

CAUGHT DEAD

A DEAD AS... SHORT STORY



K E N Z I E K E L L Y

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MYKA SWUNG THE scythe with all her strength, her entire body reverberating with the impact as the blade sunk into the side of a crypt. “Son of a gun!”

Dax slid, his claws scrabbling for purchase on the damp marble before latching onto the cloak of the wraith. “I got him!”

She heard a sickening crunch as the wraith backhanded the cat into the same crypt that trapped her weapon. She put her foot on the wall and pried the scythe loose just in time to spin the handle and knock the ghostly form of the fuzzball back into his body. “Stay out of the way! You've only got one life left!”

She spun, searching the cemetery for their quarry. It was several feet away, moving fast into section C. She groaned. That section was full of old-growth trees and mausoleums. Plenty of places to hide.

She sprinted to catch up, mumbling under her breath. “You had one job, Myka. Stop anything that comes through the breach before

it leaves cemetery grounds without losing your watcher. Simple, straightforward, no big deal. Can't even do that properly."

She jumped onto a sarcophagus, hoping for a better view, the concrete lid wobbling under her feet. Spotting the wraith, she took off running.

Her first swing missed. Shifting her grip, she swung again, this time catching the middle of its robe. It screeched as green light leaked from the gash in its back.

She pushed for an extra burst of speed to get closer, swinging the scythe overhand in a wide arc and cutting it from shoulder to waist. It stopped and she ran straight through it.

She knew he'd been young, but when she turned around the face staring at her with wide eyes was more childlike than she imagined. She panted. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Don't be. I'm ..." He glanced at the black hole widening under his feet. "Relieved."

Myka nodded as the blackness swallowed him and the ground snapped back with a soft *pop*.

It had been a year since one of the Keres had killed her. The spirits of violent death created reapers and hunters and were in charge of managing them. Reaper dealt with the living, separating spirits from flesh. Hunter dealt with the dead. It was their job—her job—to send lingering spirits where they belonged.

This Halloween, her first as a hunter, they had assigned her to Beckwith Cemetery. Sprawling across one hundred acres, three other agents of death were stationed there for the night. She didn't want to know why one was a reaper.

They were there to guard breaches—pathways that opened up between this world and the next. Only on Halloween were the spirits who had crossed into the light able to return to the land of the living. It was exceedingly rare anyone who'd gone to Heaven tried to come back, which meant nothing coming through the breach was good.

There were normal residents of the cemetery, of course. Spirits who had chosen not to cross when they'd been reaped. As long as they caused no trouble, they were left alone. The hubbub of Halloween night generally kept them underground for the duration.

Myka stepped around the still smoldering patch of ground and made her way back to the crypt. She found Dax where she'd left him, his black stripes a scant shadow in the dim light among his dark gray fur. "You alive?"

"Barely," he croaked, rolling to his paws and stretching.

She tucked him into her jacket and smiled when his body vibrated from the force of his purr. Making it back to her assigned post, she set him on the stairs of a mausoleum and sat next to him.

Tapping the handle of the scythe twice on the ground caused it to disintegrate into a swirl of smoke. It circled her arm twice before settling as a simple black tattoo on the inside of her wrist.

Dax sat on his haunches, his tail swishing. "How long has it been?"

"Two hours since sundown." They were on duty until sunrise, when the cemetery's breaches closed for another year. They had plenty to do the rest of the year, taking care of ghosts and spirits who didn't cross and caused trouble. But those who had gone into the light

would have to wait for another chance to return if they had the inclination.

“It's been quiet.” His ears flicked.

“I'm not going to complain.”

“It makes me nervous. I'm going between to look around.” Cats were watchers for death. Mentors of sorts for reapers and hunters. They could walk between worlds, giving them insight into what happened in both. Myka could see and talk with spirits, but she was firmly planted on this side of the divide. Dax straddled the line.

“Don't stay long. Your spirit being outside your body is what makes me nervous.”

His body settled and only his spirit stood and walked away. His head disappeared when he peered into various graves, and he'd wandered a good distance when the ghost of a precocious child appeared behind him wearing a formal gown trimmed in lace. The wide collar and straight skirts marked her as from the Victorian era.

Her ringlet curls bounced as she clapped with excitement. “Kitty!” She scooped him up and hugged him tight as she spun in a circle.

Myka chuckled at his distressed attempts to push out of her arms.

Then both of them disappeared.



“SON OF A BUCKET!” Myka shot to her feet and ran after them. She hadn't gone five feet when she screeched to a halt. “Dagnabbit!”

She went back to grab her backpack and shoved Dax's lifeless body inside.

She made it to the spot they'd vanished in record time, but they hadn't reappeared. Grabbing the map of the cemetery from her back pocket, she scanned the list of graves in that section for any children. Coming up empty, she double checked where a large group of kids were buried. Yep, section F.

Her assigned breach was in section A. She hesitated. If Dax's spirit wasn't back in his body by sunrise, he'd be dead for real. If anything from her rift made it off cemetery grounds, *she'd* be dead for real. She hadn't been a model hunter, and even for being new made more than her fair share of mistakes. She'd been warned if she messed up one more time, her job offer would be rescinded. Since you had to die before becoming a reaper or hunter, being terminated from your position meant something far more permanent. You didn't get a severance package.

Even so, she couldn't leave him. Decision made, she took off running. They added on to the cemetery over time in a haphazard manner giving it a nebulous shape. She needed to cut through another section to cross into the one she wanted, but stuck to main paths in the interest of speed.

Henrietta waylaid her. She had died in her eighties, but spent a lot of time in the cemetery while still alive. An incorrigible gossip, Myka tried to avoid her but failed.

"Myka! How is your night going, dear?"

"Not fabulous, very busy. I can't stop to chat." She tried to keep going, but the ghost grabbed her arm. Henrietta was strong for an

old lady.

“Oh, I bet. I've just seen a young girl skipping past with Dax. I do hope he hasn't lost his last life. He's such a friendly cat. Always appreciative of the tuna cookies I made.”

Myka tried not to gag at the thought of tuna cookies. “No, he hasn't lost his last life,” yet, “but the girl grabbed him and I do need to get him back. Which way did they go?”

“Oh, dear. That is quite the pickle.” She confirmed they'd gone into the children's section. “Do be careful, dear.”

Myka groaned. Within minutes, the whole cemetery would know she'd lost her cat.

Section F was surrounded by a three foot wrought-iron fence. She gave up looking for a gate and threw herself over. Dax's body shifted in the backpack, throwing her off balance, and she stumbled into the wings of an angel statue that oversaw the area.

The statue was fine, but her shoulder would sport a nice bruise come morning. Giggles sounded from her right. A group of children sat in a circle, watching her with wide eyes. One little boy started laughing, his arms hugging his stomach. She was sure if he'd been corporeal, tears would have been streaming down his face.

“It's not that funny.”

He laughed harder. Myka ignored him.

A girl sitting ramrod straight on the very edge of a sarcophagus sniffed. “A lady should always be graceful.”

“I'm afraid I'm neither.” She wiped her hands on her jeans. “Have you seen a young girl with ringlet curls in a formal dress? She would have been carrying a cat.”

The boy sobered. "Clementine wouldn't let us play with the cat. She ran off."

"Where did she go?"

The prim girl studied her fingernails. "She ran off toward the back. We told her not to go, but she never listens."

"Which direction?"

The girl threw her arm in a wide arc. "That way."

Myka resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Great. Thanks." She took more care getting over the fence this time, turning back to warn them. "Be careful, and stay away from the breaches tonight. You don't want to get hunted by accident."

They answered in unison. "We will."