

WARPSTONE

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TRAPPER

A Short Story by Martin Oliver

Something stirred, just up ahead. In the pale light that filtered through the forest, a shape could be seen wending its way through the shadows. It stopped, then started laughing. It wasn't a pleasant sound. Wulf decided that whatever this might be, it was absolutely the last thing he wanted to bump into tonight. Without further ado, he turned tail and ran through the undergrowth, away from the lunatic shriekings, back towards his comrades.

He didn't make it very far.

"Damn this forest! No paths, no settlements..."

"You lack vision, Pyotr. You have only lost your way in the darkness because you have no sense of where you are going, what you are aiming for. Look; there. See it?"

"No."

"A trail. Leads off into the forest, back in the direction we came from."

"So what good is that, then, eh?"

"You said there were no paths. There are plenty of paths. You simply haven't found the one you seek."

Sensing the rapid rise in tension, Franz took matters into his own hands, and butted in.

"Quiet, the both of you. We've no idea what's out here none at all. Bickering will only draw unwanted attention." The three of them plodded forwards in silence. Pyotr and Franz forced their way through the brush, Eldariel somehow managing to wind his way around it all.

That was one of the infuriating things about Eldariel. No matter how scratched, bedraggled or begrimed anyone else became, he would always look immaculate. He had said several times that this was no trick, but simply involved a little care and attention, and that he couldn't fathom how humans managed to be so clumsy. That was another of the infuriating things about him the constant surprised pity at the shortcomings of everyone else.

In fact, there seemed to be an endless number of infuriating things about him, when you thought about it...

The Inn was small, isolated. Franz didn't like it: they'd found the road, and it had led here, true enough; the inn looked normal, if a little weather-beaten. It was just... no; he couldn't put his finger on it. It was just *wrong*.

"See? Nothing to worry about. This is probably where Wulf got to. Knowing him, he's probably inside having a jar, waiting for us to catch him up."

"Pyotr, my friend..."

"Don't you start, Elf. Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it."

"But the way you try and persuade yourself..."

"I *said*, I don't want to hear it. Not a word more, alright?"

They left the trees, slipping out onto the dense-packed, moonlit soil of the road. It'd been a while. Wulf's cross-country shortcut may have saved them a day or two, but the

Drakwald forest was no place for sane people to wander, especially at night. Sure enough, the trek had brought them out onto one of the trading routes that criss-crossed the forest, but it didn't look like an important one, and it was hard to tell which of the major routes it might connect with. Their map was good, but little tracks like this, no wider than a cart well, they were forever springing up and falling in to disrepair. No map could hope to show them all.

So why was there an inn here?

Warily, Franz and Pyotr started moving along the edges of the path, close to the trees. Eldariel strode forwards with confidence; the strangeness of the place seemed not to bother him.

"Ah!" He said, with obvious pleasure. "The Trapper's Cabin! What a delightful notion. And it explains a lot, too, don't you think?"

"Perhaps..." muttered Franz. He remained dubious. There was a light on downstairs; the place was obviously in use. What worried him was that he knew full well from his own time spent hunting that this wasn't really the season for... well, for anything in particular. Places like this normally worked with the seasons, with the staff moving on to other jobs in town when business flagged. Had someone else stumbled across this haven in the midst of this black-hearted forest? Was that why the light was on?

With a gesture to Pyotr, he followed the Elf along the road. Whoever was in there, they surely wouldn't mind letting a few travellers rest in comfort for one night. The place was big enough for twenty, he was sure, and Franz had been looking forward to a night spent in a proper bed for longer than he could remember. He was getting far too old to take any pleasure in this rough adventuring life any more.

The door was rough, the curtains drawn. Light filtered out, and peering through the gaps just gave an impression of a small, dimly lit bar. Tables, chairs... no patrons, but that wasn't unusual it was late. Anyone staying here would probably be in bed by now. There did seem to be someone at the bar, though. Wiping a mug, by the look of it. Pyotr looked over to Franz and beamed.

"Looks promising. Coming?" Franz nodded, distractedly. It all seemed normal enough. He just couldn't quite shake the feeling that... something... Never mind. It would come to him, sooner or later.

Something in the forest watched them as they entered. It giggled softly to itself; a knowing chuckle, like that of a child playing a practical joke.

On a whim, it decided to pay them a visit, and show them its new toy.

The door opened into a cosy, quiet room. Tables were neatly positioned around the edges. The centre was well-kempt, covered with fresh straw. Behind the bar, at the far side of the room, a bald man stood wiping a beer glass, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He nodded, once, then went back to wiping.

"Well, it all seems normal enough." Pyotr said with relief. Franz nodded, halfheartedly. Eldariel didn't respond at all; he just carried on watching the barman.

"It's good to be inside, out of that chill wind, and sitting down, that I'll grant you." Franz looked around him. "Nice enough place, too. Good and clean. Bet their beds are nice and soft."

"Why is that man still cleaning the glass?"

"What?" Franz almost jumped as the Elf spoke. He peered up towards the bar.

"Probably a tough spot. Why don't you go ask him, eh?"

"I'll go." Pyotr said. "I could do with a drink. Want one, Franz?"

"Thanks." Pyotr scraped back the chair, fished around for his purse, then ambled over to the bar.

He stopped abruptly, and started backing away.

Franz's chair shot backwards as he sprang to his feet, fumbling with his crossbow, but Pyotr was already being dragged forwards, screaming. Like some sort of child's toy, the barman had flung his arms around Pyotr in one rubbery loop glass, cloth and all and was dragging him awkwardly over the bar. Beside him, another figure drifted upwards, as if lifted on invisible strings. A serving girl, once, by the look of her. Now... well, who knew what she was now, as she pulled open her chest and leaned forwards to engulf the screaming Pyotr.

Franz's bolt buried itself deep in the barman's head. The figure turned to look at him, seemingly perplexed, and then heaved himself forwards onto the bar. The barmaid came with him, and it looked like a couple of other torsos might follow as well. It seemed for all the world as if some child's finger puppets had been sewn together, only to take on a life of their own.

"So strange... so... familiar... so many personalities, trapped in one body..."

"Sigmar smite your soul!" blurted Franz. "Shoot it, you fool!" Eldariel jerked out of his reverie, loosed an arrow at the monstrosity. It didn't seem to do much good. With a sinking feeling, Franz realised that they needed help, and soon.

Their hearts surged with hope as the door crashed open, to reveal a dramatically posed figure with a familiar face.

"Wulf!" and then with a sinking feeling of despair, Franz realised his mistake.

It was Wulf's face, alright. It was just that it was draped at a rakish angle over someone else's features. As it started to laugh its lunatic laugh, the mask slipped off, landing with a wet slopping noise at the feet of the intruder.

Franz waited to see no more. Tables and chairs scattering in his wake, he half ran, half fell across the room before jumping head-first through a window. Eldariel was mere moments behind him, vaulting the scattered furniture, diving after Franz. The sound of their panicky retreat lingered for a few moments, before giving way to the soft sounds of the forest.

It moved from the doorway, crossed the floor, to tend and pet the injured creature.

Giggling with delight, it noticed that there was already a new bud. Soon, Pyotr's mind and body would be completely reconstituted as a part of the entity which had consumed him. Grinning the grin of a mischievous child, it remembered the look on the faces of the travellers.

Briefly, a coherent thought flickered through its turbulent mind. They might tell others what had happened. They might lead others back to this place to hunt them down. They might send the Witch Hunters. It laughed aloud, unable to contain its delight and anticipation. He hoped they came soon, then he could *really* start having fun...