

**THE DM TOOL CHEST**

# DEATH IN DENIAL

**TERROR ON THE TRAIL PART I**



HELP A PAIR OF SPIRITS MOVE ON FROM THIS REALM AND  
DISCOVER THE GRUESOME TRUTH OF THEIR MURDER



## DEATH IN DENIAL

**D***Death in Denial* is part 1 of 2 of a ghostly Fifth Edition mystery adventure called “Terror on the Trail” for **three to six characters of 3rd- to 4th-level**, optimized for a party of **four 3rd-level characters**. A pair of men are murdered on the outskirts of town while on a hunting trip, and their bodies are buried in a shallow grave. Their spirits remain bound to the Material Plane and continue to haunt the woods, refusing to believe that they are dead. Their presence has disturbed the townsfolk, who are begging for someone to help put these spirits to rest. Can the adventurers find the evidence needed to convince the ghosts that they must pass on, or will they be the new targets of the spirits' anger? This adventure takes place in the town of Sevilla in the [FREELANDS CAMPAIGN SETTING](#), but can easily be placed in any small to medium-sized town surrounded by thick forests.

### GM NOTE

*The following adventure contains themes and elements that may not be comfortable for all players, most notably the death of a beloved pet. Ensure your players are comfortable with such topics before running this adventure.*

## BACKGROUND

Horus and Blunko were two hunters from the town of Sevilla. On a routine hunting trip in the surrounding Srafdosa Wood, they were both violently murdered by a local farmer named Jeriah and his loyal family members. Jeriah had been studying the occult and believed that a ritual to Odomus, a dark forgotten deity, would bring a bountiful harvest to his struggling orchard. Jeriah needed two human hearts for his ritual. Any human hearts would do—Horus and Blunko just

proved to be easy targets, as Jeriah and his family were familiar with the pair and knew about their usual hunting trails. Jeriah and his family, including his wife and two teenage daughters, camped out in the Srafdosa Wood and prepared a trap for Horus and Blunko. When the two wandered into it, the family attacked them, killing them swiftly. Jeriah removed their hearts for his ritual before the family buried the bodies in a shallow grave not far from where the murders took place. They then returned to their farm on the outskirts of town.

After the pair did not return, the townsfolk eventually established a search party to determine what became of them. However, they quickly discovered that Horus and Blunko were dead, and their ghosts haunted the wood. Their spirits appeared as mutilated corpses that carried about regular hunting activities as if nothing was the matter. The search party was terrified and immediately returned to town, not wanting to draw the ire of the ghosts.

## GETTING THE QUEST

The town of Sevilla has decided that skilled adventurers or those otherwise experienced in communicating with spirits are required to deal with this problem. The party may be hooked to adventure by a notice board they see in town, by hearing rumors of the haunted Srafdosa Wood, or by being approached by a concerned town member who asks them for help, promising that a reward has been gathered to make it worth their while. Regardless of how the party has been hooked to adventure, the quest begins when they meet Bogrin Havencut, a hunter in Sevilla who was friendly with Horus and Blunko and who led the original search party for their whereabouts. Bogrin (LN male human **commoner**) is a tired-looking man in his mid-fifties,

with a face creased with wrinkles, close-cropped hair, and a tidy but greying beard. He speaks calmly, and his smile is touched by sadness. He explains:

"Horus and Blunko were good men. They went hunting two weeks ago with their dog and never came back, so we gathered a search party and ventured into the woods to discover what became of them. We found horror... the two are certainly dead. Murdered, without a doubt. Their spirits still roam the hunting trails as if they were alive. They appear as they did in life, though their bodies are defiled by gory wounds. It's a terrifying sight. We need them put to rest. If you can find out what happened, even better. Tread with caution; you never know what to expect from ghosts like this."

Bogrin can further explain that the townsfolk have avoided the wood entirely since the discovery of the ghosts, though the need for them to return to hunting means that they cannot avoid it forever. The townsfolk have gathered 300 gp that Bogrin will give to the party if they can successfully put the ghosts to rest, and Bogrin will personally provide the party with an additional 100 gp if the party can determine who murdered the two men. If the party asks Bogrin if he is suspicious of anyone, Bogrin says he is not; Horus and Blunko were friendly and mostly kept to themselves and had no known enemies. Bogrin tells the party that it shouldn't take them long to encounter the ghosts along the popular hunting trails within the wood, and provides direction to the campsite where the search party encountered the pair. How the party deals with the ghosts is up to them—though Bogrin theorizes that it will likely not be as "simple as steel." They should search the hunting trail for any evidence they can find that might explain the mystery.

