

It was exactly 6:30 on a Wednesday afternoon when Death sat on the uncomfortable, plastic-covered surface of an armchair. It was located in the home of another unfortunate soul on the brink of eternal rest. Henry Reed, an employee of a highly successful law firm, stared at her with wide eyes as if unable to believe the sudden appearance of any other being in his living room. It was the nature of her work to observe while the souls were still in shock, so she was drawn to sweep the room around him despite its bare, white walls which usually hinted at a lack of decoration throughout the home.

Scattered brown bottles and empty cans littered the area, serving only to add to its lackluster appearance. Among these were yellowed newspapers and glossy magazines with wrinkled pages stacked nearly to the ceiling. It was an unreasonably cluttered area, unbefitting the man sitting across from her. Usually, men in his position prided themselves on cleanliness and luxury, of which Henry had none.

From the corner of her eye, she could see he had begun to fidget, restlessly turning a bottle around in his hands. It was a sign of nervousness - something she often came across on her numerous visitations. Because of this sign, she focused her gaze on him which prompted the man to avoid looking back at her as he said, **"Are you her? Are you the..."** He paused and cleared his throat, looking around the room. Seconds went by before he stopped to take in a framed photograph on a table that suddenly materialized between them. Death was well aware that it was of his sickly sister who had passed two months ago. After all, she had seen it before when she came to his home to tend to the younger Reed. He stared at it for a moment before a deep sadness seemed to seize him and he continued.

**"That is, I mean - Are you the angel who's meant to help me?"**

She couldn't help but laugh despite his serious tone. An angel? People tended to call her a demon or a monster. One particularly upset soul even went so far as to refer to her as the devil, but never in Death's immortal life had one called her an angel. At least, none had done so before she came across the Reeds. It seemed Henry shared the same views as his sister.

**"Not exactly. Mortals in the past knew me as He Who Rides Upon Pale Horse - which is silly because I take the form of a woman - and The Inevitable End. Now it's just The Grim Reaper."** She shrugged. **"Personally, I say save your breath and just call me Death."**

Revealing her true identity seemed to upset Henry further and beads of sweat formed on his hairline. **“I’d rather you were an angel,”** he replied.

**“If it makes you more comfortable, you can think of me as that. I’ll even sprout some wings if it helps.”** She didn’t mention she had done the same for his deceased sister.

His mouth dropped open in awe as two, long ebony wings grew from behind her. They made it awkward to sit back with, but a moment of discomfort to ease a person’s mind was nothing compared to what she had had to do in the past. He sank into his seat and his hands dropped to his lap.

**“Not to sound clueless or anything, but how exactly does this work? I’ve never done... *this* before.”**

**“What, died?”** Henry grimaced. Death coughed. **“Uh, well, I’m glad you asked? Most people assume I just hack their heads off with some almighty scythe or rip their souls out. Kinda silly, really, considering it’s much simpler than that. Ever heard of the Kiss of Death?”**

He frowned. **“You mean I have to *kiss* you?”**

**“Well, you don’t have to say it like it’s such a bad thing,”** she gravely replied. The Divine Being resisted the urge to smile as he suddenly burst into apology.

**“No! Sorry, t-that’s not what I meant! I just- I-“** His face turned bright red as he looked down at his hands. Mortals were hilarious – their feathers so easily ruffled.

**“I’m just messing with you, Henry. I’m not gonna kiss you if that’s what you’re worried about, but it’s the same concept. You even have different options to choose from.”** She smiled at him, sounding much like a door-to-door salesman explaining the benefits of their product to a potential customer.

**“I have... options.”** His expression was one of disbelief. **“Okay, but wouldn’t those options include the Kiss of Death?”** A snap of her fingers and a booklet appeared in his lap.

**“Not in my case. The thing is, I know you, but you don’t know me. We’re practically strangers. Don’t you think we’d be rushing things if I went ahead and sent you out with a kiss?”**

He didn’t look up from the booklet, too absorbed in skimming over the list of choices in the pamphlet, but hummed noncommittally. **“I suppose so. I’m guessing that’s why all of these aren’t too overly friendly.”**

**“Exactly! I don’t even like kissing, but no one ever seems to agree. You wouldn’t believe the strange stuff they’ve asked me to do before.”** He glanced up at her with a single eyebrow raised and she cleared her throat loudly before quickly changing the subject. **“So, what sounds good? High Five of Death? Hug of Death? I heard you’re a real businessman. Maybe the Handshake of Death?”** A moment passed in silence. **“Do we have a verdict on the defendant’s poison, Mr. Lawyer Sir?”** she jokingly said.

