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TRAILS OF BLOOD

Argo trudged through heaps of mud and fallen leaves, shotgun in hand. The dense autumn fog obscured the road, so he kept an ear out for danger. The woods were silent. Two hours ago, he was contracted for a new job: a missing caravan. At the time, it didn't seem too bad, but now that he was several miles into the woods, an inkling of doubt clouded his mind.

A violent shrill broke the silence. Argo stopped in his tracks and aimed his gun into the woods. A small black bird flew out of the trees. The Huntsman groaned, relaxing his grip.

“Scared of crows, Argo?”

A young, smirking blond approached him from behind, clad in a leather breastplate and a machete sheathed on his belt.

“Fuck off, Matt,” Argo muttered. He took a swig of whiskey from his tin flask. It tasted of cinnamon, which burned down his throat. Not the most ideal traveling drink, but it was all he had.

“I guess they *are* pretty freaky. Eh, Dave?” Matthew chuckled.

Another Huntsman walked beside them. A dark-skinned fellow with a silver talisman around his neck and a rifle resting on his shoulder. He ignored Matthew and examined the foliage around him.

“I don't think we're findin' that caravan anytime soon,” David said. “You sure they went this way?”

“The client said they were heading to Old Grove. We should be close,” Argo said, continuing down the road. The others followed suit. They passed by some moldy fences and an old, unlit lamp post.

Matthew yawned. “I'm starting to think this was a lost cause.”

“If we don't find 'em here, we'll just ask around town.”

“I'd rather go back to Gino's, honestly.”

“Can't buy drinks without cash,” David remarked.

“Well, we *could* just tell the client they're dead.”

“Without proof? C’mon.”

Matt shrugged. “Therions don’t leave bodies. What else would we show him?”

Dave hesitated to respond.

“By the way,” he continued, “have you noticed that more of those Macabrist freaks have been popping up lately?”

“Not really, no.”

“I ran into one this morning and he started preaching about the ‘end of days’ or some bullshit. I swear, they’re all over the damn city, crawling outta the woodworks like a bunch of roaches—”

“Dammit, Matt. Will you quiet down?” Argo interjected.

Matthew furrowed his brow. “What’s *your* problem?”

He stopped in his tracks. “I dunno if you noticed, but we’re in the middle of therion territory. The last thing I need is the whole forest tearing my ass open.”

“C’mon man, knock it off,” Dave butted in, “we ain’t talking *that* loud.”

“People have been disappearin’ left and right in these parts, Dave. I just wanna find this caravan and get the hell outta here.”

“So do we, man. No need to be a jackass about it.”

“I’m not—”

A dissonant, human-like shriek echoed from the forest. The Huntsmen readied their weapons, but nothing came.

“Whatever,” Argo shook his head. “Let’s get moving.”

“Uh, guys?” Matthew said, pointing his machete down the road. “Look.”

Dave and Argo followed his gaze. An old village lay beyond the fog, ruined and devoid of life. Shattered glass and chips of wood were strewn across the soil. Rats and other vermin scuttled through the wreckage, infesting the air with a sickly odor.

“What the hell happened here? Where are we?” Dave said.

“This is Old Grove,” Argo said in a deadpan tone.

“What? How?” Matthew said. “What happened to the Schism?”

“They couldn’t afford one,” Argo replied. “All they had were Huntsmen, maybe an Aegis or two.”

Matthew glanced at him. “And you’re saying they’re all *dead*?”

“I don’t know.”

David grasped his talisman and whispered a short prayer.

“We should get outta here. No doubt this place is haunted,” Matt said.

Argo observed the ruins before him. He had been to Old Grove before, at least a month ago. It used to be a quiet village with humble townsfolk and Huntsmen. He even shared a beer with the guild captain. Seeing it as it was now, a ghost town smeared with blood and ichor, made him shudder. He had to know what happened, perhaps out of morbid curiosity. A Huntsman must hunt, else he becomes the prey; at least, that’s what his father told him. He clutched his shotgun and stepped into the village. Matthew grabbed his shoulder.

“Argo, what are you doing?”

He kept moving, shrugging off Matt’s hand. “We need to find that caravan.”

“Like hell we do! I’m not staying here.”

“Then go. I won’t stop you.”

