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Death's Harvest

“The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die any time.” –Mark Twain

“You only get one chance to do this right.” Morris Bailey leaned over Patrice’s shoulder, his onion-laced breath hot against her skin.

“I *have* done this before.” She kept her body still as she steadied the rifle’s butt against her shoulder.

Bailey’s talent depended on his feathering his own nest—a trait she detested. The cluster of people standing outside the club acted like peacocks before the velvet rope that barred them entry. Strutting and standing, flexing and fashionable, they vied for the bodyguards’ attention and hoped to gain entry.

“There are people among us that shouldn’t be allowed,” Morris whispered as to not startle the prey.

Patrice ignored him. They had a job to do. The harvest of death had come upon them, and *G*, known by mortals as the Grim Reaper, had a daily stream of souls to reap. That was the job.

“Ignoring me isn’t wise, kid.” Morris licked his lips. He popped his collar. Weathered, pale hands patted his pockets for his cigarette packets.

“I’m working. Shhh...” Patrice took aim and fired.

Bam!

Across the asphalt something dark and wet glistened beneath the streetlights as people scattered for coverage.

Blood.

“Sloppy.” Morris snickered. He lit his cigarette. “Look at the cattle stampede.”

Patrice shrugged. She preferred her laser gun, but the rifle and its antiqued bullets left little evidence.

“Tomorrow, I will be older. You will not.”

Morris blew a stream of smoke. “Maybe. Truth is that I feel so wrong when I’m doing the right thing. You know? I need a bit of naughty.”

A bit? Their occupation held more than a bit of naughty, and more like a whole ton of terror. Screams continued to puncture the velvet darkness growing fainter as they retreated. The humid night stretched on as Patrice melted back into the alleyway with Morris on her heels.

“We should’ve just stabbed him. You know, waited him out when he was alone,” Morris muttered from behind her.

“Stabbings are personal. You get to smell your victim’s last breath.” Patrice doubted he could handle that. Besides, she didn’t have anything personal against the mark. Just a job like the others.

When they reached the car, Patrice popped the trunk using the keyless remote. She tossed the rifle to Morris and he wrapped it in the blanket before putting it inside and slamming the trunk closed.

Easy. Quick. Seamless. Just the way Patrice liked it. Complicated jobs made for complex payment. Criminals would take blood when folks ran out of money. She'd take death when the funds had been cut off, but blood didn't cover her expenses. Not waiting for Morris, she slid into the driver's seat and started the vehicle. Morris hurried into the passenger's side as she threw it into drive.

"Did you have to take his head off? It's supposed to be clean." Morris buckled his seatbelt. He mopped his sweaty face with a handkerchief.

Patrice suppressed her smile. Who still used a handkerchief in this day and age?

"If I didn't have breasts, you wouldn't be asking me that question." Patrice made a left, past the cops and an ambulance with its screaming siren. A collection of gawkers had huddled just outside the yellow caution tape.

"I'm sorry." Morris ran his hand through his thinning hair.

"I bet you are."

Overhead the full moon cast down enough illumination that she couldn't hide. Cloudless evenings made hunting better. She made a right and punched in the coordinates for the drop off.

"You're one hell of an opportunist." Morris chimed in to her thoughts, interrupting her musings.

"Death is always hungry and looking to gobble people up. I just help feed it." Patrice sighed as the howling sirens grew faint.

Morris's tattered reputation as a Reaper had been the only reason she'd been called in to this assignment. Hazelwood wanted to be sure it wasn't bungled. Reapers didn't harvest in pairs, but Patrice had agreed to do it anyway. Sure, she got paid, but men like Morris wilted under the job's pressure to the point the others had contacted her as support. Just like most jobs, she, a woman, ended up doing everything.

"You got a boyfriend?" The streetlights flickered shadows across his scarred. "For all your hard act, you're actually charming. Uncompromising, but charming."

"My personal business is my own." The sooner she reached the designated drop off, the sooner she could dump Morris and transition to her next assignment.

"Oh come on. You can be economical with the truth if you want. Is it a girlfriend?"

"I think *personal* answers all your questions." Patrice searched the rearview mirror for followers. Good. No other vehicles on this stretch of road.

"I'm sure your heart breaks like everyone else's."

