

Death for Afternoon Tea

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"Ah, there you are, old boy." Severus turned, wand raised in a defensive position, at the man's voice. "I was beginning to believe you wouldn't show after all. Please, have a seat."

"Who are you?" Severus kept his voice even and low.

The man's eyebrows lifted. "Good lord, I *must* be losing my manners as well as my touch," he commented equably, rising to his feet. "I do beg your pardon, old boy. Terribly sloppy of me. Hardly fair to you." A gloved hand tipped the curled hat brim. "Severus Snape, may I introduce myself: Death, at your service. Specifically 'Angel of', if you prefer to be formal."

If Snape had any less control, his jaw would have dropped. "I'm supposed to believe that *you* are Death?" he asked, incredulity lacing his voice with sarcasm.

"Whether you believe or not makes no never mind to *me*, old boy. Might to you, I daresay. But I'm hardly an idle passer-by, now, am I?"

Snape was forced to concede the latter point. The man had been sitting at a tea table, fully laid out with two places. An absolutely ridiculous thing to have in the Shrieking Shack at any point in time. With the Dark Lord in residence, it became absurd to the point of farce. But someone had taken the time and trouble to set it up... and had done so without interference. The man himself looked to have stepped from some sort of Muggle period drama. A black jacket sat tidily over a white shirt, patterned waistcoat, and dark-coloured tie. Grey trousers and black leather shoes. Some sort of curly-brimmed hat rested upon a head of thick, blond hair and brought attention to a pair of utterly ridiculous ears, half-circles that looked to have been tacked on as an afterthought. The face was no better; slightly goggly blue eyes gazed guilelessly from above a pudge of a nose and a wide, mobile mouth. "If you *are* the Angel of Death," Snape said, sceptical tone making it quite clear that he had no intention of believing the man's claims, "why do you look like a half-witted anachronism?"

"Because I can, I imagine," came the careless answer. "I can appear as jolly near anything I please, really. I used to try to look the way people thought I looked...make it easier for them to know who I was, don't y'know...but you must admit that even black robes can pall after a time. And a few hundred years of carrying that bloody heavy scythe was outside of enough. It wasn't as though it actually *did* anything, after all. And now that you lot are all so *afraid* of death (little 'd'. I mean, not me specifically), I thought something a little less threatening was in order. Certainly, if I came in here looking like Old Snaky Moldy-whatsit, you'd hardly be likely to hang about, would you? No, you'd hexing first and asking questions later, if you didn't simply leg it out of here, and while it doesn't particularly *bother* me to be hexed...you can't really do anything to Death, don't y'know...it would be a dreadful nuisance. Waste of time, really; though I've got masses of the stuff, *you* don't, particularly, and you'd be even worse about the whole thing if you knew you'd wasted it. So here I am, looking harmless enough for you to ask questions first, so we can do this in a manner as painless...well, *relatively* painless," he amended after a glance behind Snape, "as possible. And now, would you like a seat? I guarantee it's an ordinary sort of chair...well, not precisely *ordinary*, not

from your point of view, but mundane enough, if you catch my meaning. It doesn't bite. Or melt, or move out of the way just as you're trying to sit in it. It hasn't even got one of those rude, noisemaking cushions in it. I'd offer you tea if I thought you'd accept. In fact, I *shall* offer you tea just to prove that I can be a reasonably polite fellow for all that I have occasion to be rather abrupt a great deal of the time. So if you would like some tea while we wait, I've brought a nice little pot of Lapsang Souchong for you, and some almond biscuits. Though I daresay you'll get all suspicious on me and refuse outright." He sighed rather theatrically.

Snape was not impressed. He was supposed to believe this... this prattling ninny? Assuming that Death would be here for the usual reasons, why in the name of the Seven Great Wizards would he stand around maundering on about scythes and tea? Wouldn't it be more to the point to simply usher his soul along to whatever hell it was supposed to be occupying? "What now, then?" Snape sneered. "Am I to sit down to tea while we play chess for my soul, or some such nonsense?"

"Chess? Good lord, no." The bumble-brain actually looked alarmed. "*Dreadful* cliché, that. Which is not to say I don't enjoy a good game, when I get the chance, don't y'know. Happy to indulge you once business is settled and so on. But a proper game takes far too long for most people, even if I *did* have a say in what happens to their souls...which I don't, by the way. I merely... tidy up, you might say. Sweep up the broken china. I can't put the pot back together, old boy, only pick up the pieces and shuffle them off to the celestial dustbin, so to speak. Now *do* sit down, please, would you? It's bad manners if I sit before you do, and we've a bit of a wait before things can get cleared up properly."

"What," Severus ground out, patience rapidly disappearing, "are we waiting *for*?"

