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**4954 Words**

### **Dead-Beat**

It wasn't so much that Josephine "Josie" Hemlock wished death upon things; more so that, try as she might, from house plants to goldfish, everything and everyone Josephine surrounded herself with ended up dead.

Josephine's kindergarten class had a pet gerbil named Mr. Peanut Butter. Each student took turns watching Mr. Peanut Butter over the weekends, and Josephine, who had never been allowed pets, was ecstatic when her turn finally came. The following Monday, Josephine did not attend class. In her place, her father explained to thirty very distraught five-year-olds that Mr. Peanut Butter was in a better place. Josephine was not allowed to watch classroom pets after that.

The most significant difference between the deaths of Mr. Peanutbutter and Josephine's father, was the amount of blood involved.

Teeth had ripped from the ground like a sprung mouse trap, ensnaring his body in slick, black shapes that dripped a viscous drool onto the living room carpet. The creature gnawed and pulled him into the shadows as it growled. Carnage and phlegm tore away as bones crunched in a constantly shifting jaw. It barked, and as blood splattered across her face, Josie's only thought was that it kind of looked like a dog. A dribble of something pulped and fleshy fell from the ceiling, hitting the floor with a 'splat.' The beast bucked its front legs and sank back into the ground from which it came.

Josie ran.

She had always fantasized about running away, packing the few things she owned into her thread-bare backpack, and bus hopping across the country, where no one knew her name or

the curse she bore, where no one minded the smell of rot and broken leaves, damp earth and thick fog, her cold fingers, and intense, fleeting, rage.

Josie wasn't enjoying running away nearly as much as she thought she would. When she was younger, the thought consumed her. Escaping, prying the padded locks off her window, and fleeing into the night before her dad woke up. It's not that he was a terrible parent, just *paranoid*. He hung crosses in archways and lit sage to cleanse the air, threw salt over his shoulders, and blamed things as inconsequential as a sore throat on demons. Sometimes, he looked at Josie like she could explode at any moment. As if her presence was enough to bring death into the home. To his credit, he had been right.

The sunset spilled out in a mockingly beautiful array of orange and reds as Josie hurried down the road. All things considered, she was taking her newfound job as a murderer quite well. She thought the lack of panic attacks was honestly commendable. Her chest ached, her nerves were fried, and her jacket was still soaked with blood. She had pulled the hood over her head in a hasty attempt to hide a face freckled with droplets of viscera. For someone who had literal blood on her hands, Josie handled the situation like a champ.

She wandered aimlessly, feet following each other as she stared distantly at the road in front of her. There was no going back. There was no one to go back to. As Josie's foot hit the pavement, the air froze around her, tight, bitter, and cold. All her hair stood on end, and her throat was choked with thick, frigid fog. Josie couldn't move, each of her muscles tightly bound like rubber bands being stretched to their limits. Her chest heaved; her breath hitched. There was a sharp snap from behind, and her first thought was that the monster, the shadow-moving dog from before, had come back to finish her off.

She dug her stubby nails into her palms, bracing as the sound of screeching tires filled her ears. Out of instinct, she turned, staring at what she could best describe as a modified limousine. The engine glared at her, smokey tendrils piling out from the gills of the car and whirling off into the sky. A skeleton was leaning against the car, clad in black and a hanging hood.

Josie screamed.

"Hey, hey, I'm not gonna hurt you, kid." His voice was buzzing and filled with static.

The reassurance did little to calm the screaming Josie.

"What the fuck?!"

The skeleton flinched, arms raising in a defensive position as he flailed his hands, trying to calm her down. He snapped two boney fingers, and Josie felt her mouth, literally and metaphorically, zip shut. She panicked, fingers scraping at the zipper as the skeleton beckoned for her to be quiet.

Josie's muffled cries went unheard, the skeleton simply running a hand over his face in annoyance.

"Look, kid," he said, "I'm just trying to do a job here, and you're making things really difficult for me."

Josie cried out once again, her face riddled with confusion.

"Alright, alright, how about this; you keep quiet, and I'll take that mouthpiece off your piehole—sound good?" The skeleton stuck a hand outward to make a deal.

