

The Red Iron Warp

by Paul Yoder

Chapter 1

“What could’ve done this?” an older man with a pointed, black and white peppered beard asked.

Poking at the flayed corpse with a stick, a man with a brown wave of hair and the shadow of a beard considered the oddity for a moment before responding. “Something’s off with his bones.”

“Disfigured?” The older man mused aloud.

“Could've been. Strange though, the only place he looks to be oddly shaped is the places where he’s been flayed.”

“Been dead a day?” the elder questioned.

“Likely less.”

“You know of a beast that would flay a man like this and leave it here to rot, Gareth? Seems the work of man to me, not beast,” the man with the peppered beard said, looking for his younger counterpart to confirm his suspicions.

His brown locks covered his face, obscuring him from his companion as he thought in silence once more.

Seeing that Gareth’s reply might take longer than he wanted to wait, Rinaldo hefted the backpack lying next to the dead man and walked over to the hastily broken-down campsite the corpse had been found next to, dumping its contents out on the ground.

Gareth stood, his eyes still locked on the dead man, only looking up when Rinaldo broke the silence once more. “The man was a trapper, looks like.”

“I agree. How he came to end up like this though,” Gareth sighed, standing up, “it’s like nothing I’ve seen afore. We should report this to the Dunnmur Guard. If there have been other deaths that match this one, ‘twould be good to know. We can help out if there’s a running case tied to whatever did this to our trapper friend.”

“And if we solve a case for the Dunnmur,” Rinaldo added as he wiped clean the greasy cast iron skillet from the pack, “we might finally get some payment. It’s been too long since we’ve had coin. Has made life a bit more dreary.”

Both had flat stomachs by now, and they had continued to lose weight over the last few weeks on the road. They had a decent supply of meat, but they had lucked out consistently on foraging anything else on their travels, and had passed very few farmers or woodsmen along the road from Canopy Glen, to Tarrolaine, and now the old highway from Castle Sauvignon to Dunnmur. An actual payment from Dunnmur, one of the larger cities in the region, could be a much needed reprieve and replenish their dwindling supplies.

Snatching the small trenching shovel from amongst the trapper's things, Gareth broke soil, setting to work at preparing a grave for the trapper while Rinaldo continued to clean and sort through the dead man's belongings.

A small smile came to him as he held up a bundle of forest truffles, still fresh, tied up in a cloth patch. They would sell for a fine coin in Dunnmur, he knew. The other odds and ends, like the waxed thread and nickel sewing needle, red iron hatchet, and canteen, he found in the pack were great little finds as well.

Both felt differently about scavenging from the dead, which was a subject they had bickered about countless times at the start of their brotherhood shift. The life of a ranger often found them dealing with deaths deep in the woods, outside of all other boundaries of man's laws but the realm's justice they brought with them. Gareth's scolding had seemed to make no difference upon Rinaldo's *'better used by the living than wasted on the dead'* attitude, and so as the months had passed, Gareth had begrudgingly let Rinaldo do it, chalking it up to just one of those areas where being too rigid might cause more harm to their bond than good.

Rinaldo had many rough edges about him, walking the ranger's path late in life, having years of deviant living behind him. In general, Gareth knew his watch fellow to be of good heart, but his respect for the man had waned from time to time over his lingering habits and views from his youth.

Gareth, who was making good progress in the soft soil, rested for a moment, calling to Rinaldo. "That bow and hunting knife on the ground, let's bring those back for someone to identify. Trappers favor those two things more than anything else they own, someone might know them in town. Maybe we—"

Gareth paused mid-sentence, wondering if the crinkle of dried underbrush was from a rodent, or a person. Holding dead still, he whispered to Rinaldo, beckoning for him to toss him the trapper's bow and arrow. Rinaldo threw both to Gareth, which he plucked up, smoothly nocking the arrow a second later.

"Ho there, behind the tree. Don't run. I've got an arrow on you."

Rinaldo hefted the hunting knife and started quietly pacing to the side to get a different angle from his comrade.

Out from behind the tree stepped a light-brown skinned woman wearing sky blue, loose cloth with a wide cotton belt, hand wraps and upward strung shoes, all as black as crowfeather, which matched her long braided hair.

