

# The Reapers' Scroll

By

Olinda Braganza

# CHAPTER ONE

Today was a good day to die.

Yeah, you heard that right. Today was indeed a good day to die. It was also a good day to die of natural causes, of unexpected diseases, of unavoidable circumstances, you know how it all works. People die every day in some way or the other. The inevitable end of life arrives everywhere. But, do you know what does not?

Death. Not the concept of death, but the literal being itself. He is believed to be a horseman or a terrifying god clad in black or a guardian of the underworld, or whatever people want to believe in what the being is these days. Well, all I know is that, Death is all powerful and inescapable and is everyone's ultimate path through to the beyond. Well, Death cannot be everywhere to reap or collect souls and send them to the beyond at one time. Which led him to create subordinates to fill in his shoes.

Reapers. Yes, I am a Reaper too. My name is Althea, which is a pretty cool name, isn't it? Yeah, I think so too. Now, I am not the ordinary, run-of-the-mill, guide-the-departed-to-the-afterlife-that-they-deserve kind of Reaper. You see, I am part of the special squad, where we are called the Executioners, the ones whose only superior is Death itself, the ones who have to catch the souls that break the rules.

The souls that cheat Death.

Just as the assignment that I was on.

Now, I have seen humans picturing us to be scary robed beings with scythes in our hands. Well, the truth is that, we look just like regular people, except that we bleed darkness. You know... when a person dies, his vision goes dark and all that, you know... that kind of darkness.

So here I was, sitting in a beautiful café looking over a river out here in New York, relishing on tasty, crispy Belgian waffles and a wonderful cup of mint chocolate coffee. Even if humans have degraded over the years, at least they can kill it with the food, literally and figuratively, in both a good as well as bad way. I kept checking my own special Executioner watch, which do not have the normal dial that the humans do, the ones still living or surviving anyway.

Well, you see, a Reaper's dial possesses only one hand, where the clock strikes 'twelve' when a human soul actually leaves his body. But, for an Executioner, our clock starts the moment a Reaper's clock strikes twelve. And, mine already had begun, albeit the hand was moving as slowly as possible.

"Whoa, how long did it take you to find the assignment, eh?" a voice I recognized scoffed from behind. A voice I did not mind rolling my eyes at, at all.

"What are you doing here, Hoyt?" I sipped my coffee, not bothering to follow the direction of his voice. The scrapping noise annoyed me as he pulled the adjacent chair at my table to join me.

"Just the same as you?" he smiled.

"You mean, waiting to seduce the bartender to death?" I asked. He squirmed in his seat. Now it was my turn to smile at him.

“Are you even allowed to do that?” he asked, scrunching up his nose in disgust.

“Executioners can. Reapers cannot!” I scoffed. ‘Something that you will probably never be!’ I thought to myself. He did not need to know that!

“I will, when I am upgraded...” he smiled back.

“Suit yourself!” I shrugged. I looked back at my watch. The hand was moving too slow for my comfort. When was I going to get the opportunity to capture that cheating soul?

“You are not thinking of hitting the bar in the morning, are you?” he cocked his eyebrow at me.

“What do you think, bartenders live at the bar or something?” I shook my head at him in exasperation, “They have a home, just like regular people do and do also visit other eateries too. If you are confused, simply look at the lit red-arrowed path pulsating and joining his feet and mine!”

“You made you point. I am not that dumb!” he said defensively. I could see his eyes follow the path to a man seated along with a beautiful lady on the table placed next to the exit of the café.

“The, stop asking dumb questions, will you?” I said, taking a good bite of my waffle.

“Anyway,” he frowned in curiosity, “how did this guy cheat death?”

“Well,” I took another sip of my coffee, “yesterday, he was supposed to be dashed by a car at eight in the evening after he was done with work.”

“And?” he frowned.

“And, he was dashed, but not enough to get him that injured” I mused, “But somehow, let alone die, he got off unscathed, let alone for a few bruises here and there. The driver on the other hand...”

“Died?” he asked.

“Died? No,” I shook my head, “Arrested? You bet!”

