

Wandcrafter's Tale

By Carol Oster © 2011

Business was unusually brisk at the spring fair. I was selling and turning more than the usual trickle of my wares – quills and dipping pens for the scribes and calligraphers, scratchers for the portly or elderly who could not reach their backsides, perfume holders and bracelet helpers for the well-to-do ladies, potion containers for those few who still brewed their own medicines, and small, slightly-dulled daggers for the ladies to open their love letters or the bills of ware from their latest shopping ventures – or for the dandies who dared not risk their manicured nails to slit open correspondence from business partners, customers, or illicit lovers.

And wands, of course.

Two score wands or fewer stood grounded in wood, quartz and amethyst bases on my table, occasionally shifting positions to allow an addition off my lathe, though I rarely turned wands in the presence of others. Two lay in proper horizontal positions on stands. One of these was of lightning-struck canarywood haft and bloodwood blade, a core of malachite. I hoped the uniqueness of the lightning-struck wood would encourage its adoption by some suitable adept, and indeed, several had stopped by and expressed an interest. The other was a wand I had turned - with some trepidation, but successfully I think - less than a fortnight earlier.

I kept an eye on the second wand as I turned and talked with people who wandered past or stopped to look or buy or make observations about the quality of my work or that of my apprentice. I was pleased with both business and critique. My work was always improving, but I appreciated the observations of others, especially those who were connoisseurs of fine writing instruments or who crafted wood themselves, though rarely did I meet another turner, and never another who had successfully crafted more than a single wand. In that, I was unique. I had made hundreds by then. Three had snapped – one the result of a broken relationship, two due to carelessness by their inattentive wielder, for whom I had consented to craft two others – one pocket-sized to be carried for daily use, and one for ritual purposes, to be stored more safely than its predecessors. They differed only in size – the adept for whom they were made required a particular combination of wood and stone for his spirit at the time of their crafting. Some few other wands had fallen into disuse, neglected by adepts too weakly connected to their own power and the source of that power to retain their skills in the face of daily demands. The remainder, though, set about doing their work in concert with the adepts who had chosen them – or whom they had called.

It was an endless fascination to me – and to the one apprentice with me that day – to witness the pairing of wand and adept. Inevitably, the wand called to the adept and was the first one chosen, the first to be touched or handled. Even if an adept insisted on picking up every wand in my inventory – I never could keep more than two dozen on hand at any time, as they left my shop so steadily – he or she left with the first, every time. But not that day.

That day, the first wand picked up by every person who stopped in my tent, whether adept or wistful, wishful non-adept, was the one I was keeping an eye on.

Strange things happen, sometimes, when a wand is turned. Two woods will not take to each other, and refuse to join. They will not bond unless the proper gemstones are included in their crafting, rejecting, sometimes forcefully, sometimes slyly, the wrong gem. A wand will explode during the crafting if the Wandcrafter does not heed its desires or warnings during the choosing of wood and stone, or during the turning. A third wood will be needed to mediate for two others to meld together comfortably, or a third wood will be rejected, two woods refusing to join until the third is removed, that they may enjoy a closer union. Stones will refuse to stay put, or conversely, refuse to be removed once they have found their niche. The crafting of a wand requires alertness, willingness to cooperate, caution. I often feel that the wands come to be, and I am but *their* tool.

The wand I was keeping an eye on had gone together without a problem. The three small stones at its core nestled into place so securely when I test-fit them that they refused to come out once placed. The haft and blade fit together just right – neither too snug and resisting nor too loose and weak a bond. The turning also went smoothly. No catches, vibrations, or missteps indicated I had chosen poorly or failed to listen. If anything, the reverse was true. Earlier than usual, I could feel the power of the wand. In truth, I had felt its power before I even began the work of choosing and crafting. It was one reason I had hesitated to turn it. I was not sure I was worthy, and I was not sure I was up to the choosing.

Then I dreamed it into life, and woke from that dream sure of the choosing, and certain it was time. And so it was. My apprentice busied herself crafting perfume holders and pens, working at a nearby lathe to get my input as she worked, aware that I was turning *that* wand. She would never make a Wandcrafter herself, but her other turnings were competent. Beyond competent, actually. She was becoming quite accomplished, but still wanted the reassurance of working near a master at times. Even she, non-adept though she was, knew that the one piece of wood was destined for wand rather than pen, knew to bring it to me rather than attempt turning it herself.

Oddly, I was not self-conscious while turning the wand, for all that the apprentice occasionally came to look over my shoulder as I worked. As I said, I rarely turned a wand in the presence of others, even apprentices (of which I had three). But this was the right time for this wand, and it did not matter who else was around – it needed and wanted to be turned, and as I said, at times I am simply *their* tool, not the other way around.

The shop door opened. I did not notice for a moment, absorbed in my work. Then I looked up and asked my apprentice to shut the door after she used it, to keep the dust from the living area. She protested that she had been standing at the lathe, not the door, but went to close it nonetheless. A few minutes later, it opened again. I assumed it was one of the other

apprentices, but no one answered my call, and the apprentice at the other lathe reminded me that one was out running errands and the other off on a free day. I shut the door myself this time, checking the latch and making sure it closed securely. It opened again. And yet a fourth time, as I worked. My apprentice and I looked at each other, something unspoken passing between us. The wand fairly crackled with energy as it formed under tool and hand.

In the end, it was a handsome wand. No more handsome than others I have made, to tell the truth, but a fine wand. The apprentice left before it was finished, glancing over my shoulder interestedly, folding her apron, putting away her tools, and leaving without another word. I finished the turning, oiled it thrice as usual, and took it off the lathe to finish the blade tip and the blunt end of the haft. When it was done, I scarcely knew what to do with it. I felt I dare not leave it alone, though I did not fear it. I was restless – uneasy or excited or charged with the wand's energy. It was present more strongly than were other wands upon their completion... as if it were already potent... potent before it was turned, simply brought further into being by the pairing of wood and stone, and the turning.

