

The Rustling Leaves

By

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C'rellim awoke, slowly becoming aware of his body and its current state. His left leg felt sore and numb, unable to move. He only opened his eyes at first- trying to take in his surroundings. The darkness he felt was complete. No light could be seen. At first he thought his eyes were not truly open- perhaps he was still asleep but the pain in his leg made him believe otherwise. It was fully night and this was the dark of the moon. The silent forest around him was still bathed in the dampness and chill of the rain from earlier today and he shivered.

He moved to raise himself with his hands and elbows but the pain of his pinned leg was overwhelming. He could not move from this place. Lying back down, he tried to relax himself easing the fire of his injury. His breathing was loud and filled with pain. He adjusted his position very slightly, enough to minimize his agony. He groped in the darkness. With his left hand he felt the object holding him captive. The rough surface of a large tree lay across him narrowly missing more critical parts of his body. Broken! C'rellim realized the leg beneath the fallen tree was broken. Pinned just below the hip bone, his leg was trapped in a vise grip compressed against the ground. What happened was not immediately clear.

He remembered walking home through the forest along the familiar path between the town and his cabin two miles to the West. The leaden sky was losing what light remained after the storm and the thinning upper branches of the trees was keeping even more of the light from reaching the rain-softened carpet of leaves. To either side of the path, the forest floor sloped gently downward towards small ponds where the rain had collected. A movement in the brush drew his attention. Leaves were dancing as something moved beneath them. He had not seen anything living in that part of the forest for several months and the instinct to follow the prey was instantly taking hold of him. He removed his pack- silently extracting himself from the bindings and gently laid it down on the path. He drew his rifle from his shoulder sling and moved down the slope toward the motion in the brush. The spongy floor of the autumn forest was thick with the

browned leaves which the trees had been shedding for the season of such things had come. Moss was abundantly covering the surfaces of old fallen trees and branches still glistening and slick from the rain. The downpour of a few hours earlier had made the path a combination of mud and decomposing leaves. Stepping off of the path, the forest floor became an irregular surface of small mounds, drifts of leaves, branches and fallen tree trunks steadily decomposing as all things will. The motion beneath the leaves continued as he crept toward the disturbance as silently as his skills and the forest floor allowed. When he reached the place where he saw the movement, the brush was completely still. Nearby, one of the small pools of water remained dark and still as well. Nothing troubled it to disrupt the surface. He could see in the pool, a pale reflection of the sky and the tops of the bare trees swaying in the wind. It was as though even the pool's reflection was saying, "There is nothing alive here." Perhaps the animal hidden beneath the brush detected his approach and was motionless to disguise its presence. Perhaps it had burrowed down into the earth and had made good its escape from the hunter. What happened next was difficult to take in as it happened so suddenly. C'rellim poked gently into the brush in an attempt to flush out the animal beneath. His efforts produced nothing to immerge from beneath the leafy brush. Bending over the pile, he probed further with the barrel of his rifle. A loud cracking of wood came from off to one side. A dead tree was feeling the softening effect and the weight of the earlier rain as its lifeless trunk succumbed to the inevitable rotting at its base. He glanced up and back in the sound's direction. The ground beneath his feet was soft and his weight began to shift down hill. He tried to compensate by leaning against the rifle which was nose down in the brush. Doing so however only caused the barrel to plunge into the soft earth floor of the brush. His hands slipped from the rifle as his weight became ever more offset. He sensed motion and sound behind him near the path. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw an impossible image of the shaman, Black Owl and the shadow of another creature above him standing near his pack where he left it on the path. The shaman held his staff raised skyward in one hand. His other arm was out stretched as well- as though Black Owl was about to make a ceremonial announcement to his people. The shadow was like a great bird with the wings stretching for the sky above Black Owl. From his mouth came native words that C'rellim had not heard the shaman utter before but one word was clear. In the tongue of his people, Black Owl spoke with the pain of loss and power of authority. "Judgment!" He instinctively twisted his body to face Black Owl and see more completely behind him which caused his balance to further weaken. His boots lost their

grip and he fell twisting and flailing as he went. As his body struck the forest floor, the tree which he had heard falling blotted out the sky as it filled his vision. The sound of that terrible fall and the shouting cry of Black Owl were the last things he knew before the darkness took him.

