

## Unlikely Gifts from a Reaper

Whatever heaven is, it's not this. This is a force with enough strength to bring an entire civilization to its knees. The only time I've ever seen destruction on this scale was during World War II, when bombs rained down on England, and every day I wondered if I would live to see the next. But that was over 200 years ago, and now once again I find myself an observer of one of the greatest failures of humanity. I stand on a hill overlooking what was probably once a great city. Entire buildings have been reduced to nothing but scraps of wood and piles of brick. There are tall structures of metal and wire, some standing crookedly, others on the ground in a tangle. Evergreen trees blanket the ground, which has been all but ripped apart. The concrete road is broken into pieces. I have a peculiar feeling, the beginnings of a fluttering of panic that I am alone here. The thought has just crossed my mind when an unearthly blue light illuminates the ruin around me, and then a voice is saying, "Alice?"

It's a deep voice, rich and full of life.

I turn slowly, not daring to hope, but it's true. I am no longer alone, and all at once the rest of the world is less important than my husband, who is inexplicably here with me again.

"Henry." I speak the name in a reverent whisper, filled with love and longing and remembrance. Overcome with joy, I race towards him to throw myself into his arms, stopping short only when I realize that I can't touch him. For the first time, I look down at my form, and am horrified to see that I am nothing more than a pale, wispy figure. Henry too is hardly more than a shadow.

"What happened?" he says. "Why are we here?"

I shake my head. "Do you think it got bombed?" I whisper.

"I don't think so," Henry says. "It looks more like an earthquake."

"It wasn't just an earthquake." This voice is unfamiliar. I turn around to see another figure gliding towards me, but she isn't as transparent as Henry and I are. Her hair falls in a thick black sheet behind her, and silver eyes glow on her pale face.

"It was the biggest earthquake in half a century," the creature says. "That then triggered a massive tsunami. This has been predicted by scientists for centuries, but precautions were not taken like they should have been. Welcome to the aftermath."

"I'm sorry, but--are you a ghost? Do you know why we're here?"

She smiles faintly. "*You* are a ghost, as I presume you've figured out. I, however, am a reaper. I, and the others--" she gestures to the destruction, where I see with a jolt that hundreds of other silver-eyed reapers have gathered--"only come together in such large numbers during times of great tragedy, and this is one of those times. We are the ones who help poor souls into the next world. We ease their fears and help them pass on into their new existence. And today, you two are going to help us."

I am stunned into silence. "Why us?" Henry asks. "We're not reapers."

"At times like this," the reaper says, "when many souls are released at once, it's too big a job for the reapers alone. So we employ the help of those who have already passed on."

"I don't want to." My voice comes out small and scared.

The reaper looks at me. "It's not an easy job," she says. "But a necessary one." She looks around, sharp eyes scanning the horizon. "It won't be long now, until the first souls start to appear. There's always a little buffer time, but they will be along shortly. I wish you luck." With that, she disappears.

I don't have a heartbeat, but if I did, it would be completely erratic. Instead, I feel a weight of dread and fear that gets heavier the longer we wait.

"Do you remember being alive?" Henry asks me.

"Of course I do," I say.

"What happened after...?"

"After you died?"

He nods, and I remember the worst day of my life, the soldiers who came to our house and informed me that I no longer had a husband.

"Well," I say, not really sure how much he wants to know, "There was another war."

"There was a second world war?" Henry asks me, horrified and furious all at once.

"Yes," I tell him, shivering a little in spite of myself.

"And you were alive for it?" he says in a hushed voice.

"For part of it," I say. "I was sick by then; I died in 1943, before it ended. Henry, you wouldn't believe--" I stop myself. "No, trust me, you don't want to know."

"I suppose I don't," Henry says. "One war was enough."

We're silent for awhile, each stuck inside our heads, memories of blood and violence and bombs wreaking havoc in our minds.

Henry draws in a sharp breath. He points to a spot a few hundred yards away, where a shimmering blue spirit has just appeared, curled up on the churned up earth. The closest reaper sweeps in, and then the exchange is blocked by the commotion around me, as more souls appear and the reapers rush to their aid.

"Mother?" I turn towards the quavering voice behind me. A young girl is standing behind me, hands on her hips in defiance, but her lower lip trembles when she sees me.

"No," I say, as gently as I can. Casting another glance at the wasteland around me I say, "but she'll be here as soon as she can."

"I'm not leaving without her," the girl says.