A second apprentice, my younger daughter, returned later that evening, as did her older sister and their father. As always, the younger daughter gave the wand her blessing, though this one scarcely needed it. "Nice," she said. "I like it." Her usual blessing. My other daughter, a fair adept but not an apprentice, having other gifts, took it as well and approved, commenting, "It's warm." I had not said anything about that, thinking perhaps it was me, but she was right. The haft was warm, significantly warmer than the blade, more responsive to the heat of heart and hand than any other wand I could recall, even my own.

I kept the wand near me as I made my evening ritual. As I meditated, there came a sound of clashing metal, so loud I thought it was in the room. My eyes flew open and the girls and their father called up to me, to see if I was all right.

"So it was not just me," I thought.

I glanced at the wand – not uneasy, just aware of its energy. Then I helped the family search for the source of the sound of the clashing metal. Perhaps my apprentice or I had forgotten to put away some tools and they had fallen off bench or lathe. No. Perhaps something outside had crashed around the house. No. Perhaps something somewhere else in the house had fallen? Nothing was out of place. Nothing had fallen. There was no explanation. It occurred to me it had sounded like the clash of arms, but I dismissed the thought, or at least tried to do so.

The remainder of the night was peaceful. I slept well with no unusual dreams or signs. The following morning, however, as I bathed, the door of my bathing room open to cool the air, there was again a sound from my room, this time the clear ringing of small bells. Again, I searched but found no explanation. After I dressed, I spoke aloud to the wand, to its energy. "You are welcome here. Come join us, if you wish." There were no more incidents after that, but I felt light of spirit, and my work was unusually smooth.

This was the wand I watched throughout that day, less than two weeks later. Each time a visitor to my tent picked it up, I told its story. Not the story of its turning – that would have scared off some adepts and seriously frightened the non-adept, who I hoped would at least purchase a measuring scoop for their daily dose of stimulant drink. Instead, I spoke of what I knew of the provenance of the haft, unique as it was. I doubted I would turn another like it, however long my career.

Each time someone picked it up, the echo of small bells rang in my mind, and it seemed to me that they held it differently, reverently, caressingly, before replacing it on its stand and looking elsewhere for a wand that would be theirs, if they were adept, or reluctantly moving on to more mundane purchases if they were not. It seemed to me that the wand crackled with energy in response to their touch, adept or not, in all but a few cases, in response to which it was silent and still.

Busy with customers, turning, and keeping an eye on my apprentice, as excellent a salesperson as she was a turner but occasionally needing correcting or advice, I only slowly became aware of a man standing in front of the wands. Or the wand – for he was only looking at the one. He was slight in build and stature and nearly non-descript in his quiet, calm presence. Nearly, I say, because there was something about him that stilled me as I became aware of him. I had not seen him approach. Unlike virtually every other visitor to my tent that day, he simply stood, looking at the wand. Then he put out a hand, and I was sure he would pick it up, but he did not. Instead, he held his hand over the wand, just at the join between haft and center band, then backed down the haft to the point at which, I knew, lay the embedded stones, and held there. Reluctantly then, it seemed to me, he withdrew his hand.

He looked up, directly into my eyes, more aware that I had been watching him than I had been that he stood there, and held my gaze. His eyes were a clear grey, and compelling, though quiet and still. He nodded, once – acknowledgment, recognition and approval. I nodded back - acknowledgment, recognition and thanks. And something more that it took me a moment to recognize. By the time I had, he had turned and walked on, further down the line of tents.

I thought a name. But no. How could that be? I smiled at my whimsy, then watched him move further off, still thinking I recognized something about him – his bearing, perhaps, I thought. Almost, I called after him, sure he would turn, if I did.

“It can't be him. How could it be? Don't be stupid!” I admonished myself. Then laughing at my foolishness, I turned back to my customers and apprentice. But the man hovered in my awareness.

I went back to my lathe as soon as the press of customers allowed. During fair season, my inventory shrinks and time in the shop is scarce. Turning when the crowds are thin avoids wasted time that could otherwise be productive. I had a perfume holder on the lathe, as they were selling well this season.

I became aware of him before I saw him. He stood back some feet, just out of my peripheral vision, but I felt him there, so I addressed him without looking up.

"I'm turning a lady's perfume holder, that she might carry her favorite scent without risking a spill in her purse."

"Yes. So I see," he said. And nothing more, waiting, I thought, for what would come next.

"But let me tell you about that wand you were looking at earlier," I went on, as casually as I could, as if he had said nothing, as if my heart were not begging the question. I stilled the lathe and reached one arm to lift the wand from its stand, still not raising my eyes to him.

"The wood from which the haft was turned is Irish bog oak," I told him, running my hand down the haft as I spoke, showing it to him as if he were any other customer. "The center band is cocobolo, and the blade is bloodwood." I pointed at each in turn. "They're joined with mortise and tenon. Inside the haft, at the bottom of the mortise, are three small bits of gemstone. They're..."

"They had better be amethyst," he broke in.

I looked up then, into his eyes. His face wore a small, knowing smile. "You know they are," I said.

"Go on," he invited. It was a command. Quiet, politely phrased, but a command nonetheless, or so I imagined. Then again, if one has true power, one need not shout.

"The wood of the haft was radiocarbon dated to have grown between 461 and 543," I went on. "In those days, Ireland and all of Great Britain were thickly forested and covered with heather."