"What part of my actions makes you think I'm some insipid, emotionally crushed woman?"

Morris belched, but his face remained stoic. "You didn't just kill the target, you wanted to erase him. You blew his face clean off. I'm just wondering if you have some pent up frustration or hatred toward men."

"He was the target. They don't die if you don't shoot for the head." Patrice shot him a cold glare. Surely he knew procedures.

All of these were facts he knew. Morris wanted a response, but she wouldn't give him any emotional tirade or passion. Only the icy silence could batter back the man's heat-seeking misogyny.

"Right. Right." Morris's nodding reminded her of a bobblehead doll. Its head moved only by gravity and momentum, not substance or acknowledgment.

At last he fell into a hushed silence that extended through the rest of the drive. When she reached the address, she stopped the car and unlocked the doors.

“Here.” Patrice announced.

Thankfully, Morris climbed out without a word. He took a step toward the sidewalk, but then turned back to her with a wide, greasy grin. “There’s a way to make this stick to you, Patrice.”

Patrice shook her head, and rolled up the passenger window. Just then a *crack* shot through the air. Morris’ head exploded in a shower of brain matter and blood. It sprayed onto the window, making Patrice flinch.

Already throwing the car into drive, Patrice slammed on the gas before his body hit the sidewalk. When she reached a stoplight, she reached down and removed her small pistol from her ankle holster. *Prepared to be unprepared.*

Rule number one.

Morris had forgotten that and it had cost him.

Patrice didn’t know who had just ended the miserable and pathetic existence of Morris Bailey. In this business, there were people among them that shouldn’t be allowed to be among breathing, normal people.

And she was one of them.

#

“When you have lived as long as I have, life becomes stale. It’s bitter and frail. All of its flavor and freshness leeches out in tiny nicks and gashes. It crumbles into the ground and is walked on by others. So many lives become lodged under the foot and dragged for years through garbage, weather, and human misery until the dirt covered their graves. It stains everything. At their end, when their stalks sag beneath the weight of their pathetic lives, we reap.”

Hazelwood, the Grim Reaper’s second-in-command, didn’t walk, he floated. His dark suit fit him like a glove. It spoke to a personal tailor with infinite patience and a penchant for perfection. His equally black hair fell in gentle waves to strong shoulders. His ice blue met hers.

“Don’t bore me with the recruit speech. Tell me what happened!” Patrice leaned across his desk, knocking over the raven quills and emerald inkwells. “I dropped Morris off. He took two steps and dropped like a sack, his head smashed like a pumpkin. Dead.”

“Seems like you know what happened.” Hazelwood floated from behind his desk. It resembled onyx instead of wood in the candlelight. Parchments lay scattered along its expanse. A few quills remained stuffed into a raven-black jar. Everything had to be just so. Well, until she arrived.

“Hazel, in moments he was dead. I got the hell out of there! Who else knew about the stalk?” Patrice hugged herself. The gun holster bit into her shoulder. This all felt dirty.

Hazelwood quirked an eyebrow. “The stalk? Other than G, you and Morris were the only ones who knew.” He waved off her words. “The reaping’s not the issue.”

“Then what is?” Patrice stopped short of shouting.

She forced calm into her demeanor. As a professional, she shouldn’t be this unsettled. She’d been a reaper for years.

Besides, Hazelwood could crush her body and pluck her soul with little effort. He reached for a crystal sphere on his desk. When he held it in his hands, it glowed in rippling amethyst hues.

“Morris was killed.” Patrice walked to one of the bookcases, running her fingers over the ancient texts, and scrolls.

“Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once. Morris was long since dead.” Hazelwood smiled. It quickly withered.

“Don’t give me Shakespeare at a time like this.”

“When else does one need Shakespeare?” Hazelwood frowned briefly before his usual stoic visage returned. “Morris had been reaped a thousand times in a life both shallow and dry.”

“It’s hard to be content when one can’t achieve, Patrice. Morris was the intended stalk.” His eyes pulsed in time to the orb.

“How do you know it wasn’t meant for me?” Patrice put her hands on her full hips. Nothing Hazelwood said—not that he’d said anything much—dissuaded her from thinking the gunman missed his real target. *Her*.

“Morris had been reaped,” Hazelwood repeated.