Argo disappeared into the fog. Matthew exchanged looks with David. With a sigh, he pressed his fingers against the blade of his machete. It was inscribed with intricate runes, and with the flick of his thumb they shimmered with ether, engulfing the blade in flames. Reluctantly, he entered the ruins with Dave in tow.

The Huntsmen made their way through the rubble. Monstrous footprints and wagon tracks flattened the roads. They passed through the marketplace, lined with vacant stalls containing blood-stained leather, spoiled fruits, maggot-ridden produce, and shattered pottery. Not a single soul to be found.

“What a shitty way to spend the afternoon,” Matt laughed nervously. He held out his fiery blade like a torch. The light did nothing to penetrate the fog. “Man, I could really go for a pint right now.”

Argo sighed. There was still some whiskey left in his flask. He rarely shared it with others, but it was the least he could do to make up for his outburst. He tossed the flask to Matthew, who barely caught it in his off-hand.

“Try not to drink it all.”

“Roger that,” Matthew raised the flask in a toast. He downed the whole thing in one gulp, likely out of spite.

“You think anyone managed to escape?” David asked Argo.

“If they did,” he replied, “they’d have run back to Cantham to tell everyone.”

Dave cursed under his breath, though Argo could hear him perfectly.

They pressed on. Argo scanned the ruined abodes and checked every corner he passed by. Even though it was midday, the therions could have been anywhere, waiting for him; and in fog like this, they were especially cunning. He peered into the vast grayness ahead of him. In the distance, the remains of a caravan sat beside the road. Some of the wheels were broken and its contents littered the ground. Etched into the wagon’s side was the emblem of a lucky horseshoe, just like the client described.

“This is it,” he told the others.

“Where’s the horse?” Matthew asked. Nobody answered.

Argo inspected the wagon. Wedged between two barrels was a man’s severed arm, covered in gashes. A silver wedding ring adorned one of its fingers. He didn’t dare to take it for himself.

“Well, Argo, we found what you were looking for,” Matt impatiently knocked on the wagon. “Are you satisfied? Can we go home now?”

A shiver went down Argo’s spine. He believed he had grown numb to the carnage of death years ago. Families torn asunder, rookie Huntsmen gone missing in the night; he had seen many horrible things in his life. It was an unfortunate part of the job, yet something about this massacre made him uneasy.

A hissing laughter drowned out his thoughts. He turned his head. The contorted face of a man stared back at him. Only, it wasn’t a man at all. The therion emerged from the fog, revealing its writhing, centipede-like body. Tears of black blood seeped from its eyes and trickled down to its jagged maw, large enough to swallow a man whole. It towered over the Huntsmen. Argo recognized it immediately—an Omucade.

“Look out!” he shouted to Matthew.

Snapping its mandibles, the therion lunged at Matthew. With feline agility, he dodged its strike and countered with a flaming slash, severing one of its many legs. The creature yelped and slithered away.

Argo studied the Omucade’s movements, trying to gauge when it would strike again. It was too fast; too erratic. A misplaced shot would have simply bounced off its carapace. The therion retreated into the fog. His heart pounded in his chest. Was this

the embrace of fear, or the thrill of the hunt? He couldn't tell the difference. He grit his teeth and aimed into the unknown.

With a guttural hiss, the Omucade barreled towards him from behind the caravan, toppling it over. A torrent of debris knocked the Huntsmen off their feet. A crate salted fish pinned Argo to the ground. The therion unhinged its jaw and skewered Matthew with its mandibles. He dropped his machete and howled in pain as the creature sunk its teeth into his body.

"Matthew!" David cried out. He fired several rounds that glanced off the therion's armor. It stubbornly clung to its meal, thrashing Matt around like a ragdoll.

Argo struggled against the crate crushing his legs. His friend's screams rang through his head; he had to save him, no matter the cost. He endured the pain and lifted the crate with all his strength. Scrambling to his feet, he grabbed the shotgun and glared at the Omucade, only to see—

Matthew's mangled corpse, drenched in blood.

He froze. No—his mind was playing tricks. Matthew couldn't have died. He couldn't have.

The Omucade cackled like a madman. Argo looked up to see its horrid face, smeared with Matthew's blood. It was *smiling*.

