

BETWEEN DEATH AND A HARD PLACE

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SAMPLE

I hope this is just a basic haunting. I really don't want to have to kill anyone.

I focus on my eyes in the rearview mirror. I can lean back and check what I would laughably qualify as makeup, but there's really no point in that. The only thing worth looking at just now is the eyes, because they have to be perfect. They have to be cold glass, reflecting the world without showing anything of the person behind them. They have to be as gray and colorless as my last name. They have to look through people, send that very clear message that I'm not afraid, that I can—and will—kill them all if I have to. The eyes have to be the warning, the bluff that helps me avoid conflicts.

I can't bring my knives inside, which makes the bluff a bit more necessary. But I still have me, I still have my body, my wits, and my ink. So there's still some backup to the bluff that I can

call on if I have to. But the eyes will sell it, and if they sell it right, then there won't really be a need to prove that my bite is almost as bad as my bark.

I slam the car door a little harder than I probably have to. I press the key fob to lock the doors, then lift away the piece of hematite that stops the spell circuit from completing, activating my own special brand of alarm. Other people want car alarms that make lots of noise and supposedly scare off potential thieves, but more likely just annoy the sleeping people within earshot. I want an alarm that makes people look past my shitty car and on to better and easier options, forgetting what they saw and dismissing my car as completely unimportant. It's not quite invisibility (that would be more expensive), but it gets close enough that it has the same purpose.

I found parking in downtown Minneapolis, and that in itself is an accomplishment. The last thing I need is for people to look at my car and decide they want to actually do something about my accomplishment. I've never had my car broken in to—Hennepin is pretty brightly lit at night, between the Gay 90s and First Ave, Crave and Fogo de Chao, there's always a lot of light and a decent crowd of people. I'm not saying that there isn't any crime—it's a city, after all—but it's a relatively safe neighborhood. At least, for cars. Cars with magic that makes people ignore them, anyway. Okay, maybe a bad example.

I take a deep breath and let my coat spread out a bit after being crumpled by me sitting on it. I have to wrap it around like a skirt before I get in the car or some of it gets stuck in the door and either drags along the ground, or just makes me feel like an idiot when I realize it. The trench coat isn't the warmest thing in the world, but it looks like it could be, and in Minneapolis, that's all I really care about. Temperature itself has never been an issue for me.

I can see the bright lights of the Gay 90s in the distance, but that's not where I'm headed. Not tonight. Tonight is all about club Trinity. Which, granted, is right down the street, not even a block away. Walking to the door of Trinity, I see a bouncer I

recognize. What's his name? Carter? Collin? Carl? No. Oh, right. "Hey Charlie," I say, walking past the line and right up to the door.

"AJ," he says with a slight nod and a frown. "Do I need to search you?"

"I'm not packing weapons," I say. "Just here to talk."

He scoffs. "I'll believe that one when I see it," he says. "Look, just try not to make too much of a mess, okay? I like the new set of chairs. Management finally picked something comfortable, and I don't want to have to wait another ten years before they get lucky again."

Holding up my hand, I make the boyscout salute. Don't ask why. "I solemnly swear I will not break a chair over anyone, Charlie. I'll do my best to keep them all intact."

He nods and gestures over his shoulder for me to go in, not even asking me for the cover. "If you want to smash the candle holders on the table though, feel free," he says as I pass. "They're so seventies kitsch it hurts my delicate artistic sensibilities."

I pat Charlie on the shoulder and laugh as I walk by. Patting him on the shoulder is no easy task. I'm not short, but Charlie is like a mountain. Easily seven feet tall and twice as wide across as I am, the man looks like he could pick me up and rip me in half like a phone book. So of course, everyone assumes he's this big dumb thug. None of them ever ask him about fashion or design decisions, or about what lighting works best. Which is a shame, for them. Charlie's the one who told me to get this coat instead of the white one. Said this one brought out my eyes more, and made me look more dangerous, especially with the frock.

He also tried to get me to buy oxblood colored boots, but I can only handle so much fashion advice.

The music inside isn't so loud as to be offensive, but maybe that's just because the song is only just starting. It's the Cure, that lullaby song about the spider wanting to eat people. Not portentous at all. The dance floor is almost empty, save for the few fixtures, the dancers who are either so high they can't hear the music anyway, or those so lost in their heads and the

movement that they don't care what plays, so long as it's not Bieber.

Most of the crowd, though, is sitting around at tables, having drinks, catching breathers, or engaging in deep conversations. There's laughter every so often. Some of it has humor, but most is lined with vitriol and bile, that dark mocking laughter that anyone who was ever picked on as a kid can remember.

