It was a feat of magik unseen thus far in history. Trotan grabbed Dorgelt's spear with his good right hand and the two struggled until Willen, Stellan, Constantia, and many others arrived.

Willen, his blade drawn, commanded Dorgelt to cease trying to kill Caedric.

"But, Willen, he has gone and betrayed us again. I'll wager he has warned Porto of our renewed efforts against him."

Constantia and Meala had Caedric up on his feet. His ribs hurt and the puffing from his running had been compounded by his breath being taken from him by Dorgelt's fist.

"*Puff*, Willen, I am a coward, *huff*, but that night in the hut, *puff*, the night of the, of the lights and the song, *puff*, I gained courage. I cannot fight. But I have spied for Torban. *Gasp*. You and Stellan did not think I knew, but I am a good spy. *Puff*. No one sees little me. I left that night to find out when Porto is coming. It was the only way I could help you. They come now!

"They will be here in less time than it takes to eat a meal. Probably sooner. I did not betray you, Willen. Please trust me like Torban did. I went to find him - Porto - to warn you."

The shouts of the crowd were mostly of panic, but then Willen shouted and brought some order out of chaos.

"Everyone fighting, go get your weapons and come back to the square. Everyone not fighting, please run to the woods or somewhere out of the way. Shout as you leave to the remaining visitors that the Celts are coming, but we cannot worry about them now. GO!

"Lindern, Jamin, you know what to do."

Pandemonium was produced by those fleeing the fight. The fighters knew fear to varying degrees, but there was silent, determined purpose in their activities. Most of the visitors made their way out of the towne unscathed, but a few came running back from one direction, reporting in terror, that the Celts were right behind them.

Porto's band of brigands all came riding into the town in one group. There was no subtlety in their efforts - it was full frontal arrogant arrival right into the west end of the square. There was no attempt to gather anyone fleeing their advance. The three Druid brothers were in front. Porto had a look of anger on his face, and Portan and Portag were sneering at the villagers and ogling the young women. However, instead of the ten men of their previous visit, they now had thirty Celtic warriors with them, all following Bonderman.

The tables, exhibits, and displays left from the faire formed an obvious barrier where both parties met.

As Porto brought his horse to a stop, Willen stepped out in front of those in the square to meet him.

"Welcome, Porto, we have had a had a good faire, your tribute is not ready, yet, but we should be able to have it gathered for you by dark, or at least a good bit of it. Or you can return tomorrow and we will give a full accounting." Willen kept moving so that he was not within range of the olive sticks. He also moved to keep the Druid brothers' horses' heads where they might interfere with their aim.

"And who appointed you spokesman for this city? Porto City, I fancy it." The eldest Druid brother was very delighted with himself, and the commotion and clamor he had created with his sudden and unexpected arrival.

Willen looked around and then said, "I guess you did, Great Olive Hand, when you killed the founding father of Loundon's Towne." The use of the real name of the community was on purpose.

"I've not come to *Porto City* to receive tribute; I have come to take over. What is your name, young fool?"

"My name is Willen."

"You are *the* Willen? You are the one who is supposed to have traveled all the way to the south of Gaul for olive sticks? Well, I don't see any. I heard you do not want to kill me with your sticks." Porto was sitting there, filled with arrogance, delighted to disconcert Willen with his knowledge. However, his brothers had drawn their olive sticks.

"Yes, Druid from the homeland, I arrived here after your recent visit. As you probably know, you will receive no more olive sticks from the usual source." In return, Willen used information from his own intelligence sources to try to unsettle his opponent. "So, I offer you this gift to encourage you to leave our community alone. Lindern! Jamin!"

The boys ran out with a covered half barrel and stopped with a couple of tables and displays between them and the invaders. With a flourish they placed the barrel on a sturdy table, removed the cloth, and took several steps back and behind two men. But they did not stay there.

"What is this? A barrel of sticks... are those...?" There were over a hundred olive sticks, though no strips of olive wood, arranged in the barrel. In his Druidic circles, the olive sticks before him would be a wealth leading to power with little to compare, *if* they came from the right source in southern Gaul. They would be most valuable, and could outfit a legion of killer Druids *he* could control.

"Now that you present me with this, *gift*, what is to keep me from taking them and still taking over Porto City?"

By this time all of the invaders had dismounted and a few had taken all of their horses back out of the way. Those dismounted stood with a gap of nearly a hut's length between them and the makeshift barrier debris from the faire.

Porto stepped forward and shouted for effect, "You cannot kill me or my brothers. No one can kill a Druid..."

"No one, *except*," Willen interrupted, "someone who that Druid has tried to kill and failed. You never mention that, I'm told."

"True," said Porto with a look of curiosity and confusion on his face. He obviously wondered how this Willen knew so much about Druids. "But I have always achieved every death I have attempted."

"Almost every death, Porto. You may recall a lazy-eyed youth who you thought you had killed the first day you rode into Loundon's Towne. I was that boy. I fell over with a stomach cramp and your Killing Curse missed me. Your arrogance did not allow you to check your kill.

"Of course you are not the first Druids I have killed." Willen had decided to make an educated guess to further discompose his enemies. "I killed Bordo and Bordan, and their dragon, Grang. Oh, I also killed three of the six Celtic warriors with them, all at the same time." Willen knew a new meaning to Willen's Luck that very moment when he saw the looks of shock on the three brothers' face. The barrel of olive sticks had just become even more valuable. The warriors murmured amongst themselves, wondering at the truth of Willen's claims.

Who would act first was decided by the most unlikely occurrence. Dorgelt stepped forward and shouted, "Now, spearmen!" With a bit of hesitation the nine spearmen raised their spears in a ragged fashion and threw them at the mass of warriors.

The warriors spread apart and easily used their swords to bat down any spear that would have hit them.

Dorgelt then yelled, "We have lost, lads RUN!"

The nine, shy of Trotan, turned and ran through the crowd. Some of the Tillers with pitchforks joined them, and the few foolishly brave faire visitors who had decided to join the battle, ran also. However, those defenders who had hidden their swords and bows under cloaks and coverings drew them out. Constantia swept off her outer shift and joined Willen at the front. He had tried to talk her out of taking such a prominent position, but his words had gone unheeded.

Bonderman shouted, "So, my future wife *does* wear leather like a man, and carries a bow."

He had stepped up near Porto. The little man turned and whipped the tip of his olive stick across the large man's face, splitting his cheek.



But everyone from Loundon's Towne had their eyes on the man now standing, with his spear raised, at the forefront of the Celts on the other side of Porto.

Standing by Bonderman, Dorgelt said, "Yes, Willen, and all of you. You fools can die. I have joined the ranks of the new order. I will become the first citizen of Porto City."

The traitorous Hunter hurled his spear at Willen, and for the last time our hero was stunned into inactivity. The spearhead struck hard and deep in bone and muscle.

Right in Caedric's chest.

The little Fisher had thrown himself between Willen and death.

Willen fell to his knees and heard the Fisher's last words. "I'll go keep Torban company..."

Willen stood and began to draw his sword. Dorgelt had already picked up another spear and had prepared to throw it. "I have nine more to use...." Thwack!

An arrow had pierced the Hunter's heart. Constantia brought another out of her quiver and was notching it.

The battle had begun in earnest.

Following the Celtic manner of battle, the brigands spread out to give each other fighting room. Their enemy would then have to come to them in an equally spread out fashion. Celts shunned the bow and arrow as a weapon. It seemed appropriate to them that there were several women archers among the towne's defenders.

But the Celts had not become known as legendary fighters because of their stupidity. They knew the archers were a major threat, so a third of the invaders ran as a group into the fight with the purpose of making their way to the archers and killing them as soon as possible.

Willen had discussed with the archers, swordsmen, and the few who would fight with olive hands, the idea of fighting in pairs. Meala fought beside Conlander. She would use the Body Bind Spell on a man and then Conlander would strike him down with his blade. The Smith also protected Meala while she tried to get close enough to a Celt to cast the spell. Her range of effectiveness was less than an arm's length. The huge Smith fought with his single good hand holding his sword, and an olive hand lashed to his wrist. In practice, his power concentrator had worked in this manner, while he focused all of his attention on the magik, but he could not fix all of his attention solely on casting spells in this melee. He quickly became a swordsman only. Meala hit several warriors with a Body Bind with little effect, so she started setting them on fire. That spell worked. Conlander finished a number of her flaming victims.

Panden went down very quickly. He had cast an effective Body Bind on one Celt. As he watched his archer place an arrow in the petrified warrior, another Celt cleaved the Tiller nearly in two. His archer was killed while she threw up at the sight of another dead founder of the towne.

Bengt the Miller was also dispatched after he had petrified his second warrior, but his partner swordsman ran and joined two others with battle blades and fought on through his tears. That swordsman was Bengt's son.

