

The Red Iron Warp

by Paul Yoder

Prologue

That image had burned in his mind all that day. A portly man, possibly a tradesman by the remnants of what was left of his clothes, had been turned inside out and cast to the side of the highway what must have only been moments before his arrival at that cursed spot in the road, for there had been no flies to the open carrion.

Being a trapper himself, he knew a fresh kill when he saw one, though a slaughter job as the one he had seen there, reminded him of no known animal or human's handiwork he could attribute.

"Turned clean inside out," Gerun said, staring blankly into the dark of the heart of trees he was camping in.

Shaking out of his remembered vision, he snapped a sappy twig, throwing the rest of the pine kindling in the small fire he had just finished.

Setting about his bags, he pulled out a few parcels and wooden containers. The sun was fast setting, as it always did when he still needed its light in setting up camp. Rarely did it seem to move when he was ready for night to come on. He had been the only one on the road that day, passing no others for miles. He hadn't expected anything but that. The old highway had been bypassed in recent years and few now used it. But for a trapper, it was a perfect, well-paved trail that had become a haven for game once more.

Smoke rose off the open fowl carcass he had snared earlier that day. It was too small to sell at market, but it would be enough to cook up for dinner that night. The chill evening air quickly sapped the recently living pheasant of what residual life-heat the meat still clung to.

Pulling his cast iron skillet from the worn folds of his pack, he coated the surface in a generous amount of ghee, placing the skillet along the rim of the fire where the wood had begun to mature into coals.

A sound in the woods cut through the gentle silence of twilight. Gerun stood instantly, gripping the handle of his hunting knife along his belt. He peered out into the folds of vegetation surrounding him, but the light of the fire was working against him, making it increasingly difficult to see past his small camp's perimeter.

The sound had been...a voice he thought; but, of man or animal, it came on too suddenly for him to tell. He had decided to camp quite a ways off the road that night in lieu of the dead man he had happened upon earlier that day, just to be safe in case the culprits had been highway bandits. He was

more than far off the highway's path to expect travelers out near his camp, and that, even for a seasoned woodsman like himself, more than disturbed his peace of mind.

He stood still—the only sounds were that of his fire and the now sizzling skillet for a good few minutes.

Perhaps the omen on the highway had caused him to be slightly unhinged, or maybe it was the thought of the new moon that was due this night. Perhaps...he was hearing things. Never had his ears led him astray before; but, whatever it was that might be out there in the dead of the woods, was keeping ungodly still. If it be predator, it was more skilled at the hunt than he.

He fetched his bow and two arrows, placing them next to his sitting log, and for good measure, drew his hunting knife from its stiff, waxed leather case, sticking it in the log beside him for easy retrieval.

Taking the wooden bowl he had cut up the fowl's meat in, he shakily tossed the slices of pheasant into the angry skillet. Wiping his sweaty palms along his cloak, he grabbed a pinch of salt, peppercorn, and saffron from a small container, dashing the greased meats with a moderate layer of seasoning. The searing meat thirstily soaked up the spices.

The night was quiet once more, all but for his cooking meal, and though he had planned to cook up some cumin and star anise seasoned black rice, fluffed with the pheasant ghee drippings as a side dish, his appetite had lessened under the current aura that had befallen his cursed camp; and, though he did not wish to admit it, even in his head, he preferred to move as little as possible, as every fold of cloth or brush of leather upon his movement was causing his ears to itch with nervous acuteness.

He instead just sat there, idly keeping watch of the meat, keeping it from burning, his gaze being often drawn to the pheasant carcass across the fire from him, steam no longer leaving its open insides.

"Turned clean inside out," Gerun mumbled, returning once again to the mental scene upon which his day had revolved around.

A pop from the meat brought him back to his task at hand, the sight of the shimmering golden reddish-browned chicken bolstering his mood, and courage, a bit.

"'Twas but a queer bird's call. How many years have I been alone in these woods? How many nights alone have I survived under a canopy of leaves and stars?" Gerun's voiced reassurances both emboldened him and caused a slight tremble in his limbs all at once.

He lifted some of the meat to his mouth, sloppily chewing as he finished his proclamations, "countless I say."

In truth, he had only trapped the east side of the highway in this region. The game always seemed to be more plentiful there. Rarely did he hunt or camp on the west side of the road. In all the

years he had gamed this area, this night might have been the deepest he had been into the thick of the west side of the Nightshade Forest.

“What—” a voice, not his own, boomed in a reverberating staccato tone somewhere to his side.

He dropped the skillet, his meal dropping to the ground, now clinging to the dirt and pine needles.

Yanking his knife free from the log, Gerun spun to his left, crouched, seeing nobody in his camp, and scarcely able to see even a few feet now outside of the firelight’s reach.

He knew he had heard a voice, a human voice, this time. He left over his gear, rushing into the dark forest vale, desperate to put a face to his terror.