Most people weren't laughed at because they were the bald girl from that other school—*I hear she murdered her boyfriend—what a freak...* but hey, we can't all be as lucky as I am.

Wearing gray makes me almost look colorful in here. The color scheme is so monochromatic it looks like an art film in black and white. White skin, black lips, black clothes, black fingernails. The girls aren't that much better. Every so often there's a slash of red, enough to make people think about blood without having to smell the stuff.

I head up to the bar and slide across a stool, leaving my coat hanging behind me. The bartender comes bouncing over, her T-shirt clipped tight behind her to make it that much easier for men to make out the shape of her 'tip makers,' as she calls them. She has a smile on her face, one that always seems to be there when she's working. She once told me it was because the rubber floor mats she walks across actually make her feel like she's working in a bouncy castle. And everyone has to smile when they're in a bouncy castle. It's like a rule of the universe or something.

"Hey AJ!" she says, slapping her hands on the bar top, partially to make noise and partially to stop herself from bouncing past. "Ooh, you're wearing your work coat." The smile slips away from her eyes, but remains plastered on her face. "Something I should be worried about?"

While it's true that I am working tonight, I'm not doing *that* kind of work. The violent type that tends to disrupt businesses, start fires, and make bouncers wary of me; I'm not here for any of that tonight. I'm here on a simple recon mission. Just supposed to check the place out, see if the various egghead precog types were right about me needing to be here. I'm just

looking for a ghost that, hopefully, is still mentally intact. I'm not here for violence.

I hope.

I shake my head. "No need to worry, Gina. Fucking hell, between you and Charlie, you'd think I was some kind of walking natural disaster or something."

She shrugs. "If the boots fit," she says.

"Look, that was *one* time. And I said I was sorry. Even got the ban lifted and everything."

She smirks at that. We both know how much more getting that ban lifted was because of her than of me. "You want a drink?" she asks.

"Give me a Melon Ball," I say. "Extra sweet."

She heads off to get the vodka, midori, and the orange juice, adding a touch of pineapple juice to the mixture to make it sweet enough that most people won't be able to taste the booze in the first place.

As she's making the drink, I spin my stool and lean back against the bar, taking the place in. It's a pretty simple crowd tonight. I tuck some hair behind my ear, exposing a septagram tattoo and with it, the magical overlay of the room. As I thought, most of them are human, just your average workaday goths coming to blow off some steam on a Tuesday night. And like always, where there are goths there are vampires, but just two of them that I can see, which is more on the low end than the high. And looking at them, it seems like they're hanging out in crowds that recognize them, which means they're careful when they feed. And therefore not my problem.

Out on the dance floor, I can see my client. Or at least, the reason I assume I got called here. Not for violence; that's a plus. I look at her and wonder what her deal is. She wasn't there before, but then, she isn't really there now. It's just the projection, the aura of her spirit left behind when she died. She's going about her life as best she can, at least the parts of it that matter to her. It's not living, but it's as close as she can get to it now. It's something that will keep her sane, relatively speaking, until her

issues get resolved or she loses it completely.

I don't want to interrupt her. If she can still hold on to her life strongly enough to dress the part of the club, I want her to keep doing it. I want her to stay strong for as long as possible. Besides, the longer she looks the way she did in life, the more likely I'll be able to figure out what's tying her here.

Ghosts get tied down by a lot of things. Some kind of passion, certainly. Also locations, personal items, even people. Most hauntings happen because the ghost is tied to a place, and has probably lost any real comprehension of what happened. It's not that ghosts don't know they're dead—I mean, that happens sometimes, but usually it's the other way. They don't think that they're alive, they just forget that they're dead. And once that happens, all bets are off. Frustration starts to build, which brings anger, which eventually starts to bring violence.

I get called in for those sorts of situations too, thanks to the ink on my fingers, but it's pretty clear that she isn't looking to start any trouble.

This one doesn't have any of the signs, at least not right off the bat. She's dancing to Burn by Nine Inch Nails, which is the song currently playing, so she's still interacting with the world as if she were a part of it. But she's not trying to make eye contact with anyone or get their attention. She's moving away from them as they get closer to her, and she seems completely without any concern of being watched or judged. Maybe she was like that in life, maybe she just knows that they can't see her and is dancing like no one is watching. Because, as far as she knows, no one is. No one can.

There's a glint of light from something on her chest. Probably a necklace of some sort, likely one of the items that ties her to this world. If I need to just get rid of her, I just have to get rid of her ties. Then she'll fall away to wherever it is the dead go when they're really gone.

