

DEATH MADE ME DO IT



Fat, fluffy snowflakes drifted down lazily through the twilight forest. They covered the dark evergreens in a dreamlike softness.

The hulking form of a mountain troll was all that stirred in the quiet of the trees. Puffs of hot breath escaped his maw as he nibbled on frozen berries missed by the birds.

Gobo gobbled up the blueberries happily, humming to himself as he went along. The small conifers that nestled between the rocks on his back shook as he moved, trickling snow behind him.

A subtle sound from the edge of the clearing made the troll's ear flick, though his thoughts were soon lost again to the deliciousness of the berries.

A massive figure suddenly burst from the tree line and headed straight for him. There was an unmistakable rattle of bones as the creature swiped at Gobo with a rotting claw, fur and flesh already dangling from it. The creature ripped branches from a sapling on Gobo's back and scraped a boulder.

The troll spun around, creating a wave of snow as he whipped his tail at the monster attacking him.

Gobo clenched his large hands into fists and roared at the rotting creature.

The wendigo screeched back, its skeletal head snapping.

Gobo reached up and gripped the creature's antlers, tugging its head down and thrusting it into a tree trunk. Bone hit bark, briefly dazing the ravenous monster.

Gobo went in for another attack, but the wendigo had already recovered and struck out with its terrible claws. Streaks of iridescent blood ran from the troll's arms.

The wendigo struck again and clawed at the troll's exposed sides, causing him to utter a pathetic whine. The forest seemed to shake with fury at his pain.

Gobo stumbled back and turned to flee, hoping the rocks and trees on his back would protect him from the wendigo's lethal claws.



Just as it raised a claw to take another swipe, Cheetoh raised her gold-tipped talons to meet it. With her other hand, she stabbed into the creature, roaring.

Cecile and Salem burst through the tree line behind her. "Salem," Cecile yelled, "help me up its back! Cheetoh, keep it distracted!"

Cecile did her best not to search frantically for Gobo. The sight of his blood had been enough to ignite a rage in her so strong it could level a city.

Salem was a shadow as he moved through the snow. He lifted her with ease and tossed her like a kid's toy on top of the wendigo's bony back.

Sarah WaterRaven

“Jesus!” Cecile gasped, startled by the draugr’s strength.

She gripped tightly to the skins and furs dangling from the wendigo’s body. The smell of rotting flesh and leather was overpowering as she attempted to make her way up to the skull.

The wendigo snapped and clawed wildly, threatening to maul whoever came close enough, pushing both Cheetoh and Salem back.

It didn’t seem to know about the necromancer advancing up its back, and Cecile was grateful for that.

Salem came in too close, and the creature whipped around. Cecile clamped down, holding on, and impaled her hands on the broken bones jutting out of the furs.

She screamed, unable to hold it in.

The draugr looked up, his glowing blue eyes unreadable as he stared at her.

Cecile sucked in a quick breath and began moving again. Now knowing she was on its back, the wendigo spun, attempting to reach back to remove her. Luckily, she was just out of reach, but her relief only lasted so long. The wendigo took to the forest, hitting tree trunks and branches in an attempt to scrape her off.

The pink-haired necromancer took a branch to the face, almost flinging her off its back and into the snow.

They reached another clearing, and Cheetoh and Salem engaged the creature again, stopping it in time for Cecile to gain a better hold.

She resumed her climb until she finally came to the elk skull that acted as the beast’s head. The necromancer got in close and whispered, “You’re dead.”



A shudder passed through the monster, bones rattling and pelts shifting, until the pile of bone and fur collapsed into the snow, and I came crashing down on top of it.

“Disgusting,” I grumbled as I pushed myself up.

I sucked in a pained breath. My hands stung from where they’d been cut. Kneeling down, I attempted to wipe them off in the snow, only to watch fresh crimson bleed at the openings.

Well, whatever. They’ll heal in a little bit, I told myself.