If the stalk set for reaping had been Morris’s all along then who did she reap? Why kill Morris after the crop had been harvested? Hazelwood returned the orb to the outstretched skeletal hand that cradled it. It fell dark and his eyes returned to their usual ice blue.

Her father had taught her to watch the mouth. It betrayed what the eyes tried to hide. Hazel sighed as he floated around the room, his polished black dress shoes inches above the floor.

“Saying it twice isn’t convincing, Hazel.” Patrice spied black folders on his desk. A bright green *P* had been emblazoned on the cover.

She snatched it up.

“My money?” Patrice headed for the door.

“Uh, yes?” Hazelwood briefly scowled.

“I’m done. Out. I shall reap no more.”

The exit required her to cross over a black, iron grate in the floor. Beneath that the glowing blue of liquid fire. As she approached, the entranceway erupted into flames. Patrice stumbled back, the folder flat against her chest. Damn him. “Underworld scare tactics don’t work on me.” She shifted her folder to her left hand, and reached for her gun.

Hazelwood drifted closer to her. The heat crackled, but nothing burned, not the walls, the flooring, or the heavy curtains. “Victims. Aren’t we all?” Hazelwood flashed his teeth. “Patrice Yolanda Williams, your stalk isn’t ready to be reaped. Of this I am most certain.”

A chill skated down her spine, but she didn’t let him know. This close to her, Hazelwood reeked of ash. It took her a few years to get used to Hazelwood not breathing. After all, he wasn’t alive.

“Would you tell me if it was?” Patrice searched his face for any hint, any clue, or any indication he lied. Hazelwood shifted from her and drifted back to his desk. The fire that barred her exit vanished. “That’s what I thought.”

“Moments matter less than years, Patrice, but even those flicker like worn out lightbulbs that fall dark all too soon.” Hazelwood stared at the bookcase behind his desk. In profile, his features mimicked Greek statues, classic beauty. Something in his awkward movements conveyed uncertainty despite his faux bravado and closed off nature. It rang hollow.

“You’re hiding something.” Patrice could feel it in her bones, down into their marrow. “Know this, Hazel. I’m not some self-styled migrant worker. I’ve done this for too long. I’m no poor or weak crop.”

“A bad reaper never gets a good sickle.” Hazelwood crossed his arms. G won’t sit still for your inquiries. He reaps the bearded grain at breath.”

“Really? Longfellow? You aren’t taking me seriously at all.”

“I don’t because Morris’s claiming had nothing to do with you. Don’t go taking your scorched earth attitude to this. Let. It. Go.”

The living didn't belong in the Underworld. Prolonged stays sipped years off of her life. Already her chest felt tight and she'd begun to wheeze. She wrapped her hand around the butt of her gun, and she felt better. Calmer, but still affected by the drain on her body, Patrice coughed. Time to go. She couldn't spend any more time jabbering with Hazelwood. His stubbornness fueled the fire between them and most of the time, she enjoyed pulling him along. Not tonight.

"I'm done, Hazel."

He unfolded his arms and eased himself into the wingback chair behind his desk. With an otherworldly wind blowing his hair, he stared at something she couldn't see.

"Then go," he said at last. "Your next assignment will come."

With one final glance, Patrice stalked out of the office beneath the demon carved statues and gothic décor, down the corridor, and to the exit. Most people think there's a highway to hell, but getting to the Underworld involved a ferryboat, dealing with Charon, and money. Since the vacation would last for an eternity, the pathway to get there involved more organization than an annual trip to Disney World®.

For Reapers, G and company provided a wrought-iron grate magic elevator that appeared when she pressed her hand against the slick rock. The rock turned scarlet beneath her palm, and at once, the rock melded into the grate. Once inside, Patrice braced for the rapid shot up to the surface. Virginia Woolf once said that someone had to die in order that the rest of us should value life more. That definitely rang true tonight. Creepy laughter erupted along with a jolt announcing she'd arrived back on the surface.

Patrice spilled out the elevator and inhaled the dusty mausoleum. The smooth walls and the scent of decay and mold greeted her as the elevator disappeared back into the wall. Mausoleums aren't designed to be opened from the inside, but this one had a specially installed lever, that opened the heavy door. It screamed as it slid backward. Patrice stepped into the brightness of early morning, and hurried down the cracked pathway to the cemetery's exit.