## THE SRAFDOSA WOOD

After the party has spoken with Bogrin, they'll have all the information they need to begin their quest. The hunting trail in the Srafdosa Wood where the ghosts were sighted is very close to town—the party will reach it without issue in a matter of minutes. The Srafdosa Wood itself appears innocent and unassuming, and nothing outwardly suggests that vengeful spirits might lurk within the trees. When the party reaches the trail, read aloud or paraphrase the following:

A worn, narrow trail cleaves its way through the thick brush of the wood. The canopy is dense, shielding much of the forest floor from the sky above.

It should take the characters approximately one hour of travel and a successful DC 8 Wisdom (Survival) check while keeping right on the hunting trail before they discover the campsite where the ghosts were seen by the searching party, as per Bogrin's directions. A failed

## SRAFDOSA WOODS ENCOUNTER TABLE

1d6

Encounter

- 1 The party hears distant, panicked screams echoing between the trees of the wood. The screams stop abruptly after approximately 15 seconds and efforts to pinpoint their source are fruitless. The screams are ghostly auditory illusions that persist after the murder of Horus and Blunko.
- 2 The party stumbles into a pair of **owlbears** who act aggressively to protect their nearby cubs. A successful DC 13 Wisdom (Animal Handling) check calms the owlbears, who otherwise attack if the party does not immediately flee the area. The owlbears flee if reduced to half their hit points or fewer.
- 3 The party encounters a **goblin** with its leg stuck in a bear trap. The goblin is cautiously accepting of help, though lies to the party and says that its friends will attack immediately if they "try anything." The trap can be opened with a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity check using thieves' tools. If the goblin is freed, it may return later with other goblins to ambush the party.
- 4 Four **shadows** stalk the party through the trees before eventually attacking, fighting until they are destroyed. The shadows were manifested by the grisly murder of Horus and Blunko.
- 5 A **raven** follows the party, watching them intently. If the party offers it food or is otherwise friendly towards it, it disappears for a moment before returning to give them a single silver coin stained with blood. The coin belonged to Horus and was dropped into the brush during the ambush.
- 6 A **shambling mound** lurks in the brush, awaiting its next meal. A successful DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check is required to notice the shambling mound within the brush; otherwise, the characters stumble into it and are surprised. The shambling mound fights until reduced to one-quarter of its hit points or fewer, at which point it flees.

survival check delays the party by an hour and triggers an encounter as determined by rolling a d6 on the Srafdosa Wood Encounters table.

## FIRST APPEARANCES

The characters will see the firelight from Horus and Blunko's campsite in advance of their approach. When the party spots the campsite just off the hunting trail, read aloud or paraphrase the following:

Just as you see the dim glow of a campfire within the trees, you can also hear the distant, partially muffled sounds of two men engaging in boisterous conversation.

When the party gets their first look at the pair, read aloud:

The forms of two men are seated on a log in front of a campfire, their packs on the forest floor beside them. One man has a hatchet buried in his skull, the blade and handle extending out the top of his cranium, blood

running steadily down his face. Multiple arrows pierce the chest of the other, and yet both men continue on as if nothing is the matter.

If the party calls out to Horus and Blunko, the ghosts of the two hunters greet them warmly from a distance and invite the party to join them. They are similarly friendly if the party sneaks up on them and approaches quietly. Horus is the ghost with an axe through his skull; he has a head of matted blonde hair, a strong jawline, and a loud, deep voice. Blunko has been pierced by arrows; he has a shaved head, a five 'o'clock shadow, and is mild-mannered but warm.

