

EMBRACING DEATH

A DEAD AS... SHORT STORY



K E N Z I E K E L L Y

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Crunch, crunch, crunch.

“Stop it, Dax.”

Crunch, snap, smack, crack.

“You can be as obnoxious as you like eating the popcorn. It's my turn to pick the movie and no matter what you do I'm not going to pick based on what has the highest explosion and body count. We're watching a romantic comedy. Get over it.”

It was remarkable how such a small body could hold so much drama. Dax was a black smoke tabby cat, about thirteen pounds of sleek fur and coiled muscle. He was just over a year old and housed the angst and movie taste of a teenager. He was also her watcher and friend.

She settled next to him on the faded couch, an extra-large bowl of popcorn between them and hit play.

“You should ask Steven out instead of sitting here fantasizing about whatever dude is in this movie.” He rolled his eyes skyward and crunched another piece of popcorn.

She didn't answer. She knew within five minutes of the opening credits he'd be fully invested. She sank into the cushions and was reaching for her favorite fuzzy blanket when a scratch sounded on the door.

Dax jumped up. "Saved by the spirit!"

She groaned and mumbled under her breath, "This had better be an emergency."

She opened the door expecting a ghost, wraith, poltergeist, or shade. As a particular specialty of reaper called a hunter, and the only one in her profession who had retained the ability to hear and touch the dearly (and not so dearly) departed, it wasn't uncommon to be sought by the dead. What she found was a ghost of the inhuman variety—specifically a large black hound.

"Well, that's different."

"What's different?"

Myka glanced over her shoulder to see Dax perched on the back of the couch, his tail twitching with curiosity. She moved away from the door and waved her hand at the dog, who let himself into the apartment.

The dog circled the perimeter of the room before sitting in front of Myka with an expectant look on its face. Dax poofed like a ripe dandelion and regarded the dog with a wary eye and an arched back. "That is different. I've never seen a grim off cemetery grounds."

"Grim?"

"People believed the first buried in a new cemetery became a grim, tasked with protecting that cemetery and escorting those buried after to the other side. Since nobody wanted that job for

eternity, they would bury a black dog first. Sometimes they'd take it so far as to sacrifice the animal and put it under the foundation of the church as it was built. People can be weird, and cruel."

Myka's heart hurt as she looked at the hound. She hoped he had died of natural causes, but there was no way to find out. Unlike Dax and other watchers, animals and their spirits couldn't talk. "Yes, people can. Why is he here though?"

Dax twitched his ears. "I've no idea. I didn't think they could leave the confines of their cemetery, to be honest. Their job is to escort the newly dead to cross over. Can't do that if you aren't in the cemetery."

"We aren't dead."

"Thank you, captain obvious."

She cut her eyes at him. "Remember who has thumbs." She wiggled the digits at him for emphasis.

Dax faked outrage. "That's a low blow. One of these days I'm going to figure out how to work the can opener and then where will you be with your thumbs and your threats?" He was nothing if not ruled by his stomach.

She ignored his counter threat. "So why do you *think* he's here?"

Dax tilted his head, first to one side, then the other, and studied the grim. "What is it, boy? Did Timmy fall down the well?"

Myka wasn't sure if she or the grim had the better side eye. Ignoring the cat, she turned and kneeled before the ghostly form of the dog. They stared at each other for a few seconds. Then he turned and went through the door. His head and neck appeared a short while later, and then disappeared again. She stood and opened the door to find him halfway down the hall, looking over his shoulder.

When he was sure he had her attention, he walked outside, going through the wall.

She looked back at Dax, who still sat on the edge of the couch. “He wants us to follow him.”

The cat sprang from his perch and raced to her side. “Anything to save me from stupid rom com movie.”

Myka rolled her eyes. They chose the elevator since her apartment was on the 2nd floor and she would splat rather than float. They found the grim waiting for them at the front of the building.

Most reapers were assigned to a specific hospital or cemetery and the surrounding area. As a hunter, Myka had a lot more territory to cover, and she'd chosen an apartment near the center of her region. She had no idea which cemetery the grim oversaw, or how far away it might be. Looking like a crazy person to her neighbors—it wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last—she called out “Wait!” to halt the grim's forward progress.

He came trotting back, and she opened her car's passenger door for him and Dax. If she drove slow enough, he could do something to indicate which way she should go. She rolled the window down for him. Even if he couldn't feel the wind, he could stick his head out and remember. She smiled to see his tongue flapping, ghost slobber streaking across the rear passenger window.