He looked away from her to the bottle of beer he had absentmindedly placed on the coffee table and suddenly the room went cold.

**“Oh. Sorry. That was insensitive of me considering my reason for being summoned here and all.”** Death took the bottle from the table and placed it behind her. He looked back to her and she carefully continued. **“You have to understand that that part of you is gone. It won’t follow you when you leave this plane of existence.”** This didn’t seem to faze Henry, who had become glassy-eyed. A chill went up her spine as the temperature spiked.

She stuck out her hand, balling it in a fist and raising her pinky. **“I pinky promise!”**

He stared at her pinky as if it were some rare object before bringing his pinky to hers. They shook their fingers for good measure and he snapped out of it.

**“This doesn’t count as a Pinky Promise of Death, right?”**

The divine being rolled her eyes at him and sarcastically responded, **“Ha-ha, hilarious.”**

He laughed at her mock annoyance – a good sign. If he had been stuck in a bad mood, Fate demanded he be left as a poltergeist doomed to roam the earth – too burdened by his past to move on.

**“Sorry, I just can’t believe that this is all real. Death literally just pinky promised me. If anything, I’d expect the fabled Grim Reaper to be a terrifying, skeletal old man lurking around in a black robe, ready to whisk me away to the infinite beyond.”**

She gasped and brought a hand to her chest in mock offence. **“An old man! I take it back. That’s definitely gonna count now. Say goodbye to your worthless body and hello to your eternal soul.”** She made a vague, grand gesture with her arms and promptly stood up from the arm chair as if to leave.

Henry shot up from his own seat and exclaimed, **“Wait, wait! Is that it? You know I didn’t mean that!”**

She held a single finger up to silence him as fog rose from the carpeted floor and slowly swallowed her feet. He didn’t take the bait. **“What if I didn’t want the Pinky Promise of Death? The Thumb War of Death sounded better! Anything would be better, really.”**

The wings she had created earlier rose above her so that they casted a shadow on him as she brought her hands together as if in prayer. **“Now you’re just being ridiculous.”** he muttered.

Lightning struck outside the window and he jumped, suddenly unsure if Death was joking or not. Her clothes had been replaced with black robes. Voice booming dramatically, she yelled, **“BY THE POWER INVESTED IN ME AS SHE WHO RIDES UPON PALE HORSE, THE INEVITABLE END, AND THE GRIM REAPER, I HEREBY RELEASE YOU, HENRY JAMES REED, FROM YOUR HUMAN BONDS TO-”**

He scoffed and crossed his arms. **“You forgot Death.”**

**“-LEAVE THIS WORLD AND PASS ON TO THE NEXT-”**

He sat back down and picked up a nearby newspaper. **“I’ll just wait here until you’re done with all this nonsense.”**

The lightning suddenly stopped mid-crack and the fog disappeared. She pushed back the hood of the robe and lowered her hands. **“-PLANE OF- Seriously? You’re such a party pooper. I was really on a roll there. What with my ALL-POWERFUL VOICE and all.”** He shrugged indifferently. **“You’re lucky I find some twisted sense of amusement in you. Back in the day, I smote people for interrupting me.”**

He bowed as much as one could while seated and swept his arm in front of his body, much like a butler would. ***“Terribly sorry, Your Ghastly Majesty. I would’ve let you go on, but you forgot to include Death and I felt a little cheated of the full experience.”***

***“Right, right. And you say *I’m* the one being ridiculous.”***

***“You *are* the one being ridiculous. Remember, just a few minutes ago when you were going to leave me without so much as a send off?”***

***“Remember, just a few minutes ago when you chose the Pinky Promise of Death?”***

***“I did not. I told you I wanted something else!”***

***“You also told me you expected me to be an old man.”***

Henry’s brow scrunched in frustration. ***“Yes, but I didn’t say you *looked* like an old man.”***