“Wait, are you telling me that he got dashed by the car but he got away alive and well?” Hoyt asked, “Wow, that takes the ‘I cheated death’ concept to a whole new level, don’t you think?”

“Well, humans have come up with so many technological improvements to cheat death lately, that I sometimes feel that we may be needing more Executioners than Reapers, don’t you think?” I smiled at him. It gives me a great deal of satisfaction to pull up Reapers like him.

Just then, the man and the woman stood up, ready to leave the café. It was time for me to make my move. Hoyt followed me, close behind.

“Don’t you have a soul to reap?” I shook my head in exasperation, “This is an Executioner’s assignment, not a Reaper’s.”

“Well, I have not been assigned one right now, so I just wanted to observe yours for the moment,” he gave me an innocent smile.

“Just, do not interfere, okay?” I gritted my teeth in annoyance. I did not sign up for babysitting duties that day!

“You know, it is not fair,” Hoyt opened his mouth once more to complain, “why do Executioners have the right to interfere with the series of events of their assignments and the Reapers have to simply sit and wait till their assignments kick the bucket?”

“First of all, ‘kick the bucket’? Show some respect for the dead!” I answered in exasperation, “and second of all, cheating death is a crime, okay? If they did the crime, they have to do the time and pay the price. Even if it means that we have to help in accelerating the motion of events, understood?”

“Okay boss!” Hoyt answered. I ignored the sarcasm in his voice. It was cold that morning, which was fine by me because weather never affected Reapers and Executioners anyway. But that did not stop our physical bodies to exhibit effects of the weather on them, to make it look realistic for the humans and other living beings. And, luckily for me, the cheating soul had decided to walk it out so I did not have to take any sort of transport to keep him in check.

“Walking along the pretty pavement along the bank of the river is pretty detoxing, isn’t it?” Hoyt mused.

“I guess,” I shrugged in disinterest, though he was right in a way.

“So, when are you going to push him off the pavement into the river?” He asked, with his voice laced in excitement.

“I do not want to do that,” I looked back in surprise, “And even if I did, the most I can do is to be a catalyst in the whole mission. But the actual end of his life has to happen on his own. Direct meddling is not allowed, even for us!”

“Alrighty then,” he shrugged in disappointment, “so, when are you planning on being a catalyst to let nature take its late course, or whatever you want to call it?”

“Give it some time,” I said, scrunching my eyes at the couple in front of me, “There is nothing around to make him fall or to push him off or... wait!”

Okay. There was some drama about to brew between the two of them. To my luck, I was standing at a bend with a lot of shrubs growing around and crowding the area. I hid behind the bushes and made sure that Hoyt did the same, to watch the circumstance unfold.

They both had stopped in their tracks, as she had apparently decided to have words with him during a pleasant morning walk.

“Wow, humans arguing?” Hoyt seemed excited, “Looks like a great soap opera and source material to use when they bite the dust, don’t you think?”

“Wow, again, some respect for the dead?” I said, a little irritation creeping in my voice if I could help it at all, “Now, will you kindly shut it and let me focus on getting on with my mission? Your job is to observe, not disturb!”

I redirected my focus on them back again. What started as an argument between the two of them started to get a little physical, when the lady started to point a finger at him. He seemed to have been shouting back at her, which was quite evident by the spit flying out of his mouth. She began to throw her hands in the air belligerently, while the man himself began to get quite aggressive himself. The argument had become heated to the point that she began to push his shoulders.

“Now this is getting interesting,” he said excitedly, “Want to meddle and probably, push her so that she falls on him and he falls to his death?”

“I could, but there are chances that I will be spotted,” I answered back, “and, that I something that I am trying to avoid at the moment. If things get too confusing, or if the couple gets to the right, then they will be standing in a dead spot of the CCTV cam at the corner and then maybe, I can go and act on your dear suggestion.”

The pushing was getting more and more intense. ‘Okay, I think the opportunity is getting closer and closer’, I thought to myself as I could see them shouting and pushing each other to the right. A little more... A little more... A little more...