That's one way to play this. Or I could help her settle whatever it is that's keeping her here. Then she can move on of her own free will, which I imagine is probably better for her. I don't know

though—I've never died myself. What really matters is that I settle her, one way or another, before a necromancer finds the ties that bind her and uses them to control her. A ghost being controlled tends to get angry and frustrated a whole lot faster. Worse, they tend to want revenge against the person controlling them. That's all well and good if they can escape. But if not, or if the necromancer disappears, they may just decide to go after those who look like the necromancer. Or, you know, all men between the ages of eighteen and forty. That's when ghosts go bad, when they become specters. That's when they get really dangerous.

Hopefully, I can avoid that happening to her. But first, I need to talk to her. Which in itself presents all kind of problems. I can see her; she's part of the magic in the area now, so with my septagram uncovered, I can see her just fine. But I can't *hear* her. When she talks, I won't know what she's saying unless I can read lips. Maybe I'll get lucky and she'll know sign language. But given that she's dancing to actual music playing, and seems to be pretty solidly on beat, I'm pretty sure she isn't deaf. Which makes sign unlikely.

Well, no one ever said being a witch was easy.

I don't really have a plan for how to get her attention, either. For right now, I'm just watching her. Maybe she'll feel my eyes on her and come over to check me out. Maybe she'll look up and realize that, unlike everyone else in here, I can actually see her. Or maybe she'll ignore me like she's ignoring everyone else. And then what? How do you get a ghost's attention?

Gina comes back with my drink, and I turn back to the bar, my hair falling forward and covering the septagram. She glances up at my hair line and smiles knowingly. "Seeing someone?" she asks. Anyone overhearing might think it a perfectly innocuous question. Gina's great at those.

I nod. "One of the dancers," I say.

"What's she look like?"

"Maybe five four, somewhere around a buck, buck ten. Straight black hair with a—" I hold my hand up to my own

chocolate brown hair, “streak of blue. Some kind of necklace, I couldn’t make it out. Boots to her knees, heels not platforms.”

Gina nods. “That sounds like about ninety percent of the girls in here, and maybe half the boys,” she says. “Still, that’s a bit on the short side. Any piercings?”

“Nose, eyebrow, snake fangs, and ears, that I could see. Oh, and a teardrop on the right.”

Gina lets out a sigh that tells me I’ve hit gold. “That would be Michelle. I was afraid something might have happened to her. She’s a regular, but it’s been about a week since she was in here.”

“Regular as in every night?”

“Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays,” Gina says. “Goth, punk, and industrial.”

I nod. “That sounds about right. When was the last time she was here?”

“Saturday before last. This is the second Tuesday she’s missed. Or, I guess, hasn’t missed.” She smiles a little, but it’s a sad smile. “Does she know you can see her?”

I shake my head and take a sip of my melon ball. Yeah, that’s sweet. Really sweet. My body loves it, and I end up drinking nearly a third of it in one go. I’d keep going, but I may still need to drive tonight. Odds are, I can’t just sit down and talk with Michelle. I didn’t even bring a Ouija board.

Those piss me off, by the way. Not because they work (they don’t), but because people think that they’re this ancient thing, when really they were invented by Parker Brothers. But they can be useful when talking to someone you can see but can’t hear. She could point at the letters and spell out a word. It would take forever, but it would be a way of communicating.

Or she could know sign language. I took the time to learn it. Why can’t the dead?

“She seems to know that no one can see her,” I say. “Enough that she isn’t bothering to check if people are watching her. I guess I could wave at her or something.” Yeah, because that won’t make me look like an idiot, waving at empty space.

“You could always go and bump into her on the dance floor.”

I guess I could do that. Thanks to the tattoos on my fingers, I can make contact with the insubstantial. I mean, I can actually touch her as if she's solid. Which might freak her out, or make her think I'm like her. But she's been making it a point to move away from anyone who dances too close to her. There's no way I could pull off an accidental collision.

On the other hand, that might not be a bad thing. I shrug out of my coat and leave it on the stool. "Keep an eye on that for me?" I ask Gina, taking another long 'sip' from the melon ball.

She nods. "Absolutely. Wouldn't want someone touching it and bursting into flames."

I roll my eyes. "One time," I mutter under my breath, heading out towards the dance floor.

I put my hair up in a ponytail with a band from my wrist, making sure to free the septagram and overlay the magic in the area. I may look a bit out of place on this dance floor, wearing just a black tank top and matching jeans with the cuffs rolled up to the top of my boots. But I'm less out of place here than I would be in most dance clubs. I at least have the right colors on. And my bare arms are so covered with ink that virtually anything I'm wearing gets its own hard core cred.

