

Chapter Eleven

The Wanderer

At precisely that moment, but in a place faraway—though not the one across the sea, an old man napping in his rocking chair came awake with a shutter, a shutter so great it threatened to unseat him and left him wide eyed and gasping for breath. Only a foot from his left elbow, reclining in her own chair, his wife hardly notice as she paused in sipping her wine to sit abruptly upright and exclaim, “*He’s coming!*”

The strangest thing that Garrel and Girty Gallumn had ever experienced before that was the day their old plow horse gave birth to a white mule. And while that was odd, especially considering that their mare was too old to pull a buggy, much less a plow, and coal black except where she was turning gray—not to mention no one had seen a donkey in the area for decades; still, none of any of that was beyond explanation as long as you were willing to throw a few “what ifs” or “just maybes” at the situation. None of that kept the village’s oldest couple from leaping to their feet to go racing off to spread the news—that’s a slight exaggeration. But they did eventually manage to hoist themselves out of their rockers to go shuffling off around the town spreading word about their shared vision. A number of people scoffed. In truth almost no one really believed them. But in a place where the most exciting thing to happen is the annual pumpkin seed spitting contest—which was still a full two months away, then when someone said, “You’ve got to come here what this stranger has to stay!”, well, then even if you don’t actually believe there *is* a stranger coming to town, you still lay your hoe, or curry comb, or whatever else you might be holding, aside and march yourself to the town square, because, what have you got to lose besides another day that was just like the last one and the one before?

By noon word had spread beyond the village and close to three hundred people where gather at the town square—which *was* square, but with that many bodies crammed together it’s shape more closely a slightly misshapen hen’s egg. That was the scene that greeted the young man who came strolling up the narrow rutted lane that led to the village. You’d think having that many eyes turn to watch his approach would be a bit offsetting, but he took it right in stride—literally, and kept right on coming until he was at the edge of the waiting throng, which parted to let him through, and continued forward until he reached the only open seat in the place. It was the seat of honor, normally reserved for the ‘*sitting*’ Elderman—and Quallace Perly *had* tried to claim his rightful spot on the padded bench, until his wife had not so gently reminded him that they weren’t in a town meeting, which meant the bench should be offered to any special visitors. Quallace had grumbled, but in the end he’d climbed to his feet to wait like everyone else.

“Good day, everyone” the young man said as he lowered himself onto the bench. He looked around at everyone with a gentle smile as he did, letting it greet them even more warmly than his words. It was almost as if he weren’t a stranger, though no one in the crowd had ever laid eyes on him before. That in itself seemed odd since sure the fellow couldn’t have come from too far away given that he wasn’t carrying hardly anything with him; not even a walking staff or an extra tunic, just a small book that was tucked into the belt at his waist.

“Would you care for something to eat or drink?” Everyone had questions, but Tammer Perly spoke first since she was the ‘*standing*’ Elderman’s wife, and therefore eager to fulfill her hospitality duties.

“Yes, I would very much appreciate that,” the visitor replied. When Tammer just stood there looking at him expectantly, he added, “Anything you have will do nicely.”

At that, Tammer held her position, but her eyes darted around, locking on a number of other women who immediately began working their way through the crowd to see to her unspoken command. Once again reminded that decorum needed to be followed, this time by his wife's proper behavior instead of her sharp tongue, the Elderman found his voice.

"I'm Quallace Perly, Elderman of Fairwind, welcome to our village," he gave a slight bow as he said it, which the young man he greeted returned. "How might we address you, sir?"

The question was simple enough, but it brought a distant look to the stranger's eyes, as if he were sorting through a list of possible replies—*which he was, and it was a long list at that.*

"I think Walker will do fine," he finally answered.

It was such an odd name that Quallace was trying to find a polite way to inquire if there was some honorarium or another to couple it with—unless "Walker" *was* the honorarium and there was still a name to come; it was such a conundrum that he was still mulling through what to do when the hospitality ladies arrived back on the scene. Of course, they brought with them only the very best; in short order their guest's lap and the portions of the bench he wasn't occupying was load up with fresh baked bread, a dozen different varieties of fresh fruits and vegetables, goat cheese, a wedge of steaming honeyed ham that set half the crowd to salivating, and to top it all off, a full skin of Jakkum Skeeze's best spice wine—not many visitors came to Fairwind, but of those that did, most came to purchase Jakkum's wine.

