

The Cold Hand of Mercy, Chapter 1

Fluttershy had known from the beginning, she supposed—the rabbit’s wounds were too terrible, even for her expert healing abilities. The poor thing; she’d found it several yards away from her cottage, bleeding from a wicked bite in its back—the wound reached just above its spine.

It had been three days since then, and Fluttershy had tried everything she knew to keep the rabbit alive with no success: it had lost too much blood, and its brain had lost the vast majority of its functions.

The yellow pony sighed, rubbing her raw, red eyes and sweeping her tangled mane out of her face. Even now little Hector, as Fluttershy had named him, was having trouble breathing; every time his tiny chest rose and fell, he seemed to grow more exhausted—simply living was taking its toll on him. His black eyes rolled around in his head, sightless and clouded. There was no way he’d live through the night.

Fluttershy had lost animals before—it was impossible to avoid with the kind of work she did—but not for many years, and even if she had, she’d never have gotten used to it. She was supposed to be nursing these animals back to health, helping them get their lives back on the road. And yet here was Hector, knowing that she’d failed him, knowing that his life was on the verge of ending.

Fluttershy found herself wondering if her talents meant anything at all.

Her train of thought was interrupted when Hector let out a squeaky, pitiful cough; Fluttershy felt the cold knife of guilt twisting in her stomach. The waiting was agonizing, and Fluttershy hadn’t slept all three days of it, but she hadn’t been able to bring herself to leave Hector’s side. She wanted to be with him when he passed.

However, as Hector’s eyes closed and his chest started the familiar, slow pattern of unconscious breathing, Fluttershy could no longer stave off the needs of the other animals—as important as Hector’s life (or what remained of it) was, she knew she needed to fix herself up, get some sleep, and help the other animals, or it could be her on the deathbed next. She kissed Hector gently on the forehead, stood, and made for the door.

Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the black-cloaked figure in the center of her private-care room.

“Oh, um, excuse me...” she stammered, heart hammering. “I didn’t hear you come in.” The figure shook its head, black cloak rippling.

“I didn’t use the door,” the figure said with the voice of a stallion, soft and dark.

Fluttershy swallowed. “Well, um...is there anything I can help you with? I’m Fluttershy, and, um...I’m good with animals.”

“I know,” the figure said, moving closer, almost indistinguishable from the shadows, “and yes, I suppose you can help me, in a way. Though, to be honest, my visit is more for your benefit—and the rabbit’s.”

Fluttershy’s head instinctively snapped back to her patient. “Hector?” she said, puzzled. “I’m sorry, but...well, there’s nothing more that can be done for him.” It hurt her to say it out loud, but it was the truth.

The figure shook his head. “Not what I meant,” he said. “I’m acutely aware of your little friend’s health. He’s dying—basically dead already.” Fluttershy winced, at once shocked and stung by the stranger’s bluntness, and his knowledge of Hector.

“How...how did you know that?” she squeaked. “I haven’t told anypony else, and Hector’s been under my care for three days—he hasn’t left my sight.”

The shadowy pony walked forward, no sound coming from his hooves as he neared the bed. “I know,” he said. “I know plenty of things. I’ve been watching *you* for some time now—Hector is a more recent distraction. His addition to my list proved quite fortuitous.”

Fluttershy found it hard to breathe as the stranger got closer—the area around him was ice-cold. “Um...” She could barely find the words to speak. “Who...who *are* you?”

The figure’s head slowly swiveled to face her. “Many things. I could give you some long speech about how I’m the Shadow in the Night, how I’m the thing that stalks you in your dreams, the thing you beg for when you need sweet, eternal release... But unlike my predecessor, I don’t have a flare for the dramatic, and I don’t want to bore you.”

Fluttershy moved towards Hector protectively—terrified as she was, it was clear this pony was here for Hector. “Well, um...what’s your name?” she asked, trying to delay him.

The shadow chuckled. “You want a name?” he asked, shaking his head with bemusement. “Fine, fine, I’ll give you a name.” He paused for a moment, then raised his hooves to his head. “I’ll be simple for you. In the far west, my name is Pergia. In the far east, I’m known as Fequitus. Around here, I believe you ponies just call me Death.” The hood fell away, revealing a stallion with a beautiful white coat, long dark hair, and golden eyes. “For the sake of convenience, just call me Blanche—I’m pretty sure that used to be my name.”