It didn't take long for them to work out signals and following his directions, they made it to a small church tucked down a gravel road. The cemetery dwarfed the church, sprawling in an unorganized mishmash of modern marble crypts and headstones so worn you couldn't read them. The peeling paint and crooked stairs also bore testament to the church's age. Myka parked in the shade of an oak tree's sprawling branches and stepped out, taking in the buzz of insects while Dax stalked among the graves.

"Can I help you find someone?"

She was reaching for her scythe, stored as a tattoo on her wrist, before she registered the speaker wasn't a threat. A woman in overalls, her beauty shop curls escaping a large brim straw hat, sat on the edge of a crypt several feet away. She had a large bucket at her feet, a cardboard box to her left, and a colander full of beans in her lap. Myka guessed the box was full of more beans and confirmed that suspicion as she walked closer.

She gave the older woman her least threatening smile and rubbed her wrist like it's what she meant to do all along. "I'm looking for the grave of the church grim. Can you show me where it is?"

The pause in her snapping beans was so minuscule, if she hadn't been looking at the woman, Myka wouldn't have noticed.

"Church Grim, you say? I don't recall anyone by that name buried here, sorry." The rhythm of shucking peas sped up. *Snap, pull, pop, pop, pop.*

"Oh, it isn't a person's name. This would be a large black dog. He wouldn't have a headstone and might even be under the cornerstone of the church."

The lady pursed her lips, but before she could say anything, Myka pressed on. "I'm doing research into the history of church grims, and an old county record led me here."

She considered Myka with squinted eyes for longer than was comfortable before rising to her feet with a groan. "You're not with PETA?"

She could hear Dax laughing from three graves away.

"No ma'am. Simply curious about folklore and suspicion surrounding religion and death."

She nodded. "Give me your arm, then. My balance isn't what it used to be, and I'll need to show you. That grave isn't marked."

The woman latched on with the strength of a grown man and Myka almost winced as her fingers dug into her forearm. Her grip eased a bit when they started moving, the woman leading the way to the far end of the cemetery.

"These are the earliest graves at St. James Methodist. The oldest on record is a man named James Smith, believe it or not, who died in 1803, but we suspect there are older ones that weren't recorded."

This far back the graves appeared to melt into weeds. Some headstones listed to the side or had given up their fight with gravity. Before long, even the broken markers disappeared. An iron fence had once enclosed the space but now stood in pieces, entire sections swallowed by trees. It was a stark contrast to the manicured space the more recent graves inhabited. "Why is this section not kept up?"

She sighed and slumped like the air was let out of her balloon. "It's mostly paupers and slaves this far back. Nobody cares to do the

work.” She pulled hard to the right and didn't stop until they were behind the old church. Like the graveyard, the back of the church was neglected, the paint peeling and the bottom boards rotting on the ends. “Careful now!”

She hauled Myka to a stop just before she fell into some animal's den. They sidestepped the deep hole and passed through the fence. Between two ancient oaks was a square shaped space. Here the weeds were kept back by a section of low-growing plants sporting tiny blue blossoms. The woman tipped her head, the brim of her hat waving several times. “There's your grim.”

Myka kneeled at the edge of the patch and ran her hand over the soft bed of flowers. She found the grim to her left, sitting on his haunches next to one of the oaks. “Buddy” was carved into the tree's trunk. She ran her fingers over the crude letters. “Looks like someone marked his grave after all.”

The woman peered closer, using Myka's shoulder to balance and making her glad she was already on her knees.

“Well, I'll be darned. Surely that's not the dog's original name? The carving wouldn't look so good if it were that old. The cemetery's been here a long time, and I know this was here before they built the current church. That was back in the 20s.”

She grunted and the vise claw of her hand squeezed tighter as she stood. Myka resisted the urge to hiss in pain. Not sure about the rest of her, but there was nothing wrong with the old woman's hands. The grip eased, and she took a deep breath. “Buddy.”

The grim's ears pricked and she heard a soft whine.

Eyes wide, the woman whipped her head back and forth. She whacked Myka's shoulder. "I'd like to go back to my peas now. It's creepy back here."

"I'll help you get back."

Buddy whined louder this time.

"And then come back here, if it's okay?" She had no intention of staying away if the woman said no, but she found it easier to give people the illusion of choice.

Her eyes darting, she waved her hand in a rapid circle. "Fine, fine. Just watch your feet. That fox den is deep, and this time of year the snakes are moving."