Salem stepped over to offer me a hand and then growled when he saw the blood.

“Easy,” I said, uninterested in his undead fresh-blood ridiculousness. Though I really couldn’t say whether he had growled with concern or hunger.

Salem turned away in a huff, his inky black fading to reveal his human form once again.

Ignoring him, I snagged a nearby stick and began poking the rancid pile of parts in front of me.

“What is it?” Cheetoh asked as she stepped over. She nudged what looked like a hip bone with her boot before making a face. “It stinks.”

“It’s a wendigo,” I informed her as I continued prodding. “I’m just looking for...”

The stick pressed into something that felt like a body. I knelt down. “Help me remove some of these furs,” I said as I began clearing them away.

I tugged at a raccoon skin, fresh and haunting, and whispered mentally, *I am so sorry I didn’t stop this sooner.*

Both Salem and Cheetoh knelt to either side of me and helped pull away furs until we revealed the shriveled and long dead body of a woman. She was encased in the rib cage of a dead

elk. Her clothes were filthy and her shoes had holes. One shoe was duct-taped together, and her hair was greasy and knotted.

I stood up and shook my head. With a heavy sigh, I looked away.

“Was she hiker who died in forest?” Cheetoh asked.

“No, look at her,” I replied. “She was poor and most likely homeless.”

“What killed her?” Salem asked, still kneeling beside the corpse. He gently moved some hair away from her sunken-in face.

“With wendigos, it’s starvation—always starvation. Somehow, before the brink of death, she was desperate enough to eat human flesh and she turned into this. She just kept eating and eating and the bodies of those she killed became a part of her.”

Cheetoh put her hand to her chin. “Is that why she had animal skull for head?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Starvation turned her into a monster.”



“Gobo?” I whispered, my lip trembling.

I was furious, but also scared. The thought of anything hurting that big lovable troll made me feel things I didn’t want to feel. I was sick of sadness and sick of mourning.

He just needed to be okay.

“Gobo? It’s me. We got it. It won’t bother you anymore,” I reassured him.

I could only hope I’d walked in the right direction. Using his fairy glamor, the mountain troll had hidden his tracks in the snow and disappeared into the landscape.

Gobo was the only mountain troll I knew, but he was a far cry from any description I’d ever read of one. They were supposedly aggressive and territorial, and the farther away from human society they lived, the wilder they would become.

Gobo was definitely wild, and I doubted he could ever function in human society like some other trolls had, but aside from Tanner, he was the gentlest creature I knew.

I snapped my fingers, remembering I’d brought backup.

I quickly pulled a bright red apple from my pocket and said, “Apple, Gobo. I brought an apple.”

There was a loud *mmpf* sound. It was a huffy complaint from my friend, but I was glad to hear it.

Several feet in front of me, the landscape changed and, out of nowhere, his massive form appeared. The poor sapling on his back had been shredded, a single branch holding on for dear life, and I could make out striations in the rock surfaces from where the wendigo tried to maul him.

“Here.” I held out the apple.

Gobo sniffed in my direction and took a step forward.

I could see that his wounds had already stopped bleeding, as my own had, but I could also make out scars left over from other attacks. The vicious claws of the wendigo might have scarred his beautiful fur forever. Silvery-white fur grew in over his gray fur wherever a scar was on his skin, creating a terrible pattern.

Gobo’s massive hand took the apple and popped it into his mouth. He chewed happily, though his eyes continued to scan the forest.

Sarah WaterRaven

“Look, it got me too, but I’m healing.” I showed him my hands and the wounds that were slowly scabbing over. I didn’t have insta-healing like gods and powerful fairy, but I sported a healing ability that was something to brag about to the average human if I wanted.

Gobo stepped closer and took my hand, his massive form somehow silent. He put his other hand over it and cooed.

“It’s gone. I promise you,” I said, looking up into his dark eyes.

“So much pain. Didn’t want to hurt,” he replied, his gruff voice softened by his sadness.