Five minutes later, they were right where I wanted them to be. “Wish me luck,” I took a deep breath and gave Hoyt a smile.

“Go kill ‘em, champ!” he clenched his fists in excitement. Wow, for a reaper, he was an excited individual. “Calm down and stay here, okay?” I pursed my lips and stood up to walk towards them.

I shoved my hands in my pocket and tried my best to sound casual. They did not seem to notice me and were getting into a good fight with more pushes between them. I was reaching closer to them and was about to complete the transaction of the mission, when something unexpected happened.

Amidst all the yelling and pushing, the man grabbed her shoulders as she yelled and pushed him. He lost his balance and slip on the ledge. His hands tried to search for something to grab for life support, but instead he grabbed the woman’s shoulders and fell off the ledge, taking the yelling woman along with her as they plunged to their deaths.

All of this took just about ten seconds to happen and all I did was watch the spectacle unfold. Hoyt came running behind me with a big smile on his face, “Looks like nature took its time, but second time’s the charm!”

“Okay, I have to agree with you on this,” I allowed myself to give a little smile, “Now, we simply wait for them to show up on this bridge, right here...”

“Okay...” Hoyt mused as he slowly walked towards the edge of the ledge. I followed suit. The force of the flow of water was a little too strong at this corner, which is obvious that the two would have obviously lost their lives by now. We waited for a long time, keeping an eye for their bodies and the gushing water below, but there still seemed to be no signs of them. I frowned and checked my watch. Yeah, my clock had struck twelve, pretty much at this point, which means that he was pretty much dead at this point.

Then, why didn’t he show up at the place that he was last seen alive?

“Let’s go down to the edge of the flowing water,” I suggested, walking ahead to find a place that would climb down to where I assumed, they fell over, “Maybe if we find their dead bodies, we may find their souls somewhere close by.”

“You think it happens?” Hoyt frowned.

“It has happened in the past,” I shrugged, “It is rare, but it happens that they are not drawn to their reaper immediately. Sometimes, we have to find where they are lost... or hiding...”

I found a small break in the smooth road that opened to a flight of natural, rocky steps leading down to the river. I looked down to trace the route to where it led and could find a decent place where a sensible adult would not slip and flow away along with the river's undercurrents.

"Let's go, follow me," I said, as I started my descent, with Hoyt close on my heels.

"Don't you have any superpower of, you know, sliding down the whole way instead of making the effort of climbing down?" Hoyt complained.

"Don't you, champ?" I smiled, hoping that my sarcasm would shut him up. To my delight, it worked.

After a ten-minute climb down to the bottom, we finally got some dry land to stabilize our footing, barely avoiding the gushing foams forming and crashing at the bank of the river. Wasting no time, I began walking along the glowing red path that began to pulsate even stronger, which was the clear indication of his soul being very close by. At least he was courteous enough to get the deed done by himself.

I followed the glowing red path in to a thicket of trees nearby, as the faint sounds of an echo came back at me. The soul seemed far away for me but not too far for me to have to chase him down once again. We ran and ran, as the echo and faint noise became clearer and clearer and even more distinct.

As fast as the pulsing began, it stopped and the path ended in to a little clearing, where someone was waiting, all right. I stopped in my tracks at the end and came face to face with him...

...except that it was not a soul that I was assigned to collect.

It was another Executioner.

"What are you doing here?" I asked in confusion, "Does the boss not trust me anymore?"

"No, it is not that," he answered me, "I am come here to collect a soul that cheated death!"

"Oh no," an uneasy dread began to fill the pit in my stomach.

"What happened?" he asked with concern, "Do you know something that will help me?"

"Yeah, I may," I answered in resignation, "It means that I am the first Executioner that is laid off her case."

"No, I don't think that is the right answer," he scrunched his nose, "Because, mine is a fresh one. I am chasing a first-time cheater."

"Wait, what?" I shook my head, a little perplexed for a few seconds, "Where did the soul cheat?"