Trotan the Houseman had hurled his spear with the others. He pounded a table to pieces with his good hand, and used a table leg to bludgeon three Celts to death before the end of the battle. Trotan's father, Baijan the Houser, died while attempting to make a second kill with one of his hammers. Baijan's first swing had killed a warrior who had just killed one of the many Tillers with pitchforks.

Porto snarled his rage at the onset of the fight, and melted back into the press of his warriors. He feared the truth of Willen's claim on his life. However, Porto's brothers came forward. Portan went straight after Willen.

"I haven't tried to kill you and failed, Lazy Eye."

Using the name, Lazy Eye, obviously meant as an insult, puzzled Willen. He no longer had a lazy eye, but bigotry needs no basis in fact.

A Celt helped him dodge the Killing Curse. Just as *Avada Kedavra* left Portan's mouth, the warrior struck Willen in the back with his blade. Willen went down and the curse hit the Celt in his face. Willen was bruised but unhurt. The blade had hit Willen's dragon skin cloak and had not penetrated as it would have any other article of clothing. Kwildas the Dragonslayer had been right, the dragon hide gave protective powers to the wearer who had slain the dragon that gave the skin.

Willen rolled forward and came up onto his feet, right in front of his attacker - much closer than men stood talking to each other. Willen said, "Thank you. You are now mine."

Instead of cursing Willen, Portan looked back so he could step back without tripping, and then turned to face his opponent. Before Portan could curse him again, Willen stabbed his blade into the ground and raised his right hand in the well-known signal to halt. "But first let me show you this."

Willen drew out his carved holly wood and phoenix feather power concentrator. He raised it up into the air. He shot a tremendous explosion of red sparks into the air that caused all on the field to look up. The burst of red sparks made an impressive and distracting display; however, all of the defenders still alive had seen Willen do this before. They recovered from this distraction before their opponents, and in their individual battles, seven more invaders fell to sword and arrow in the next moment's time.

Portan looked back down at Willen and was about to ask how he had done that.

Willen said, "Surprise!" as he brought his blade around in a mighty swing and took off Portan's head.

Bonderman roared and hacked the bow out of Constantia's hand, destroying it. He had snuck up on her from behind and moved to disarm her. "My wife will never take up arms against me. I will be Keeper and you will serve me with a limp to slow you." Bonderman swung his sword at Constantia's legs in an attempt to maim her. Taleena, the wife of Vanch the Cooper, had joined Constantia after her husband had died. Vanch had made two small barrels and filled them with sand. He had run arm's length rope handles through them and used them as battle maces after a fashion. He had crushed the skull of one Celt and broken the sword arm of another - that one pulled out a small blade with his unbroken arm and had slit the Cooper's throat.

Through her tears, Taleena had joined Constantia, and had momentarily petrified one warrior and set fire to two others. Constantia had placed arrows in all three, ending their lives. The bow was a distance weapon, and rather awkward to use at this close range, but use it she did. Then Bonderman broke her bow. Willen's intended had only wanted to fight with her bow, even though the olive wood and embedded veela hair magik stick Willen had made her had sung to her and shot out red sparks. Now the power concentrator was her only weapon - almost.

Constantia rolled right and then left away from Bonderman's strikes at her legs, and found a moment to cast, *Confundus!* Willen had taught her the spell to confuse people, and it did stop Bonderman in his tracks momentarily. Constantia dodged the sword swings of another before Rezala hit that warrior with an arrow from over a hut's length away. Constantia waved her gratitude and turned back to Bonderman.

The big oaf had cleared his head and ran towards her; there was murder in his eyes. He appeared to have no further plans to cripple her. Constantia shouted, *Incendio!* and Bonderman rolled on the ground covered in flames. Though rolling to put out the flames, he still lunged towards her. Constantia skidded back on her hands, barely keeping out of the flaming berserker's reach.

Most of his body was still on fire as he stopped crab-walking forward. His singed face looked up at her as he came to his knees. Constantia's bow was broken, but she still had two arrows in her quiver. Bonderman looked into her eyes and she said, "Your wife waits for you in the pit of death." Then she drove an arrow through each of Bonderman's eye sockets.

Taleena helped Constantia to her feet. Though still teary-eyed, the newly widowed Cooper's wife pointed to Constantia's magik stick and said, "I want one like that." The two re-entered the fight.

Rather unique in history is the fact that Celtic women were quite often a part of their warrior bands. This group, however, viewed women as property, and therefore, viewed killing a woman not as much of an achievement as killing a man. This protected a number of the women of Loundon's Towne, and made the Celts ignore the women defenders to a certain degree. The oversight cost a number of them their lives.

Jamin and Lindern came running out from their hiding places and started tripping the Celtic warriors. They were both very adept at the Tripping Spell. They headed in different directions. Jamin was responsible for several warriors falling so others could stab, slice, or bludgeon them to death.

Lindern tripped one Celt and ran into the side of Portag. Portag had foolishly spent most of his time using *Crucio* to torture the defenders instead of killing them. He noticed that the battle seemed to be turning in favor of the town's combatants, so only then did he begin to kill in earnest. He had killed his sixth, one of Ludno's sailors, when he was almost knocked down by Lindern in their collision.

Lindern was small and fast. And he was scared out of his mind. The boy ran in and out and under several tables and displays from the faire that had been damaged in the fighting. The Killing Curses caused an exploding sound when they hit the wooden objects, and splinters flew everywhere. As he chased Lindern through the debris, and after he had missed the lad with his fifth attempt, he ran across the head of his brother, Portan.

Portag forgot the lad and went after Willen - the only one who could have killed his brother.

Willen spotted Porto across the battlefield at the same time that Porto found him. Their eyes locked from over two huts' length away, and they fought their way towards each other. Willen killed a Celt with his blade on the way to this confrontation, and Porto sent a Killing Curse into Rezala. She dropped her bow and went down noiselessly.

Willen purposefully went to his left as he moved toward his ultimate foe. Porto unknowingly followed him in that direction. While still out of Porto's death range, Willen sent a Body Bind Spell and a Fire Starting Spell at the Druid. Porto easily used a method from the Old Way to block the spells. Willen wished he had thought of trying to discover a blocking spell. Too late now.

Porto stopped and laughed. "You have power, boy, I grant you that. But you're too soft hearted to rule - and too soft headed. That's why it will be called Porto City."

The Druid was still out of his range to kill Willen. Our hero raised his holly and phoenix feather concentrator and Porto prepared to block him again. But Willen turned to his left and shouted, "Incendio!" The barrel of olive sticks burst into flames.

Porto was stricken. His new prize, the means to rule an empire made up of all the Celtic tribes, burned before him. He ran to the blazing barrel, trying to remember the water producing words of the Old Way. He looked up and saw that Willen ran towards him. The spoiler of his dreams was now in range and Porto wanted his death.

The Druid stopped and faced Willen as they converged. Constantia saw it and wanted to shout. Conlander and Meala looked on in horror. Stellan tried in vain to close his eyes. Trotan wished for a spear to hurl.

Willen knew he would not reach Porto in time with his blade, so he considered the Killing Curse. He remembered the words he had tried to forget. He raised his holly stick.

Lindern had circled around when Portag had stopped chasing him. He came out in a place where he could see Porto about to kill Willen. The stone would just not settle in his sling in time.

Constantia placed her hand holding her olive wood and veela hair power concentrator over her heart and said, "I love you, Willen. I believe in you."

Willen's decision was made. He threw his power concentrator high into the air for Porto to catch. Porto released his own olive stick and caught Willen's device in mid air. It only took an extra moment to catch Willen's olive hand, which had amazed Porto during the entire battle. Porto caught it, held it up, and shouted, *Avada Kedavra!* at Willen who was only a man's length away.

Such a highly developed magikal power concentrator has to be matched to the individual - so much so that the more powerful and advanced the design, the more the device itself has to choose its owner. This device had chosen Willen. In addition to that, even though Porto had a strong affinity for olive wood, he had no compatibility with holly. The green light Killing Curse went a hand's length from the end of the carved stick Porto held and dissipated into nothing.

Willen came down almost from the sky it seemed, with the blade that Torban had lovingly made with his Touch for metalcrafting. All of the defenders left alive with the Touch for magik, heard the song of the blade. Meala felt a wholeness in her heart that she had not felt in a fortnight. Constantia told her father that she loved him. One wounded sailor from Stellan's boat swore for the rest of his life that he saw the corpse of Caedric smile at that moment.

Torban's blade came down from the sky and Willen cut off Porto's arm holding the carved holly stick just behind the wrist. Using the momentum of the blade, Willen turned in a complete circle and took off Porto's head.

Willen bent over to take his power concentrator from Porto's lifeless hand, and the green light of a Killing Curse sizzled just over his back, missing taking our hero's life by a fraction of a moment. The dragon hide cloak protected him from what would have been serious peripheral damage from the curse, but the green light still drove Willen to his knees.

