

Walking Through A Forest That Loathes His Presence

The Felon had shot a man on the edge of the forest. He wasn't sure why, though he hadn't pondered it much. He had, however, begun fleeing frantically and without reason from some obscure judgement or law as soon as he truly understood in his psychosis the body on the ground and the gun in his hands. One swift matter of inane and clouded judgement dictated his course: he turned to the woods for cover, and passed into another place.

The woods were not normal. It was as though in some horrible cosmic wager the rules of that land had been put at hazard and lost completely. Time, distance, and other curiosities seem provisory or eroded entirely, and he'd walked through the trees with nary a change in scenery or a pang in his stomach for what he judged to be about a week.

The Felon, and in the woods he had forgotten his name although he did not realize it, had seen things that first appeared odd and then strange entirely. Once, a bipedal sort of antelope crossed through the bushes in front of him, turning uninterested to the scrappy gunman as it lopped by with a horrifyingly unnatural gait. At night, he heard swooping noises over his improvised fire, and if he looked close enough, he could see the dark shadow of a creature passing over him again and again.

Strange. Strange, but not dangerous until the beast in the woods.

It'd been nine days on the trail when the Felon first caught wind of the beast. It marched behind him, just out of view, and no warning shot or threat could fall or diminish its resolve. It would have him, that is, unless he had it first.

It took the shape of a massive bear, but had a coat of metal and a large sort of glowing, circular, orange window that took up almost the entirety of its face, if such a word was even applicable. Hinges near the bottom of the thing's stagnant head left a great deal of pain to the imagination, and the Felon did not dawdle walking for long.

At night, in the clearing where he had no choice but to bivouac, it stopped not far from the edge of the circle of firelight and stared. He watched warily the dark with his old rifle gripped in his palms. The thing's single, cyclopean optic flashed orange through the growth, and he spent the time watching moths and specks of dust roll through its gleam. The fire sparked, and the wind changed. That great, serene, shambling mutant glided gently onto a branch behind him and, perhaps looking over the Felon and to the mechanism beyond, made no sound.

Silence in that profound darkness. Eventually, it spoke. "Turn, sir," it said tonelessly. "Turn, let each acknowledge each."

He turned and aimed squarely at the creature, his old rifle feeling all too weighted in his hands. "Leave, or I'll shoot!"

It was the swooping bird-thing that had spent nights stalking him, winged like a crow, beaked like a raven, and taloned like a vulture but otherwise in the abominated shape of a human man. "Sir," it spoke in a sort of mock offend. "Use that toy, if you feel so sure. It's just like killing a man."

“Don’t think I won’t. It’s fully loaded, and I’ve a good aim. Leave me, or I’ll lay you into the ground.”

“All the same, all the same.” Its hooded visage flicked first to the fire, then the creature beyond. “A fine situation, I’d say. Shoot that and it charges; that creature may seem to have little or nothing up in its carapace, but it knows what a gun sounds like by its dents.”

“And what are you going to do when I lower it?”

“Speak without that weapon polluting the clearing. Throw it aside, you know it’s no good for any of us.”

He tossed it sideways with no small measure of contempt. He turned back, and the eye had not moved. “I don’t know what you are,” he spat. “And I don’t know where I am. It’s a strange country, and I’m lost. Leave me, that’s all I ask.”

“It’s a strange country indeed,” the bird-thing spoke, and gestured with one talon out beyond them. “You’re on the run. Don’t think you’re safe from blame out here, this strange country knows what you’ve done, as do I. Perhaps even that creature has latched onto that stench and followed it like any smell.”

“I’ll pick up that gun and I’ll shoot it.”

“You’ll be torn apart, you can see those dents in its chassis too. If you think that gun is a blessing in this place, you’ll only draw attention to yourself,” he shook his head. “I think you’ve been made delirious, a quick end.”

“I’m the only one here of sound mind, you cretin,” the Felon said. He was sweating now, recollecting perhaps for the first time since he set out the horrible start of his journey. The man, gunfire.

“Were you of sound mind when you killed that man? Did you act with your brain, or with your eyes? Only the man who acts dishonestly is truly guilty of a crime.”

The Felon stared up at the creature on its perch. It was hard to discern any facial emotion through its veil. “I’ll talk no more of it, not to you or to any of those constables, if they manage to catch me,” he swore under his breath, and looked back up. “Just tell me what you want.”

“Nihil dicit, just so,” it gave a grim chuckle. “I’m not quite here to steal from you, runaway. An eye for an eye, so to speak.”

“I don’t understand you.”

He pointed into the darkness slowly bleeding into the circle of dying fire. “Yonder beast,” the creature spoke, and indeed, the Felon had almost forgotten the thing and turned back to it as if to report its continued existence. “I can get rid of it, nice and easy. Tell me, is that a fair end of the bargain?”

“You told me yourself that bullets won’t kill it.”

“With all due respect, bullets are for the dull or disenfranchised, but I’ve my ways,” it turned obscurely to a patch of ground beside him. “On the subject of bullets, why don’t we speak of your arm?”

The rifle, of course, the one he'd thrown aside. He'd forgotten about that too, and turned sideways to glare at it. "My gun. The hell do you want with it?"

"I wouldn't take that thing for the clothes off your back," it stated simply. "Here's the deal: I'll erase that thing in the trees, and you'll throw that contraption into the fire where it belongs. You've done enough damage with it, I'd wrought."

The Felon looked bemused. "You want me out here without a weapon, is that right?"

"You'll find something else, but you can't have that. Not here."

He gestured wildly to the glow. "If one of those finds me?"

"That's not how it works," he rose on the branch, and stood no larger than seven feet tall. "Throw it or I fly, your choice."

"You're a miserable villain, do you know that?"

He laughed, and the forest seemed to quake in the sudden intrusion of the noise. "You're a curious study, sir," he was good-humoured, and the Felon felt more unnerved with every passing moment. "We'll do business again. It's a seller's market, after all. Throw that thing in the fire and I'll do as I've bid."

He shuttled awkwardly towards the discarded rifle, keeping his eyes on the perched judge as he did. Gripping it, he took one last inventory over the creature in the woods, and threw it into the smallness of the fire. It crackled, grew, and he watched the monster

back further into the trees. Turning one last time to his witness, he balked.

“Is that it? Are you just going t-“

Wings. They sprouted from its back in an instant and measured from oily feather to feather twelve feet in length. Its arm-talons suddenly gripped the branch on which it had lazily sat with a force of power that was insane and unbelievable in the dark of the moon. It burst forward into the trees, into the thing, and it made no sound as metal collided with eldritch bone and eldritch strength. The Felon saw some of this, or perhaps all of it, and it was precisely the sight of it that caused his tired and throttled brain to pass out on the shallow dirt, where he saw no more.

He awoke in the morning when the air was humid and the fire was cold. He'd hit his head on the ground, not with excessive force, but enough to give him a phantom pain in the back of his skull. He turned up to the tree, then to the edge of the clearing, and found both void. There was nothing in the ashes of the fire.

He ducked into the space where the beast had been tremulously, finding nothing but trampled devil grass and a squirrel who, on the edge of the space, was trembling on the ground senselessly like a prisoner of war. He picked it up, saw no intelligence in its eyes, and twisted its neck gently and quietly set it down in the weeds to die.

Nihil dicit, just so.

He grabbed his meager belongings and set off on the trail. The leaves which had sat green from the beginning of his journey were

changing to a sickly brown moments into his walk, and he felt strangeness in the air.

He was no criminal, and he wasn't lost, either. Everything, he thought, was going to be fine, just fine.