After a moment of tense silence and internal debate, Josie nodded. She stared at the skeleton's outstretched hand, not moving to shake it. He didn't seem to mind and shrugged before pulling it back and snapping again. Josie felt a sudden release of pressure, and all at once, she could talk again.

"What the hell was that?" She shouted.

A smarter girl would have ran. But Josie, who always had a tendency to stick her fingers where they didn't belong, did not.

"Magic, sheesh. Didn't your dad ever teach you about magic?" The skeleton was nonchalant, leaning against his limo.

"Yeah, sure," Josie quipped, a fit of numb, sarcastic anger lining her voice, "between our lessons on taming dragons and finding Atlantis."

"Oh great," The skeleton did not get the hint. "I've heard the weather there is lovely this time of year."

Josie was confused, a swirl of emotions clashed in her gut. Maybe she'd finally snapped; perhaps hallucinating an eldritch skeleton man with a sick sense of humor was her brain's way of calming her down.

"Who *are* you?" And yet here she was, entertaining it.

The skeleton looked surprised. He placed a skeletal hand against his chest in mock hurt.

"Who am I? Don't you know?"

His gaping, shadowed eye sockets widened, and the skeleton glided to Josie in sizeable, calculated steps that shook the ground. His dark cloak billowed around his ankles, a thin layer of wisping fog spilling out from underneath him. He hovered over Josie, his shadow casting a long, cold void across her trembling figure. A smile, terrible and boney, lined with frighteningly sharp, yellow-stained teeth, far too wide for any human face, stretched across the skull.

"I'm your uncle."

All at once, his posture changed, and even the clouds began to part; letting the fading pink light shine directly down onto the pair. The skeleton's grin looked less sharp now, cheery

and forced like a young child's yearbook picture. He did what could only be described as jazz hands—as if accentuating his point.

"Oh my God, I've lost it," Josie laughed slightly, an unhinged glimmer in her eyes. "All those shrinks were right about me. Or I'm dead. Oh no, I'm definitely dead, aren't I? that creature found me and killed me too, and now you're here to take me to Hell because I'm dead,"

She knew she was bound to snap at some point—everyone did—she just didn't think it would be like this.

"Kid, calm down. You're not dead; I would know." The skeleton said, grinning cheekily at Josie but doing little to ease her fears.

The teenager turned around to walk the other way. Her "uncle" rolled his eyes, shifting position as if to change tactics. A cloud of smoke trailed next to Josie, and the skeleton reappeared before her.

"Alright, alright, how about we clear that head of yours and you come along with your Uncle Death? We can do some catching up—pancakes, maybe? My treat?" Death had a cool, low, and guttural voice. He sounded earnest while coaxing Josie to calm down.

"I . . . Are you really my uncle?" She asked, still not sure of what was happening.

The initial adrenaline of witnessing her only family killed and being faced with a magic skeleton faded, leaving Josie scared and alone. The weight of the day's events hung heavily on her shoulders, and although Death was terrifying, Josie didn't think she could bring herself to attempt running away with the skeleton nearby. Something else stopped her, making her feel the familiarity of loss. The comfort she'd grown to find in grief—what else could she do when it engrossed itself in her life?

It was horrible, but she couldn't find it in herself to cry. Grief was an old friend, and her dad's death felt inevitable. She couldn't prevent it, but she blamed herself for it, and the sorrow that came after everything was an old, worn coat she slipped on with ease. Josie had taken to perfecting the art of grieving.

Josie had thought she wanted to die, but now that she'd met him, she wasn't keen on Death either.

She took a step forward, and Death smiled.

"Of course, I'm your uncle," Death said. "Don't tell me Simon never talked about good ol' Uncle Death."

The skeleton beckoned Josie closer. Timidly, she obliged.

"My dad," Josie said, "Never told me about any uncles. Let alone a skeleton one."

Death pouted. His arms were crossed, face sullen.

"He has a baby with . . . and he doesn't even . . ." he grumbled, trailing off. "I even come here to save your ass, and what do I get? A brooding teen who doesn't even know her own Uncle Death."