"Thank you," the young man said simply, giving the ladies a gentle smile. Then he began to eat, and eat...and eat. You'd have thought he hadn't a bite of food in weeks from the way he went at everything piled around him—that *wasn't quite true*, but after a bit some of the townsfolk started to wonder if he'd ever need to eat again. Most everyone stood by patiently watching, with only a smattering of foot tapping and throat clearings here and there throughout the crowd. Elder Quallace was the worst of that lot; he finally got so fed up that he took a step forward and had a hand half raised to draw everyone's attention when the young man on the bench beat him to it.

Setting aside the empty husk of the last of six ears of corn he'd been given, he looked around and asked, "Would you like to hear a story?"

Even the toe tappers found themselves nodding their heads. If the young man had pulled out a flute, lute *and* a lyre their reaction couldn't have been any more enthusiastic. An opportunity to hear a musician would have certainly been a rare treat, but having an *Orator* stop by their little village, that was simply beyond what anyone could have hoped for. Of course, they were wrong, the young man wasn't an actual Orator, he was nothing so simple as that.

"Then let me tell you about the blind man," the young traveler began. Orators are *not* known for their brevity, so almost of one accord, the gathered villagers began to break one of their longest standing ordinances—by *sitting* down in the town square. Since it wasn't an *official* town meeting, technically no rules were being broken. That didn't keep Elder Quallace from casting a disdainful glare at those around him as he stubbornly remained standing, causing those behind him to have to crane their necks to get a look at the speaker. Rather than *openly* defy her husband on the matter, Tammer Perly joined the handful of women she'd been directing earlier as they hurried forward to take the few scraps that were left of their guest's meal away, to deposit them on a nearby table dominated by the bronze figure of a woman with a bird's beak and wings. After finishing her task, Tammer circled back around to the back of the crowd—out of her Quallace's purview and lowered herself to the ground, where she too waited anxiously for the orator to regale them with a tale of adventure in exotic lands.

“He was born in a village named Greenleaf, a place not unlike this one,” Walker continued. “Sightless from birth, Cato’s life was hard from the beginning,” he paused as those gathered around him nodded with sympathetic understanding. “A life made even harder by another boy, Dumas, who, though he was handsome and from a wealthy family, still went out of his way to torment the blind boy. Tripping Cato by moving things into his path was one of his favorite tactics, but the thing that he *always* went out of his way to do was to race up and take whatever the blind boy happened to be carrying...which was most often just the walking staff Cato relied upon to find his way around, which he would then fling as far away as he could. Now, Dumas was a very stout boy so when he threw something it would take you or I a good bit of time just to walk over and pick it back up. Poor Cato, having no idea where his possessions might have ended up, would often spend the better part of the day trying to track them down.”

Walker left off his telling for a moment while his audience made appropriate disapproving comments. This despite the fact that a number of the ones acting sympathetic to blind Cato truthfully had more in common with cold-hearted Dumas during their own youths.

“There’s a child that could use a good switching,” Lillup Jessie voiced her opinion on the matter with loud indignation. That drew a number of looks from the other women present, but not of concurrence as she supposed; you see these were other mothers whose children had been the victims of Fairwind’s current reigning tormentor, Clem Jessie.

“I’m sure it all works out in the end, the Mother’s hands are busy even when ours are idle,” Corda Milbry put in as she nodded over in the direction of the bronze statuette that actually didn’t even have arms. Corda was the last Elderman’s wife and had never completely relinquished her position of authority. She was so caught up in the wisdom of her own words that she failed to notice the slight frown that crossed the lips of their visitor at the mention of *the Mother*. Walker waited for his audience to become spectators again before resuming.

“Cato suffered in silence, as if he were as mute as he was blind...and alone,” he explained patiently after a short debate between two men about whether the ‘*sad little retch*’ should have left town or better yet, “*used his walking stick for more than just walkin’, if you know what I mean?*”, and a counter proposal by two ladies in the front that all poor little Cato needed was one good friend. “Alas, none of the other children would even go near him since they feared if they did then they too would fall victim to Dumas’ abusive ways. Time passed, and as they inevitably do, things *did* change. Dumas’ parents got richer and lavished their wealth on their favored son, while Cato’s met an untimely end, leaving the blind boy to rely mostly on begging in the village square to meet his daily needs.”