He nodded, confirming what I said more than indicating attention.

"As the heather and smaller plants died, they collected moisture, which caused the bottoms of trees to decay sooner than they would have otherwise. The trees fell into the peat below and sank. The minerals in the peat interacted with the tannin in the oak, turning it black, though if you look closely, you can still see the golden glow in this piece."

He nodded again, keeping his eyes on me rather than the wand.

"The peat is airless, and the remains of whatever fell into them were often preserved. Over centuries and millennia, some say 8000 years or more, the peat bog dried, entombing what lay within."

I paused and looked up. He knew this already. But he said nothing, motioning to me to continue. "St. Patrick came to Ireland during the years of this oak tree's life," I said. "The last of the Roman emperors died, Rome was sacked, and the Roman Empire fell. Rome had ruled nearly all of Europe, including Britain and Ireland. When Rome fell, the Romans were driven out of Britain. In the vacuum, the Saxons invaded, temporarily overrunning the native Britons. But the Britons fought back. One of those who led the fight to drive the Saxons from the Britons' shores was a young man..."

I paused again, and looked him in the eyes. "His name was Arthur – and he later became king of all Britain." I fell silent and waited, nearly challenging him with my gaze.

He smiled, but said nothing. I spoke more about the history of Britain and Ireland, of events there during the lifetime of the ancient tree that so recently had yielded the wood that became the haft of the wand I held as I talked. He gently corrected my story at times, and caught my reversal of Britons and Saxons at one part. He laughed when I explained that I often reversed things and could not tell my right from my left, despite many a suitor's efforts to teach me before I married. I said there was controversy about whether Arthur ever existed, but if he did, the best evidence suggested that the king of legend was Arthur Pendragon. He looked surprised at that, but more, I think, that there was any evidence at all, rather than at the conclusion.

Again half challengingly, I said, "If there was a Merlin, I like to think that perhaps he might have stood under this very tree."

He smiled at that, and said, "I'm sure there was a Merlin – and that there is evidence enough, for those willing to consider it." He hesitated himself a moment, then said, "You haven't asked my name."

"What is it?" I asked. But I already knew the answer.

"I'm Arthur."

He smiled then, and laughed a low laugh as I searched for something to say. Then, leaning closer, as if to tell a secret, he added, "And I'm Italian. And Welsh, German and French. Just so you know." He winked, his eyes twinkling in amusement.

We talked some more. It was comfortable – or he was comfortable. He spoke of the value of craftsmanship, of the need for passion and respect for how a thing comes to be, respect for the history of a thing and the originators of ideas. He spoke of his own passion, and nodded his approval when I said that, though I love turning wood regardless of the object, my passion is for the wands. We spoke of this and that related thing. Every other person, sound, and distraction faded as we spoke, until just we two stood there, out of time and space. I do not recall all of what he said, or how I answered.

At the end – and I do not know how or why there came an end– he nodded at the wand as I placed it back on its stand. “There was a Merlin,” he said. “And... I think you will find that he had a staff – from this same tree.” Then he added, “Your craftsmanship is excellent. Thank you for sharing it with me, and for the talk of old times.”

He turned to go. “It was nice meeting you – Arthur,” I dared. Almost, I named him “Sire.”

He turned back toward me. “I don’t even know your name, in this time,” he called over the short distance.

“It’s Carol,” I said.

“It was a pleasure talking with you, Lady Carol,” he said, with a slight bow and a wry smile. Then, lifting a hand in farewell, he turned and disappeared into the crowd. I stared after him, unmoving but for a slow smile spreading across my face, as a wild joy filled my heart.

I tell you this that you should know: Arthur lives.

I swear by the life of The One Tree that this is true.

2

I felt it in the wind, smelled it in the air, dreamed it.

But more than that, I felt it as I worked, turning wands, quill pens and other things at my lathe, readying my wares for the upcoming season of fairs.

I was slow to notice the change, for all that I had experienced it before. The light shifted. I thought it but a trick of the oncoming autumn, a play of light and shadow, a factor of the afternoon sun. The air was crisper, my tools sharper, the work smoother, for all that the wands were no more special or unique than any other I had turned before – save one.

That one had come off my lathe the season before, and lay with its brethren up in my living quarters. As always, some wands had been added to the collection awaiting adoption, while others had gone off with the adepts who had chosen them or whom they had chosen – their true mates. Turned from ancient wood from a distant land, paired with a younger wood from a newer world, and given a heart of clear amethyst, stone of spiritual awakening and deep intuitive wisdom, this one wand waited, as did I. Its adept, its true mate, had been heralded the season before by one who had been his lord – who was still his lord and sire, for all I knew.

I would have given it to him – the lord. He had appeared out of nowhere, quietly standing at my lathe as I turned, watching me... watching the wand. He held his hand out over

the wand, hovering over the spot where the amethyst stone, hidden within, had beat its rhythm, proof that the wand lived. He listened as I related the wand's provenance, correcting my tale in parts. He had nearly promised, without saying so...

Arthur.

I would have given him the wand. Had he circled the fair a third time, returned to my booth, I would have given it to him.

"You're more likely to see him than I," I would have said. "You keep it for him – and give him greeting for me."

But I had known, when he turned away that second time, that he would not return. Not that day. Not yet. But it was enough to know that he had left Avalon, and that he walked the world once more.

I packed the wand away, sure now that its true owner, the adept for whom it had come into being, would find me.

In hope, I laid it out at every fair that season, but he did not show himself. Nor did Arthur appear again, though I could hardly expect him to. He had other business to attend to, and I was sure, whether because Arthur sent him word or because the wand itself called him, he would make his way to me over time. But not that season.