She stood very still, and though she did not look worried about the two armed men with weapons trained on her, both men could feel a tension just under the surface.

Both lowered their weapons, Rinaldo asking, "Why are you out here, milady? You're a long way from the road, and even that road is not used by most folk these days."

She eyed both men over long and slow, choosing to remain silent.

"Do you know what happened here? How that man died over there?" Gareth asked.

She looked down at the trapper's corpse, considering for a moment before looking back to Gareth and nodded a *yes*.

"And how is that?" Rinaldo asked, exchanging glances with Gareth.

Her lips parted, replying in a heavy foreign accent which caused both men to strain to understand. "It is near," she replied.

Gareth briefly scanned the woods while Rinaldo kept the woman talking.

"What's near, milady?"

She looked over her shoulder for a moment, looking intently in a direction, but neither of the men could see the point of interest. Dreamily, she spoke, "It has sight of us."

Raising their weapons again, the two men cautiously readied themselves against the unknown threat the woman riddled at.

A breeze rustled a few leaves along the forest floor. The breeze picked up, and soon, a whole blanket of leaves roiled in the air down the way through the trees. A hissing flowed along the wave of leaves—quiet, but impossibly entrancing, holding the two men's attention for longer than it should.

"Rin," Gareth whispered, and Rinaldo was not sure if Gareth had slurred his name horribly long, or that his hearing had plummeted down an audible sinkhole momentarily. Either way, an instant shroud of panic struck them both, realizing something was awfully askew with their perception.

The foreign woman's arms and neck were moving, waving and swaying at a slow, but blurring speed and rhythm, chanting something in a binaural tone, rippling off their ears at different moments.

There was a figure amidst the leaves now, and just as the two men locked eyes on it, the leaves parted, unveiling a boy whose eyes were upon the woman, softly saying in a curious tone, "you can see. You're the only other I've met who has eyes."

Gareth turned to Rinaldo, head sluggishly complying with the movement, but between them now stood another person. The trapper stood awkwardly upright next to the two men, his mutilated red boney grin snarling wickedly at Gareth.

A hunting knife slammed into the trapper's chest, sinking up to the hilt, the impact rippling waves of force outwards. Rinaldo let go of the knife, taking a step back, waiting to see if the death strike had been enough to kill the already dead man.

Gareth looked briefly back to the boy and the woman, both seeming to be in some sort of warped tunnel, waving slightly on and on through and to the trees beyond. The woman held something. Gareth tried to make it out through the rippling passage, but in his periphery, he caught a swing of Rinaldo's arm, striking the trapper, again and again, but the trapper had Rinaldo in his hands, locked onto his leather jerkin and cloak, pulling him in as the corpse's face bloomed, bone and rotten meat flowered further out, popping blood and gore on Rinaldo.

A blinding swath of silver arced through the trapper's arms. Rinaldo leapt back from the dead man with sword drawn now, the trapper's severed hands still clinging to his jerkin and cloak.

The flowering bone and viscera budded faster, new growth now shooting from his stump arms where Rinaldo had sliced him clean, gore spewing up in gouts from the open wounds.

Just as Gareth brought his arrow to point at the dead man, the rippling all at once snapped flat, the forest floor jarringly coming to a halt.

The twang of a bowstring thudded an arrow into the corpse, sinking in deep, Gareth's boot kicking the thing over, meeting no resistance. It was just a corpse now, horribly disfigured, but a corpse back on the ground that no longer budded like a demonic flower from its openings.

"Hell's crypt! What the fuck was that?" Rinaldo blurted out, shaking off the dead man's hands from him and wiping blood from his face.

Gareth looked back to see the boy running away, holding a hand to his head, quickly becoming obscured by the forest. The woman stood there, watching as the boy disappeared, then turned back to the men.

"What the hell was that?" Gareth asked, looking briefly at the trapper to make sure he was still dead on the forest floor.

"You two have many questions for women walking in the woods."

"Let's get out of this forest," Rinaldo said, visibly rattled from the strange encounter.

Gareth nodded, thoughts still lingering on the madness pitch that had just ripped through their camp, and waved a hand to beckon the foreign woman to walk with them. "Come, let us get back to the old highway first. We'll talk there."

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