

# WARPSTONE

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## Red Moon Rising A Short Story by Martin Oliver

The bloody moon hung low over the black of the forest. Beneath, mist curled between the trunks. Maybe that was red too - but Albrecht was in no fit state to notice, as pain wracked his body and convulsions flung him to the floor.

Spasms forced his face into the dirt, and the smell of rich loam became almost overwhelming. His sight swam, colours blurred and changed alarmingly, and he felt his flesh crawling across the altering bones. The time of changes was upon him, and Albrecht knew he was too close to home. Fighting it, dragging himself forward inch by painful inch, every advance became a triumph of will. Fingers - they were still recognisably fingers, for all that they were stunted and clawed, he noticed with relief - dug into the soil, pulled at tree roots, struggling deeper into the midnight darkness of the forest's heart.

Albrecht regained his senses in a state of agony he knew only too well. Every muscle, every tendon, was stretched and aching. His head pounded, his ears rang, and when he finally dared to open his eyes they were lanced by the harsh light of a noonday sun. It was all he could manage to haul himself upright against a tree trunk, panting and sweating even from that small exertion. But it was only when the beating in his head lessened a little and he had caught his breath that the real horror struck him. Like rough brown gloves, scaly and dry across both hands, was what could only be dried blood. A long, tired, groan slipped from him. What to do? What could he do? Wait. Recover a little. Then... Then find a stream, or a pond, and clean himself up. In the meantime, nothing - apart from muttering a despairing prayer, half anger, and half unalloyed grief. The pool gave no favours. Under the gold-red canopy of reflected leaves, the tan-brown of his bloodstained skin. Hands, chest, and face. By Sigmar, it had never been this bad before. Never. He shuddered, thinking of some beast, lying half eaten somewhere in the forest, stinking of fresh blood, and the weight of raw meat bloating his guts. It was all too much. He staggered away as his stomach rebelled. This time, he felt no regret about succumbing to convulsions and retching violently.

The next few days were spent deep in the forest, living wild, hunting when each morning's pain subsided, gathering enough pelts to justify his claim that this was just another hunting trip. Regaining his cotton shirt and breeches was an easy matter once he had his bearings again, and several evenings were spent repairing and cleaning them. He stayed there even after the pains subsided and sleep returned. He needed time to gather his thoughts away from the bustle of the village, and besides, this way he could concentrate on trapping until he had gathered enough pelts to live off for many weeks to come.

But when it came, his return brought him no joy. Glad as he was to hear the laughter and noise of the children, to recognise the familiar faces, to smell the woodsmoke and cooking meat, it was plain that something was amiss here. A strange frisson chilled him; intuition chided him for returning, and he wished he had taken a few more days in which to prepare himself. Warm greetings from fellow trappers were mixed with sorrow, and a news that chilled him. Reiner, one of the younger hunters, had not returned from his trip. He had been found by a search party, three days ago - or at least, what was left of

him had been. His throat was torn out, his body gored and mauled. Wolf bites, they all agreed - but only the one set of tracks.

Albrecht felt, once again, spasms deep in his gut. His mouth swung open, puppet-like, but no voice would come. Ashen and silent, he left his friends and began clearing up. It was clear the news had shaken him. The traders grumbled that he hadn't even haggled as they fleeced him; friends could not draw him into conversation. Grief, they all assumed.

Desolate and despairing he went about his own strange business. It did not take him long.

The ground was red. Maybe he was, too - this time, he didn't care. He gave himself up easily as convulsions wracked his body for the last time. When they found him, he was curled around a silver knife that stuck out from his punctured heart, and the blood filled his crescent out into a still-spreading circle.

But what mystified them most was the look of contentment on Albrecht's face.