Most who approached my booth at a fair were drawn to that one wand, feeling – whether with some awareness or not – its pull, its power. Whether they gazed upon it or lifted it from its stand to hold it for a moment before returning it to its place, none had the temerity to claim it.

But one. One came who attempted to claim the wand. Red haired, tall in stature and imposing in build, bejeweled, she had an intensity about her that spoke of an assumption of authority. She seemed pleasant enough, genuinely interested in the wands, and drawn, as all had been, to the one. She asked about it, lingered over it. I kept an eye on her – and it – as she held it, vaguely uneasy for no reason I could name. I told her of the wand's making, strange a story as it was. She kept her face pleasant, though her gaze sharpened, her interest quickened. No reluctance marked her bearing as she held onto the wand, but rather an eagerness that she tried, but failed, to hide, and she clutched the wand rather more tightly than I cared for before deliberately loosening her hold. I was tempted to snatch it back from her, but held still. Who am I to alter another's path, even – perhaps especially – a wand's?

She asked to sit, making an excuse of the heat of the day and the cane looped over her arm with a braided bit of some poor creature's hide, and insinuated herself into my private space at the back of the booth, still clutching the wand. My apprentice was not with me that one day, having taken ill with some seasonal affliction. I had a moment's thought for my money bag,

meager as the contents were, but the wand was more valuable, though not in the way you might think.

“Tell me more,” she demanded, and foolishly, I looked her in the eye. They say that is dangerous, and perhaps I should have known better, but I was not expecting to be Read, though you might think my foreboding should have been warning enough.

I am ashamed to say that in the end, she had nearly the whole tale from me. How the wand came into being, how Arthur had appeared, how we spoke, and where and when. I managed, in the end, to withhold that he had assured me that Merlin, too, had lived... that he had borne a staff of this self-same wood, from the very tree from which the wand was born. Had I revealed that, I would be surprised if I had escaped with my life, let alone the wand – though I suspect the wand is the more valuable of the two.

“I would buy this wand from you,” she said. “What price are you asking?” I named an exorbitant figure, hoping to dissuade her, but she was not to be turned away so easily.

“I will pay that,” she said carelessly, reaching for her own money bag.

I smiled apologetically. “I’m afraid it is not actually for sale,” I said.

She changed the subject. “What do you think of my walking stick?” she asked, thrusting the cane into my hands.

I took it reluctantly, loathe, for some reason, to touch it. The wood was conflicted, a trapped and bound thing. I would have released it if I could, but one must choose ones battles, and I never joust with customers – even one to whom I was determined to sell nothing.

I went to return it to her, but she would not take it. “I will be bound as well,” I thought, “if I hold it any longer,” and leaned it against her chair – for she sat as if she owned the space and had called me to attend her. She scowled, then schooled her expression.

“I can pay twice your price,” she insisted. “Surely you need the money.” She looked me up and down, and glanced around my poor booth pointedly.

“That wand is awaiting its true owner, and he or she can have it for the asking. But no one else may own it.”

“Isn’t it yours?” she asked. “Surely *you* own it – I feel you must be its master,” she added, thinking to flatter.

“No, my lady. It but passes through me. It waits upon its true mate.”

“Am I that mate?” she demanded in a harsh whisper, making me look at her once more.

I have been taught by mages. I can shield if need be... I can dissimilate, as well. I looked back at her. "I do not feel it is yours," I said gently, as if reluctant – but it took all my skill and knowledge to force the words out so calmly, so compelling was her gaze.

"Could I *be* that mate?" she demanded again, more powerfully.

"I am sure not, my lady," I said again, keeping a reluctant tone. "But perhaps you are its messenger. If you find the one for whom it is meant, perhaps you can send him or her to me."

Her eyes narrowed in irritation. I had miscalculated: she would not be anyone's messenger, least of all the messenger of a being she considered but a thing and a tool. She tried yet again. "Let me take it to him – or her," she suggested.

I pretended to consider. "I do not know exactly where he or she is... or who he or she might be," I said slowly.

"But I am bound for the wand's homeland, by your telling. Surely its true owner is there, awaiting it. How do you know I am not meant to carry it to him? Let me take it to him. It can pass through my hands as easily as yours."

I considered again, gazing at her, still shielded. "I feel it is not yet time, my lady," I said, at last. "Besides, if its owner came looking for it, what would I say? That their paths crossed, the wand on its way to the east as its mate wended his or her way to the west to find it?"

"I will trade you my staff for the wand," she said. "Take it!"

"Thank you, my lady," I said, still respectfully and with a tone of reluctance in my voice – for there are more ways to die than by magic, and my booth was not warded. "... but I am bound to hold the wand until its true owner comes to fetch it."

It was the seventh request, and with that and my refusal, she had lost the bargain. With some effort, she relinquished the wand, thrusting it at me. I felt its relief as it left her hands, mirrored by my own which I successfully hid, I believe. She stood, towering over me more than before, it seemed, grimacing a smile of concession. I noted her eyeteeth were unusually pointed, and stifled a shiver.

She murmured polite things about the rest of my wares, trailing her fingers along the display as she went, deliberately not looking at the wand in my hand. I feared some trick or spell or curse – upon myself, my wares, or the wand itself, but this at least I can say – she abided by the code, albeit reluctantly. Search as I might, I found no trace of evil. The wand warmed to my touch, resonating cleanly and clearly, and sang with joyful energy as I placed it back on its holder. The woman strolled away, looking back once, her eyes filled with avarice and reluctant defeat.

"Morgana," I thought.