What they'll be able to see, especially in the lighting of the club, is just swirls of black down my arms. They start as arrows from my shoulders, then kind of dissolve into a tentacle like design. There isn't much detail, but that was the point. That tattoo is there to cover the others. The others that are various glyphs, symbols, runes, and pictographic spells, things that would hurt the human eye to look at for too long. I should know; putting them there gave me a migraine every fucking time.

Plus there's the pain. People who have tattoos will tell you the pain isn't that bad. And it's not; it's like having a cat scratch at you for a really long time. It'll hurt, but it's no big deal. That's with a tattoo gun. That's a normal tattoo.

These spells in my skin were stabbed in by hand. It feels like dripping battery acid on the skin. You never get used to it. It never hurts any less. And once you start, you can't stop until

you're done. Otherwise, you have a wasted half spell that doesn't do a fucking thing, and you went through that pain for nothing. You can't just finish it later, either. You have to start all over again.

Covering them up was much easier. That I could do without really paying all that much attention, just shading for some contours and making sure the lines are crisp. Doesn't matter that they go over and through the real things. Those spells were designed to work even when covered. Not like the septagram. Same process, different results.

I dance out onto the floor, moving my hands in a gentle wave that passes up my arms to my shoulders, a movement that makes it look like I have no bones when I do it right. I pay a lot of attention to my hands, making sure they stay pointed and outstretched. I took a belly dancing class once, for a couple of weeks, and they told me that the poise of the hand is as important as everything else. They were really big on the whole thing of using different muscles independently of one another. That's why I wanted to learn. It's also why I ended up quitting while I could still feel those muscles.

The result has made my dancing almost serpentine, flowing along like the chords of a Voltaire song. It can be distracting to some, but usually it just gets me ignored in a goth club. The rest of my body doesn't move the same way as my hands. I move my hips like a dancer, another remnant from the classes, but I move my feet like a fighter. I keep my balance steady, I keep my shoulders straight, and I don't cross my legs, not ever. Those who really know have told me that my dancing looks like my arms are trying to relax while the rest of my body stands around it with suits, sunglasses, and a little radio in the ear, just waiting for a threat so they can usher me off to Air Force One or something.

Okay, so I'm not a great dancer. Certainly not as good as the girl I'm slowly moving towards. She moves like she really has no bones, like she's not from this planet. Her hips are moving the way the girl who tried to teach me moved, and her feet and legs

move with a grace that make her combat boots look out of place. My combat boots look appropriate. She looks like she's a ballerina dressed up to scare off high school boys. She sways her entire body, and it seriously looks like she has had her spine segmented. No one should be able to move that way. I'd be a bit worried if I hadn't seen it before. It's a trick of the movement, of the control she has, or had, over her body. She can move her lower body while keeping her head perfectly still. That's how it looks. But really, she's moving everything, she's just negating the movement with her head, moving in the opposite directions of her body so it *looks* like her head is keeping still.

It's a skill I never mastered. But she looks like she was a real dancer. Maybe even a professional. She's got the muscle tone for it. Though looking closely, she doesn't have the age for it. This isn't a girl who got into the club to drink, unless she had a fake ID. This is a girl who was just here to dance. That also might explain why she's so good at it.

I slide towards her, extending my hands out to my sides and then turning to face her full on. I don't want her to panic, but I need her to know that I can see her. I try locking eyes with her, but her eyes are closed. She's lost in the music, lost in the dulcet tones of Trent Reznor, back before he started making music for Gen Z.

Plan B then. I make a sliding step towards her, my feet moving into position to throw some seriously nasty knees in her direction. Then I bend forward and bring my hands down slowly, waving them around.

And sliding them down her arm.

Anyone watching will think it was just a bit of a stretch for me, like I'm trying to show off. But they can't see her. She opens her eyes in absolute shock and looks at me. I smile and wink at her.

She starts to talk, but I can't hear her. I can see magic, I can't hear it. I'm not a necromancer, and I'm not a medium. That magic is beyond me, largely because of all the other magic I have inked into my skin; it doesn't leave enough leaking out to be able to talk to the dead, and I've never had the desire or the need to

add a tattoo to one of my ears so I could hear them. I can't really communicate with her. But I can see her, and that might be enough.

I walk off the dance floor, looking back at her and raising my eyebrows as I go. As I'd hoped, she follows after me, so intent on me that she literally walks right through someone else coming to dance to the Rammstein song starting as I go to a table away from the bar.

She sits down across from me and starts talking. From what I can see, she's going a mile a minute, and I can't hear word one.

I hold up my hands. "Hold on," I say. "Can you hear me?"