**The Campsite.** A pair of rotted logs are positioned around a campfire in the middle of this small clearing just off the hunting trail. Two bulging hunter's packs lie on the ground nearby. Characters with a passive Perception of 14 or higher will quickly notice that the campfire gives off no heat. Further investigation reveals that the fire appears to be completely illusory, and nothing that touches the flames is burnt. Coals or ashes removed from the fire are cold and slightly damp. The hunter's packs are also corporeal illusions. Characters to investigate the packs find them packed with maggots and viscera. If a character attempts to remove a pack from the campsite, it quickly turns to dust and reappears at the campsite moments later. If Horus and Blunko are not present at the campsite (see 'Negotiating with Ghosts'), the illusions vanish.

## NEGOTIATING WITH GHOSTS

The ghosts of Horus and Blunko do not believe they are dead and have no memory of their attack. Initially, even suggesting such a fact is wildly perplexing and distressing to them. They are happy to engage with the party as friendly kindred travelers eager to swap stories. If the party does not bring up the fact that they are dead, topics of conversation include their most recent hunt, what they hope to bring back to the village, the amount they can out-drink one another, and romantic

escapades they've had in their past. The first time the party tells the ghosts that they are dead, they quickly grow confused and annoyed. If the party continues to unsuccessfully argue or be disruptive, such as pawing at the weapons lodged in their forms or pointing out that the campfire gives off no heat, Horus and Blunko fly into a rage, and their forms become decayed and monstrous as they attack the party. Horus uses **ghost** statistics, while Blunko is a **specter**. They fight until they are reduced to 0 hit points, at which point they vanish. They reappear at the campsite after 1 hour, with little to no memory of the party or their confrontation.

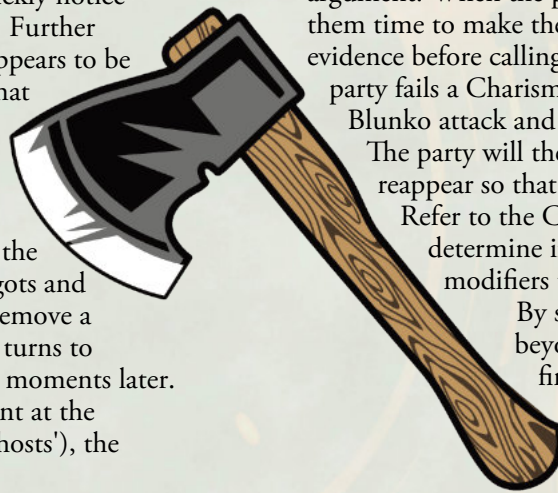
A successful DC 25 Charisma (Persuasion) check is required to convince the ghosts that they are, in fact, dead and should pass on to the afterlife. The "Convincing Evidence" table below outlines the evidence the party can build to strengthen their argument. When the party appeals to the ghosts, allow them time to make their case and present all of their evidence before calling for the check. Each time the party fails a Charisma (Persuasion) check, Horus and Blunko attack and fight until they are destroyed.

The party will then have to wait for them to reappear so that they may make their case again.

Refer to the Convincing Evidence Table to determine if the characters earn additional modifiers to their attempts.

By searching the hunting trail beyond the campsite, the party may find the evidence that will help them put the ghosts of Horus and Blunko to rest. Following the tracks from the campsite, the party should first find the

remains of Rugged, then the bloody hatchet further down the trail, and then finally the shallow grave where the pair was buried, less than half a mile away from the site of the attack. A successful DC 12 Wisdom (Survival) check is required to follow the tracks in the area towards each piece of evidence. For each failed Wisdom (Survival) check, the party becomes temporarily lost, triggers an encounter (see Srafdosa Wood Encounters, page 3), and spends one hour reorienting themselves on the trail.



CONVINCING EVIDENCE TABLE		
EVIDENCE	DESCRIPTION	MODIFIER
Previous Attempt(s)	Consistency is key. The spectral pair hold unconscious awareness of past events. Each failed attempt to convince the pair of their death comes closer to succeeding.	+2 to Charisma (Persuasion)
Remains of Rugged	The party has found the corpse of Rugged, the hunting dog of Horus and Blunko. Showing Horus and Blunko the corpse of the dog or its blood-stained collar invokes memories of their ambush.	+4 to Charisma (Persuasion)
Bloody Hatchet	The party has found the bloody hatchet that struck the killing blow against Horus. Showing the hatchet to the pair invokes memories of their ambush.	+4 to Charisma (Persuasion)
Shallow Grave	The party has found the shallow grave where the corpses of Horus and Blunko were buried. Leading the pair to the site invokes memories of their ambush.	+10 to Charisma (Persuasion)