Portag stood triumphantly over the temporarily defenseless Willen. With a wild-eyed look on his face he started to say, "*Avada Kedav...*"

Lindern used the dragon heartstring sling to sink a stone deeply into Portag's forehead, ending the curse half spoken. Portag had tried and failed five times to kill the lad.

At that moment, Pholx appeared over the battlefield. His phoenix song brought courage, hope, and joy to the hearts to the remaining defenders. The two unwounded Celtic warriors ran in fear as their impure hearts clawed at their minds.

Quiet descended on the scene of carnage. Only the sound of the few Celtic horses marred the stillness. The town champions, those still standing, and those still alive but on the ground with their wounds, surveyed the detritus of the battle. Broken displays, tables, and wares were interspersed with severed limbs and bloody mud - and corpses.

There was no joy in victory or delight in the success of battle. There were twenty-nine dead invaders.

And forty-two dead defenders. Nine were wounded seriously, and two of them would die from their wounds during the night. No one who fought came out of the battle without cuts, bruises, or scrapes to show for their efforts.

Willen felt like such a failure.

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"And now I place the wreath of union over your entwined arms. This is my first official act as chosen leader of Loundon's Towne," said Stellan, "and I know I will never have a happier duty."

Naely did not stand at her friend Constantia's side at her union with Willen. Instead, she sat in a chair specially built for her by Barlint the Cooper. His oldest living friend, Stellan would have been Willen's choice to stand with him, but the Fisher had to preside over the union ceremony, so Conlander stood with Willen instead. The Smith had been surprised when he had been asked, but he had also been galvanized into action.

After the battle, Willen had time to think about olive hands, power concentrators, whatever you call them; and he remembered he had made a dragon heartstring and olive wood carved stick for the Metal Forger of Loundon's Towne. He had felt all along that it would be for Torban. It did not occur to him that it might be for Conlander until after the battle. Willen had showed him the device he had thought was Torban's. Willen heard the same familiar song when Conlander first held it in his hand, and the familiar red sparks came out of the end.

Another one had chosen its owner.

Conlander and Willen quickly discovered the Latin words for a sticking spell so the Smith could work his trade. The first two items he crafted were gold and silver finger wreaths for Constantia and Willen.

When the battle had ended, the victors - who had felt anything but victorious - stood, dumbstruck, among the carnage. Those left standing staggered to Willen and Lindern. They had been the focus point of the last moments of the battle. They all embraced for just a moment, but then they heard one of their fellow defenders weakly crying for help.

From an unknown resource, with the fever of the battle draining strength from them rapidly, the defenders went to the aid of the wounded. Most had cuts, scrapes, or some sort of damage from the fighting. The nine defenders seriously wounded but still alive from the battle, were moved to Meala's hut, which had barely been remade into her home after its previous use as an infirmary. Willen tried to use the healing spell he had showed Haana in the south of Gaul, but he seemed to be only slightly effective with it. Meala had better results with her unicorn hair and olive wood carved stick, even though it had not chosen her. A Tiller and one of Ludno's sailors died in that hut during the night.

The wounded Celts were dead before half of the wounded of the city's defenders had been moved to the hut. These enemies had been dispatched

by angered loved ones of those killed before Willen even thought about that possibility.

With the quiet after the battle painfully obvious, many of those who had hidden during the fighting had tentatively at first, and then joyously come out to greet and congratulate the victors. They came from the edge of the woods and their huts where they had hidden. They saw the last of the Celts cowardly riding away in haste.

Their desire to celebrate with the successful defenders was strangled in moments. They found their protectors dazed, muddled, speechless for the most part, and dizzy. Many shivered with the shock, and a few shook terribly.

Instead of a joyous commemoration, those who did not fight organized themselves to deal with the aftermath - relieving the fighters of the task. Several of the vanquishers stood there seriously bleeding while staring at nothing. They were led to Meala's hut to be tended and sent home.

Graller the Tanner was too old to have fought. He had offered to join the battle anyway, but all of the city founders had asked him not to. Now, Graller took over those others who had not been in the fight, and formed them into three groups. One group carefully took the dead defenders to the river, where they would be prepared to be sent on their journey in the morning. A second group transported the dead invaders to a field to be burned in good riddance. A third had started cleaning up the debris of the faire and the fight.

Graller asked, "Willen, please excuse me, but what do we do with the Druids?"

Willen wiped his face and turned from Constantia, and Meala. They had been in a silent, mind-numbed loose embrace. "Erm... tomorrow I will deal with their bodies. I do not know what I will do, but I don't want them burnt. They will not join their dead to be so quickly sent on. Just gather all their... that is, please place all of them near the speaking platform, cover them with one of the abandoned cloth coverings from the faire, and I will deal with them in the morning."

Few woke with the crowing roosters the next day.

At midmorning, Willen staggered out of Stellan's hut. Stellan had collapsed there the night before, too drained to walk the short distance to his boat. Willen found the Fisher sleeping on his carryall.

"Stellan." He shook him. "Stellan, what are you doing sleeping on my carryall?"

"Huh, uhm, uh, I thought you would use it to dispose of the Druids. I didn't want you to have to do it alone."

Willen nodded after a too-long moment, and they staggered off to their task.

They had dug the grave about three man lengths west of the tree - the holly tree that had started Willen on his path to his destiny.

It was one grave, but it was wide enough for all three brothers' bodies, side by side. Willen had used the shovel last. In their exhaustion the two had taken turns, and Willen made a mental note to himself to try to develop a digging spell.

The bodies were arranged and Stellan moved to begin to cover them. Willen stopped him. "I want to say something first."

Stellan nodded and Willen cleared his throat and began. "I bury you rather than burn you so you can think on your lives and the waste you made of them *before* you are released to go beyond. Ending your bodies now, by fire, would not give you enough time to learn. While you wait for release, think on this tree. It gave me my olive hand. Think of what might have been had you wanted friendship and cooperation, instead of aggression and domination."

Willen grabbed the shovel and started to cover the bodies.

"I wondered why you wanted to bury them rather than burn them in dishonor. You are wise to send them beyond after they have paid for their crimes by waiting."

"It is not that, Stellan, though honestly that is a reason too. But I might have ended up just like them, and I wanted them to have a chance to change for their own good, as well as the good of whatever lies beyond."

As the dirt completely covered the last bit of Portag's robe, Stellan hesitantly asked, "*How* could you have possibly ended up like them?"

"That tree," Willen pointed at the tree he had been talking about all this time, "has the same power for magik as I call it, for me, as the olive trees had for Porto and his brothers. It is not the type of tree that is powerful. Certain specific trees within many types of trees, apparently, are protected by bowtruckles. Those protected trees are the ones that produce the wood that can become power concentrators. In addition, certain trees work with certain people with the Touch, and other people work better with a different type of wood. I work well with holly wood, Constantia and Conlander work well with olive wood, as did these three. Jamin will probably work with an olive wood and dragon heartstring magik stick, but I have not manufactured it yet, and I do not know if I can on purpose, unless I feel it while making it. I have made olive hands with certain people in mind at the start. I have made them for a type of person by trade. And I have made them with no one in mind, and have had them call to me when the opportunity arose. I have even had power concentrators I have made choose people I have never met in a city I have never been to.

"Also, I have used as magik stick cores unicorn hairs, dragon heartstring, phoenix feathers, and veela hair. Although, I had a funny feeling about the veela hair embedded carved stick even while I made it - it works well enough for Constantia though. But who knows what else will work? They are all magikal creatures, I guess, but what other creatures are magikal? And what parts of them will work? Feathers? Hair? Heartstring? Skin? Bone? Claws? What else don't I know?

"Then there are the spells. I know almost a dozen - is that it? Are there a dozen more, or a dozen dozen more?"

"This is my new quest, Stellan. I must find the different types of trees protected by bowtruckles, the different magikal cores, the different types of spells needed, and whatever else there is to discover. Of course I will start near here with short day trips and sail with you to different parts of Albion, and beyond, but that is why, when they come to me today and ask me to be the new leader of this town, I will decline the offer and tell them to appoint you in my place."

"But... but, Willen. I - you - but I can't--"

"You can and you will, because in some ways you already have been a town leader, and should step up to the primary role. Meala, Vanch, Bengt, Pandan, even Caedric recognized that you had been a valuable advisor to Torban and the founders of this community. You had the idea about bringing people here with your boat. You had the idea of selling our excess goods by shipment all year around, and to build the new goods transporting boat. You just made contact with the copper miner. Frandit the Miner told me at the faire that he plans on making all of his ore shipments with you once that boat is completed. We need to start another such shipping boat right away - and there is the fishing boat fleet to rebuild. Distant trade and the sea will be a major part of Loundon's Towne's future - and who knows that better than you? You'll be wealthy and bring much more wealth to our community. We can build more ships, more row makers, and who knows what else. We can support an ever-expanding city with what you have done so far, and what else might you think up next season, or next summer, or ten summers from now?"