Honestly, as weird as Death was, Josie was relieved to have him. Relieved to not be alone. Who knows what she would've done if left to her own devices? The original edge of numbness—the blanket of depression that suffocated and blinded her, making her act on autopilot—subsided with him there. Now, she was confused and tired, bitter annoyance making its way up through her brain. She wondered, darkly, if this was just her messed-up mind's last hoorah before finally dropping her off the deep end. If the shadow-dogs lurking at the edge of her vision would eventually come for her.

"Why the long face Josie? You do go by Josie, don't you?" Death leaned against her, cracking a failed attempt at a suave pose against a street lamp.

"What—no. No, stop that." Josie swatted at Death, stepping away.

"Stop what? I'm just doing my job." Death grinned.

"No, you're—" Josie paused, "Okay, you're the Grim Reaper, right?"

Death nodded, shaking his skeletal hand in a teetering, 'so-so' fashion.

"So," Josie continued, annoyance rising, "Aren't you supposed to be out—you know, *reaping*?" She raised her arms, gesturing to the surrounding area.

Death shrugged, "I suppose so."

The teenager raised an eyebrow. "So? Why are you here and not doing that?"

This got a low, vibrating laugh from Death.

"What, and let you go and get yourself killed? No, I owe your poor parents more than that."

Josie winced slightly. "You . . . Owe them?"

Death nodded, shrugging haphazardly. "Something like that."

She was still confused, Death raised more questions than answers. Her confusion was clearly written all over her face because Death spoke up again.

"Besides, my main job is being your uncle, and that always comes before Reaping. Your dad said I needed to take care of you if anything happened to him."

There was an awkward pause filled with the sounds of empty air as Death let Josie consider his words. Had her dad counted on *her* being the thing that happened to him?

"Do you like pancakes?" Death asked.

"Do I—what?"

Josie didn't understand her so-called uncle's antics. After all, the sun had settled into the horizon by now, and dark black ink trailed over the sky in its place. Breakfast time ended hours ago.

"Well, I like pancakes and know a great place to find 'em. I'm sure you've got questions; we can answer them there." Death waved Josie over, marching towards the limousine that started appearing more and more hearse-like the longer she stared at it.

Josie did not follow, still stuck in place, overwhelmed by the evening's events. Death looked excited, smiling surprisingly earnestly and waving from the driver's seat. What the hell? She didn't have anything to lose. Josie climbed into the car.

The interior of the hearse-turned-luxury-vehicle was gothic. Maroon-colored velvet coated the seats, and black lace trimmings followed along each seam. A candy bowl rested in the middle console, clearly designated for passengers. However, the candy supply looked significantly depleted if the four salt-water taffy and single penny sitting at the bottom were anything to go by. On the rearview mirror, a small, dangling ghost keychain bounced. Death raised a boney hand to adjust the mirror, grinning at Josie as he waved his hand across his eyes. A pair of stylish but simultaneously corny sunglasses came in the hand's wake. Josie nearly groaned.

Death continued grinning, plugging a pair of rusty keys into the engine, causing the car to come to life with a horrible series of deep coughs and sputters. Josie was convinced it would fall apart at any moment. Death, unsurprisingly, didn't seem to mind. Or care.

He laughed, and Josie's ears rang.

"We're visiting an old friend of mine's place—best diner in town."



He slammed a boney foot on the gas pedal, and the hearse convulsed. Its engine revved, the wheels leaving clouds of dust behind as it sped off toward the nearest wall.

"Death?!" Josie yelled, shielding her face with her arms.

"Hold on and trust me, kid," he said.

When the hearse made contact with the wall, it rippled and glowed, but there was no impact. No crash. No crunch of metal and slam of brakes. The entire wall fell away as the hearse nose-dived into it, and for moments, Josie couldn't see her own hands in the darkness. Despite the lack of vision, they didn't crash, but Josie felt the hearse lurch and hurl with every minor bump and twist through the shadows. Suddenly, with a slight warble, the hearse popped out of the dark, and bright light flooded Josie's vision as they launched forward. Josie's hair whipped around her face, the car freefalling for just a second longer until it thumped and skidded on contact with the new road.

They, somehow, had ended up on a highway in broad daylight. A nearby sign read, "Welcome to Utah!" and Josie's stomach felt a little lighter, knowing she was several states away from the house where the remains of her foster parents lay.