## REMAINS OF RUGGED

Rugged died valiantly fighting to defend his masters from Jeriah's ambush. After being fatally wounded at the site of the attack, he tried to crawl down the hunting trail towards camp before eventually succumbing to his wounds. His body now lies in the brush just off the trail, swarmed by flies and two opportunistic **dire wolves**. The dire wolves are fiercely defensive of their meal and attack the party if provoked. They flee if reduced to one-quarter of their hit points or fewer. When the party approaches the body of Rugged, read aloud or paraphrase the following:

The body of a large dog lies mangled in the brush, partially decayed and ripped up by scavengers. A dog tag hangs from a black leather collar around its neck, stained with blood.

The body is so mangled that determining a cause of death is impossible. Characters who inspect the dog tag find it engraved with the name "Rugged." Presenting the dog tag (or the entire body) to the ghosts helps jog their memory of the attack.

## BLOODY HATCHET

Jeriah and his wife attacked Horus and Blunko with hatchets while Jeriah's daughters fired arrows from the trees. One of these hatchets was lost in the ambush and never recovered by the family. It is lodged in the trunk of a tree at the site of the attack. When the characters find the site along the trail, read aloud or paraphrase the following:

A swarm of ravens are perched in the branches of a nearby tree. One raven sits atop the handle of an axe, the blade of which is lodged deeply in the tree's trunk.

The **swarm of ravens** are supernaturally drawn to the site of the murder. They shift their eyes and tilt their heads to follow the characters. If the characters take some time to look around the area surrounding the tree, a successful DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation) check finds flattened ground, stains of blood, a scrap of torn wool clothing, and half an arrowhead. Characters who approach the axe in the tree agitate the ravens, who ruffle their feathers and croak wildly. A token of deference such as a small coin or a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Animal Handling) check is enough to pacify the swarm and remove the axe from the tree without issue. Otherwise, the ravens attack, dispersing once reduced to half their hit points or fewer. Presenting the hatchet to the ghosts helps jog their memory of the attack.

## SHALLOW GRAVE

The tracks eventually break away from the trail and continue into the brush of the wood towards the site where Jeriah and his family buried the bodies. When

the characters find the grave, read aloud or paraphrase the following:

The trail you follow leads into a tiny clearing, in the middle of which is a roughly rectangular patch of disturbed earth.

Characters who investigate the earth soon find it to be a shallow grave with a depth of just over one foot. Inside are the stinking, decaying bodies of Horus and Blunko, thrown together haphazardly into the dirt. They are wearing the clothes they died in, though their bodies have been stripped of any valuables. If the party leads the ghosts to the site or otherwise shows them their own corpses, they are very likely to remember their murder.



## REALIZATION

When the ghosts of Horus and Blunko have been convinced that they are dead, a calming wash of realization takes over them. They then recall the events leading up to their death—an ambush at the hands of a man, his wife, and their two daughters while out in the bush. They do not understand the reason for their murder, but they recognize their killers as the Earcard family, headed by Jeriah Earcard. They thank the party profusely for their help and ask them to help in carrying out justice. They inform the party that the Earcard family lives in an old farmhouse by the orchard on the outskirts of Sevilla. If the party has not already properly reburied the pair, the ghosts ask the party to do them that one last favor so that they may rest in peace.

**Burying Horus and Blunko.** After discovering the shallow grave, the party may opt to immediately rebury Horus and Blunko in a more appropriate grave and provide small funeral rites. At GM discretion, this may suffice for putting the pair to rest, rather than having to convince the ghosts of their death. In this case, the ghosts appear before the party in the moments after their burial, thanking them for their help and relaying the information about their murder contained in the above section.

## AFTERMATH

After the party has put the ghosts of Horus and Blunko to rest, Bogrin rewards them the 300 gp for their service and asks them eagerly for any information about who committed the murders. If the party tells him about the Earcard family, he promises them the additional 100 gp if they can gather any proof of their involvement or extract a confession from one or all of the family members. How they accomplish this task is left up to them. Characters can continue this plot in part 2 of this adventure, "The Earcards' Bargain." Ω

# CREDITS

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