

The Wanderer of the Storm

Original Story by Andrew Johnson

The storm was overpowering. The wind blew dust every which way, limiting visibility to a minimum and sweeping away any signs of life attempting to brave its dreadful howl. Even after the townsfolk of Avastheim warned the foreigner against it, a single lone figure crossed into the piercing whirlwind. They had arrived in Avastheim just that morning, wearing an old cloak with a hood, his face covered in chestnut brown rags.

The foreigner said not a word to anyone in town, merely stepping into the inn and sitting down at the bar as the wind picked up and the dust began to fly. His actions had brought a silence to the room, but gradually people began to look back to their drinks and conversations, raising their voices louder to be heard over the worsening gale. Within minutes, it was like the man was no longer there, so when he eventually stood up and headed for the exit, the room was shocked back into silence. A few folks called out as he walked, recommending that the foreigner not head out into the storm, as indoors was the safest place to be. But their words fell on deaf ears. Responding in no way, not even to give indication that he had heard, the man opened the door and stepped out into the wall of dust.

Avastheim was an old town in the Walkreath Plains, and her inhabitants were a superstitious lot. There were more than one who remembered tales of the Gods walking the earth and believed they may have just witnessed one. For the next weeks and months, speculation ran rampant about whether the mysterious foreigner in the tavern was actually the God Davose, Lord of Ashes and Endings. The town soothsayer wailed about the beginning of a fourth holy war between the Gods, and the townsfolk hurried to stockpile supplies and fortify their houses, hoping that the words of their prophet were nothing more than hogwash brought on by drinking too much Formberry Mead. But history had taught them otherwise.

For the unknown man, life seemed to him to be an endless storm. Wherever he went, dust followed. To any who asked, he would respond that he awoke one day within the walls of the storm, his name a mystery to even himself, and his memories a canvas washed with black ink. He walked endlessly, hoping to find the truth about who he was, and his visit to Avastheim was just the most recent of seemingly endless ventures into the different hubs of the Walkreath Plains.

Years passed. The mysterious man would show up in a town on the Walkreath Plains and take a seat at the tavern bar as a storm of dust and dirt followed him, until he eventually would stand up and leave, taking the storm with him. Those who tried to speak with the man would get no response, but it became a sort of custom to slide the man a drink of whatever the signature brew was in that town. He would always pay before leaving, so people saw his appearance as an omen of good fortune. He faded into town legends, never appearing in the same town twice, and the people began to

herald him as a spirit of the dead, cursed to wander the Plains for some unforgiven sin. Eventually though, his appearances faded out of the peoples' memories. The foreshadowed Fourth Holy War had begun, and people became concerned more for their own survival.

It was during this time, back in the destroyed town of Avastheim, that the storm reappeared. Jonas Tillsbrook was salvaging what he could from the wreckage of his house when the wind picked up. The armies of Elturil had just fought the forces of Bron two days prior, and their clash had generated shockwaves strong enough to flatten most of Avastheim. At least, that is what Jonas had been told by the other surviving townsfolk. Truth be told, he had been hit in the head and knocked out by rubble, and his memory was foggy at best. Surely Bron and his troops haven't come back, have they? This thought rang through Jonas's mind as he stood up and straightened his back, testing the direction of the wind with his finger. North, huh? Last thing we need right now is a storm.... Unfortunately, a storm was exactly what was arriving, but not the typical storm of rain and sleet. Instead, dust and dirt began to kick up, flying throughout the air and creating magnificent circular patterns amidst the wreckage. Those who could took refuge among the collapsed buildings. But Jonas, his house having been on the western end of town, was caught in the storm with nowhere to take cover.

Jonas Tillsbrook was swallowed by the storm, which proceeded to pass from the wreckage of Avastheim as quickly as it had appeared.

When Jonas opened his eyes, all he could see was brown. Swirling clouds of dirt and dust surrounded him on all sides, the howling of the gale pounding in his ears and deafening him. Strangely though, the dust did not touch him. It swirled near him, but it was like a slim coating of air was cushioning him against having his body punctured and ripped apart by the high velocity particulates hurtling around him. Tentatively, he reached out. If the protection only covered where he was standing, then his arm was about to get ripped off in a horrific fashion. Luckily, or perhaps unluckily though, the cushion followed his arm, protecting it. Following this, Jonas tentatively took a step forward, followed by another, and then another.