A murder of crows watched her as she walked along the path to her vehicle. She'd never seen so many of them clustered amongst the headstones, patiently waiting. For what? The inconsolable soul? The wretched and the wrong?

A chill skated down her side. Perhaps she didn't want to know the answer. Didn't *need* to know.

She returned to her car. Once she placed the folder on the passenger seat, it disintegrated into ash, leaving only the grey-scaled check. Great. Now, she had to get the motorvac out later to clean up the mess. Why G hadn't switched to direct deposit, Patrice didn't know, but asking the Grim Reaper to update his technology didn't seem appropriate.

Aching with fatigue and adrenaline withdrawal, Patrice drove home with her hands trembling. Not all the trembling came from the withdrawal, but from the creeping fear inching along the hairs on her neck.

If Morris had been the intended target, who had she killed last night?

#

Patrice awoke to a gale howling outside her window. Sitting upright in her bed, she listened to the rain lash against the glass. When she first arrived home, she sought only the nurturing arms of sleep.

It had avoided her.

Only nightmares awaited once she slept. All of them involved Hazelwood.

Had Hazelwood set her up? G?

The storm threatened to pour into her room, but she bolted upright. It whipped into a fury and rage as cold air met the hot, steamy atmosphere. Already, dark clouds blotted out the sun. The storm announced the arrival of G, but Patrice wanted none of it. She'd slept most of the day, and now, at the onset of dusk, Patrice hurried out of bed, snatching her weapons from their hiding places.

Barefoot, she scarcely had time to yank on pants before her bedroom door crumpled and creased into nothingness. In its rectangular entranceway, G, known to all as the Grim Reaper stood. His dark cloak clapping in its otherworldly wind. Despite this harsh wind, his face remained obscured.

"You haven't come for me." Patrice forced her calm.

In a crash of lightning, death winked out, and there stood Morris Bailey. That couldn't be right. She witnessed his reaping! "Morris?"

Already responding by instinct, Patrice lunged forward. Her knife's tip plunged into his squishy wet body. He shrieked and out spewed acrid liquid.

"Damn!" Patrice leapt onto her bed, out of the path.

Morris wailed in agony, writhing on the carpet. His secretions ate away the stain-resistant fibers. Patrice fired. Putting a sliver bullet into Morris's brain.

"Was that necessary?" Hazelwood inquired.

Startled, Patrice jumped and whirled unsteadily on the bed with drawn pistol. On reflex, she fired. The projectile passed through Hazelwood and lodged in the wall behind him.

"That most surely wasn't necessary." He levitated over to Morris's decomposing body.

Hazelwood squatted down and reached into the bile and secretions and removed the silver bullet.

"You can't have too many of these." He dropped it into Patrice's open palm.

"I'm going to need more than tetanus shot after handling this. What the heck was he, Hazel?"

"You're going to make me ask aren't you?" Patrice climbed down from the bed, avoiding tripping on the twisted sheets.

He gave her his version of wide-eyed innocence. It consisted of his blue eyes staring blankly at her. "I don't know what you mean?"

Great.

"I know all this otherworld and paranormal bits are your bread and butter. They might be your reality, but they're not mine. I do my job. I get paid. I go home."

Hazelwood glowered. "You speak truth."

Patrice screamed in outright fury, "What. Just. Happened?"

Silence. Hazelwood's hair fell like a curtain, partially obscuring his face.

"If you're trying to decide whether or not to tell me. Don't. Just speak."

He threw back his head, tossing his hair over his wide shoulders. "It's never that simple."

"I have to know before this hell rises again." Patrice pointed at the now blackened body-sized spot on the floor. "I saw him get shot. Dead. Then he appears in my bedroom."

Hazelwood crossed his legs and as his body shifted to a sitting position, a wingback chair materialized along with ash and the punch of sulfur into the air.

"Really? I have furniture."

"What? Your furniture is classic but uncomfortable." Hazelwood tented his hands in front of him and peered across at her.

She didn't like the feel of this situation. Instinct kept her standing and propelled her to move back from him. Loyalty had its price. She picked up her dagger in her other hand. Now equipped with a weapon in each hand, she started to feel safer.