He dreamt- or something like a vivid dream of the previous events of the day. The long trek to town was rarely pleasant for C'rellim. He dreaded leaving his cabin near the Indian reservation for the town beyond the forest. The rack on which he carried his spoils always dug into his shoulders when it was so heavily laden with furs and meats that he took to sell and trade in town. Being among other people was also uncomfortable for him and he loathed the necessary trips back and forth for supplies. The casual chit-chat which was common for 'civilized' folk seemed pointless to him. He didn't care for the friendship of other men or the comfort of women. The more time he spent alone in his solitary place on the far side of the forest, the less he wanted to use spoken words and carry on useless discussions with others of his own kind. Today's journey was made worse by the surprisingly heavy rain which had begun to fall as he neared town. By the time he had walked to where the buildings of town rose up, the ground had become a thick mud and the increasing wind made each drop pelt him as though nature were reminding him of how small he was in the scheme of things. Running now to escape the downpour, the bouncing pack of goods dug even more harshly than usual into his shoulders. Suddenly, one of the rack's bindings tore and the pack shifted heavily to the left. With his burden pitching to one side and the mud beneath his feet, C'rellim lost his balance and fell to the thick mud of the street beneath him. He landed in a spread-eagle fashion with his arms stretched out before him and his face down in the filth. His nose gave him the first hint of condition. Spitting and wiping at his face only served to further work the mud and awful into his beard and hair. A mere inch from his face, a large horse dropping was combining with the mud. C'rellim felt the rage rising up in him. He had never been the type to let things go easily. For him, this was not merely an accident which could happen to anyone. Instead, it was an offence against him. He always took such things personally. But who to blame? The mud? The pack which he held on his back? No one was around to push him nor did anything trip him as he made his way along the street. Oh but if there were a person nearby! They would be the target of his anger- weather they were responsible for his fall or not!

He regained his feet and stood again in the mud, cursing his pack which hung lazily to one side. The broken binding was dangling from the pack. Holding it in his hand, he examined it as the rain poured over him. It looked...chewed on. Grinding his teeth, he thought that perhaps a rodent was responsible for the condition of his pack. Growling at his misfortune, C'rellim held his pack tightly to his shoulder and continued toward the trading post. He supposed that the towns people disapproved of the weather as much as he did for none of them could be seen in the street or at the doors of the buildings. His labored steps took him further along the slop that had become the single street of the small old western town. Ha! Perhaps that was not quite true after all.

At the trading post, a small, hunched over figure stood at the door. The rawhide covered form was familiar enough to be recognized as an Indian of many seasons. The ornamented staff in the form's wrinkled and weathered hand however identified him as Black Owl, the local tribal Shaman. As C'rellim made his way onto the porch of the trading post, the old shaman raised himself up to stand between C'rellim and the doorway. When the shaman spoke, his voice was as old as his wrinkled face. "C'rellim, the forest has cried out of its pain and can be silent no more!" Dark Owl's voice was raspy but strong. "Your thoughtless taking of its riches must stop! Man was meant to care for the forest and the creatures in it. The Maker did not place it here for your sport and spoil!"

C'rellim had heard such condemnation from the shaman before. Twenty years ago, when he lived among the Indian tribe in the winter of 1878, Black Owl spoke to him in a softer tone, that of a teacher speaking to a wayward student. "The Maker gave Man the bounty of the land and the forest so that he may dwell in harmony with the creation and care for it. We must remember that we shall give an accounting of ourselves one day. The forest provides us with food, clothing and shelter as the Maker has decreed but He has also given us the responsibility to balance our needs with the creatures of the forest. We must not take more than we need!"

At the time, C'rellim nodded at the wisdom that Black Owl spoke. The tribe believed that a Shaman was not only a man but also possessed the spirit of the forest animal for which he was named. The mythical wisdom of the owl was believed to be the shaman's gift from the Great Spirit. Even then, greed was consuming C'rellim as he took not only for his needs but pillaged to sell the rest in town and with the tribe. That was many years ago. Now as they

were both aged and hardened by many years of bleak winters, their relationship had also hardened. No longer did Black Owl speak to C'rellim as an impetuous young man but as one who has committed a crime. C'rellim no longer paid respect to the Indian either. The frequent admonishments against his trade made him bitter and hateful against Black Owl.

“You and your kind have hated me for years, I know it! You think that the forest is yours alone and I am supposed to merely enjoy the scenery and pass through it! I do not believe in the stories of your people, Black Owl. There are no animal spirits and there is no Maker! Now get out of my way, old man!” With that, C'rellim grabbed Black Owl by his skin tunic and threw him into the street. The withered figure crumpled to a heap in the mud. His mud covered form rolled to raise himself slowly back to his feet. Even in such a state, Black Owl stood with dignity and held C'rellim's angry stare.

Steadying himself against his shaman's staff, Black Owl again spoke with his voice pained but tempered. “I had hoped that once more you would heed my teaching and turn from your hate and loathing of the forest. When a man can no longer receive teaching, he is beyond help. May the Maker show you what I could not!” With that the old Indian began to walk down the mud-covered street and slowly back in the direction of the forest.

Hours later, his business at the trading post done, C'rellim saw no value in remaining in town. He did not hear the rain any longer and it was time to return to his cabin on the other side of the forest. A slate gray sky hid the sun as he stepped out of the doorway of the trading post. Although the rain had ceased pummeling the streets of the town, a clear message was made- it could happen again. “No sense in waiting”, C'rellim thought to himself as he grimaced up at the sky. It was time to leave the safety of the buildings and of the town. The street was still muddy but that could not be helped. With his pack repaired and filled with a month's supplies, he turned west and began to walk the two miles which would return him through the forest to his hewn log cabin on the other side.