I have to get out of this storm and back to town and make sure everyone is safe. Armed solely with this thought, Jonas began trekking through the dense storm, walking endlessly until he escaped. As time passed, that thought shrank. The goal of making sure the townsfolk were safe and even finding his way back to those ruins abandoned him, until all that was left was the sole desire to escape this awful storm. As he walked, he ripped off the sleeves of his coat, since the wind seemed to be protecting him. He wrapped them around his face though, on the off chance that the protection ended, and in order to help him focus his vision.

After what seemed like an eternity of walking, Jonas finally found his escape. He found a place where the storm seemed even thicker, almost as if it were forming a solid wall. Forcing his way through, he found himself standing in front of what appeared to be a

wooden, two-story inn. The storm surrounded it on all sides, but the building itself and the space surrounding it were completely clear of dust and dirt. Relieved, he stepped up the single step and onto the whitewashed wooden porch. Taking a deep sigh of relief, he pushed open the door and stepped into the building.

What greeted him was pristine emptiness. A perfectly put together dining area, with a bar at the back, but no one in sight. He stopped and glanced around, taking in the myriad of oak tables, the chairs all pushed in neatly and without a speck of dirt upon them. It was at this point that he recognized just how parched he truly was. Although he had been walking for what seemed like eternity, he had felt neither exhaustion nor hunger for the entire duration. But now that he was here, within an inn and taking a break, he finally felt how parched he was, as if his throat had entirely closed off from lack of hydration. He slowly made his way over to the bar and sat down on one of the stools, looking around for any sort of way to call a bartender over. Without one in sight, he mulled over his options, considering just reaching over the bar and grabbing one of the bottles that was comfortably resting on the shelf, completely unattended. However, before he could make a move, a glass slid down the bar toward him. Surprised, he caught in, noting the dark auburn liquid sloshing inside. He looked down to where the glass had come from, but could not see anyone.

Unsure of what exactly was happening, Jonas lifted the glass to his lips and shot the liquid back like a shot of tequila, relishing in the feeling of the cold liquid sliding down his dried throat. He set the glass gingerly back down on the bar, hoping that whatever had sent him the glass in the first place would also miraculously refill it, but to no avail. The moment of peace dragged on and on, but with no change. Something about the inn felt uninviting and foreboding, as if him staying there would bring about some sort of calamity. Taking this feeling as a sign, he rooted around in his pockets, finding a bit of change that had been stuffed in there, which he left on the counter.

Standing up, he headed out the front door of the inn, taking stock in the storm wall presenting itself to him. The wall had moved closer to the inn while he stayed inside. Whereas there had been maybe 5 feet of free space between the storm and the building when he entered, now the entire front step of the patio was covered. Any longer inside the building and the storm may have consumed it. Sighing to himself, he stepped back through the wall of dust, which seemed to almost invite him in, leaving the inn behind and moving forward.

It wasn't long before he found his next exit. Granted, he had no way of keeping time during this experience, so it could have been days or weeks since he had visited the inn. It was, however, enough time the dryness of his throat to make itself apparent to him again, taking up any and all thought and focus. But once again confronted with a wall in the storm, he stepped through, finding himself face to face with yet another inn. Notably different from the previous one, this inn was built of stone and had no attached porch.

Climbing the two steps to the door and pushing his way inside, he once again found himself in a pristinely kept dining room, without a person in sight. Once again, sitting down at the bar netted him a drink in his hand, this time an orange liquor that tasted distinctly of maudly (a fermented bark grown in the Dusklight Reaches). After downing his drink and paying for it, he stood up and walked out of the building again, noting that the storm wall had crept closer in his absence, but not nearly as close as it had the previous time, considering he had spent less time inside.

And so, this cycle continued. He wandered for an eternity at a time, desperately searching for that drink that would relieve his parched throat, albeit briefly. But as time went on, even when he found his way into a new tavern, the drinks stopped coming. He found his pockets empty of any money, and his hands empty of any drink.

Eventually, he reached an inn that seemed somewhat familiar. He didn't even notice the storm anymore when he was inside it, and he navigated without any eyes, so consumed in his desire for a drink and trust that the storm would provide him with one. This new tavern seemed to be trying to spark some hidden, ancient memory within his mind, but so delirious for a drink as he was, the feeling meant nothing to him. But once again, sitting down at the bar in this building gave him no reprieve from his thirst, and so he quickly stood and left, heading out in search of any liquid.

As he left though, so single-minded as he was that he never noticed the storm had vanished. No more was he surrounded by dust and dirt and wind, but instead by a quaint town with an ancient history. As he trudged out and across the plains once more, those living in the town he had just left began to murmur and wonder among themselves about who exactly it was that had just appeared, bringing unprecedented storm with them, appearing in their tavern out of nowhere.