"But you must," I say. "You must go now so that you're ready for her when she comes along."

She hesitates. "And you're sure she'll find me?"

"She'll do everything she can," I tell her, though with all my experience being dead I still don't really know how things work beyond the veil.

The girl nods, and then her figure dissolves into bluish wisps of smoke.

One down, a thousand to go. I lose Henry in the carnage as I go from soul to soul, offering guidance and solace when I can. Some are hysterical, many refuse to go, and all are confused. I shudder

at the thought of being a reaper, having this job for an eternity.

The sun descends low in the sky, casting an orange glow over the decimated city. There are very few souls lingering now. The reapers do a final sweep, and declare the job finished. I scan anxiously for Henry, finding him a few hundred feet away, staring into the setting sun.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “That was--” I can’t even finish the sentence.

“I know,” he says.

“You did well.” The reaper’s voice makes me turn once more.

“Do all reapers sneak up on people like that?” I say. She doesn’t smile, but something softens in her fierce eyes.

“We entrust very few spirits to help us,” she continues. “And you did a very fine job.”

“How do you do this every day?” I ask her. “It’s such a burden.”

“It’s the only life I know,” she says simply. “It’s what I was created to do.”

“Do we have to go back now?” Henry asks suddenly. His hands are shaking slightly.

I feel as though the wind has been knocked out of me. I hadn’t even thought about what might happen when this is all over.

“No.” I back up slowly, shaking my head frantically. “No, I won’t go back.”

“Alice,” Henry says. “It’s okay. I don’t want to go back either, but there’s no reason to be afraid.”

“He’s right,” the reaper says. “There’s nothing to fear.”

“It’s not that,” I say. I look over at Henry. He looks back at me, and can see by his expression that he is thinking the same thing I am. We can’t leave each other again. I want more time with him, a lifetime of moments I was robbed of the first time.

“Oh,” the reaper says softly.

“Please,” Henry says. “Can you do something to help us?”

“There...may be something I can do,” the reaper says slowly, and hope flares up inside me. “Occasionally, we are granted regeneration privileges. I believe mortals call it reincarnation.”

“You can do that?” Henry asks. “But you’re a reaper.”

“It’s true that we are mainly in the business of death. But we dabble in life as well. You can’t have one without the other,” she replies.

“So you can, what, send our souls back to earth?” I ask her. “How will we find each other?”

“If you are reincarnated,” she says, “you have to start a completely new human life. But I can make sure that it is a good one. And when the time comes, you will meet again in your new forms. And only when you see each other again will you recall this conversation, and have the memories of your first life back.”

I glance at Henry. He looks nervous, but there’s excitement there too.

“I guess we’ll see each other again,” he says.

“I guess we will,” I say.

I look at the reaper. She’s as calm as ever, patiently waiting to send us back to earth.

“Thank you,” I say. There’s so much more to be said but I don’t know how to say it. She says nothing, just smiles and raises her arms, and the world dissolves into nothing.

In the year 2190 I take a solo trip to Europe. My father, who was instrumental in stabilizing the economy after the tsunami that destroyed most of the Northwest, encouraged me to take the trip. It's thanks to him that I'm now standing in a remodeled church in England. I am drawn to it in a way that I can't explain, content to spend the whole day there. Slowly the cathedral empties of tourists, until the sun is starting to set and I'm the only one left. Still I can't bring myself to leave.

A single footstep echoes in the wide open space, and I turn to see a tall young man entering. His face turns towards mine, and when it does, a whole world comes rushing back to me.

I can't move as memory after memory envelops me. I see a young woman in a lacy white dress standing before the altar of this church. I see her crying silently from the doorway of a small house as she watches her husband ride off to war. Finally, I see her standing in the wake of a disaster, and she and her husband wander through the crowd of spirits trying to cling to life.

A full lifetime passes by in a split second, and then suddenly I'm standing in the church again, but now I'm Alice, and the man in front of me--

"Henry!" The sound reverberates, an echo of pure elation, and I'm being swept up in the arms of someone I haven't seen in over twenty years.

"The reaper. She kept her promise," I say. Every tear I shed is a whisper of thanks to the universe, to my reaper turned guardian angel. Henry looks down at me in utter amazement, like he can't believe his eyes.

"You're here, you're really here," he says.

"So, what should we do with our second life?" I ask him. He just laughs, a giddy, joyful sound, and pulls me out of the door of the church, into our future.