More sad head shaking and not just a few comments about how unfair life could be at times followed. Corda Milbry speculated that, considering all the dreadful events that had befallen the family, it was quite likely that at some point Cato’s parents had done something to offend the Mother. Many of the head shakers became nodders upon hearing that.

“Years passed until the day came when Dumas was the richest man in all the land and no one even remembered the name of the poor creature who hunkered in one corner of the village square, only rousing himself enough to cry out for a bite of food or possibly a coin when he heard someone come near,” Walker continued. “But while some things do change, others never do. Dumas might have been able to recall the name of the man he’d tormented since they were both youths had he been so inclined, but don’t make the mistake of thinking he forgot all about the blind boy *or* the man he grew into. No...Dumas took great pleasure in taking a stroll into the square now and again to hear Cato’s desperate pleadings, at which point he would toss whichever worthless bit of trash he’d brought with him on the ground near where the blind

beggar crouched...but not *too* near. That would have taken all the fun out of watching the other man scamper around searching frantically for what he supposed was something to eat."

Cries of outrage filled the village square. It was one thing for one child to mistreat another, but for a grown man, and one so privileged too, to behave so abominably was just beyond comprehension. Where was the Elderman and the rest of the village counsel when all this was going on? Surely they should have stepped in and done something.

"Elderman *Dumas* was quite happy with the way things were," Walker explained, hushing the crowd. "And if there were members of the counsel who disagreed, they were wise enough to keep it to themselves. That was another thing that *hadn't* changed...no one wanted to get on the wrong side of Dumas. Over the years, Cato wasn't the only one to have suffered after drawing his ire."

"Surely, something has to be done about it," the widow Gurmly seated to Walker's left voiced her outrage in a whisper that carried across the square louder than if she'd shouted a few minutes before because everyone else had fallen silent at their visitor's latest statement.

"The rain falls on the just and the unjust," Walker lamented—which even though it was a saying that no one from Fairwind had heard before, made perfect sense given that it was a farming community. "Still, the day did arrive when Dumas found himself the target of someone else's ill will. He had grown into such a shrewd businessman that the entire region, not just the village of Greenleaf, had prospered along with him. The area had become so affluent that it became known far and wide, drawing the attention of many who came to seek their own fortune...but also others content to abscond with someone else's'."

"Bandits!" Elderman Quallace declared with disdain.

"Indeed," Walker confirmed. "A vast hoard of them. They came sweeping into the valley where Greenleaf and a dozen other villages resided like a swarm of ravenous locust, descending on the first village they came to and reducing it to not much more than a pile of rubble, with many more of its citizens left dead than alive in a matter of days. The next village in line suffered the same fate in short order."

"Where's the king and his soldiers when you need them?" Elderman Quallace chortled. "You can bet the royal taxman wasn't tardy about seeing to *his* duties."

If the stranger had an opinion on the Elderman's political musings, he kept it to himself. "Word of what was happening reached Greenleaf within hours of each tragic event. And since theirs was then the next village in line, Dumas summoned everyone to the town square to determine what they should do."

"Hightail it out of there is what they should do...and don't bother to pause and pack a bag either, it would just slow you down," Gast Milbry asserted. Gast wasn't known for his iron will; had he been a little more stalwart in how he handled adversity he might not have been the only Elderman in memory to serve the minimum two year term.

"As you can imagine the entire village was in a panic," Walker continued. "And they might very well have abandoned everything and fled for their lives had Dumas not strode into the middle of them, standing tall and confident as he declared, "There is no cause for alarm...I have a plan to bring all of us through this calamity safely.'"

Both crowds—the one in his story as well as the one standing in the actual town square voiced their objections, but Walker raised a calming hand and marched on ahead. "'This is a bad business, but it is still a type of a business in a certain way...and nobody knows business like I do," Dumas said, shouting down his doubters. Then he proceeded to back up his boast by outlining what had to be done. "What need would the bandits have to even set foot in our village

if what they were after was piled up neatly outside the gates just waiting for them to come gather it up and cart it away...and we'll even supply the carts. Now, you might not like the idea, but there will be no stopping them from taking what they want. What's really at stake here is whether we can keep them from destroying and killing in the process.””