That was the last fair of the season. The snows and the cold put an end to travel for seller and buyer alike. I packed my unsold wares and returned home to my children, their father, and the peace of my workshop. The wand I kept with its brethren, and as I said, those changed from time to time, as adepts sought me out for a first, replacement, or additional wand – though I myself never felt the need for but one.

Though I felt no threat, I kept the wand with the others, for protection. Most days, I did not think of it, occupied with my work and the needs of my children, my clients, and my apprentices, as well as my duties to the community, which occasionally called upon me to explain some subtlety of wand lore. Once a week, perhaps, I felt compelled to check on it, hold it, assure myself it was safe and unsullied by any threat. Morgana was always in the back of my mind. But all was well.

We craftsmen and women are thrifty people, reluctant to part with the smallest bit of wood lest it be useful. I do not know if you have witnessed a craftsperson working at a lathe. When a piece is finished, there is a nub of wood remnant at each end of the turning, the bits that hold the wood between two sharp points as it spins. These two bits are cut off or knocked off by a sharp rap of a tool handle. They sometimes go on to become part of other turnings, if they are not too small to be of such use.

I kept the nubs at the end of the wand I speak of – one the ancient bit of bog oak from Britain, protector and liberator, bearing the wisdom of the ages, the other bloodwood from the new world, carrying a connection with all the elements, purifying and integrating all energies. Neither would be put into another wand... to do so would put this wand's adept at risk, create too strong a bond. But I could not bring myself to burn the bits.

I carried them in my pocket for a long while. They gave me comfort and protection, I felt. A foolish place to keep items of such value, though perhaps no one – or few – would recognize their worth.

I lost one, of course. I intended to make it into an amulet to wear under my shirt as I worked. I wished to have it near me, to ease the loss I knew I would feel when the adept finally came to claim his wand. One day, it was gone. I searched everywhere – in my clothing and the wash, the workshop and the dustbin, the living and sleeping quarters – and over again, day after day. But it was simply gone. Swept up with general shop debris, I supposed, and I eventually came to grips with my foolishness and my loss. It was the ancient oak I lost – the stronger of the two, the piece that called more powerfully to its mage.

The other bit, I resolved not to lose, though I also did not move to make it an amulet or charm or any other thing. Instead, I stored it with care, with a few other valued objects, checking occasionally to see that it was there. I have it still.

Less than a seven night ago, as I worked in my shop, my apprentices gone off for the day to further their schooling in other ways, my shop door opened of its own accord, as it had before. I am a skeptic, for all that there are mysteries in the universe that we do not understand. I laughed it off and returned to my work. Yet again, the light shifted, the very air changed, and I worked under some charm. I confess I did not analyze it – or even make much of it. I let it be, accepting that what would be would be, cooperating as best I could with those forces I do not understand, though not for want of trying.

Nothing of note took place until two days ago. I rose from a deep sleep and dreams filled with portents and omens and signs that I do not recall, but for their feel. I made my morning ablutions and rituals in the small bathing room off my sleeping quarters, dressed for the day, and returned to my cot to retrieve my wand, laying on my bedside table... and stopped, astonished and bewildered.

There, on my cot, in the very spot I lay not a quarter hour earlier, lay the remnant of the wand, the bit I had lost months before. I picked it up. It was warm, and my hand tingled as I held it.

It lives again in my pocket. See – I have it here. It is no coincidence, no mere accident of timing that it should return now, with the fair season upon us in less than a fortnight. It was left as a message. I have come, as you bade me after my first tale, that you should know.

He draws near. Merlin comes.

I swear by the life of The One Tree that this is true.

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3

The weather was stormy, out of season, or so it seemed. Winds blew in gales around our small house. Hail pounded the windows, drummed on the roof, and shredded trees and bushes, still bare in the late winter.

Intent on my work, I barely registered the fury – not fully. A crack sounded outside the window under which I turned, at my lathe despite the storm, out of financial necessity as well as restless need. I put it down to lightning, and continued my work without pause.

“There’s a branch down.”

My daughter broke into my concentration. My youngest, most talented apprentice, most attuned to my work, she would not have done so if the situation had not required my immediate attention. Her father was not yet home from his day’s labor, so I went to look, peering out the

door through the storm in response to her direction. A sizeable branch had fallen off one of the trees that overhung our roof. I glanced at her.

“Not a big one,” I commented.

She nodded. “The others were worse.”

I thought to step outside to assess the threat, but allowed the rain and hail to dissuade me. I looked out the door again. The branch was, as far as I could see, cleanly broken off, leaning against the house, nearly clear of it.

“It’ll keep until your father comes home,” I decided. “Let him know, would you?”

She nodded, serene as always, trusting my decision. I glanced at the storm again, able to see only a few feet through the rain and hail, nodded to her, and returned to my work, trusting her to keep watch.

Not long after - or so it seemed to me, though I never could sense the passage of time as I worked - I straightened up from my lathe, stretched, and set aside my tools for the night. I heard the girls and their father, and realized, thinking back on it, that he had been home for a while. It was later than I thought - too late and too dark to examine the grounds to search for other threats, despite the storm's waning fury.

“Come look at this,” the girls' father said the next morning.

“Did you move that branch?”

“Yes, but that's not the problem.”

I followed him out the door. He led me to the corner of the house, where a tree grew at an angle, reaching past and through others in search of the light. It leaned more steeply, I noted, and was careful to walk close to the house, away from it, as I followed him to its base.

The tree had split, cleanly cut off from the anchoring root that had kept it from threatening the house despite the angle at which it grew.

