

ELEMENTALS by Trevor Denyer

Empty fields and silent woods await the coming snow. If you listen carefully - standing and feeling the air freezing - you can hear the breath of the countryside.

Trees stand, stark naked. They point their twisted, gnarled and nail bitten fingers at the sky. It hangs over them like a bladder about to burst.

The cold holds everything in its grip. The countryside listens. You stand and wait.

A breeze stirs the freezing air, lazily yawning across the fields, and clattering amongst the dark trees of the wood.

The bitter exhalation breaks the spell, and deep beneath the earth something stirs.

Like frozen tears they fall, pure and perfect white. The stark and barren winter world becomes a smooth, undulating carpet of snow. Sharp edges are rounded and softened, camouflaging the still life.

You stand upon the frozen earth as the whiteness swirls around you. Snowflakes touch your misty breath, partly melting and passing through.

You start to feel uneasy. It comes without warning, turning enchantment to malevolence. The sound of hidden objects settling under the snow comes to you. Your senses are keen. Something moves beyond the edge of sight, rustling beneath the brambles where the dead leaves of long ago autumn lie.

Your mind fills with thoughts of death and deep sleep. From the netherworld the souls of the dead reach out, and you wait, as quiet and still as possible. Apprehension hammers at your heart, making you sweat.

Their pinprick eyes stare from the darkness under snow laden bushes. You turn, but the flashes are gone. There is a cackle - or was it a crackle?

You stumble through thick snow, painfully aware of the coldness. In the wood the snow is patchy. You feel the weight of it above you, spread out along the branches. You feel safer within the confines of the wood, as if the hidden life of trees can protect you.

You move deeper into the heart of the wood, where the trees grow close. Memories return. You thought you could escape them by coming here; by running away. You thought that the horror was in the rational world, but now you see it from a different

perspective.

Your children smile, reaching out and trying to save you. Their smiles twist into anguished, silent cries as tiny events drop into the frame. The sprawl of your life is laid before you and you yearn for comfort, like a drowning man grasping for straws.

You are suddenly aware that they have trapped you. Safety lies back where you came from - in the open, snow covered fields. Out there, they baited you, hooking you into the dark depths of the wood. This is *their* element.

They have circled you and stand watching, flexing their icicle sharp claws amongst the brambles. Their eyes reflect the heart of the forest; deep and green.

They are triumphant, and wait for you to run screaming in a final, fatal effort to prove that you and your rational mind - the product of a civilisation so suddenly alien - can save you.

The sound of water, dripping and running in rivulets dominates. Ice and snow slides from branches and shatters on the ground. The wood is alive with watery activity. In the trees the sap rises, ready for Spring.

You no longer see, though your eyes are open. Water splashes over them but you do not flinch. Your body thaws, and will soon begin to rot into the ground with last year's brittle leaves.

A shower of snow falls from an overhanging branch, melting and running along the bloody ruts that criss-cross your face and neck. A pool gathers in the ravaged and empty hollow of your chest, laid bare to the chatter of the countryside, and devoid of organs.

The elementals have gorged themselves and slipped away down burrows and through cracks. The Earth holds them, like a mother with cancer in her womb.

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