"And who better will know how to help others with new ideas to help our community?"

"No, Stellan, you should be the leader of this community, and I will help you in any way I can, but I want to make two requests."

Dumbfounded with the possibilities, Stellan just nodded.

"First, I would like to be the head of your defensive forces. We have not seen the last of the Celts or these selfish evil Druids. Freedom is not purchased only once. We will have to pay again and again."

"Willen, I wouldn't want anyone else in charge of our defenses. What else?"

"Second, you must proclaim the union between Constantia and me. For some reason, she insists it should take place seven days after the battle day. That is not too soon for me, so I agreed. Will you do it?"

"It will be my great joy, Willen. So this is going to be what you will be doing for a trade now that you are back with us? Is there pay enough in it to support a family?"

"I have a number of gold bits and other valuables from my travels as a peddler. There is income promised from a number of Torban's investments over the years. One of the visitors to the faire offered me a purse full of gold bits if I would agree to help his son find a power concentrator that chooses him. The lad has almost finished his apprenticeship as a Weaver, and apparently has the Touch for it.

"There are plenty of people with the Touch as you know it, Stellan, that may be chosen by an olive hand of known design and composition, but many won't with either olive wood or holly, so I feel my future trade lies in discovering all that I mentioned before so I can help empower as many *good* people with the Touch for magik as I can."

"How will you know if they're good, Willen?"

"I'll try and succeed, and I'll try and fail. I knew you were good when you had just halted trying to kill me. I knew Caedric was somehow good, and he certainly proved that in the end. I felt sure Dorgelt was good, and that belief almost got me killed. How else would you do it?"

Stellan said nothing. They finished covering the grave. Willen said, "I will bring Meala and Constantia out here to spit on their graves, this afternoon or tomorrow. They will want to give water to speed their enemies on the way to their slow trip beyond."

"Willen, how could you have been as bad as these three? I still can't believe that!"

"Imagine, Stellan, had I discovered before my travels the power of the wood from this holly for me. I would have used it on Porto the next time he came to Loundon's Towne, and I might have killed him, particularly if I had surprised him. Remember, I knew the words of his Killing Curse. In that I would have killed with the Old Way. My soul would have become poisoned, and I would have become drunk with my power eventually. How soon would it have taken me to become as callous to killing as these three were? I would have been worse than them, Stellan, I know it."

Stellan took over the narrative. "So, instead, you go on a journey longer than anyone has ever been on that I have heard of. You fight dragons, wolves, Druids, and Celtic warriors. You are nearly killed on any number of occasions and you spend most of the time in a dungeon with a man most considered mad.

"You make friends with a phoenix and a veela; you discover a major new form of the Touch called magik. You set people free from bondage, convert a crotchety old sailor from his thieving ways, and turn him into a city leader. You lead a whole town into a major battle on a moment's notice and win at great cost. You kill not one, but two impossible to kill Druids and teach a boy of fourteen summers how to do it also.

"You save the town, marry the beautiful girl of your dreams, and do so, *not* with the object of the quest that you sought for all of those seasons, but with the wood from a tree you could have walked to in the time it takes to boil an egg.

"Willen! How do you explain all of that?"

The boy turned man who had experienced all just described and so much more, looked at his oldest friend and smiled.

"Willen's Luck."

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## *Epilogue*

"And that, Mr. Potter, is the story of how my family's business was founded in 382 B.C. Of course Willen did not know that number designation system for the summers and cycles that he wrote of then. It wasn't until the institution of the Julian calendar and the Gregorian calendar, that the year was actually set at the number 382 B.C."

Harry was dazed by these words for a second, but then said, "And so Willen and Constantia lived happily ever after?"

"Why, of course not, Mr. Potter. I mentioned that their love story could be a model for a fairy tale, and so it was and is, but real life is not a fairy tale as you know all too well."

"Sir, I know we've finished the inventory, but could you please tell me a little about their lives? And you also mentioned a final battle with the Druids, and, well, how *did* the name Olive Hander evolve into Ollivander?"

Ollivander looked at his pocket watch and said, "We close in nineteen minutes, and I daresay I have kept you from your studies long enough, but in the time remaining, what can I briefly tell you...? Hmmmm."

"Well. You asked about happily ever after. No, it was too violent a time, and two Celtic warriors did escape to tell the others of what had happened, and of the riches of Loundon's Towne."

*And one last time our story continues...*

With Meala's blessing, and with the general agreement of all of the remaining prominent and oldest residents of the community, Stellan declared the name of the City on the Tameas River to be changed to Loundon Towne. It was a fine distinction, but the intent was to change the name from an acknowledgement that Torban had led them to the location, to actually naming the city for him.

Though one of the world's great cities for hundreds of years, it is still referred to as 'London Town.'

That very next spring another band of Celtic brigands approached Loundon Towne. The two survivors had attached themselves, fortunately, to Flidag, son of Krido, the young underlord who Porto had embarrassed in the port tavern.

To try to re-establish the family's tarnished honor, Krido had purchased a position of overlord for his son in Albion, and had sent him a number of Celtic warriors for his use in conquest. Flidag was just as Porto had surmised. He was arrogant, bold, overconfident, and stupid. He delighted in the story of Porto's death and ignored every shred of evidence that Loundon Towne would be formidable to conquer - including the means of Porto's death.

Fifty Celts and four weak olive hand Druids rode straight into Loundon Towne, and Flidag had made sure that the two who had escaped that first fight were in the front echelon. By the time of the attack, Flidag had convinced himself that the myth of a Druid killer named Willen, wielding an especially powerful olive hand, was just that - a myth - and the two had been cowards.

Noting the effectiveness of the one weak spy, Caedric, Willen had developed a spy network that had worked well. The towne was forewarned and had plenty of time to prepare. The arrows flew from a distance this time. The spears were thrown correctly. The final battle ended with a massive fire for the dead Celts in the same field of dishonor. Six of the defenders had been wounded, none seriously.

This victory was better because of the one sided butcher's bill, but Willen and the rest of the towne did not want to kill anyone.

Willen had corresponded by Pholx with Nerta and Ninato. The two had perfected their methods of subtlety, subterfuge, and hiding in plain sight, to the point where they were ready to teach other magikal couples - it took two married magikal ones.

After their first son was born, Stellan took Willen, Constantia, and the baby on a sea voyage. The three spent two moons in Hirel and the baby returned, spoiled and fattened by Nerta's attention and cooking. Willen and Constantia conceived their second son on this trip. He would be named Torban.

Hiding Hirel, a village of less than a hundred with no geographic distinctiveness had been one thing. Hiding the largest city in Albion in a prominent place on a key river tributary was another. But Ninato had a theory that might work - the bigger and the grander the lie, the bigger and better would be the fall of the gullible.

What if the Celts who landed at the white cliffs *didn't* go north along the coast and up the Tameas and into the more populated regions? Instead, what if they went due west and avoided most of the places where the natives of Albion lived? Good idea, but what would make them do such a thing?

A party of twenty-three arrived at a flat piece of land that was nowhere near the inhabited regions of Albion. They had traveled about a three-day's walk with their carts, tools, and devices, and this was the perfect spot. Below the surface there were a number of huge splintered rocks. Perfect for

the largest subterfuge in all of what would be known as Europe.

Taking into account the fact that those in this last wave of Celts from the homeland were very superstitious, and very ignorant of the Old Ways, those of the party that could do magik began to help the rest take the large rocks and prepare them. They cut the stones very roughly and applied spells to make the cuts look like they had occurred many years before - hundreds, thousands of years before.

They raised some stones on end and stacked other stones on top of them. They made a giant circle out of them. All of this was aged to look like it had been there for centuries upon centuries. Not far away another group with woodcutters were creating huge circles of wooden poles and stakes. Easily discoverable tombs were created at each site and instead of skeletons, they were filled with old parchments. Some were real Druidic writings in disrepair that had been copied already. Nerta and Ninato, and Eirran had donated a number of such scrolls and scroll bits. To this was added the subtleties.

The grand lie went as follows: A mythic and ancient Celtic wonder world awaited them on an island on the west coast of Albion. All true, believing, pure Celts needed to do to release the riches, power, and grandeur of that world was to go there and rebuild according to the ancient texts. As the wonderful world neared completion, the ancients would come back to life and bring their power and riches with them, filling what Celts and Celts alone had built with the wealth and splendor had been before.

Only pure Celtic hands could do the building. Only Celts could be faithful enough. They must cast off their contact with the polluting native population, and never soil themselves with mating or raping or even killing the natives.