The Indian Shaman was at the edge of town as he set about the business of returning home. Clearly angry at the humiliation that C'rellim had given him, the Shaman shook his staff at him and spoke his native tongue in a harsh and pain filled voice. The Indian's words were not meaningless to C'rellim. He had spent years with the tribe of the Shaman. “Fear and pain

be upon you C'rellim! Death will be a horror to you! You will be repaid for the ill you have done to us all!"

"To us all?" wondered C'rellim. Who was the old Indian talking about? The fool! Old and crazy! Why should anyone respect the wailings of such a man? He moved past the shaman with an angry stomping in his feet. There was something that made C'rellim want to be away from Black Owl. A mile or so into the forest, his mind was still clouded with the anger and frustration of their encounter. So his memories of this day ended.

Again the pain of his broken leg returned C'rellim to his present. The forest floor seemed to becoming alive with sound. He could hear the foot falls of beasts and rustling of the leaves by smaller creatures. Where would these animals have come from, he wondered? Digging with his left hand, he began to clear the leaves and earth from around his left leg. Tugging against the leg as he moved was excruciating but he knew of no other way to free himself of the fallen tree. The effort was exhausting and seemingly futile against the great tree which held him fast. He had to stop a moment to rest. His body shook with pain and the chill of the dampened ground. The sounds of the forest floor came again- nearer this time. They seemed to come from every direction. Something was near him. The sounds brought back memories from years ago, when he was here as a younger man. Stalking his prey in silence, he waited- hidden along paths where the deer and other creatures moved about the forest. Often, he would wait for an hour or more- alone, patient and almost motionless. "The Forest Hunter" they would call him in town whenever he would show his face among his own kind. They respected him for his load of furs and meats that he would bring to the people of the town for trade. When he had his fill of the civilized world, he would return to the forest- and the kill. "Hunter" they called him. The Indians gave him the name "C'rellim". It meant 'bitter'. Most did not know he had any other name. Yet if they only knew how complete his ravaging of the forest was, the people of the town may choose other names for him. "Pillager of the Forest" would be more correct. He cared nothing for the community of wildlife that he plundered. His only thought was to take for the sake of taking. Even the forest itself was not immune from his greed. The trees, particularly the oaks, ash and walnut were felled regularly and dragged into town by a mule team owned by the town's people.

Nothing could be alive here! His mind demanded a rational explanation. He knew he had killed everything worthwhile. He sensed that the beings were

not flesh and blood animals- nor were they figments of his imagination but something else. Spirits! Ghosts!

The presence of animals surrounding him was unmistakable. He could feel them closing in. The small and the great were all around him- every one of them, killed by his hand. He began to see- or imagine their outlines in the dark. He felt a sharp bite on his trapped leg! The hunter gasped in surprise. Moments later, he felt another small bite. Just below the knee. In vain, he tried to kick at his antagonist. His leg, immobilized by the fallen tree was useless to defend itself. Again a small bit! Small paws clawing at his trousered legs became numerous. How many were setting themselves to task against his hopeless limb? How many small creatures had he killed out of boredom while he waited for the larger of his prey? He began to raise himself up again to defend himself when something struck his chest and pressed him firmly back down to the ground with crushing force. Very near to his face, the low growl of a bear bore down on him. He could feel an impossible, icy-cold breath but the smell of bear was unmistakable. His hands flew to his chest to wrestle the bear's paw from him. His hands felt nothing but his own skin jersey on top of him! His hands could not feel the bear paw that held him. The crushing force felt like the paw was right on top of his ribs. He flailed his arms around attempting to fight off the invisible bear. His hands again felt nothing! Yet the pressure of paw holding him was as real as he was. The close breathing of the bear, low and deep, was nose to nose with him now. He pressed himself down now trying to escape the creature which held him. C'rellim screamed suddenly with pain! Something large was sinking its teeth into him biting his free leg. He felt it pull on his leg as though to tear it away from his helpless body. His unseen attackers were all around him now. He felt the scratching of sharp claws all over him and something- a fox? Something was tearing at his left ear and growling in pleasure at the meal it was about to enjoy. Another invisible creature tore at his eye sockets with sharp claws. He screamed uncontrollably now. No part of his body was free of the torment. Large teeth grasped his throat and he could smell the heavy musk of bear. Terror filled C'rellim. The hunter was now another's pray – as hopeless as those he had taken so now he was to be claimed.

The forest was not silent that night. The pain of its dwellers exacted the revenge of the hundreds of creatures taken from it. In the ears of the Hunter, the forest was alive again with the sounds of the creatures which he had killed. Growls and grunts! Screeches and snorts! The scurrying and

scratching of so many dead things returned once more. As invisible bodies bore down on him, rushing from every direction to have their piece of him, C'rellim could hear himself add his own screams to those of the animal dead and the rustling of the leaves.

The End