She says something. I'm guessing it was somewhere along the line of, "Of course I can hear you. Can't you hear me?"

"I can't hear you," I say, shaking my head. "I can only see you." I flash her a few basic signs with my hands, but she looks at it like I'm signing in Greek. And I'm not. It just means she doesn't sign. Long shot anyway.

She tries to pantomime a pen and paper. I shake my head. "You won't be able to hold the pen," I say. "And before you ask, I am not using a Ouija board like a bored sorority girl."

She laughs at that. I wish I could hear it. From the way it lights up her face, she seems like her laugh would be infectious. "Okay. I'm sorry we can't get more complex than this for now, but I'm going to ask you questions, and you nod your head for yes, shake your head for no. Okay?"

She nods and gives me the thumbs up. She's probably just happy to be able to communicate at all, despite how annoying this has got to be.

"Do you know what happened to you?" I ask.

She nods.

"Do you know why no one can see you?"

She nods again. Okay, good. That means she knows she's dead. And she's not in denial about it. That helps. Usually, when the dead don't know they're dead, they get angry and frustrated. A normal situation for a normal person, but the rules are different for ghosts.

“Is there a message you need to give someone?”

She shakes her head. Of course it wouldn't be that easy.

“Are you looking for revenge?”

Shakes her head again. Also good; the vengeful spirits tend to go bad fast. But what else could it be? If she's not here to send a message, and not here to get revenge, what's left? She can't want to warn someone of something; that's back to the message. Does she want to finish up an art project? See the next Star Wars movie? No, it has to be something important.

“Is there something that you have to finish?”

She nods. Maybe it *is* Star Wars.

“Can you show me?”

She fingers the necklace I saw light glinting off of before. It's a crucifix. Not a gothic one. She has one of those too, and an ankh and all the other stereotype jewelry that tells me she was just a normal girl. But that crucifix, simple and silver and elegant, that's something different. That's something that matters to her.

“Can you show me what you need to finish?” I ask.

She nods, still playing with the little cross.

I sigh. “Okay,” I say. “Come on, show me where we have to go.”

She nods and starts to get up, then falls back to the chair as if jerked off her feet. She looks at me, scared, and says something. She grabs the cross, and I can see her jolt off to the side several feet. But it's not like she's moving. It's like she's being moved. And being moved by the cross itself.

Which can only mean one thing.

“Shit,” I say. “Okay. Hold it together,” I tell her. “I'll find you. Don't let go, don't forget what you need.” She screams, but I can't hear it. “And whatever happens,” I grab her hand and force her to look at me. “Remember that it's not your choice. You're being forced to do it. It's not your fault.”

She looks at me in confusion, then is tugged away from me so hard that it nearly pulls me off my feet. When I look for her, she's gone. But I knew she would be.

I head back to the bar and finish my drink in one swift gulp,

gathering my jacket and throwing money on the bar.

“What’s wrong?” Gina asks me.

“Someone got her,” I say.

“You mean?”

I nod. “Necromancer.”

INTERLUDE ONE

It was like something out of a movie. Sophomore year of high school, the mousy girl who developed over the summer, still not quite used to her new body. The popular boy, a year older than her. Dating for a few months, about to go to prom together. Only she wants to lose her virginity before the dance. She wants to get it out of the way.

He is gentle. He is careful. He cares about her, and she cares about him. There's Blues Traveler playing on his tape deck. Back when there were still tape decks. John Popper crooning about his Canadian Rose, heavy breathing, the smell of sweat and the giggling as they try to find a good position for him to enter her. She bites her lip, wondering if it will hurt, having been told it would, warned that there would be blood, but unsure what would happen. Him trying to act manly and in control, like he knows what he is doing when he is just as clueless as she is. Young love, young lust.

He uses all the moves he's learned from pornography he's watched. She keeps her hand down there to help guide him in, and because it feels good. They grind against each other, giggling when they make noises. He keeps asking her if she is okay, because he's one of the good guys. He doesn't force her, and he

really would stop if she said anything.

But she doesn't say anything. And they keep moving together, "Business as Usual" playing on the tape. If they noticed the song, they would have laughed, but they're too focused on each other. Too wrapped up in their own pleasure.

Then she starts feeling warm. Hot. She thinks it's part of the process, and she begins to moan and make noises like the women in the pornography *she's* watched. Her sounds push him over the edge, and he thinks they are orgasming at the same time.

It's his last thought.

A few seconds later, she shivers and looks around. The music has stopped; they never made it to "Yours". And she'd never listen to that album again. The car is gone. Her clothes are gone. Her hair is gone. He is gone.

Like a movie. But not a romance.