Fluttershy recoiled, pressing up against the bed in fear. “Death...?” she whispered, not able to manage any more.

Blanche smirked, moving his waves of hair behind his neck. “No, Blanche,” he said. “I swear, nopony ever reacts well to my arrival except the ones who’ve been expecting me...it’s kind of depressing, honestly.”

Fluttershy’s eyes darted back to look at Hector, and she instinctively swept him up in her hooves, trying to keep her teeth from chattering as she glared at the stallion.

Blanche wasn’t impressed. “Don’t bother,” he said. “I’ve seen it before—when you’ve been Death as long as I have...well, you’ve seen it all. I can take his soul from here if you want—forcefully. Or you can accept that little Hector’s number is up, let me gently whisk him away and allow me to cross his name off my list; we’ve still got other business to attend to, you and I.”

Fluttershy’s eyes stung with held-back tears, and her grip weakened, exposing Hector to Blanche—the pony could have been lying for whatever reason, but then, he did seem to have a chilling reverence about him...

“Cute,” Blanche said. “Very picturesque, but there’s no need for it.” He stepped forward, smiling and raising his hoof. “Thanks for cooperating, though. It’s never fun having to drag out a soul.”

Fluttershy turned her head away, but was unable to close her eyes. Blanche placed a hoof carefully on Hector’s chest, cooing as the poor little thing’s soul was taken straight from his body. Hector didn’t fight on the way out; in fact, Fluttershy almost thought he looked relieved.

Blanche took Hector’s soul—an adorable, blue-lit thing—and raised it up toward the ceiling. It floated upwards and through a glowing light which appeared in the solid oak boards, giving a squeak of approval. Blanche, having completed his task, motioned for Fluttershy to lay Hector’s body back down on the bed.

The white stallion took in a long breath through his nose and smiled at Fluttershy. “There,” he said. “Wasn’t so bad, right?”

But when Blanche looked at Fluttershy, he saw her crying, tears spilling from her eyes and onto the floor. She tried to say something, but it was lost in her sobbing.

Blanche sighed. “Guess I couldn’t have expected a happy reaction,” he said. “Ponies like you have such a hard time dealing with death... I don’t understand it.”

Fluttershy raised her head, swallowing hard as she looked up to the ceiling. “W...where’d he go?” she asked, voice barely audible.

Blanche looked up with her, smiling gently. “The Ever,” he said. “Same place everypony

goes.” He smirked. “Couldn’t tell you what it’s like—I’ve never been.”

Fluttershy wanted to yell at him, wanted to cry and ask him why he took Hector, wanted to ask why it had to be now...but all she said was, “Why?”

Blanche shrugged. “Not allowed,” he said. “Unless you mean about Hector.” When Fluttershy nodded, he shook his head. “Every creature walks this earth, and when it’s time to go, it’s time to go. Death’s number-one policy is to never be swayed by emotions—the second is to never brook argument.”

When Fluttershy remained silent, her gaze shifting to the floor; Blanche rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Well, I guess it’s time to move on to the second order of business.” Fluttershy’s head came up as she remembered that it dealt directly with her.

“What...what is it?” she asked, trying to ignore the cold knot in her belly.

Blanche raised his hooves up, unfastened his cloak, and smiled, tossing it onto the formerly occupied bed. “Well, it needs a bit of background before I get to the meat of things,” he said, “so, as much as I don’t care to, I’ll explain.

“Death is not a single eternal being,” he began matter-of-factly. “It’s a title, passed down through ponies generation after generation.” He chuckled. “I can tell you’re confused; that’s natural—I was too.”

Blanche leaned against the wall, continuing. “The purpose of the passing-on of the title of Death is simple: once a pony stops being Death, their soul passes on and enters the Ever, where they’re given, from what I understand, special treatment. They’re given their own personal corners of the Ever, to do whatever they want. There’s only one stipulation: the pony has to archive and catalogue everything they’ve learned. It’s supposed to be good for the collective knowledge of the Ever or something—it’s been so long I can hardly remember what my predecessor said about it.