Special routes were mapped out and sacred pilgrimages described that took the Celts on a circuitous path to a western island of past and future wonder. Many other rock and wooden circle formations would lead them on this path.

Of course Willen and Constantia had made up all of this with Nerta and Ninato. Willen's best spies wandered into Celtic strongholds, told of their visions of the ancient rock and wooden circle structures appearing out of the mist. They told where the structures could be found, and then somehow vanished to go to the ancient island.

Most Celts followed the path and went to the Isle of Anglesey off of the coast of what would one day be known as Wales. The major destructive force of the Celts was diluted with the desire for the new city of the faithful Celts. The migration/invasion paths went away from all known native cities, and Loundon Towne was spared having ever increasing numbers of brigands assaulting them. Roughly once a generation those in Loundon Towne would experience some attempt at conquest at the hands of the greediest of Celts led by Druids, but the potential for an overwhelming, unified, mass attack had been thwarted.

Loundon Towne continued to grow. In 376 B.C., right after Willen and Constantia's third son, Egorn, was born, the five of them and Stellan set out on a voyage to Remers. Stellan took his new bride with him, Meala. She had been the woman that he'd spoken of to Willen; the woman he loved, who loved another. They had shared leadership of the city together, and had done so much more together to advance his goods shipping and fishing business, and all of the businesses of Loundon Towne. However, Stellan would have never said a word to her in memory and honor of Torban. But Torban had always said to Meala that he thought Stellan would make a good husband for a good woman, and Meala felt like she could never marry anyone who wanted her to forget her first husband. Stellan would never be like that.

Willen had taught all of the economic principles and practices he'd learned from Eirran, as well as responsibilities, to Stellan, Conlander, Lindern, and every other tradesman in Loundon Towne who had been interested. This set a basis for an economy that would last for thousands of years. It was responsible business working hand in hand with responsible government, both providing opportunity for prosperity for all, based on merit, ability, and effort. Of course the lazy and greedy did not like the system, but that had not been newsworthy even in 382 B.C.

Willen taught about magik there in Remers for three moons, and experimented with the magikal ones on advancing spell and wand tekhnologi.

**Finally**, a simple and elegant name had been determined for the carved and embedded, power concentrating, magikal-one-choosing, olive hand magik sticks.

Wand!

The perfect name.

The family of Eirran and the family of Willen would be life long friends. Stellan spent that summer opening up trade routes and relationships with all of what would be northern Europe. In just over two millennia the expression "Rule Britannia" would be a global catchphrase for commerce and empire. It would exist because of sea power - trading and military sea power - all dating back to the non-magikal magical seagoing mind of Stellan the Fisher.

Two years later, after their fourth son, Vanch, was born, Willen, Constantia, and their sons joined Stellan and Meala on a voyage around Gaul and Iberia to the southern coast of Gaul. Trade was established and a visit was paid to the Aldertani Keep. Willen had never known that part of the lands of the Keep touched the sea there at a tiny fishing village known as Massilia. Meala and Constantia consulted with Haana about her healing spells. She was the only one in their generation to ever have developed spells other than Willen. They had much to teach each other. Stellan now had sailing routes and trading contacts throughout this region as well. Initial trading was even established, covertly, with the new Roman Empire.

All trade was established in a surreptitious and covert manner, unless friendships likes those with the good people of Remers and the Aldertani Keep were in place. It was policy for Loundon Towne businesses and leadership, that the only ones that would know about them were those who understood magik, and the special responsibilities accompanying such power. This is why Muggle history records that nothing existed but a few small fishing huts on the banks of the Tameas before the Roman invasion, even thought a huge community had existed there for centuries.

Everywhere Stellan went, even covertly, contact was made with those identified as trustworthy magikal ones. The network of magikal ones existed through the owl (and one phoenix) system of message carrying birds. Trustworthiness was determined and relationships initiated. Then, someone

would visit the new contacts with one of Stellan's goods trading boats - and soon many people with the Touch and the promise to use magik only for good, were receiving by boat or bird a power concentrating wand.

Conlander and Neally had not been idle while Willen discovered more spells and bowtruckle guarded wand wood sources, and Stellan had been opening trade relations throughout the western half of the known world.

The forge had been untouched by the battle, so Conlander immediately began developing his ideas of metal crafts with broad appeal. His work leaned towards the more practical items. The battle blades, forever to be known as swords, were a difficult item to manufacture, but they brought a great price. Every non-Celtic warrior and Keeper of Land wanted a sword. Most wanted a longer blade with a one-handed grip, or an even longer blade designed for two hands. So the benefits of the Torban design, a shorter, two-handed sword, remained a fighting secret of those trained in Conlander's and Willen's style.

Conlander also developed the utility blade and sheath, and advances in metal parts used for boat building and agriculture. Finding metal workers had been difficult for Torban, but now those who wanted to be Smiths by trade, came to Loundon Towne in increasing numbers.

Naelly made her contribution to the metal working industry of the community in two ways. She bore Conlander seven sons, all who became Smiths in name as well as trade, and three daughters. All three daughters married sons of Willen and Constantia.

Naelly also contributed to her husband's business in more practical ways. Stellan's trade in shipping copper to ports in Albion and Gaul caused Naelly to wonder why Conlander did so little with copper. Copper alone, and its amalgamations with other metals, were too soft for most of the products Conlander was interested in - he primarily worked in iron and iron mixtures. But one of the new journeymen metal workers had spent time making copper jewelry in his previous village, which had been overrun by Celts. His name was Awert, and he did not fancy himself a Smith. Naelly designed the jewelry she wanted and Awert made it. They experimented with combinations of copper and zinc to make brass candleholders, and worked with copper and tin to make bronze mirrors. Soon this aspect of their business rivaled the iron works in profitability. Naelly and Conlander, and their following generations, provided opportunity and employment for many.

Lindern co-managed the Cooperage set up by Vanch with Cinko. The lad's arm held a mighty scar, but he recovered almost all of his use of that arm and hand. Over the years Lindern spent less and less time in barrel making, and more time with bow and arrow design. His basic design for the bow, and a modified arrow, proved to be an excellent hunting weapon. Lindern took on the trade name, Bowman, and the ever so many great grandson of the bow he and Vanch developed, became the famous English Longbow, heroic weapon of the Battles of Cercy and Agincourt, and many others.

After Constantia and Willen's fifth son, Pandan, was born, Willen began a tedious tour of Albion. He tried to avoid Celtic areas that were strictly Celtic because of the subterfuges he had created, but he intentionally went into areas held by Celts where natives of Albion also lived. He visited all other native settlements and communities he could discover.

He hunted for those with the Touch. He wanted them to come to Loundon Towne to train in magik with the magikal ones there. It was good for his business, but it was much better for those with the Touch and their communities. It took three summers on foot to cover all of Albion, but during this three year sojourn, he was able to arrive back home by late autumn, where he wintered with his family before setting out the next spring.

At the end of all of this traveling, Willen rested. No one had been where he had been or had seen what he had witnessed. He began to write. His sixth and last son, Bengt, was born.

Willen's sons all grew up strong, wise, and powerful in magik. The two eldest trained to carry on the traditions and business of the family, wandmaking. All were trained in the basic family abilities.

Porto had a younger cousin, who had a son. In the next generation he convinced the powers that be among the Celtic nobility in Albion to attack the city of Loundon Towne. It was known by all Celts as a poor little village and *no one ever* went there because of it. Porto's cousin once removed, renamed himself Porto and declared he had risen from the grave to fight Loundon's Towne again.

Though getting older, Willen was much younger looking than anyone his age without the Touch - all magikal ones who had trained and used magik with one of Willen's wands experienced the same youthfulness and longer lives than average. After setting up the defensive systems, training cadres, and his spy network, Willen had handed over defense of the town to Lindern before his trips throughout Albion. Lindern had maintained the same sharp edge on the defenses, but his successor had not.

When the self-proclaimed resurrected Porto attacked with his new army of nearly two hundred pillagers, the town was surprised and many died before Willen and his six sons, Lindern and his four sons, and the fourteen Potters arrived. They were all excellent swordsmen or spearmen and the battle turned quickly in favor of the defenders. The still powerful Conlander and his huge sons all cut a wide path through the attackers. In a few more minutes a rain of arrows fell from Constantia and the wives and sisters of the four families of warrior magikal ones.

Few Celts survived, and they were all captured. Torban, the second son of Willen and Constantia, had been working with early memory charms. He could only erase all memories or nothing at all, so all of the warriors that survived ended up as simpleton farm hands with native farmers throughout Albion. They came with a small bag of gold bits to help ease the transition of the memory-less warrior into the pastoral life.

No good deed seems to go unpunished.