“I know. She didn’t deserve to die like that and be reborn into pain. She’s going to rest soon and be at peace,” I reassured him.

Gobo nodded. “Let’s burn and help find peace.”



Salem and Cheetoh dug a pit and placed the remains inside while Gobo and I searched for dry kindling.

Once we had enough wood, dry needles, leaves, and birch bark, I got out a lighter and set the pile ablaze.

One by one, the trapped souls of that terrible creature stepped out of the flame: the beautiful elk whose skull had become the head, raccoons, and rabbits—until finally, the ghost of the dead woman appeared.

The animals walked off into the forest, their souls released and ready to be ferried by the rifters, who chose not to reveal themselves, but I could see the woman was fighting her transition.

Unlike Darren, who had forgotten his death and looked as handsome as he had in life, this woman wore her death with the burden of a hard life behind her.

She was still emaciated and filthy, but her eyes, though sad, were bright and intelligent.

I stepped over to a fallen tree by the fire and sat down. I patted the space beside me and waited for her.

She sat down and for a time we watched the fire with macabre fascination.

“Where are they going?” she asked me.

“The other side. Rifters—angels—are taking them to the next life,” I replied.

“What’s the next life?”

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully. “Could be heaven, could be rebirth into this world as something or someone else—or maybe a life somewhere far, far away from here, at the other side of space and time.”

“Not very reassuring,” she replied.

“I suppose not, but judging by the serene beauty of the angels, I can’t imagine it would be worse than what you had to endure here,” I speculated.

She moved her duct-taped shoe in the snow and watched with mild interest as it passed through it.

I thought of Darren and how he too could sit, and yet it still took him a while to believe he could touch things with his hands.

“Poisonous things are beautiful—butterflies, frogs, and berries,” she commented.

Her rifter appeared. A radiant, androgynous being that somehow outshone the fire. The woman looked up, her eyes wide.

Sarah WaterRaven

I stood. “The way I see it, you can either take your chances with the next life, or you can stay here and turn into a monster again.”

If she wouldn't go, I decided I would summon a raven spirit to gobble her up and fly her ass to the other side. I couldn't risk her becoming a killer again.

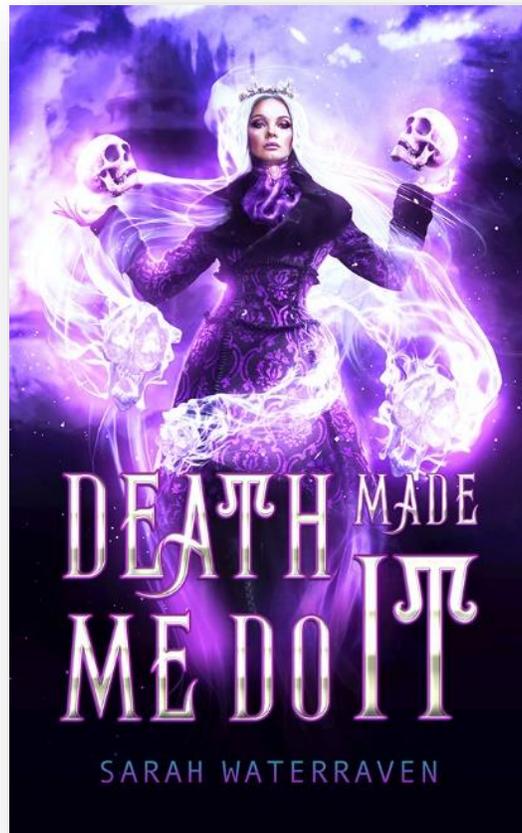
She continued to stare at the rifter and finally said, “Will *you* tell me what's ahead?”

“Possibility. Endless possibility,” its wind-chime voice replied.

The ghost took one last look at the burning pile of fur and bones and finally took the rifter's hand.

I hope you enjoyed this sneak peek!

-WaterRaven



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