A tangle of roots and bushes caused him to trip, knocking his cheek along a pine’s rough bark, sprawling him flat on the ground.

Some of the excitement knocked from him, he rose, rubbing the needles and shards of bark from the side of his face, tasting no longer the rich, sweetness of the fowl, but the sour sting of blood from his scrape.

Gerun gritted his teeth, sneering in the gloom, cursing his eyes that were attempting to focus in the night’s darkness. Holding his knife point out, leading his frantic scan of the foliage around him, he stilled, trying to at least hear signs of the intruder.

For long moments, even as his eyes began to adjust to the dark that he was enveloped in, it seemed once again, the signs pointed to him being alone in the woods.

“Nothin’,” he breathed, a whole tangle of emotions confusing his thoughts now.

Slowly, he began back to the fireside. He made it no further than a step before stopping cold in his tracks.

Underfoot was a soft and twiggy pile that squelched and cracked as his foot came down upon it. He knew he had stepped onto a small animal of some sort. But the slipperiness of it rushed the blood from his veins, taking the breath right from him.

He hesitated for a moment, listening, only hearing the leaking of fluids and feeling the wetness through his boots, until dropping his gaze to the ground. His mouth was agape as he looked down at the same pheasant carcass he had stripped earlier now under his foot.

He squinted his eyes as he entered the camp, grabbing his pack, stuffing it with his things, the grease and dirt that clung to the skillet sullyng all of his possessions. Putting his knife back in its case and snatching up his bow and arrows, he turned to hustle away from the place, back to the highway, back to sanity, but in an instant, the fire went out, once more leaving his eyes desperately narrowed trying to adjust to the sudden lack of light.

The coals were cold.

Through blurry vision, Gerun could see a small figure out amongst the trees. He ran towards it, yelling threats at the stranger as he closed the gap—but the gap never fully closed. He rushed through bush after bramble, the figure not moving, its back towards him, but remaining the same distance away from him always.

“What devilry is this?” Gerun screamed, his voice raked with exhaustion and coated in mock anger. “You use me in a ritual, like I’m some lamb on an altar!”

He raised his bow and nocked one of the two arrows, pulling it back, the device rattling in his jarred state.

The small figure turned to face him now, and Gerun hesitated, lowering the bow slightly. It was a young boy, face emotionless, soft, harmless. A face that seemed familiar. As though he had seen it earlier that day. But he had seen no other living person for a few days now, so how could that be the case? The more the deadpanned-faced child stared at him, the more he felt he’d seen him recently, as though a repressed memory was quickly surfacing—the impending revelation frightening him to wits end.

He could hear whisperings in his ear. He wasn't sure when they had started, but they sloshed their guttural musings around in his eardrums now, itching, raking his mind as a unified choir of the damned. The boy stared indifferently at him. The cause of it all, Gerun thought—hoped—as he raised his arrow and loosed it at the boy.

Suddenly, he was the thing on the road. The dead man, looking up to see himself standing above him, looking down in concerned disgust. Mouthing the words over and over again, “turned clean inside out, turned clean inside out.” He had somehow become the tumble and sprawl of all the raw innards of the carcass on the road, exposed to the air, stabbing with tender pain, wanting to be covered by that stretch of skin that once was protectively, warmly, over him.

Then, the next moment...he was back in the woods on his log, a pink, starlit sky overhead, knife stuck in the bark beside him, his pheasant meat searing in his red-hot skillet on a bed of unlit firewood—though, Gerun the trapper, he no longer was.

“Left my team roadside. Shouldn’t ‘ave done that,” he calmly said, tugging curtly at the hems of his trim evening vest, turning to go back to the highway to prepare his coach for the ride back home.

“No,” he said, all of a sudden feeling something was off. “This is not as it should be....”

A face drifted halfway into his peripheral vision. He was trying to look towards it to get a better look at their face but no matter how he turned, he could only see the blurry side glance of their

features. Chunks of earth began falling up, some sections of wood dropped out around where he stood, leaving him in a blank, grey void with half a child's face in his vision.

It moved, ever so slowly into full view.

The face he had seen...when? Just a moment ago, or a century ago when he had been Gerun, the trapper? Neither felt accurate. Time seemed the issue in his guesswork, as if the concept was utterly lacking in scope or measurement. The void. The child, soft, unconcerned. Had he not shot him?

He landed, as if the land that had fallen away from him eons ago, now all decided to obey the laws of his once physical realm that he had been a specimen in, and snapped back in place, the location he existed in becoming the west reaches of the Nightshade Forest once more.

Gerun yelled into the dark of the woods, pain ripping his breath from him as his face and torso began splitting apart, warping bone, muscle, entrails, and brain matter into a flowering fatal growth.

Gerun was still. His limbs no longer strained with fright and awareness. His viscera exposed to the night's chill, steaming the surrounding area, his flayed face showing a red grin along his warped skull.

"Turned clean inside out," a child's voice overhead said in an emotionless, soft tone.

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