Myka circled the small clearing, the distant *snap, pop, pop* of peas being shucked falling away as she focused on the details. The oaks that bracketed his grave swept their arms wide, leaves keeping most of the sun from reaching the ground. The only thing unusual about the square patch of ground was the decided lack of weeds infiltrating the blue flowered ground cover.

She turned to the church and examined the exposed footings, finding no marks or occupants besides cracks and spiders. There was nothing peculiar on the ground or the structure itself.

"Dax, I'm striking out on clues. I haven't seen anything that would help us understand why Buddy wanted us out here." She sighed and

kneeled in front of the hound, whose tail thumped a silent beat on the ground.

He looked at her with sad, patient eyes. How long they sat staring at each other she wasn't sure, but she noticed a soft gold glow from his eyes. When she looked up, the sky was dark, and the soft sound of shucking peas had stopped.

“Dax?”

The cat blinked one eye open from across the clearing where he'd curled into a ball. He stood, stretched, yawned, licked his lips, and then began licking a paw.

Myka waited for several seconds, congratulating herself on her patience before snapping. “Are you going to finish your post nap bath anytime soon?”

He stopped mid-lick to glare at her, his lolling tongue ruining the effect. He executed a cursory glance of their surroundings. She watched as his eyes went wide.

“It's dark!”

“Thank you, captain obvious.”

Dax's side-eye was not as epic as hers or Buddy's, but bless him, he tried. “It was the middle of the day when we got here, and it hasn't been long enough to get full dark.”

“I agree. Poke your head between and tell me what you see.”

Cats in general and Dax in particular could move from this plane to whatever was between life and death and back again. Myka suspected he could even enter Hell if he chose, since he claimed to be a hellcat spawn. She hoped never to have to test that theory.

She watched as his spirit left his body. He walked in a circle, which ended up being more a wonky “C” with an exclamation point when he jumped straight up in the air several feet and came down yowling and hissing.

Myka shot to her feet. “What is it—”

His spirit darted back into his body, which then double-timed up her side until he was standing on her shoulders, still hissing. His infectious panic took a bit of the sting out of the roughly gazillion claw punctures he left in his wake.

“Hellhounds.”

No sooner had the whispered word left his mouth than three sets of red eyes appeared just past the oaks. Buddy moved to stand beside Myka, his lips pulled into a snarl.

She willed the scythe from her wrist and swung it in a menacing arc. “Why are we so afraid of them? Don't they just ferry the bad guys to Hell?”

“Weren't you listening? In a cemetery that's the Grim's job. He takes them over. Doesn't matter which way they go.” He hissed for punctuation, leaving a fair amount of cat spit on her cheek.

“I was listening!” She closed her eyes and reminded herself right now was not the best time for petty arguments. “Any theories on why they're here then?”

“None.”

“Great. That's immensely helpful.” She allowed the weight of the blade to swing her weapon until the point rested on the ground. She propped against the shaft and put her opposite fist on her hip. “Don't suppose you guys can give us a clue?”

The hounds stepped forward, their snouts and sleek heads entering the clearing. They sniffed at the air, but aside from the glowing red eyes and the sheer size of the things, they weren't threatening.

"I might be able to help with that."

She kept her relaxed pose, the clenched fist on her scythe the only indicator that the echoing voice from somewhere behind the hounds had scared her witless. "And who might you be?"

"Your boss."



Before the answer registered, she heard Dax whisper furiously in her ear, "Gotta go!" Then came the pain of claws digging into her shoulder as he launched himself off her back and streaked into the night. She stared after him with her mouth open, vowing to wrench a thousand apologies from him after she got a detailed explanation as to why he abandoned her.

"Don't judge him too harshly. Most cats with only one life left try to avoid death."

The hellhounds parted and a figure stepped through the gap. Thin, but not wiry, wearing black boots, black jeans, and a black t-shirt, Death was both exactly as she imagined and nothing like it. "You're Death?"

He grinned. "You expected a shroud, perhaps? With nothing but clacking bones beneath?"

"Yes, actually. Or at least a scythe." She wiggled the handle of hers as if he needed an example.

He chuckled and said, "I gave them all to my reapers."

"Oh." She half nodded like she understood, but honestly who gives all their weapons away? Not to mention, hello, magic scythes. Shouldn't there be an unlimited supply?

"Not the time to explain inventory issues."

Danggit. Her face always gave away her inner dialogue.

His grin was lopsided and tilted to the right. His eyes were dark but sparkled with what little light there was. He was joking.

It made sense, Myka supposed, for Death to have a sense of humor. Buddy whined, snapping her focus back like a rubber band around her wrist. "Right. So why are they here?"