"The blade is an artifact of death," Hazelwood began. "I gave it out to all Reapers."

Patrice studied the blade's handle. Bone.

"It's a hand-sized version of G's sickle. You use it to separate the spiritual wheat from its earthly shaft."

All this she knew. A clap of thunder punctuated his words.

"So, Morris was shot," Patrice returned the dagger to its sheath and tossed it on her bed.

"Bailey was *shot*." Hazelwood repeated, a wicked grin stretched across his face.

It dawned on Patrice like a ton of bricks. "We don't reap with guns."

Hazelwood nodded. "Exactly. Too noisy for our purpose. Besides, death is personal, like stabbings they are up close. Intimate."

Patrice swallowed as the hair on the back of her neck rose. She'd used a gun to reap the victim. Morris had even made a comment about her using the rifle. Now that she thought about it, the Reapers never reap in public places. Yet last night's crop had been harvested in a crowded and visual place. Morris had remarked on that too. He'd been trying to warn her, wake her up from the spell she'd been under.

No wonder Morris's death bothered her so much. Her instincts and Morris had been trying to warn her all along that she'd been acting outside of Reaper protocols.

Across from her, Hazelwood stood. The chair vanished into black flames.

"Bailey was a bullish man, but he didn't deserve to be murdered, Hazel." The tremor in her voice didn't lessen their impact.

Hazelwood faked a smile. "Murder? Morris, as I told you, was reaped."

She swept the pistol up and pointed it at him. "It was *you*. You ordered his harvesting."

"I order all the reapings." Hazelwood leaned toward her, walking directly into the pistol. "Do better dear!"

He slapped her, sending her reeling backward into her dresser. Contents spilled as the night thundered. She straightened and lunged, anger and the raw taste of betrayal raced through her. Hazelwood backhanded her, sending her crashing into the floor again. On her third attempt, she sailed through him as he winked out of this realm temporarily before reappearing. With terror, she caught herself before she rammed into the bookshelf. She searched the room.

How the hell am I supposed to stop him? The Grim Reaper's right hand. No one weapon can touch him. Only Grim himself...

Blood trickled her cheek from a gash. Her lip swelled and ached, but she had to have all of it now. The truth.

"You reaped Morris Bailey's soul, leaving it in limbo between heaven and hell. His body was what? Festering? Why, Hazel?"

Cool. Calm. Hazelwood nodded in agreement. "You're almost there. Do go on."

Patrice coughed out the outright horror inching up her throat. God, she'd been so foolish. As she studied Hazelwood's gloating face, it all unfolded for her.

Morris wasn't the first of these unsanctioned reapings. How long? How many lives cut short with G's knowledge?

"You snatched his soul, the crow from earlier. The one in the cemetery..."

"The one that followed you home." Hazelwood finished. He then gestured her to go ahead.

“You called Morris here to kill me.”

“Bingo!” Hazelwood shouted, fist pumping like an ecstatic athlete. It looked strange when combined with his polished appearance, the action at odds with the image.

“Tell me, Patrice. Now that you know the truth, do you feel free?”

Before she could form the thought to answer, his hands appeared around her throat.

“No!” She managed, clawing at his hands. “Why?”

Hazelwood paused. “Why?”

“Why. Kill. Me?” She continued trying to free his hands from her throat, but he didn’t squeeze any longer. “Tell me that truth before you kill me. Dying request. I’m a Reaper. Give me that.”

“Death is a commodity.” Hazelwood admitted, releasing her.

“Demons don’t need money.”

His jaw tightened, but then he grinned. “No. We don’t. I don’t get paid in currency, but in flesh.” As he turned to the window, his eyes took on a far away, glazed look into the dark, rain-drenched night. “A human summons me, and I barter to kill whomever they wish. In return, I’m allowed to possess them for 24 human hours.”

“Morris did the off the books harvests.” Patrice interjected, rubbing her neck. She had to find a way to defeat Hazelwood, but more importantly, she had to stop him.

“Yes, and I got to breathe, to eat good food, smell sweet air not pungent with sulfur. I got to *live*, Patrice.” Hazelwood glanced over his shoulder to her, his previous anger gone.

She stood there, in the flickering light of the lamp, in stunned silence.