Overwhelmed with pain, Argo let out a livid scream and sprinted towards the therion. A blossom of azure bullets erupted from the barrel of his gun, piercing the Omucade's rotten skin. It writhed as black blood poured down its face. He ignored the recoil and shot several more slugs of ether into its trunk.

The therion swerved its body and swept Argo off his feet. It closed in for the kill, but David charged in from behind and leapt onto its back, driving his bayonet into the nape of its neck. The Omucade flailed around, trying to shake him off. Argo stood and pointed his gun at its deformed skull.

The shotgun roared across the village. Argo's ears rang. Black blood and chunks of brain matter scattered into the air. The therion slumped to the ground with a loud thud, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Matthew!" David wrenched the rifle from the Omucade's flesh and rushed to his friend's side.

"Oh God," He held his shredded remains and wept. "*Fuck!*"

Argo stared at the therion's carcass, then back at Dave. He came to a grim realization—Matthew died because of *him*. If he hadn't been so careless, they could have marched back to Cantham to live another day. They could have shared a drink at the pub and listened to Gino's stories about his most bizarre patrons. But instead, he chose to press on without a care in the world. Was this truly the fate of a Huntsman? To be unceremoniously torn to pieces and left to rot in the middle of nowhere, like his father and his grandfather before him? Argo choked up, cursing to himself.

The wails of the damned echoed throughout the forest. More therions were closing in, drawn to the Huntsmen's looming despair. Argo looked down at his friends. Matthew gazed back at him with hollowed eyes. Wispy black mist seeped from his pores. He was minutes away from turning into a therion. Argo grabbed David's arm and pulled him away.

"What are you doing?" Dave cried. He struggled against Argo's iron grip.

"We need to go, *now*."

"We can't just leave him here!"

"Fuckin' hell, Dave, the whole damn forest knows we're here!" Argo shook him desperately. "Do you wanna die with him?"

He glanced back at Matthew. His body twitched like a dead insect as it gurgled its own blood. With no time to say farewell, Dave picked up his rifle and ran.

Dave and Argo dashed out of the village as at least a dozen therions bellowed from behind. Despite his efforts, Argo's stamina waned. He stopped and gasped for air, cursing at his tired legs. The fight with the Omucade left him exhausted. David wasn't doing too well, either.

"How the hell," Dave wheezed, "are we gonna get out of here?"

Argo peered down the road. Trying to outrun the therions was out of the question. Cantham was miles away. There was no other option: he had to stand his ground knowing full well what would happen. That was until a terrified horse neighed from beyond the woods.

A steed with a dark mane galloped out of the bushes. Strips of leather from its harness dragged across the soil. It belonged to the caravan, no doubt. Argo took a deep breath. This horse was their only chance to escape.

“Keep an eye out,” he told David, “I’ll handle this.”

The horse trembled from the therions’ screams. He ambled towards it.

“Easy there, we’re not monsters.”

It whimpered as he approached. He held out his hand and gently brushed its mane. The shivering died down, but not completely.

“Calm down. You’re not hurt, are you? We need your help.”

“Argo!”

He turned around. David aimed his rifle into the village. From the fog, the silhouette of a man crawled towards them. It was Matthew, his body twisted into the shape of a Mananggal. His entrails dragged behind him, leaving a trail of blood. His nails grew into razor-thin claws and demonic wings sprouted from his back. Tears of ichor ran down his face.

“Dave,” he spoke in a haunting tone. “Argo ...”

David stood there, wide-eyed. His hands trembled.

“Don’t ... leave me here.” The therion flapped his wings and took to the air. He opened his mouth to reveal a long, serrated tongue. “*Don’t leave me!*”

Matthew darted towards Dave. He held out his rifle, but couldn’t muster the courage to shoot. The therion grabbed David by the neck and drove his claws into his stomach. He coughed up blood.

Argo sprinted down the road and tackled Matthew. The two tumbled to the ground. The therion clawed at his back, tearing through his shirt. With the butt of his shotgun, he struck Matthew in the temple. Argo pinned the therion down with his boot and pointed the gun to his face. He hesitated.

“Argo, please,” the therion wept.

Sweat ran down his forehead. The wails in the distance grew louder. David lay beside him, blood gushing from his stomach. Matthew stared into his soul. Was he truly about to kill his own friend?

The therion wrapped his claws around the barrel of the gun.

“*Argooo!*”

Recalling his father’s words, he closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.