"Your grim friend has been remiss in his duties of late. I sent the hounds to find out why. I did not mean it as a threat, but I suppose he took it that way since he brought in reinforcements." He waved a hand in her direction; in case she needed the clarification.

Her brows came down in confusion. "I don't follow."

Death sighed and she caught a fleeting glimpse of exhaustion. As quickly as it came, it was gone. Replaced with another, though less mirthful, grin. "The grim is guarding a spirit, refusing to give passage. Because the church and graveyard are his domain, I can't enter to retrieve this spirit. I thought the hellhounds might be excluded from that particular rule, but I was wrong."

“Some spirits don't want to go. That's why hunters like me exist, to police those who choose to stay. To... encourage the troublemakers to cross.”

“Yes, that is true. In this case, the grim made the choice, not the spirit.”

Myka kneeled in front of the inky black hound, waiting until he met her eyes. “Is he right? Are you refusing passage?”

Buddy tucked his head and whined. Then he took off, screeching to a halt in front of a small headstone near the center of the cemetery.

Myka looked back at Death before she followed, who nodded his encouragement. She picked her way through the headstones, stage whispering “traitor!” at Dax when she passed him hiding behind a large marble tomb.

She stopped next to Buddy, who was sitting at the foot of a grave, his tail thumping. She sat on the grass to read the inscription.

Michael Aston Smith

2015 - 2021

Buddy looked back at her, his tongue lolling in a grin. The ghost of a small boy rose from the grave. He squealed, “Buddy!” and threw his arms around the dog's neck.

Myka swallowed the lump in her throat. “Hello.”

The boy looked at her with wide eyes. “Hello. You can see us? You can hear us?”

“Yes. I'm a reaper.” She flashed her wrist in his direction, her scythe having returned to a tattoo.

His little arms squeezed tighter. "Are you going to make me leave him?"

She ignored her tears. "No, I'm not. Are you the one who carved the tree?"

He shook his head. "I'm too little to use knives. I overheard some of the old people talking about the dog buried in the back. Didn't seem right for him not to have a name. So, I asked my older brother to carve it for me."

"You have a good older brother."

He nodded. "That was before I could see Buddy. But now Josh can't see me or play with me, and Buddy can." His hand smoothed down the dog's neck. "You promise you won't make me leave him?"

"I promise."

"What about them?" He looked over his shoulder, to the oaks beside Buddy's grave, and to Death waiting beyond.

She reached and ruffled his hair. "Let me see what I can do."

She spent the walk back wiping her cheeks and taking deep breaths to loosen the ache in her throat. "He," she squeaked, cleared her throat, and tried again. "He wants to stay."

Death's voice was gentle but firm. "No, he doesn't want to leave the grim."

"What's the difference?"

"Not wanting to leave something behind is not an active choice to stay. He's too young to appreciate the difference."

"Then let Buddy go with him. Promise to keep them together, and he'll go."

Death stared at the boy and dog, wrapped around each other, for longer than Myka could stand.

“Buddy has been grim of this church and graveyard for who knows how long. He deserves this.” She steeled her voice and lined up more arguments in her head.

She didn't need them.

“You're right.” He nodded and smiled at her. “They deserve the comfort they bring to each other.” He whistled.

Together, Myka and Death watched the boy and his dog reluctantly close the distance until they stood just out of arm's reach staring at the ground.

“Myka has convinced me that you both may go. You can stay together, and no one will part you.”

The boy grinned and gave Death's leg a quick hug. “Did you hear that, Buddy? You're going with me! Let's go!”

He ran through the gap the hellhounds still held for Death. Buddy followed, then turned back to Myka.

She leaned in and gave him a tight hug around his neck. His tail swished from the force of his butt wiggling wag. When she released him, he turned and leaped after his boy.

“Thank you,” she said to Death.

“No, thank you,” he replied, “for reminding me that even ghost dogs are good boys and deserve happiness.”

She watched as he gave each of the hellhounds a pat on the head, then disappeared into the dark.

“Are they gone?” Dax was sitting on a headstone a healthy distance away.

“Yes, they're gone.” Myka took a deep breath and used her already soaked shirt to dab at her cheeks.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I'm okay.”

“Did you cry enough?”

Myka laughed. “It's still my turn, and we're still watching the romantic comedy.”

She lifted him onto her shoulder and let him grumble as they made their way back to the car.

As predicted, ten minutes into the movie he was on the edge of the couch, asking why the male lead was so stupid not to see the female lead was in love with him.