“You traded people’s lives so you can experience *life*?” Outrage made her hot.

The irony appeared lost on him. Of course it did. She recalled his earlier comments about immortality. It had become stale, he’d said. Damn. He’d tried to tell her in his office. She’d missed all the clues.

And she had to pay for her sloppy detection skills.

There was only one way to summon the Grim Reaper.

Only he alone could stop Hazelwood from continuing his death for life campaign.

Hazelwood laughed. “Modern times. Capitalism reigns supreme. This is a glorious time to live. Before I could eat human livers and experience the glories of human existence, but G forbade it centuries ago.”

“You don’t think he’d sanction *this*, do you?”

“No!” Hazelwood turned and flew at her, slamming her back against the dresser.

The impact stole her breath, and she collapsed to the floor. Hazelwood straightened up, fixed his fly-aways, and yanked down his shirt. As he adjusted the cuff of his sleeve, he produced a long dagger. The hilt bone contained a raised *H* etched in bone.

“Patrice, you’ve sown a life of destruction, sorrow, and pain, long before your tenure as a Reaper.”

She pushed herself up, debris biting into her hands, knees, and legs as she got to unsteady feet. Everything hurt, but she wasn’t dead, yet. Summoning her own reserve of will, she picked up her pistol.

Hazelwood snorted. “You can’t kill me with those silly bullets.”

What was is about demons and hubris?

Patrice placed the gun against her temple. The barrel’s still warm tip stung as it made contact. A cold resolution rippled through her. When her finger rested against the trigger, she smiled, but it felt taut and tight on her face.

“What are you doing?” His jaw fell.

“Calling Death.” She squeezed the trigger.

Lightening flashed as she collapsed to the floor. The edges of her vision blurred as life ebbed away. It occurred to her at that moment that G might be too busy to answer her “call.”

Hazelwood jerked her up, and shouted at her. Words she couldn’t hear. Or feel anything. She could tell his outrage by his twisted animated expressions. None of her senses worked as her body died. Soon, her eyesight would dissolve and she’d be on her way to Charon at last—or whomever was working the boats tonight.

Those few moments stretched on like forever.

The room went dark. A crash of thunder and the crackle of lightening. A silver of illumination appeared as her closet door yawned open, stretching wider as the Grim Reaper stepped out, as tall as the ceiling. The bedroom seemed to shrink in response.

“Hazelwood, I haven’t called for Patrice’s reaping.” G dressed in traditional black cloak and carried his sickle. He reached out to Hazelwood, who shrunk back from G’s skeletal hand. “Explain.”

Hazelwood’s eyes darted from G down to her then back to him. His lips drew back into a snarl. “Why do you care whose soul is reaped? There are billions of *them*. The humans are a dangerous disease that requires a desperate remedy.”

Emboldened by his passion, Hazelwood stepped toward G.

“I am death.” G reached again for Hazelwood, but this time, the demon couldn’t escape his grasp.

Patrice doubted G missed the first time.

G’s faceless hood turned to her. “Tonight is not your time.”

With those words, agony left her. Awake, Patrice sat up with the metallic taste in her mouth. She spat and out came the bullet. She gawked at G.

“G, he’s been bartering human lives for…” Patrice started.

“I am aware.” G turned back to Hazelwood.

“You knew?” Patrice frowned.

“Yes.”

He offered no other explanation, but one did not argue with death. So Patrice said no more.

“You took my freedom away! I want to live, Grim!” Hazelwood slapped at the hand clutching his shirt, but couldn’t dislodge it.

“You want to live, Hazelwood?” G asked.

A cold shiver raced over Patrice. She rubbed her arms. *Don’t answer that Hazel.*

“Yes!” Hazelwood spat.

“Part of life is death.” G leaned down and placed his hood over Hazelwood’s face.

Hazelwood’s shrieking and violently convulsing body would forever remain stained upon her memory as she vowed that night to start living.

The End

Bio: A humble scribbler of tales, Nicole Givens Kurtz is the author of the science fiction/cyberpunk novel series, *Cybil Lewis*. Her novels have been named as finalists in the Fresh Voices in Science Fiction, EPIE in Science fiction, and DREAM REALM AWARDS in science fiction.

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