“I heard it split,” I said, examining the root closely. “I thought it was a clap of thunder.” Standing at the root, I sighted along the trunk. “It’ll have to come down,” I said reluctantly. It bothered me to do so. I was loathe to take a life if it was not necessary, particularly that of a tree - any tree - connected as they are with the heart blood of the world and with the One Tree. But the tree would come down in the next storm, might not even make it that long if spring arrived early, with the increased flow of sap, the life-giving weight of leaves, the greater vulnerability to the wind that they would bring.

He nodded. “I’ll see to it,” he said.

A neighbor and the local tree experts concurred that the tree required immediate removal, and joined us two days later. They dared not climb the trunk to trim the branches. The weight of a single man would have brought the tree crashing down, taking out a corner of my workshop and backlashing trunk through the window over my lathe.

That, of course, was the intent of the storm, a fact I tucked away in a corner of my awareness to focus on the task at hand. The morning had dawned clear, but as the men arrived, one by one, and considered the task, a storm arose again – first a mist, then a spatter of drops, then rain, then a full storm. Determinedly, the men carried on, aware they were working to save our home and that of the neighbor whose property abutted our own, homes a mere twenty spans apart. A twist of wind could as easily bring the tree down upon either, though there was no doubt that ours was the one threatened.

The men knew what they were protecting, at least in general, and they knew their work. They clambered up the roof to work back from the tops of branches to the trunk, and then, the major threat taken care of – that the wind would snatch the branches and snap the trunk, bringing the whole down on men and house alike – they relaxed and cheerfully and swiftly managed the rest, carting off the wood to use to heat their homes, cushion the feet of livestock, or return nutrients to the soil in vegetable gardens, leaving only a low stump, still severed from the anchoring root, mute testimony to the sad loss. I'd thought, at first, to hold back a part of the wood, to turn it, still wet, into bowls, or dry bits over a year for wands or soup ladles, to repay the workers for their care. But some self-preservation kept me from following that thought. I let it go.

"You'll lose that one next," one of the men commented, nodding toward a second tree alongside the house, again outside the window that opened onto my small workshop. I grimaced and nodded my understanding of the inevitability.

The men went off, back to their other tasks, and my husband patted my shoulder and went back to the house. I was fortunate – in more ways than one. I thought gratefully that not one of the men questioned my work. They all knew my profession, of course. Each had been recipient of my wares, purchasing them for themselves or for gifts, or receiving them in exchange for some small service. Even the adepts among them did not question me, though they were curious enough about the only wandcrafter most of them had known. The non-adepts, fortunately, were deaf to the elemental energies within and around our home, though they commented on the unusual weather, wondering if the world had changed.

It had. Of that I was certain.

Some need had called through the soul of the world, releasing those who rested, recovered, renewed themselves, out of time and place. Why that should concern itself with me, I did not know, save for the oddity of my particular... occupation. Few, if any, mages crafted or found more than a single wand or two in their lifetimes, for their own use, usually, or – rarely –

for a son or daughter. But I was driven, compelled, to do this, and the call to do so filled me, stomach, shoulders, fingers, mind overcome by some sense of urgency, some need, as if I *must* do this, before it was too late.

Good and evil. These were the... things, if they be things... that raced each other, chased each other out of the rift in time and space when the world changed – or perhaps they created the change. In any case, not only Arthur had been called into the world. Morgana too had been set loose. And both had found their way to me – Arthur first, for good or ill, and Morgana soon thereafter.

It may have been the wand that called them – I do not know. No doubt it was unique, its haft born of the same tree – for Arthur had told me this – that had once yielded Merlin's staff, back before Arthur was mortally wounded, back before he found ease in Avalon. Morgana found me later that year, and if Arthur's appearance had filled me with a mad joy and gladness, Morgana's had filled me with foreboding and increased my sense of urgency. But Merlin did not come, for all that I had expected him... for all that Arthur's and Morgana's visit had forewarned of his coming.

Still, I kept watch, and my younger daughter with me, for I had entrusted her and her older sister – an adept, but no wandcrafter – with the tale, as well as my former apprentice, now a journeyman, who brought me the wood and who was there at the start of the wand's turning.

Late winter blended into spring, spring into early summer. Trees, grass and bush grew green around us. The steady demand for wands continued, along with requests for consultations, here and there, about wood or stone or herb, for such was my occupation that it acquainted me with all three. Without my conscious awareness or intent, the community of mages drew me further into discussions and debate – about training, about the changes we sensed in earth, air, fire and water, about our responsibilities beyond our own kith and kin, about the nature of the forces we manipulated, and how and why.

None knew about Arthur and Morgana. I debated with myself whether to tell them, but what would I say? That Arthur had shared stories? That Morgana had wished to buy a wand?

That I waited for Merlin?

I had told no one – no one but you – about the wand I was sure had come into being for him, had called Arthur and Morgana to me. Despite the fact that I knew and liked the mages I met during these debates, I did not reveal the secret, though I held it lightly, to be sure. I feared Morgana's agents, I think – some black dog or changeling or suborned mage threatened into doing her will or only too willing, drawn to her power or the power they hoped to claim for themselves.

The weather continued to be unsettled, shifting suddenly, violently, from unseasonably cold to unseasonably hot, storms boiling out of a grey-green sky that, moments before, had been clear and blue. But what could I do, if the elements warred with themselves?

I continued to turn, and our home continued to be threatened. We fought off incursions of insects and water, repaired wind-torn shingles, sash and siding, kept watchful eye on the trees around us. To their credit, neither daughters nor their father demanded I cease turning. In fact, as the threats grew, their good cheer and willing assistance also increased, so that I worked in gratitude.

The pieces I had saved of the one wand stayed on my nightstand by night and in my pocket by day. My collection of wands alternatively grew and shrank, purchases ebbing and flowing like the tides, like breathing, like fire dying down only to flare up again in living rhythm.

