

Small Choices

By: Aelth Faye

He didn't like the cold. It was too...well, cold. Despite him being ethereal, it still seemed to chill his bones.

The Reaper couldn't believe he'd been sent out for this job in the first place. Sure, people died in all sorts of situations, but short of freezing to death, why would anyone die in the middle of the night during a blizzard?

But the reapers were never told why their victims were dying. It was a common conversation topic among the reapers, trying to guess at the cause of death for some of the stranger ones. One of the more mysterious ones was a man who fell to his death. No one knew where he had fallen from. No one even knew how far he had fallen. There were no cliffs nearby. As far as the reapers knew, there hadn't even been any airplanes near there recently. The man had just fallen out of the sky at the feet of his reaper.

The Reaper shook his head, clearing his thoughts. He wasn't here to reminisce. He was here to find the victim and collect his or her soul. That was all. Now if the Powers That Be would only give them better directions to the victim, the Reaper would be happier.

The snow blew up in eddies around him as the wind picked up again. Thankfully, his robes were as insubstantial as the rest of him and therefore couldn't get wet. But the snow flurries obscured his vision, making it difficult to see where he was supposed to be going.

Eyes blinked out the snow at him, and he stopped abruptly. He readied his scythe, waiting until the right moment to cleanly sever the soul from the body. Then he realized that this particular body was small and furry, not exactly his usual type.

The Reaper sniffed in annoyance. Bad enough to be sent out in a blizzard, but for a bunny? Their souls were virtually useless. They didn't have enough brains to make any moral decisions and they didn't live long enough to accumulate a wealth of knowledge. He began to wonder if he should lodge a complaint with the Powers That Be.

The bunny hopped away, and the Reaper sullenly floated after it. He didn't have any interest in following the small creature around until it died. Knowing his luck, it would get wounded by a wolf and take hours to die. He shivered and reached up to pull the edges of his unearthly cloak closer around himself.

Quietly fuming, the Reaper started to compose the letter of complaint. "Dear sir," he muttered to himself. "I would like to report an incident'...Hm...no...make it a 'grievous' incident of...hm...No, 'like to report a grievous case of wasted time and manpower.' Yes, that sounds better."

It wasn't until he floated over the body that he realized how distracted he was from his original goal. He checked the body, then realized it was still alive.

It was a teenage girl, skinny, pale, and generally ill-looking. The tear-stained face suggested that she had been in great distress. Her clothing was adequate for the weather and she didn't show signs of frostbite, so the Reaper wondered what was going to cause her death. An animal? They seldom attacked humans. Though this one looked small and weak enough that a hungry animal might go after it anyways.

The bunny bounded over and sniffed at the girl's face. Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled weakly. "Aw, Bun-bun. How did you know I'd be here?"

The bunny's only response was to hop into the hood of her coat, taking shelter from the wind and snow. The girl laughed softly and shifted positions enough that the bunny could burrow in deeper.

The girl gazed dreamily up at the snow whirling around her and softly said, "It's so beautiful, isn't it? Just...so pretty. The perfect place to die."

Well, the Reaper thought, *that answered one question*. The kid was indeed trying to kill herself. Now it was only a question of what method she was using. Judging by the glazed look in her eyes, he guessed that it was drugs of some kind. Maybe even sleeping pills.

The Reaper sighed and readied his scythe. Technically, his job had two parts. First, he was supposed to draw out the victim's memories for perusal for one of the other departments. That was where the rumor that your life flashed before your eyes when dying had started. And then, of course, he needed to cleanly sever the soul from body to avoid leaving a ghost floating around, haunting the place. Though, given the number of hauntings that humans talked about, it was likely that more than a few reapers had shirked that particular task.

The Reaper sighed again, thinking about how lazy certain of his comrades were when it came to their work. After a moment, he shook off the thought and turned back to the child lying in front of him. She looked even paler than before and the Reaper hadn't noticed any animals nearby. Obviously, she was dying, and that meant that he needed to move quickly. He reached one ghostly hand out towards her and then started to collect her memories.

As always, he saw them as they slowly flowed past his hand into the hourglass issued for the purpose. There were memories of this child being beaten by her father. Memories of her teacher scolding her for falling asleep in class. She had been hungry for most of the memories, and cold for at least half of them. There were a few good memories, mostly hazy ones of her mother when she was very young. The more recent 'good' memories mostly centered around the small creature huddling in her hood, the so-called 'Bun-bun.'

Given her youth, there were few enough memories and the process was quickly done. The Reaper gently swirled the sandy-looking ephemeral collection barely coating the bottom of the hourglass. It was rather sad, actually. Such a young life, and so miserable and lonely.

After having done this job for so long, the Reaper seldom allowed emotions to get the better of him, but he actually felt sorry for the child. Of course, he couldn't allow her to live. That was strictly forbidden. And, besides, from what he had seen of her life, it wasn't likely to get any better.

The bunny turned around in the hood of her coat and sniffed at her face. The girl's lips slowly curved into the faintest of smiles. Then the bunny hopped a few feet away, seeming to wait for something. The Reaper thought about it for a long minute. He wasn't the type to break rules, least of all when it wouldn't make any significant difference. But perhaps this once it wouldn't matter. And the kid really had lived a lonely life. Surely she shouldn't be alone for this final moment.

Raising his scythe, he cleanly sliced her soul away from her body, allowing it to drift freely. Then, he turned to face the bunny and raised his scythe once more.

The Reaper faced the senior reaper in front of him, folding his bony hands casually around his scythe. "Yes, sir?"

"It looks like...hmm...It appears that there was a second soul scythed during your last mission. What happened?"

The Reaper thought about his carefully worded complaint. He thought about his other comrades, who complained about the misery of the souls they were sent to take.

In the end, all he said was, "A bunny jumped in the way."

"Oh. Hm...Well, they do that sometimes. Dismissed."

The Reaper bowed slightly and went on his way. Despite the lingering chill of the snow, his old

bones seemed a bit warmer.