Even outside of the dark, Death was an astoundingly terrible driver. He swerved in and out of lanes with no rhyme or reason, the car speeding at rates bound to kill someone. Although maybe that was the point. Josie gripped the plush of her seat so tightly she thought her fingers might pop off.

She nearly broke the door trying to get out when Death finally announced they had arrived.

Josie clambered from the back of the car, tumbling out onto the sidewalk in an entanglement of limbs. Death laughed a deep, haunting noise that made Josie all but flinch. It

sounded like a sputtering engine from a long-dead car, desperately trying to start in the rain. Despite the laugh, Death helped the sprawled-out teen to her feet. Looking at the empty street, Josie saw no sign of Death's supposed pancake diner.

"It's a bit of a walk." Death said, reading her mind. "Thought we could talk on the way over. Besides, you were starting to look sick back there, and I don't need any of that in the hearse."

Josie nodded, thankful.

"Aren't you worried someone will see us?"

It had been bothering her for a while now, and although Josie still wasn't entirely convinced "Uncle Death" was real, she couldn't help but think of the repercussions of someone seeing them together. Either she was a crazy criminal who would get arrested for talking to herself like a lunatic, or Death would cause a scene on the basis of being a walking-talking skeleton. Neither situation was preferable.

Her uncle snapped his boney fingers, signaling he had just remembered something. Turning back to the hearse, Death opened the trunk, pulling out a bundle of red cloth. When he turned to face Josie, he had donned a garish, floral-patterned shirt and the same pair of equally gaudy sunglasses from before.

Josie couldn't help it; she snorted. She busted into a fit of laughter, seeing Death standing in all his gloomy, skeletal glory, wearing an outfit typically found amongst barbecue dads. Death didn't look offended, instead basking in the sound of his niece's laughter. After a moment, the laughter trailed off, and Josie smiled to herself.

"I take it you like my disguise."

Josie let out a small chuckle, nodding.

"You look great," she said.

Grinning, Death gestured for Josie to lead the way, pointing at the sidewalk eagerly. She thanked the skeleton, stepping forward gingerly. They walked in comfortable silence, Josie finding herself oddly at ease around the Grim Reaper. The street they shared was quiet, not a soul around for quite some time, save for a portly-looking woman walking a dog. Her dark hair tied up in tight curlers, she wore a boxy, beige nightgown while a fat cigar hung lazily from her gaping hole of a mouth.

The woman gripped the thin rope leash rigidly, its sloping shape connecting to the neck of an obedient hound at her feet. The rope wrapped around the animal tightly, reminding Josie faintly of a noose. She winced, watching the poor thing pant and heave while the leash gripped its neck. Although Josie tried not to stare, the woman caught her gaze.

She stared at the teenager, her smile twisted and sitting plumply between her cheeks, the shape slicing through her face like a knife through damp clay. Her teeth were oblong and crooked, each digging deep into her mouth and causing thick, dark bile to spill from the imprints they left like blood. Josie felt her heart skip a beat, quickly averting her gaze from the woman and her face of teeth.

Beside her, Death whistled. "Nasty lookin' Witch, wasn't it?"

Josie's head snapped upwards.

"You—Wait—You could see that too?" She stuttered out.

"What am I? Blind? Of course, I could see it. Ugly little thing—the Familiar too." Death grimaced, shaking his head as if to brush off the image.

Josie was reeling. No one had ever been able to see what she had done before. Even her dad, as supportive as he was, never fully believed her. She knew he didn't want to say it, but deep

down, Josie knew her dad thought her craziness had been why her mom didn't stick around. If she'd actually listened to her dad's advice, kept to herself, and ignored the odd vision or delusion of ghosts and monsters hiding around every corner, she wouldn't have been alone.

She shook her head to clear her thought, focusing back on Death.

"That lady was a Witch?" She asked.

Death wheezed, his laugh cascading through the air and making Josie hear static in its echo. He clasped a hand on the teen's back for support, his giggles still tumbling out. After a moment, the skeleton wiped an invisible tear from his empty eye socket, blowing a final puff of air to calm down.

"That lady," Death finally said, "if you can call her that, was not a Witch, Josie. That was the Familiar."