"Oh. *heaps* of apologies, old boy," and Death had the grace to look truly contrite, though the effect was rather like that of a washed-out bloodhound, "but I'm really not allowed to say. Just not done. Against the rules. And I'm sure you know how much the old Pater Familias hates *that*. Simply puts Him in knots like a mangled macramé project, and it takes *eons* getting everything straightened out again. So I'm afraid you'll simply have to muck about a bit here with me. Drink your tea, nibble a biscuit, converse about nothing a two-year-old couldn't understand, pretend to be civilized and philosophical. You know the sort of thing I mean. Be... Be *English*. "

"Merlin's bloody bugging *balls*." Snape began loping about the room, scowling all the while. "I can't even manage to *die* properly," he growled. "No, even *this* has to be a fucking farce. My body's lying there, bleeding all over a filthy floor, and I'm being told by the Ghost of Christmas Idiots to be fucking *English*. *For your information*," he snarled, jabbing a finger in the idiot's direction, "my god-forsaken family is *Welsh*. "

"Really?" Eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Never would have guessed *that*."

But Severus had returned to his pacing, spewing out phrase after phrase of colourful, creative invective. "Griffin-bugged, peroxide-brained... how long do I damn well have to watch my... self... bleed..." A certain detail had finally wormed its way into his brain and made a home there. Severus pulled up short, spun on one heel with all the drama of twenty-years' habit, and strode back over to his body. "I am *not* fucking dead, you eighth-witted pillock!" he accused Death. Dead men do not bleed, of course, and his not-quite-yet-corpse was still spilling the stuff out all over everything. He'd never really realized that people had that much blood in them. Revels and so forth, for all of their other... charms... rarely involved any bodily fluids. It was actually vaguely appalling.

"We...ell," Death temporized, "Yes and no. You have to admit you're not exactly leaping about like a jolly old bullfrog, now are you? *Living* spirits tend not to wander off without their bodies, don't y'know. But now that you've noticed that little detail, *will* you come have tea? Hate to press the point, but really, even knowing that you're not technically dead doesn't really change the status quo, as they say."

"So what *does*?" Snape ground out as he threw himself ungraciously into the chair. Death took a more ginger seat and started pouring out.

"Drink your tea, old boy, and try out some of that marvellous patience I know you've got tucked away in there somewhere. You can't rush... That's to say, you can't... Well, there's a deciding factor at play here somewhere, old boy, and I simply *can't* tell you what it is because that would change what is meant to be, and while I don't know what that *is*, precisely, I *do* know that it's one of those things that is Not To Be Meddled With, because it's all part and parcel of that nice little tapestry the Pater has going upstairs, and it's as much as my bowler is worth to change *that* without authorization...which I've no intention of doing, so be a good boy and we can discuss the nature of the universe in the meantime. Unique experience, don't y'know. Most poor blighters never *really* get a chance to talk to *me*. "

"Lucky bastards," Snape mumbled into his teacup.

In truth, it wasn't too much longer before The Deciding Factor...the capitals were now ingrained in Snape's mind...appeared. And it was just as well, for even wizards can only bleed for so long before the possibility of Blood Replenishing Potion becomes moot.

The door slammed open with all the splintering power of a gale-force wind, and the girl blew into the room with much the same effect. She was covered in dirt and blood and sweat, and her hair frizzed about her like an electrocuted angora. But she was alive...brilliantly, vibrantly alive...and Severus Snape found that more beautiful than anything. At least, until she opened her mouth.

"You *bastard!*" she screeched. "You unmitigated, arrogant, self-absorbed, egotistical *bastard!*" Snape blinked as she flew across the room to where his ravaged body lay. He thought she might kick it...and was glad he wasn't actually *in* there to feel the effects of what looked like steel-toed boots...but she dropped to her knees instead and aimed a magnificent open-handed slap to his cheek. Even Death winced a bit at that one.

"Enthusiastic little lioness, is she?" he murmured absently, taking another sip of tea.

"How *could* you?" Granger abandoned his face in favour of pummelling his chest. "How *could* you?" *Thump!* "How *could* you," *thump*, "you bloody," *thump*, "selfish," *thump*, "*bastard?*" *Thump!*

"Nice to know how she really feels," Snape drawled. But his urbanity vanished utterly when her face crumpled and she sagged down beside his body, oblivious to the red liquid soaking into her robes.

"Oh, Severus, how could you do this to me?" Her voice hitched and caught, and he barely managed to hear her next words. "How could you do this to *us*?" She grasped his limp hand, pulling it first to her cheek, than laying it over her stomach. Spirit or no, Snape could feel the blood drain from his face as the true meaning of her words penetrated his curiously thick-feeling brain.

"How could you leave us like this?" she sniffled. "I never even had a chance to tell you. You'd've yelled at me, I know, for not being careful. But it wasn't as though either of us had that night *planned*. You didn't even want me there. But... I could imagine you with her; she'd've been the *world* to you.

"Severus, you git, what do we do *now*?"

His stricken expression became a snarl as he whirled to glare at Death. The bloody idiot had pulled out...and was *playing*...a fucking *violin!* He evidently had *some* sense of self-preservation, for he put it away again with an amiable shrug. But the moment had passed and the feeling of farce had returned. Except... except that Granger was still on the floor, weeping, with blood soaking through her robes and most certainly staining whatever she wore beneath. He was tempted to leave her like that; surely...*surely*...she was better off without him, however she might feel about *it*now.

She would be a magnificent mother.