The winds continued to lash the house, and the trees and bushes around it. One morning, branches lay littered around our door, piled atop our stoop and transportation – or I should say, my transportation, for the wagons used by the girls and their father lay untouched. Mine, on the other hand, was covered in twigs and small branches, in green neatly snapped off some nearby tree.

“Cut,” the girls’ father commented as he examined them, noting the neat ends. Both of us looked up into the branches of the nearest tree, but it was whole and unharmed, at least to my eye.

Another morning dawned bright and blue, but by mid-day, the sky was dark, and at nightfall, the storm raged again, as vicious as I had ever seen, affecting not just our small acreage but also those of the neighbors, the nearby town. It ended before midnight, but left trees uprooted, branches across the lanes, across homes and sheds and workshops, yet without harming a living soul, drawing neighbors out to clear the paths and homesteads, as cheerful as ever.

The community of mages consulted me more frequently yet, bringing me into discussions I felt unqualified to attend, though they did not see it that way. I spoke little, but when I did offer an observation or opinion, my contributions were warmly welcomed. It became difficult to find time for turning, though the need – both mine and that of the community – did not abate, and I had to deny some requests to arm mages too young to be entrusted with a wand just yet.

Mages come into their power between their sixth and twelfth year. It is discernable earlier, but the mage must become aware of it, and claim it, or the spark withers and dies. A six year old mage rarely has the self-control to master the elemental forces that flow through his or her veins, regardless of the proud parents’ insistence on the giftedness and maturity of the child. Eleven is the usual age at which self-control develops, or can be effectively encouraged, and it is

then that most mages acquire a wand – often by the simple expedient of happening upon some willing bit of tree, a twig that places itself in its mate's path, the wand choosing the mage.

Winter turned, as I say, to summer, weather changing unpredictably from beauty to threat and back again, a war of good and evil played out through the elements.

I chanced upon a healer, an unassuming mage of small magic himself, yet it *was* there, and better yet, he was a man of good heart. His gift was to see what needed healing, and he dismissed the minor aches of hands and back, swiftly seeing the ache of feet that marked a displacement in my bones from years of tending my lathe – aided, no doubt, by a fall I had taken some years before, too caught up in my thoughts to note where I placed a step. He shook his head and tut-tutted over one foot, then the other, prescribing stretches and wraps, heat and cold in turn at the start and end of the work day, and sternly lectured me about long hours of unrelieved standing.

“It's a wonder you are walking at all,” he admonished, as his fingers stretched and massaged tendons and ligaments, and I half wondered how I had ended up with my feet in his hands as we spoke.

He came again later that week to tend my feet, and again the following week. He refused payment, only speaking of magic and herbs and his work and mine. The third week, he spoke of his son.

“He's different,” he said. “His mind is in the clouds all the time. He gets teased by the other boys, but not too badly.” I asked for more, but the healer seemed unable to put his... not unease, but concern for his boy... into words. “You'll see,” he said. “You'll meet him.” I accepted that as given, though what he hoped I could tell him, or do for the boy, I did not know.

“He needs a wand,” the healer told me, some visits on. I asked the boy's age. “Eleven. About to be eleven.”

“Bring him to see me,” I said, “or I can come to you, if you wish.”

“He comes with me when I tend others sometimes,” he said, so I agreed to meet him at the space he was given to work in, where most of his clientele found him.

Two boys played behind a low wall as I pushed open the door. Two people, a woman and a man, stood talking to another healer. No one paid me any heed as I entered. The healer I knew was busy in another room, tending to a man lying prone on a treatment table.

There was no doubt which boy was the healer's son – not by resemblance, for they looked much alike as playmates of the same age sometimes do – but by the energy surrounding him, some ineffable quality he did not need even to turn his head for me to see.

I slipped behind the wall, my quiver of wands across my back, and bent to his ear. "Come with me," I murmured. Neither he nor his playmate protested. He simply looked at me, then rose and followed as I led him to an empty consulting room and fetched a chair to me with another murmured word.

I sat him across from me at the low, padded treatment table, and considered him a moment. He was thin, slight yet tall, with black curls that shaded his clear, calm eyes as he regarded me back.

"I hear you are in need of a wand," I said, watching him. He said nothing, though I could feel a gathering of energy about him, reflecting his sharpened interest. I wondered where he had learned this, the gathering of that diffuse, pulsating, elemental ether that surrounded the true mage, since he was not yet old enough to be mentored, and his father was a middling mage at best.

I watched him a moment more, alert for the indefinable something that would say to me, "Not yet," indicating he was still too young, too undisciplined, not yet trustworthy. He did not waver in his calm, preternaturally still, still gathering the elements in a silent call. I wondered if he knew what he was doing.

I set my quiver of wands on the table between us, and withdrew them, wrapped in black cotton felting, and unrolled it in front of him, haft in my direction, blade in his, out of habitual caution. He continued to look at me rather than the wands, and I felt, rather than heard, him invoke a ritual, though where he had learned that I continued to wonder. He closed his eyes a moment, and I took advantage of that to cast a swift ward around us. This choice could not be interrupted. The danger was too great – for him as well as for me, and those who might accidentally wander into the gathering energy.

When he opened his eyes again, it was as if he had pulled all the elements to his command, contained within him. This I saw, though only a small boy sat before me. "Wizard," I thought.

"Wizard," I said. "Choose your wand."

Seventeen wands lay before him. I expected him to reach for one, or to pick up several to test them in his hand, but he sat still, barely acknowledging the wands' existence. "Tell me of the woods," he said, "and of the stones." I had not mentioned the stones.

I named them off for him.