“Well, there's no denying he's a shrewd one,” Sackle Plake observed. Being a merchant himself, Sackle liked to think that those with a mind for business had the best minds of all.

“The good people of Greenleaf thought so too,” Walked nodded. “Most of them anyway. But at the back of the crowded square, sitting forgotten by himself, Cato did something most unusual for him, he spoke up...and quite loudly too. “That won't stop them!” he shouted, causing eyes who hadn't done more than glance in his direction in years to turn and stare. “I know something about people who take things from you. And I can tell you this...it's not the *things* they really want...it's the *taking* itself that drives them. They have an appetite for violence that can't be sated.” No one turned to look in Dumas' direction as Cato spoke, but if they had they would have seen his words come to life as the Greenleaf Elderman was just barely able to restrain himself from rushing forward to attack the sightless beggar.”

“Did they listen?” the widow Gurmly asked in a worried voice. “And even if so, then what was left for them to do?”

“They did,” Walker assured her. “And they kept listening as Cato explained what else his years of mistreatment had taught him. That being that the '*takers*' only attack the weak. “There's a reason why they haven't broken into smaller groups and began to ravish our entire valley all at once,” Cato told them. “Do you think they would dare to attack us if our village was ten times the size it is?” Of course, the other villagers were quick to point out how little good that did them since they *weren't* ten times bigger. That's when the sightless man explained to them what only he could see. “They've destroyed two of the villages in our valley, but we're still here and there are nine more behind us. Send runners to them and have them send every able bodied man with whatever weapon he has at hand...be it a sword, hoe, sickle or club, and have them come here where we will all take our stand.”

“That might just work,” Elderman Quallace said thoughtfully.

“Did it work?” his wife called out from the back of the room.

“It did,” Walk assured her and the rest of his audience. “By the time the bandits arrived outside of Greenleaf two days later they were met by a wall of men stretching out nearly a quarter mile wide. They were wielding mostly farm implements, but the bandits took one look at the determined looks on their grim faces and turned around and rode away, never to be seen or heard from again.”

Cheers erupted from the Fairwind denizens upon hearing the happy ending. Many congratulated their guest on his excellent oratory skills, while even more begged for another. After a while, Walker raised his hand to silence the crowd. “I'm glad you enjoyed the tale, but now that you've heard it, I have a question for you...what was the name of the blind man in the story?”

Still caught up in the excitement of the moment, the crowd stumbled all over itself as everyone hurried to be the first to shout out their answers. Over a hundred voices called out the word, “Cato”—though they were hardly in unison. But once the fervor died down and everyone was waiting eagerly for the storyteller to congratulate them on their astuteness, a quiet voice in the back offered an alternate opinion.

“Dumas,” Thommy Jilks, a slightly built boy with big almond colored eyes said with conviction. “He was the one who was truly blind to what was really needed.”

Walker gave an appreciative nod. "You *listened* well, young fellow." Then he swept his eyes over everyone else as he added. "Having eyes, we do not always see...and having ears, we do not always hear."

"The Mother guides us," Corda Milbry tried to brush away Walker's words with her favorite catch phrase.

Walker glanced over at the table where the bronze figure rested and gave a sad smile. Then he spoke a favorite phrase of his own. And this time he wasn't telling those around him something they'd never heard before—but that didn't mean they'd listened. "*He* who spoke, speaks still...*he* always has, *he* always will. So the world began, as it will end. With a word it came, with a word *he'll* rend."

After speaking from the prophesy every man, woman and child had heard since birth, he fixed his gaze on Corda and asked gently, "Why do you place your hope in something fashioned from metal, metal taken from the earth and crafted by the hand of man? Open your ears to what you've heard your whole life...open your eyes to see what those words truly mean. Then open your heart and your mind and let them become more than just words."

Then, while Corda—and everyone else sat looking up at him with slack jaws and wide eyes, the Wanderer stood up, gave a friendly wave, and started forward, walking back in the direction he'd just came—but only as far as the next fork in the road. There, as always, he turned in a direction he'd never gone before. After so many years you'd have thought that was no longer even possible, but sadly the world he strode was still filled with blind and deaf people, so he just kept walking.