“If only one pony was Death, there’d only be one perspective in the archives—only one school of thought would be represented. Changing the title out every several hundred years keeps things fresh, and helps to keep the ruling body of the Ever—whoever that may be—versed in different ways of seeing Equestria.”

Blanche grinned. “Personally, I’m looking forward to it. The Death before me was a real grouch—he never really came to terms with having to become Death...or with what he had to give up.”

Fluttershy finally found her voice. “Give up?” she asked. “What do you mean?”

Blanche tapped his chin a moment, thinking. “Well, every pony who becomes Death has to give up their life, essentially. After all, nopony wants to be your friend when you’re

stiff and cold..." He looked down and chuckled. "Aside from that, you also have to pick something special to you, something that binds you to the Equestrian realm, and give that up too. Don't ask me why—I've never gotten an explanation."

Fluttershy swallowed. "What, um...what did *you* give up?"

Blanche gave the mare a look. "Me? Well...I never had much to give, you see. No friends, no parents...all I'd ever really had were my looks, my brains, and my physical body. And, since I wasn't willing to give up my looks or brains..." He moved forward, sweeping his hoof through Fluttershy's body—a nasty chill was left in its wake. "...you can see pretty clearly what I chose."

Fluttershy was horrified, but also puzzled. "So...a pony can be Death and still be...here?"

"Yes, and in fact, that's how most Deaths have been. I'm a very rare exception; I just wasn't willing to part with my looks or my brains, being the stupid, vain pony that I was. A vain orphan—who ever heard of such a thing? But hey, I was a fresh stallion when it happened—can you blame me for a young pony's mistakes?" He laughed. "In case you're wondering, my predecessor gave up his eyesight—that was all he had, too, even though he was an old gelding. I think he used to be in some kinda cult."

"Anyway, that's the gist of things. And with that in mind, you probably know what I'm going to say next."

Fluttershy knew; somewhere inside she knew, but she couldn't bring herself to acknowledge it. "No..."

Blanche sighed. "I'm here to ask you to be *my* successor. I want you to become Death."

Fluttershy's heart dropped into her stomach when the words finally came out. "M...me?" she squeaked. "But...I...why?"

Blanche smirked. "Two reasons," he said. "One: I'm almost certain you'll grow into the role. Personally, with time, I think you'll be the Ever's number-one Death. Second: Well, how to put this...as you are now, well...hmm. Let's just say that, when you've lived for four hundred and twenty-one years, you develop a keen sense of irony."

When he smiled, Fluttershy wanted to scream at him. Instead, she asked, "What...what if I refuse? I can't become Death...I could never take the lives of other ponies."

Blanche chuckled. "Of course you could," he said. "I didn't think I could either, honestly. But that's not the point. If you refuse, well...since I've bound my choice to you already, I'd have to take your soul with me to the Ever after I made my next selection. So those are your choices; become Death, or die. Die peacefully, but still."

Fluttershy couldn't believe what she was hearing, couldn't believe how unfair all of this was: become Death or die?! There was no way she could take other ponies' lives...but she didn't want to die either...

"Do I at least get some time to say goodbye?" she asked, hoping to stall.

To her relief, Blanche nodded. "I didn't," he said, "but I'm a nice guy, so I'll give you three days. That's more than enough time to say your goodbyes, one way or another. Just, uh...don't mention what's going to happen. I'm going out on a limb, letting you do this, and I trust you won't betray my confidence. I revealed myself to you; Death isn't supposed to be seen until Death is needed, and if ponies knew about you, well...just don't let it happen."

Fluttershy nodded. "I just...have a few ponies I really need to say goodbye to."

"I know," he said. "I'm not sure the Ever is going to be happy with me picking an Element of Harmony, but you'll technically still be around if you're needed in that role, not that anypony will be able to see you until their time is up...or until you're needed, I guess. They never exactly primed me on these things." With that, Blanche turned and started towards the door. He stopped under the frame, turning back. "Don't worry," he said. "It'll all be okay in the end. I promise." And then, as quickly as he'd come, he was gone.

Fluttershy was empty. Everything had been squeezed out of her—there were no more tears, no more sobs...no more anything. There was just a gaping hole where Fluttershy used to be.