Josie's brows furrowed. "Wait, does that mean the dog—?"

She turned on her heels, head whipping around to look back at the woman and her dog. The woman seemed normal now, while the dog smiled at Josie with a set of sparkling white, human teeth. Its tongue, black and slender, creeped out from a gap between its jaw to wave hello, and the woman barked. Josie felt her hair stand on end, and the dog—the *Witch*—winked at her with its third eye.

The teenager turned back around and walked a bit faster toward the safety of the diner. Like all diners, this one felt greasy, and the air sat heavy with the scent of fried breakfast. Maple syrup coated nearly every tabletop and nearby surface while the carpet crunched under the weight of each sticky step. Josie quickly shuffled in after Death, slightly nervous the hostess would say something about their appearances. A teenager and their uncle was one thing, but a teenager covered in blood and the literal personification of Death was another thing entirely.

Death winked, if you could call it that, pulling down his sunglasses to talk to the hauntingly thin, college-aged brunette running the hostess stand. She chuckled at whatever Death said; his voice muffled from where Josie stood. She smiled, nodding before she grabbed a couple of menus and led the pair to a nearby booth.

Josie slid into the sheen, plastic booth, finally catching a glimpse at the woman's nametag. For a split second, Josie could clearly read "Famine" scratched onto the laminated plastic in big, bold letters—but as soon as the light hit it, "Famine" had been replaced by "Francine." For a moment, Josie thought she could have misread it. But only for a moment.

"Francine" grinned at Josie, her eyes shining a pale, glossed-over yellow.

"How about some pancakes, Frannie?" Death teased.

Francine nodded, not bothering to write down the request. She disappeared before Death could say another word.

He turned to Josie, flipping up his menu.

"The food here's great," Death said, though it had been in such a way it made Josie's stomach churn. "It won't ever fill you up, no matter how much you eat. The calories just burn right through. Tastes delicious, though."

Josie didn't feel hungry anymore. Not that she had been, to begin with.

"Hey, Death?" She started to ask, fingers nervously messing with the hem of her jacket.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Shoot, Josie."

Josie slowly took a deep breath. "Why did you come after me?"

Death didn't put down his menu.

"Kid, we talked about this. I'm your uncle."

Josie shook her head, misplaced anger slowly rising in her voice. "No, we didn't. You showed up with your weird car, and then you claimed to know my parents and brought me to your crazy diner, and for what? Pancakes? Served by some ancient horror posed as a waitress?"

Death was quiet.

He sighed, slowly putting down the menu to look at the teenager. Death's sunglasses were pushed up, and his sunken eyes focused on her. He seemed sullen and rubbed where the bridge of his nose would be, that was, if he had a nose, to begin with.

"Alright, kid. Have it your way." Death gave Josie a long, sad stare. "Your mom and I, we were friends, alright? We go way back, and when she met your dad, she knew she couldn't stick around, but he didn't care. They tried anyways, had you, and your mom saw family life was never in the cards for her. Bada-bing, bada-boom, I'm your uncle. That's the story."

Josie sighed, leaning forward to rest on the tabletop. She figured Death wouldn't take the conversation seriously for too long.

"That's it? You just met her when she was younger, and the rest is history?" She said.

"Yup." Death popped the 'p.'

Josie's fists clenched under the table. "Be straight with me. Where is my mom? *Who* is my mom? Why did she leave?"

"I get it's unfair, but you have to understand that horsemen can't just stop being horsemen. War is no place for children."

"What are you talking about?" Josie's head hurt.

Death paused, "Did no one ever tell you?"

"Tell me *what*?"

"Your mom is War, kid." Death said it plainly, as if he was reading the weather report.

Josie's world felt like it was crashing down. Things were clicking into place, and she couldn't help the rage building up in her chest. Her dad never talked about her mom except in cautious whispers and careful stories. She'd left shortly after Josie had been born, and she'd always assumed it was her fault; that no one wanted a baby who smelled like death and stared at you with large, calculating eyes, as if plotting the exact moment you would be weakest.

"So that's it?" Josie said, blood pressure rising. "My dad died, and you were the backup plan? If you're so buddy-buddy with my parents, why didn't you show up any sooner?"