At any time there were significantly more non-magikal people in a town or village than magikal ones. The number without the Touch was very large in Loundon's Towne, and a number of troublemakers did not like the fact that the magikal ones seemed to be wealthier and lived longer than everyone else. Plenty of people began to complain about these disparities.

What Eirran had said so many summers before in the dungeon came back to Willen's mind: Those the magikal ones helped would become jealous and fearful of them.



Slowly but surely homes and businesses of the magikal ones became shabby looking; no one was ever seen going into those shops. Most of their huts and places of business seemed to be arranged around and near the Diagon.

Soon, no one thought there was any reason to go to the Diagon area. No one ever came from far off to see what had once been a major monument of resistance against the Celtic invaders.

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**321 B.C.** A little old man was walking down the street from the main warehouse district of the town. Several young teens thought it would be good sport to throw apples at him. They always missed him, and they hardly ever missed anyone else, so they began to chase him. He ran in such a crippled manner that the teens laughed all the way. They never asked themselves why they never caught up to him.

They were stopped by a cane, which tripped the first boy. He stood up to fight, and then fell to his knees with the others.

"Mr. Stellanson, I didn't see you, sir. Please forgive me for running into your cane like that, sir."

"You didn't run into my cane," said Willen Stellanson, only son of the shipping genius, the Great Stellan the Fisher, and the man who employed these boys' fathers as sailors. "I tripped you. How dare you chase after a little old man like that. What would you have done if you had caught him?"

The lads said nothing and just shivered in place.

"Well, off with you. To your homes and never let me see you being disrespectful of your elders again. I recognized the man you were chasing. He fought valiantly in the last major battle with the Celts. He stood with the Olive Handers. You will never know who you might be mean to, so only be kind and respectful to everyone, especially your elders."

The boys ran home and he watched them. When they were well out of sight and earshot, Stellanson said, "Where are you, Uncle Vanch?"

After a moment, a man who was obviously there but had not been obviously there a moment before said, "I'm not your uncle, I'm your cousin."

The speaker was four summers older than the one he called his cousin, Willen Stellanson, but he looked much younger out of his old age illusionment, which had made him look forty summers older than he was. Stellan the Fisher and Meala had surprised everyone, particularly themselves, when she'd told Stellan the news that she was with child.

They fell into a comfortable walk towards the ramshackle Diagon part of town. Stellanson said, "Actually, I am your mother's half brother, so you should call *me* Uncle. You have been out spying again, haven't you? On Loundon Towne or the Celts?"

"The Celts for the last moon, but I always walk back through Loundon Towne and see what I can see, and hear what I can hear."

Willen Stellanson had not inherited from his mother, Meala, any of her magikal abilities discovered by his half brother-in-law, Willen the Olive Hander. Stellanson had been upset as a youth, but his father had instilled in him a love for the sea, and a greater love for business. So he was more than happy with a successful business and a big family of his own.

Vanch the Olive Hander said, "Nice idea telling them I fought with the Olive Handers, not that I *was* one. Reduces their curiosity that way."

"My thoughts exactly."

They walked through the gloomy terribly run down-falling down buildings. Then they shimmered as they came out of the gloom and into the thriving magikal Diagon Square. Vanch visited his two older brothers at the wand shop and Willen Stellanson joined his wife, Lindern's daughter, Rezala, for dinner.

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**43 A.D.** "Trotandius, are you sure you want to do this? No one has seen anyone claiming to be a magikan in a several dozen years."

"It was your spies, Caedricius, who alerted us to the danger. The Romans will arrive and find a Latin speaking city of over ten thousand that *no one* in their empire has ever heard of, and how will we explain it?"

"Trotandius, we exist. That does not mean that the Olivehanders still exist, even if they ever did. We must deal with what we know. It is a legend that they became tired of having us dislike them for their powers and longer lives, and so they hid themselves in the Diagon district. The first thing the Romans will do is burn it to the ground so they can build something like an aqueduct, or a bath house, or maybe a bridge. I hear they like bridges. This area is a mess. Why haven't *we* torn it down before now?"

"I have thought to propose it to the Londinium Council, but I have never remembered to do it when we were in session."

Trotandius started shouting, "Olivehanders! Great Olivehanders! We need you. I am Trotandius Houseneum, and I am head of the Council. It is our wish, no, our request, on our knees if need be, to ask for your help!"

"Trotandius. Are you *sure* you want their help if they answer? They steal people's minds, they say."

"Caedricius, they do not! My ancestor was Trotan the Houseman. He learned Latin from the Great Willen himself, the first Olivehander, the one who brought Latin to our city, and all of the other wonderful things he did, too numerous to list. Willen would never do anything to harm us, and he would ensure that his Olivehander heirs would never hurt us either. I will stand here and offer my life if need be to prove I am serious about saving

Londinium. We have our defense forces to fight off these occasional stupidly persistent Druid-led attacks, but we cannot stand against the might of Rome.

"We need the Olivehanders and their subal-teeth, subtertudes, and hiding in plant-slites."

"You are sure, Trotandius? You will guard their secrets, and convince the citizens of Londinium to obey without question? You know how pig-headed our citizens can be sometimes."

"Yes! We have to have their subal-teeth..."

"It's subtleties, subterfuge, and hiding in plain sight, Trotandius."

"That makes more sense, but how do you know that?"

"Old friend, you have never heard my full name and I have made sure you haven't. I am Caedricius of the Olivehanders." He put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Look at the Diagon."

Trotandius stood slack-mouthed in awe. It was like an unknown land existed right there, not even a league from his own home.

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**47 A.D.** "Governor Aulus Plautius, all of Rome sings your praises. Just four short years ago you came here and found a small village on this spot, and a willing populous, and now you have a city of over five thousand *Brittons*, and they all speak Latin. Industry is thriving in all aspects, and taxes are flowing to Rome as well as copper and other raw and manufactured goods. I am impressed. How *have* you done all of this?"

"Publius Ostorius, I am honored by your praise. I am sure you will rival and exceed my accomplishments in your reign as governor. There is still much to be done, and many hostile inhabitants of Britannia to subdue. As to my success, I cannot say any one thing has made the difference, all of the circumstances were right. But the bridge has helped immensely. It was as if commerce was waiting to explode once the two sides of the river were connected. I am glad Rome, and you, are pleased with Londinium."

"It is a very impressive sight, but I, like many, want to know why you have called it Londinium? It is not the usual name given to a city in the Empire."

Aulus Plautius looked confused and sputtered a bit.

The new governor asked, "Governor, is it from '*longinquus*' for a long distance or time, and from '*dinumero*' to count money? Are you saying we had to come a long way from Rome to count a lot of money?"

"Uh, yes. Yes, Publius Ostorius, that is it.

"Now, I want you to meet the local civic leaders of the Brittons. But before you do, I must tell you a few things about the people of Britannia. The natives here in Londinium are very welcoming, and have proven over and over again their loyalty. They are the original inhabitants of what was once called Albion.

"But there is another part of the populous of this island that are near open revolt. They are called Celts and are related to peoples we have fought before in many places - They come from the same root as the Galatians, the Celtiberians, and of course the Gauls, who Julius Caesar had to battle so hard and long to finally subdue. We Romans have fought them for over four hundred years in one form or another. The problem here is that they are not in easily defined regions. Our friends, and the rebellious Celts, are interspersed all over this island. Londinium is the strongest city not part of the Celts. Yet, not a day's ride away, in Caulodunum, the population is almost entirely Celtic, and hostile to my every action and proclamation.

"Where we have gone before, Spain, Galatia, or Gaul, the people have fought bravely, and then become good citizens of Rome. Here there is a difference. Their religious leaders are called Druids, and they are much more powerful and hideously evil than any other Celtic shaman we have encountered. Their unspeakable practices, the human sacrifices, and the atrocities against their own people - well, we do this island and the Empire a kindness every time we kill one. The rumor is that they perform *magicae*, and I fear we may have to root them out and destroy them."

"Surely you are wrong, Aulus Plautius, there is no such thing as *magicae*. They are the usual band of tricksters. We always let the local religions exist in peace as long as they do not foment rebellion. Surely these people will calm themselves once they know we will not tamper with their beliefs."

"Whatever the outcome, I leave for Rome tomorrow, and the Druids are yours to handle as you see fit.

"But, I keep you from those most anxious to meet you. You will find out more than you ever need to know about this in the years of your governorship. Let me take you and introduce you to the civic leaders I mentioned earlier. They know all about the Druids and Celts, and they willingly help us.

"Governor Publius Ostorius, may I introduce Caedricius. He is a local, but has purchased Roman citizenship. He has proven his loyalty time and again. He has taken my most trusted centurion with him to spy on these Druids. His family has fought the Celts and Druids for centuries, and his council has been invaluable. Please consider carefully his advice.

"And this is the head of the local city council, Trotandius Houseneum..."

