Rabbit, Skin and Walker

SPLIT INTO TWO SEPARATE STORIES: Rabbit and Skin, Skin and Walker

The stench of burned powder filled Walker’s nostrils, rushed into his lungs and stung him from within. He coughed deeply, raggedly, expelling the mixture of deadly fumes from himself; the gunpowder of his profession and the thick, acrid tobacco smoke that kept his reservations about his work hidden away. Walker inhaled, tried to straighten up before another fit of coughing drove him to his knees. His rifle’s barrel dug into his shoulder; the tiny nub of the front sight caught the thin and tattering remains of his union frock under his buffalo hide overcoat. The old Minnie ball that had cracked Walker’s rifle stock shortly before dislodged along with the last brass button from his coat’s cuff; Both dropped onto a dead man’s chest. A stern-eyed eagle and a deformed bullet staring up from above an unmoving hand which still clutched a bloodied knife.

Walker wiped his brow with the flat back of his fist, pushing away his sweat while smudging on blood in its stead. He gagged as the tuft of hair passed by his nose, the freshly severed bit of scalp swinging limply from his grip. He retched as he pushed it into side pouch of his knapsack atop the others. The bag kicked up a small cloud of dust, one which filled a moonbeam and danced in lazy spirals over Walker’s uninvited guests. The bounty hunter staggered to his feet, wiped crimson onto his sleeve and patted the short but deep gash in his thigh. He could wait to dress it. For now Walker needed to get on the move. He surveyed the flat rock before him, the path he’d come down on and the deep arroyo just beside it that could provide cover during his retreat.

He cursed the horse that abandoned him and the men at his feet. They shouldn’t have been involved. Should have kept away, but close ties meant they *had* to avenge their kin. A proper Christian would bury them, even if they weren’t believers. But that’d be a proper Christian. Instead Walker took a step away, wincing as his leg revealed its infirmity. Time demanded he run, but living up to his name was all he had left. Cursed that fact too, right along with the mangled tokens in his bag. He’d come for a single bounty, one piece of murdering scum, and instead would return to the small fortune that the state would pay for five confirmed ‘Red’ kills. But maybe with that much cash he could set down his Henry rifle and the poorly named ‘Peacemaker’ once and for all, take the coach home to Ohio and never smell blood again.

Walker pulled his scarf up over his nose, sucked in the cool desert air before hoisting his bag onto his shoulder and slinging his rifle under his arm. It slipped from the crook of his elbow, dropped on the moccasin-clad foot of one of the dead with a ‘thud.’ Walker stooped to retrieve his weapon and caught a glimpse of the man’s blank and glassy eyes lit by the heavens above. He snatched up his rifle and threw his eyes up to the moon, his frustrations tearing from his chest to shake the sky.

High above, Gah-Yazhi shuddered at the inhuman shriek and the ice it sent up his spine. From the rocky canyon’s edge he’d seen everything. This left no room to wonder; brother had been taken by *yee naaldlooshii*. He hadn’t seen the creature’s human face, sister had brought the news to the hunting party from the grazing camp secondhand. But if it was a *Belegaana* settler like father had said, he was impossibly far from the small townships to the north. Gah-Yazhi had seen the scuffle, the way father and the uncles had gone down to confront the cursed creature with their bows and grandfather’s treasured percussion rifle. Just before they’d come onto the ledge where the witch had its cookfire, the beast must have smelled them. It had vanished into the shadows, clutching what Gah-Yazhi thought was club, or maybe one of the blowguns witches were said to use to give people bone sickness.

Father had gotten off his shot when the dark form had burst out from behind a cleft of rock, belched fire directly into the monster’s chest. But even grandfather’s rifle couldn’t stop the beast. It had clubbed father in the head with its weapon, knocked him to the ground before turning the stick on the uncles. It spat thunder like the rifle, but more ferociously. Over and over the monster’s witchcraft had sounded out, knocking down men like mere playthings. When one of the hunting party tried to stand, it would hit them again, attack them until they stopped moving.

The young man pushed away his burning hatred and clawing terror, felt for the quiver near his leg. He drew an arrow and rose up onto one knee, readying his bow and straightening his back with a deep breath in. Without the beasts true, human name, he’d have no way to stop the shape shifting witch if his first shot failed to fell it. It would tear him apart as brutally as it had the others.

(After Gah-Yazhi shoots walker, walker falls out over the ledge and in the moonlight, as he falls away into the river, Gah-Yazhi catches a glimpse of his face, and describes it as a bone-pale skin)

Gah-Yazhi died telling one last story for his grandchildren, words long unspoken pouring like water over his lips to tell of his encounter with the one, white Skinwalker.

Walker died thinking how nice and cool the water felt on his face.