And then he could see in his mind's eye a black-haired girl-child. One who *smiled* to see *him*. And then she was replaced by a stony-faced lass who raised a familiar eyebrow at a crowd that sneered at her...and her mother, who wore a brittle smile with only a vague resemblance to the one he had enjoyed.

Snape risked a glance at an all-too-carefully blank-faced Death, uncertain of the validity of these visions. He well knew the gossip and petty cruelties that would surface should the world learn of her child's father...and she would be all but certain to tell them...perhaps even to proclaim it from the mountaintops. Yes, Granger would be a magnificent mother, but... she could not protect her...*his*...child from everything. Could... could it be that *his* presence in her life would make such a difference? Would make her life *better*? Could he make *Hermione's* life better?

It seemed an impossibility.

All those little dreams she's confided in him. The dreams that would slip through her fingers as an unwed witch with a child to raise...and she barely more than a child herself, never mind how he had felt and acted. Selfish of him to snatch those moments of joy with her and to make her pay the balance. Cruel to make the child pay the remainder.

His spirit drifted, almost diffidently, across the floor. *Pocket*, it whispered to the girl, becoming more insistent as the seconds ticked by. *Pocket. Pocket! POCKET, MISS GRANGER!*

Not quite as satisfactory as his usual effect, but the meaning seemed to have gotten through. Granger blinked, her eyes widened, and her fingers sought a pulse in the wrist she held. Hands scrabbled madly over his robes in a manner that would have been quite distracting under different circumstances. But she located the proper vials, poured them on and down his throat, and watched his body expectantly.

Severus could feel the light tug grow stronger, pulling him back towards himself. He looked again to his erstwhile companion.

"Well, that's taken care of, then!" There was relief in those goggle-eyes. "Good work, old boy. Pleasure meeting you and all that." He tipped his hat and grinned madly. "Lads upstairs will be right chuffed about this one, though not a little grizzly that I've netted the pool. Utmost confidence in my handiwork, don't y'know." Severus merely nodded his head in acquiescence. Really, what could he possibly say to *that*? "I'm off then. Masses of tidying up to do and all that. And we'll see each other again one of these days. Can't really avoid it, now, can we?" He grasped Severus's hand, and the man was startled to find its grip warm. "I'll let you in on a little inside information," Death whispered conspiratorially. "I sha'n't be seeing you again for ages and *ages*."

"And from me," Death stepped back and popped a finger against his hat, "that's really saying something!"

And everything went dark.

Severus found himself wrapped in blankets, surrounded by walls of dark blue. A rattle of a teacup had caused his eyes to pop open, and they looked about wildly until he located a bushy-haired girl sitting by his bed with a cup of...he sniffed...Earl Grey tea. She smiled shakily. "Welcome back. Severus."

His smile, too, was tentative. "Thank you," he said gravely. "And the little one?"

"How did you...?" Granger stared, then shook her head. "I get the feeling you have a lot to tell me."

"A black-haired girl," he murmured, as much to himself as to her, "with her mother's smile. She'll be called Ariel, and she will laugh."

Hermione leaned across to kiss his cheek, and pulled his hand over her stomach as she had during those ghastly moments in the Shack. "You should say hello to Ariel properly, then."

"Hello, little Ariel." His eyes turned upward once more. "Hello... Madam Snape?"

Her smile took on that marvellous, whole-hearted brilliance, and all was well.

And... somewhere... on an unearthly plane, a wide mouth grinned beneath a stubby nose, knowing that none of the three people in that room was at all inclined to let well enough alone. Not for very long, anyway.

ANs: Oh, where to start on this one... I guess it started with playing with the idea of Death's stereotype and asking what if...? What if Death was another sort of 'person' altogether? Someone less threatening and, well, *morbid*? How would he act as Death, *then*, and how would Severus react in turn? And the possibility that occurred to me on the extreme other end of the spectrum was the classic 1920s/30s comic gentleman, à la 'Jeeves & Wooster'. In fact, Death's appearance here is very much based on Barmy Fotheringay-Phipps from one of the J&W episodes. His attitudes stem from the J&W types as well as Lord Peter Wimsey in his vacuous moods and quite possibly the Tenth Doctor when he starts rambling. (Any lapses in proper Britishisms are, however, solely my fault.) In other words, the most ineffectual, nonsensical, useless sort of person you can imagine.

And Snape *loves* that sort, right? (^_^)

Hermione's part in all this comes from linking this up to another half-written fic (incidentally far more somber in tone). It was more to help wrap things up than anything else, actually; any longer and Snape really *would* have been playing chess with Death, and my goal was to get him out of there alive.

(NB...No blasphemy or offensive attitudes were intended with the writing of this fic. Just a little poking fun.)

So that's the most of it, I guess.

Well, to add: 'Ariel' comes from the angel of the same name, who is associated with Sariel, one of the angels of death. The name also means 'Lion of God'; the reference was too tempting to be ignored simply because of a singing, red-haired chit who superglues seashells to her chest. *lol* Oh, and I made the Prince Family Welsh simply because I could.

Hope you enjoyed, and tokens dropped in the little box are always appreciated.