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**61 A.D.** "Mealaliala, this is Portanata. Our son Willenium plans to marry her when he returns. I am so glad you are safe. Londinium has been sacked

and burned, but I am thankful that you are safe, and the Subtleties and Illusionments have kept Queen Boudicca's army away from the Diagon. Governor Suetonius was a fool to leave her army unchecked by a blocking force. But I am home now to stay. Finally our battle is over. It was horrible. But our son is safe, and sends his mother his love."

"Bentgium, my husband," Mealalia's formal tone forecasted a gentle reprimand. "You return from half a year of siege of that evil island. You stand there in the rain with your wand at *Lumos*, and you feel you must explain all of this before entering your own home? Come in, you will have our new daughter-to-be think me inhospitable. Come in, my child."

The three walked into the main chamber. Bentgium said "Nox" as his wife cast "Incendio" to start a blaze in the fire grate. The girl was in rich Roman brocade, and her hair and face were completely covered.

"Come here, my dear, and let me look at you." The girl walked slowly towards her.

"Your son loves her, my wife, and I love her as a daughter already..."

"Husband, you act as if she is...*shriek!* A Druidess!"

"Mealalia, my wife whom I love, please calm yourself. We have had terrible information, and as head of subterfuge for our people I am to blame. It was the Roman spies that had infiltrated Ynys Mons, what the Romans call Mona Island. Their spies are usually so good that I did not think they would be fooled by the subtleties of the Druids, crude as they are. The name Druid no longer includes those of the Old Way. Over half of those on that island dressed and arranged their hair and appearance like Druids, but they have no powers from the Old Way. Some of them were bred solely for the sacrifices."

Portanata had put her hood back up to hide her distinctively Druidic hair style, and only her beautiful face showed. His wife for once, was stunned to silence. He needed to explain quickly.

"I swear on my family name as Bentgium Olivehander, direct descendant of the Great Olive Hander, Willen, we have all made a grave mistake. We saw an opportunity, I saw an opportunity to end the Druid influence once and for all, and we all agreed to take it.

"For almost four hundred years we have seen selfish Druid after evil Druid after insane Druid rise up and cause the populations still primarily Celtic to fight us. They had that foul island where they kill children and adult alike, almost for sport. And *all* of the rumors of other practices are true! So it still makes good sense to join the Romans. They wanted to attack, and finally we had a trained assault army to use, not just a defensive force, so we surreptitiously added our magikal ones into their midst acting like the comic tricksters the soldiers love so well. We were in position to stop the killer Druids from devastating the Roman squares, and we were successful.

"We fought and destroyed the craven ones as had to be done, but we did not know. Mealalia, there were hundreds, probably thousands of innocent women, children, and even a few men on the island. It was their overlords that had evolved into such ruthless killers of innocents, and now..."

"My wife, the Romans began a slaughter of all - every single creature on the island. They were killing people, children, even pigs and horses - everything. We had given our bond, so we would not betray the legions. Yet we did all that we could do.

"I gave orders for all of the magikal ones to spread out and hide every person they could. Many of us have died trying to distinguish the extremists from the innocent. We just threw up the Illusionments haphazardly and tried to calm all inside. The Romans were too numerous, we were only able to spare perhaps one in four of the innocents. I have given orders to spread them with the magikal ones throughout Britannia, but most will come here to Londinium. The death toll from Boudicca's attack will cover the increase in population. We will work among the non-magikals to ensure those we have rescued are well situated and acclimated.

"Our son loves Portanata, because she saw us immediately for what we were, not wanton pillagers but people trying to save whomever we could. And here is the miraculous part of all this. She has the Touch - not the Old Way, but the Touch for magik. The Celts have been here long enough to become a part of Albion. She saved our son's life when one of his hiding barriers broke down.

"She and a few others helped lead us to pockets of those in hiding from the Romans. *They* are responsible more than we are for the number of those spared. One day she had heard of a large group on hiding right in the path of an advancing Roman legion. She led our son to the place where they were. Portanata had watched him cast spells. When the rampaging Romans broke through Willenium's hastily cast Illusionment because a babe was crying, he was knocked unconscious. She took his wand and stopped the Roman soldiers with Body Bind Spells. For the last fortnight she has led us into areas we would have never found to rescue the innocent, but the legions scouring that island would have. We would have never saved so many without her help.

"Mealalia, I have thought long and hard on my ride back. I had charmed the horse to recognize the way. After we settle these innocent Druids into our city and elsewhere, and after we help rebuild Londinium, I will face the Diagon Council and propose that we resume the course the Great Willen the Olive Hander had set. We must let the non-magikals go their own way and make their own decisions. We must make the Diagon area fade into nothingness again. My uncle, Caedricius, diverted us from that path for all of the right reasons. He did right to help the city, but we must extract ourselves from involvement with the non-magikals. We must become a mythical memory."

His wife rose from her seat and walked to Portanata, who also stood to meet her. She pushed back the young woman's hood. She was beautiful if you ignored her hair. "My child, welcome to our home and our family. You're so lovely, and I cannot wait to see how beautiful our grandsons will be. My son did tell you that Olivehanders only have boys, didn't he?"

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"And that, Mr. Potter, is definitely the end of the story. You have heard the life of Willen and Constantia. You know how London and my family's business were established, as well as Diagon Alley. You have heard about the final battle with the Druids, and you know how we finally separated

from the Muggle world once and for all. You also now know that we fight for the good in the midst of the bad, or we will destroy that which is redeemable in the midst of horror.

"Now, as for my name: you already know that my ancestor who negotiated with the goblins at the inception of Gringotts was named Kelden Olivhander. How that 'e' was lost we do not know.

"The English propensity to drop the letter 'h,' a cockney affectation at this time, began with the Norman invasion. Vancimere Olivander dropped the 'h' in 1071 A.D. to welcome the French wizards and witches to Diagon Alley. It became an Alley sometime before that, once again for reasons of subtlety and subterfuge.

"As to the double 'l' in our name. Ichabod Ollivander was the most, shall I say 'frugal' of the Ollivanders in our family history. In 1437 he bid a contract to paint our shop sign with never wear paint. The lowest bidder was a drunken wizard house painter, and he put the second 'l' in because he said that he could see two 'l's' on the piece of paper. Ichabod refused to pay to rebuild the side of the building to remove the never wear misspelled sign, so he had our name legally changed to save money.

"In 1622, Caedric Ollivander finally rebuilt that part of the shop to remove the old sign. Caedric has been a very popular name for Ollivanders throughout the centuries. It was my grandfather's middle name as a matter of fact.

"Mr. Potter, I have asked you to not repeat this story to others, but I particularly do not want you to reveal my ancestor, Ichabod's miserliness."

Harry nodded. He understood the idea of relatives that you did not want others to know about. Harry said, "Well, sir, it's closing time, so I'll leave you and walk myself back to the Leaky Cauldron."

Mr. Ollivander looked at him with a far away look for several long seconds, and then said, "If you have a few more minutes, Mr. Potter, I would like to show you something, actually several things."

Harry followed the wand maker to the back, after he had locked the shop door. Harry had not noticed the stairway to a cellar, which he was sure had not been there that morning. Down the steps and around several corners sat a walk-in vault. Mr. Ollivander flicked his wand wordlessly, the tumblers spun in rapidly alternating circles to the proper positions, and the door creaked open.

As they walked in, a small torch flamed over in one corner. Harry noticed other unlit torches over other draped tables with different shapes under the cloth coverings. As they approached the largest of these tables, the covering rolled back on its own, and the light became brighter.

Harry was wide-eyed and breathless with the realization. "Is that...? Are they...?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter, the original wands that belonged to Willen and Constantia, and the carving of Constantia that Willen made so long ago.

"The veela hair and olive wood wand has not been touched in over seventeen hundred years. That was the first and last workable wand of its kind that an Ollivander-, that is an Olive Hander, has ever made. All other attempts with a veela hair combined with any type of wand wood has been, well, unreliable at best.

"But Willen's holly wood and phoenix feather core wand - the same materials as in your wand, Mr. Potter - that wand can still perform magik, though we rarely use it. Actually we rarely come down here; it has been decades..."

The wands were much bigger around and longer than any Harry had ever seen. They were roughly sanded and showed many imperfections. There were several tiny specks of flaked flaxseed oil below Constantia's wand, but there was no debris under Willen's.

With a handkerchief, Mr. Ollivander very carefully, almost reverently, picked up Willen's wand in the middle and brought it around to hand to Harry.

"I don't have a handkerchief, sir."

"No, Mr. Potter, take it in your wand hand."

Harry wiped his right hand on his breeches and very gingerly took the wand.

A small tune seemed to enter his head. Then it rose in volume. Then red sparks began to shoot sporadically out of the end of this, the most ancient of wands. Harry felt as he had when he'd first heard Fawkes sing.