Death hummed thoughtfully. ***“Maybe... but I dare say it was implied!”***

***“Implied! Nowhere in that statement did I im-“***

***“Yeah, yeah. I get it, you’re a man and you hate to lose an argument.”***

Henry glowered at her. She ignored the look in favor of reading the time from a clock hanging precariously between two stacks of newspapers. ***“I think your time’s a little overdue. Wouldn’t want you to get stuck in Limbo.”***

***“Limbo?”***

***“Horrible place, really. It exists within and without time, between Paradise and the Inferno. I wouldn’t want to be caught dead there.”*** She snickered, realizing what she had said. Henry merely rolled his eyes. ***“Anyway, what was it you chose? The Thumb War of Death?”***

***“I said that in the heat of the moment, but I suppose I don’t see why not. I didn’t really read the full list of options.”***

***“Well, there’s no time to do that now. You’ll be forever haunted by the regret of never knowing what you missed out on!”***

**“I doubt that.”**

**“Well, you’ll just have to see for yourself then.”** She sat back down in the arm chair and grimaced at the sound of plastic. **“You really need to get new furniture.”**

He looked at her disapprovingly. **“Sorry, sorry. I couldn’t help myself. Now, come on, let’s play us one of the oldest games in the known universe.”**

**“It was said to have been invented around the 1940s. That technically can’t be considered one of the oldest ones.”**

**“I’m gonna pretend you didn’t just say that.”** She grabbed his hand and folded their fingers together. **“Would you like to do the honors?”**

He shrugged. **“One, two, three, four, I declare a thumb war.”**

Henry attempted to catch Death’s thumb on various occasions, but he never seemed to be able to grab a hold of it. He laid his thumb down and then swooped around to pin it when hers followed, but he was again met with failure. **“You’re not using any supernatural powers I don’t know about, are you?”**

**“Not exactly?”**

He looked up at her through his eyelashes. **“Even when I think I’m about to pin you, your thumb manages to escape at the last second.”**

**“Yeah. I know. It’s kind of a thing that happens.”**

**“Why is th-“** His gaze dropped back down to their thumbs. **“You’re kidding me.”**

**“Nope.”**

**“I only looked away for a moment.”**

**“Yep.”**

He sighed in dissatisfaction. **“Well... I guess you won. I think you might’ve cheated just then, but-“**

**“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait. What’re you trying to say, Henry? That I can’t win a thumb war without cheating?”**

He put his hands up in defense. **“No, no, I would never suggest something like that. I’m just saying that that last move might’ve been bordering on the illegal side of things.”**

**“Illegal? Really? What is this, court? I wasn’t aware that there were laws restricting the things I can and can’t do with my own thumb.”**

**“Oh, they exist. You can be sure of that. It’s clearly stated in Article 1, Section 8 of the-“**

**“You’ve got to be kidding me. There’s no such thing.”**

**“-Official Thumb War Manual that all actions of the thumb committed with the thumb directly-“**

**“Official Thumb War Manual? What kind of bull-“**

**“-in violation of Codes 3-12 of the Code of Thumb Movement Conduct-“**

Her next breath came out forcefully. **“If you don’t quit right now, I swear I’ll send you to the other side!”**

Henry’s grin fell and his playful tone faded away. **“Speaking of which, what happens now? It’s a shame I didn’t beat you, but you’ve won and all, haven’t you?”**

**“Yeah, I have. No one’s ever beaten me before, you know.”** She didn’t mention that he had started fading away the moment their game ended.

**“Why do I feel like that means something? Something grand and philosophical and wise my puny, human mind just can’t comprehend right now.”**

**“You’re just thinking too hard! Come on, Henry. You’re “free in death” and all, aren’t you? Stop worrying so much and live a little.”**

He snorted at this, rolling his eyes as he mimicked her voice. **“Ha-ha, hilarious.”**

**“Joke’s on you, ghost man. I don’t even sound like that!”**

He grinned and she smiled dumbly back at him. He opened his mouth to reply, but his time had run out. She watched as the last of him faded away.

Her smile went flat once he disappeared and she let out the breath she’d been holding despite not needing to breathe. Henry Reed had been right, of course. Her constant victory *did* mean something, even if it wasn’t as grand as he had thought.

After all, Death always wins in the end.