"But tell me of their energies, of what elements they correspond with," he said when I had finished. So I named them again, lightly touching each wood, pausing over the energy of the gemstones within each as I spoke of their uniqueness.

Before I'd finished my recitation, never valuing one wand over the other or praising one more than the ones around it, he had chosen. Or it had chosen him. Even before I said its name, it had called to him.

He looked to me for permission and I nodded my assent. Still he did not grab for the wand, but ran his hand over the lot. Energy flowed from them to him in streams that were nearly visible in the half-lit room. The wands nearly leapt for him, eagerly, longingly. He lingered over them as if reluctant to give hurt or to disappoint. But the one wand waited – more patient than the others: it had already made its choice, had already been chosen.

At last, having given thanks and farewell to all the unchosen, he took it in his hand, gently, tenderly, running it lightly between his fingers, holding it in his open palms. I could see the fit, feel it in the pulsing of the air, beating against my eardrums despite the lack of sound, yet no great surge of energy accompanied the pairing, such was his control – more a sense of inevitability, two friends finding each other after a long absence.

To my surprise, he put it down, laid it along the bottom of the roll of felt, *placed* it there with an unspoken word. He looked up at me, then – or at least, he turned his face toward me, for his eyes were elsewhere.

“It calls to me,” he said. I nodded. “I feel the energy move.” He watched me, then, as if wondering whether I would deny it – and him. “I feel the call of wood and stone...” His eyes grew unfocused. “I hear the word on the wind.”

It was well I had warded our space. A wind picked up around us as he spoke, scattering cloths and papers in his father's workroom, but he was unaware of this and I did not interrupt him.

Still unfocused, he reached for the wand again, and his eyes closed as it leapt to his hand and some other Sight opened.

“It suits me,” he murmured in words nearly too low to catch. “It fits. Tell me again of the wood and the stone,” he commanded, though gently, recalling Arthur to my mind in his manner.

And this time, I spoke of the provenance of the haft, of the pairing of old and new wood, of the stone and the wand's making. I did not tell him of Morgana – or Arthur, for that matter. He was too young, I thought then, for that burden.

He nodded as I spoke, and continued to caress the wood, pausing over the stone, and I felt it nearly burn its way into his hand. The wand moved, alive in his hand as he confirmed the fit, bonded with it more completely, more deeply, than I could credit in one so young.

A moment longer he held it, after I finished the tale, then lay the wand in front of him deliberately, setting it aside as if to assure himself that he could, as if to assure he could still find it if it should leave him again, or he it.

He spoke then, and the man showed clearly, overlaying the boy as if I had the Second Sight, though I do not have that gift. He spoke of other bits of wood, other would-be wands, that had called to him, how their energy moved within them, how he felt compelled to give them his energy, how they fit in his hand. It was a quest he spoke of, his longing for the one wand that drove him, buffeted his spirit like the gale he had called forth, unknowing, as we sat, expression of the torment he had felt in his quest. He ached to pick up the wand again – I could feel it as if it were my own longing, my own long-felt pain. Yet he denied himself that surcease of pain, as if to pick it up would change things irrevocably and he was not – yet – ready.

“How do I learn?” he asked.

I looked at him. The boy before me already knew more of wood and stone, earth, air, water and fire than I ever would. I had nothing to give him. Yet his eyes pleaded with me, and I knew, despite the echo of the mage he had been and would be again, that at that moment, he was just a boy – that he felt alone, half-elated, half frightened.

Before I could begin to form an answer, he spoke again, the words pulled out of the depths of him almost against his will. He had never spoken of it, I realized, of the power that took him, the magic coursing through his veins that pulsed and burned him with every beat of his heart.

“The others think I’m mad,” he said, “the things I can do... the way the world speaks to me. But I do feel it. I do. Only... where do I learn? How do I know?”

“You are not mad,” I said, as gently as I could. “You are already on your way. You are already learning. You already know. And as for the rest, your wand will teach you, though I can give you some books to help you on your way, if you like – herbology, and the movement of stars, and what mages know of energy.” He nodded, and I felt he was relieved, a bit.

He picked up the wand again, surrendering to his need and to its call. He stroked it, clung to it. It was already claiming him, and he could no more deny it than deny himself, and fire, water, wind and earth chased each other down its length and through him, burning and cooling, elating and grounding. I sat as they settled within him, as he found a point of balance on which to hang his sanity and his sense of self.

It was the man, the mage, who looked out at me when he opened his eyes again, as if he had accepted some truth, some irrefutable reality, and had come to terms with it in those few moments.

He murmured a word of dismissal, and the ward I had set around us fell, though it should have done so only at my word. I bowed to him, acknowledging him the master, and a corner of his mouth twitched in amusement, though both of us knew, I think, who was the elder mage.

We concluded our business in the usual way, though I felt my instructions for the wand's dedication and daily care, and the usual warnings, were superfluous. He already held the wand as if it was part of him, had been for years – which, of course, it had.

I refused payment. The wand was not mine, had never been. Besides, his father had already paid for it in his care of my feet. I promised to send him the books I had mentioned, and he thanked me for that with quiet sincerity, but his mind was already elsewhere.

I took my leave of him, then, and his father, who had left us in peace as we worked. His playmate was gone – would never be his mate again, I realized. Already he looked older to my eye, and I saw his glance at the door, felt him test the wind and probe the stone beneath his feet, speak to the rain and call to the fire at the center of the world – knew that he was already sending out his call, in search of Arthur – and Morgana – though I had not mentioned them.

I set out in the gathering storm, to come as you bade me, to tell you my tale.

Ewan, his father called him. But it was he – Merlin.

I swear by the life of the One Tree that this is true.