The sparks died down, and the tune ended. He moved to hand it back to Mr. Ollivander who stood stock still.

After a moment Harry said, "Would you call that 'curious,' sir?"

"No, that would be *interesting*."

They walked out of the vault, and Harry heard it close and the tumblers spin behind them. Mr. Ollivander walked him to the Leaky Cauldron, and paid Harry for his time helping with the inventory. Harry tried to refuse, but the wand master would brook no argument.

Mr. Ollivander Apparated to one of the most secluded homes still in the middle of London. In the evening sun, while a house-elf finished his dinner, he sat down at an outside table under the oldest holly tree in England. The bowtruckles jumped down out of the tree and chatted with Mr. Ollivander for a few minutes. Then he took quill and parchment to write a letter.

*My Dear Dumbledore,*

*As I wrote you yesterday, Mr. Potter has been helping me with my inventory, as you had so kindly helped me in the summer of 1853, before the start of your third year at Hogwarts.*

*As you may remember, I took you downstairs to our vault and showed you the wand that was owned by my ancestor, Willen the Olive Hander. You examined it and handed it back, and we left.*

*Today I followed the identical steps with Mr. Potter with one exception - an exception not of my design. When Mr. Potter took the wand in his hand, the song and red sparks so aptly described by Willen in his journals, occurred. It is known only to the Ollivander family, that this has happened with only one other wizard since Willen himself.*

*That other occurrence happened in 1032. My ancestor, Caedrillion Olivhander placed it in the hand of Godric Gryffindor and...*

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### ***Epilogue to the Epilogue***

**Magical Historian's Research Note** - - Mr. Ollivander believes the story of Willen ends as he has told our young hero, and it does in the archives of his, the oldest magical family. But one fact is missing. One question goes unanswered, and *it* would not let the research for this story come to an end.

As stated, the answer to the question came not from the journals or writings or parchment or scrolls of the multitudinous great Olive Hander/Ollivanders. The answer was found in the most ancient parchment uncovered by the International Wizarding Archeological Society in their digs at the ancient site of Remers. The parchment found is believed to be a part of the journal of the first headmaster of the *Remers Lyceum de Magikae*, the Seer, Eirran.

Here is a small excerpt from this priceless tome:

*Eirran,*

*I so enjoy writing to myself each day. In this I am always ensured an attentive and appreciative audience.*

*Today was the day I have been writing to you about for so long. Willen and his family finally arrived. Of course I had every magikal one in Remers, and the important non-magikal leaders there for a special welcoming ceremony. But Willen's boat arrived earlier than we had expected, so I had time to visit with our guests on board Stellan's marvelous goods transporting boat.*

*My young friend, Willen, had never exaggerated the beauty or the charm of the fair Constantia. Their newborn, Egom was fat and healthy, and my seven daughters could not stop fighting among themselves to see who could hold him - even those with children of their own. The other two of Willen's young lads were as handsome as you could want.*

*After such hardship and such sacrifice, and with his future struggles as sure as life itself, I am overjoyed that my friend, Willen, has such a happy family life.*

*It was time to ask the question I had asked several times in my correspondence, and that Willen had never answered. About three summers before, the confusion over what to call the power concentrators was finally settled. I had always liked olive hands until the perfect one for me - that is, the one that chose me, turned out to be birch wood and unicorn hair. Embedded carved stick was also too much to say. Well, the discoverer of magik, none other than Willen, finally wrote that they should be called wands.*

Wand. What a perfectly elegant, concise, appropriate name. Of course, it is no surprise that the discoverer, developer, and inventor of magik, spells, and the devices themselves, would be the one to name them, but I still wondered how Willen came up with the name.

*I met Willen and Constantia at the part of the ship that touched our newextended platform designed to load and unload such*



My gratitude goes out to all of those who have read and all who have reviewed. Thank you for enduring what it took to get Latin into the magikal world and Willen back home. Thanks for reading one of the longest chapters in HP fanficdom- Chapter Eight. My two beta readers, Ninkenate and Ozma have been wonderful, and most of the ease of reading comes from their interception of my written and grammatical errors. Ozma also insisted I write a "life after the end" for Conlander and Naely - so thank her if you are fans of theirs.

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## Author's Historical Notes - -

**Britton** - (with two 't's) is the Latin form of Briton.

**Crucio** - Crucifixion as a means of slow painful death was first mentioned in ancient history, in use by Darius I, king of Persia, in 519 B.C. But the Persians did not name this method of cruel execution. *Crucio* is the Latin word for torture or torment, and the root of the word 'crucifixion.' Did the word come from the Celts who had sacked and pillaged northern Italy for well over a hundred years before finally being driven out?

**Druid Dress** - According to the *Malkin's Book of Magical Fashions Throughout the Ages*, the classic witch and wizard garb of a black floor-length robe cloak and black pointed hat dates back to mourning wear from end of the Dark Ages, when the Black Death had ravaged magical and Muggle populations indiscriminately. Research for this work indicates that this classic Druid look, had been appropriated for those magikal ones spying on the Druids. Also, when the innocent Druids were brought back to London and made a part of the community, they were dressed in this manner. The look became very popular. After all, black is most slimming.

**Massilia** - This fishing village, later port of the Aldertani Keep, is now the site of the French port, Marseille. It was this link in historical research of ancient texts that finally helped Wizarding Archeology find the Aldertani Keep, home of magical healing.

**Stonehenge and Woodhenge** - The success of the subtleties and subterfuge at these and other sites, created by the Great Willen the Olive Hander to distract and confuse the curious away from the magikal community, continues to be effective to this day. Muggles have conjectured the most absurd dating systems and explanations for these mysterious locations - everything from ancient giant races to space aliens. Most assuredly Willen chuckles from the beyond.

**Phoenix Feather Wand Cores** - Madam Lupinia of the *Institut d'Francais d'Gaulish Magikae* asked a very important question. How could Willen's wand be made from a phoenix feather core if Fawkes has only given two tail feathers for wand use? Fawkes *has* only given two feathers, but there is no record as to how many tail feathers Pholx gave.

**Magikal Ones and Magikans** - The word "magikan," now spelled magician, denotes a slight-of-hand artist with explainable magic tricks. This contrived occupation was a clever subtlety devised to cast doubt on non-magikals (pre-Muggles) attempting to discover the existence of magikal ones. It still is effective today.

**Caulodunum** the ancient name for the British city, Colchester.

**The Romans and London** - Muggle history tells that there were only failed fishing villages at the site of present day London until Aulus Plautius, Roman general and first Roman Governor of Britain, built his bridge across the Thames River to aid in troop movements. His bridge was built only a few yards from the current London Bridge. Muggles continue to say that the bridge provided a location for a vital crossroads and this explains the rapid growth of London.

**Londinium** - Londinium is not a typical Roman name given a conquered or established city in the Roman Empire, even though it is Romanized in its spelling. Though used as the Roman capital of the province and as a port, Londinium was not liked by native Romans because it was such a city of commerce and financial activities. Need you guess who made sure the name London, not Londinium, is used to day.

**The Governors of the Roman Province of Britannia** - Aulus Plautius was the first governor and governed from 43 to 47 A.D. Publius Ostorius took his place and ruled rather poorly from 47 to 52 A.D. Suetonius Paulinus was the fifth Roman governor and ruled from 59 to 62 A.D. Suetonius crushed the Druids at the Isle of Anglesey, let London burn because he had insufficient forces available to stop it, and then defeated the forces of Queen Boudicca at the Battle of Watling Street.

**Watling Street** - This was the great Roman road leading into to the Midlands. The Battle of Watling Street actually took place just off of this road, and is believed to have been fought in a wood near the modern day town of Atherstone in Warwickshire.

**Ynys Mons** - The present day Isle of Anglesey in western Wales. The Romans called it Mona Island. Translated, it means cow island.

**The Romans, the Celts, and the Druids of England** - In brief here are the historical facts about the Romans leading up to the slaughter of Druids at Ynes Mons/Mona Island/Isle of Anglesey. History here is very incomplete, quite often gruesome, and obviously tainted to a limited degree by Roman prejudice - but all evidence points to these facts being true:

- The Celts invaded, pillaged, and settled across most of Europe from 600 to 300 B.C.
- The Romans drove them out of the Italian peninsula, better known as the Apennine peninsula, but no other native population did.
- The Romans encountered Celts and their Druids (called Druids rarely except in England and Ireland) and fought them everywhere the Romans found them. (Caesar's Gaulic Wars are perhaps the most famous of these battles.)
- The Celts and Druids invading England in 400 to 300 B.C., were disconnected by over two hundred years from the Celts and Druids sailing to Ireland from Spain starting in 350 B.C.
- Other than its well known persecution of the early Christian church, which failed, nowhere did the Romans attempt to destroy a religious group of