"Somewhere down the river," he said, shaking his head, "the soul traces began along the bank leading up to--"

"Wait," I cut him off, realizing something that made my hopes sink, "You mentioned 'traces'. Were there more than one soul?"

"Actually, yes," he shrugged, "And the strange part was that, the two traces began up the river, but only one trace showed up, which was the soul assigned to me..."

“You mean, the man’s trace disappeared?” I shook my head, “Did he cross over to the special beyond through the Executioner’s portal? That is not possible, because I did not even meet him to reap him...yet.”

“No, no,” The fellow Executioner proceeded to clarify, “There were two soul traces, that of a man and a woman that had appeared a few minutes back, but after some time, just when I had arrived, I was assigned to the soul who cheated death, the soul who is still alive. I am the man’s Executioner!”

“No, no, wait, wait,” I raised my hands. I needed to organize my thoughts. Before I knew it, I was thinking my thoughts out loud, “So, you are telling me that the woman crossed over to the other side, but the man escaped alive and this is the first time he cheated death? The bartender who is cheating death for the second time is assigned a new Executioner under the pretence of him being a first-time cheater? An assignment that was lifted off my roster without my authorization or the boss’s?”

“No,” the fellow Executioner frowned, “What I am saying is that, he was never your assignment to begin with!”

“Take me with you!” I said, walking towards him, “I want to make sure that we both are talking about the same person!”

“Be my guest,” he said, waiting for me to join him. I walked beside him, while Hoyt walked behind me and whistled casually, like he was enjoying the drama unfold. As we walked, the Executioner with me frowned in thoughtful curiosity, “Say, in all that argument, I completely forgot to ask you your name!”

“Oh, I am Althea,” I gave him a little smile and shook his extended hand, “And you are?”

“Joshua,” he returned my smile, “So, are you one of the new Executioners?”

“No,” my smile wavered a little, “Why would you think that?”

“No, it is just that, since the number of souls slipping away and cheating their own demise are on a steep rise, it seems that many of the new ones are having trouble handling their assignments and capturing them. And if he is the same person and I was mistaken that it was my present assignment because, maybe, the big boss itself-”

“Hey!” I cut him off. How dare he question a senior Executioner like me? My annoyance amplified when I could hear Hoyt’s stifled laughter behind me.

“You know,” I continued, “Maybe you are the new one. Because you could have been the one who mistook the assignment as your own.”

“Well, the soul path does not lie. It appears the moment you are assigned!” he shrugged and returned my frown with an even bigger smile.

I simply found it hard to digest the fact that my assignment got reassigned to someone else. This was going to look very bad on my review.

Joshua’s current soul path began to pulsate brightly, when we got out of the thick tree cover into a small part of town. The path ended right in front of a crowd of people cowering over someone. Joshua pushed ahead to see what the commotion was about, with Hoyt and me following close behind.

A man was sitting on a huge, flat rock all wet and shivering. He was crying and hysterical as he kept mumbling words that sounded like, ‘...my wife melted’ or ‘...my wife is never coming back.’ Or both.

Joshua cleared the crowd till it was only us alone with him. He slowly led the man back into the thicket.

“Now sir,” Joshua said gently, “I cannot imagine what you must have gone through. But I am here to help you...”

To my surprise, he agreed with him. How did Joshua do it so easily?

We walked back on the bridge, where I realized what Joshua’s plan was. Joshua walked him to the edge ever so slightly, and was about to complete his mission, when...

Suddenly, Joshua froze, mid-action. And before I could comprehend what happened, his body began to freeze, slowly from the legs, up to his torso, then to his neck and eventually his head. And, without another warning, he burst into a million waves of darkness, out of existence.

“What the hell-”

A voice boomed behind me, as a loud alarm blared from my watch as the dial filled with red light, “Death has imposed a trial on the one responsible for letting the soul cheat Death a third time as well as the death of the Executioner. Now, as only one Executioner or Death itself can kill another, we need the culprit.”

Hoyt and I exchanged nervous glances. And then, Hoyt did something terrible.

He raised a finger at me and said, “It was Althea. She is the culprit!”