Death made a face, "It's not like that, kid—I've been busy—"

"No, stop." Josie cut him off. "I'm just supposed to get into your hearse and drive away? Ignore the fact that I'm a crazy murderer who killed her dad and that my mom is *War* and no one ever thought to tell me?"

Death was not amused.

"You're not a murderer; it was an accident." He rebutted, voice low.

"No, it *wasn't*." Josie stood up quickly, bumping the table as she did and sending the silverware scattering across it. The stubs of her fingernails dug deeply into her palms, enough to break the skin and enough so she could feel tiny droplets of blood well up underneath them.

The ground rumbled slightly, and Josie felt her stomach drop.

She saw it before Death did; could see the shadows behind her shift as a single, dark black dog head poked its way out of the ground, snarling. Two large paws forced their way through the floor as Josie begged silently for this not to happen again. The shadow dog's mouth lolled, tongue spilling out onto the floor as it ignored Josie and shoved its way toward them.

"You can summon the Dogs of War?" Death, despite everything, was grinning.

"The what?" Josie stood still as a statue.

Death whistled, and the dog's ears perked up. It shrank in size, jumping from the shadows and ignoring Josie to skip over to the skeleton as he stuck his hand inside the flap of his cloak.

With a 'crack,' he brought the hand out again, holding a rib bone outstretched to the dog.

It snatched the bone, tail wagging, and Death rubbed its head. "He's a Dog of War, one of your mom's hounds. Though, I've never seen them react to emotions like that before. Earlier, did one of these guys kill your dad?"

Josie nodded. "I was mad, and I felt something inside me click into place. That thing jumped out seconds later, and I knew it was because I told it to."

When Death spoke, his voice was softer than Josie had ever heard. The usual static, vibrating echo that lined each word was now absent.

"You're not a bad kid, Josie."

The teenager couldn't help but cry.

Her whole world fell apart, and Josie thought, had hoped if she disappeared, maybe she could feel again. Maybe she could feel something, anything other than guilt. Guilt she didn't do enough, guilt she did too much. She tried wiping away the tears, warm and freshly pouring down her face like a never-ending rainstorm, but that didn't stop them. Every breath she took was shallow and wheezing; her chest hurt, and she felt light-headed. Josie was crying in the middle of a dingy, greasy, fast-food diner, and she hated it.

Death stared, each empty socket looking pitifully at the sniffling girl, and didn't say anything in reply.

"I don't know what to do," Josie said between sobs. "I can't do this. I can't go around with you pretending everything's fine and that I'm—*we're* normal, that *this* is normal. We're murderers."



Death reached out to take his niece's hand from across the table. Josie took it and though she usually avoided contact, let herself revel in the small comfort. He squeezed her hand slightly. She took a shaky breath, calming herself down. The War Dog nudged her leg under the table, its wet nose pressing to her pants with a slight huff. Her hand rested at her side, pressed against the cool, faux leather of the booth's seat. Gently—more gently than a creature with teeth that big should be capable of—it licked the back of her hand.

"I miss my dad," Josie finally said.

"I know, kid."

This time, Josie squeezed Death's hand. He sighed, shifting in his seat. The dog rested its head on Josie's thigh, and she sniffled, weakly.

"Alright," Death paused. It felt as if he was reassessing whether or not to continue speaking, "Why don't I take you to see your mom?"

It felt like all the air had been sucked from Josie's lungs. Her mouth couldn't help but hang agape, and she stared at Death in bewilderment.

"You know where she is?"

Death nodded. "I always know where the horsemen are. I can't promise you'll like War—or that she'll be happy to see you. But, I can take you to her. I owe you that much."

Josie felt a pang in her heart. She'd always wondered about her mom, but knowing the minimal amount she did, the idea scared her. Her mom was a horseman of the apocalypse, war incarnate; through that, Josie had been given the gift of death. The gift of rage. Maybe her mom had left for a good reason. She glanced over at the War Dog, looking at how its void-like eyes sparkled as it seemingly waited for her to say something; its tail slowly thumped against the ground in excitement.

"Death?" She said.

"Yeah, Josie?"

"Get the hearse."

**THE END.**