

The Dead Can't Dance

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The death's head is panther-stalking her through the party.

Bodies washed in neon pink ebb and flow, sinking and rising from the shadows as light thrums. The speakers shoot out a wild saxophone salvo that takes no prisoners. Sonic casualties twitch on the dancefloor, clutching their eardrums, laughter inaudible, flouncing like grounded fish to the rhythm. A thousand shoes tap-tap-tappa-tap on the wooden floor of the club. A mass of peacock-feathers rise out of sweaty headbands swaying like a windswept treeline.

It's the new year, darling, and everyone's invited to the party.

Gotta get away, Natalin's exhausted brain screams at her through a haze of cocktails and second-hand nansang smoke. Fear and the after effects of intoxication urge her to vomit. She might have been scared sober.

The elf runs, shoving revellers aside, her senses overloaded with the stench of sweat, smoke, hard liquor, and traces of ammonia. The music had long ago obliterated her ability to hear, effectively making her rabbit-long ears immune to further harm. She's torn her headband and feather off, hoping to make herself less conspicuous to the apparition trailing her.

Warm slick from all the shiny, perspiring bodies covers her hairy, dark hands. Her fingers twitch and curl into claws, and she wipes her palms distractedly on the front of her expensive suit.

The peacock blue velvet, dark with moisture, transforms into black as the music and mood switch.

The lights go dim, the crowd gasps in anticipation as an air raid siren banshee wails, and the bandleader makes a redundant request for more noise to be made. There couldn't possibly be more noise in the echoing cavernous airship hangar. She glances behind and sees two pinpricks of cyan light flicker in and out as the bodies block her view. Nata could just as easily be circling with each step. The exits could be anywhere. Animal fear shuts this knowledge out—all that matters is that she must *move*.

She had no idea why the creature was after her, or why no one was doing anything to stop it. Probably, in the middle of this wild, pulsing mass of fun and

drugs and noise no one had even noticed the horror in their midst.

Two missiles—supposedly disarmed from the last war—hang from the roof, their forbidding metal bodies dully reflecting their garnish of holiday lights. As the siren crescendos, the warheads spark in a spiral, the crowd gasps, and two hot explosions of pink and orange rain glitter and confetti down as the band kicks up *Bad Moon Nights* by Half-caste Harrison. It's Nata's favourite song.

*My momma she always be askin'
How come I ain't ever be taskin'
Just I be keepin' on jivin'
Never no be good for nothin', I!
Aye! Aye! Aye!*

The heat-flash of the explosion shows her pursuer. A head like a stained-tooth, grinning amiably, blue-green fire dancing inside empty sockets. The skeleton wears a green party hat decorated with drunken, passed-out peacocks. A streamer is between its teeth. The apparition disappears briefly as a glitter covered pair of women, one riding the

other's shoulders, amble past them, dancing under the renewed lights. Then it's back, pointing a bony finger gun at her, and winking one of its flaming eyes out and back.

*I says her it ain't no fault of I,
Momma, you born'd me under a witchy moon-a
Bad moon witchy momma
You know what you do!
Aye! Aye! Aye!*

Nata curses, blocked by a circling posse of rat-faced retchitt, their powerful, furry bodies dripping moisture, arms on each other's shoulders as their splayed feet hammer the floor in heavy, black boots. Sensing her pursuer gaining ground, she angles to dive into the midst.

Right into a brick wall.

She spins around, heart hammering in her chest, readying herself to find her way back towards the exit, and comes face to face with her skeletal pursuer. Then a bony hand grasps her shoulder, and it shifts its body just enough to reveal what it had hidden under its jacket.

Nata cringes against the wall, expecting a gun, or a knife. What's under the jacket is worse than that. A long-stemmed rose.

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