

Cold air, dark grey sky...a winter day like any other. A winter day that Fluttershy could remember seeing thousands of, all of them exactly the same.

She ran a hoof along the silken interior of the robe, a wide smile crossing her face. It didn't do much for the cold, but Fluttershy didn't mind. It wasn't like she could feel it, anyway.

She didn't move when the door creaked open behind her. Her ears perked up at the sound of a stallion clearing his throat, and she turned around to find Blanche standing in the center of the room.

"Fluttershy," he said with a wry smirk, "you don't look a day older."

Fluttershy laughed at that. "Speak for yourself," she said, "you're younger and spryer than me by no small stretch."

The unicorn ran a hoof through his hair. "Says you. When you've seen as much as me, you start to feel your age, tangible or not."

The pegasus turned away, back towards the window. "It's today, isn't it? I...wanted to make sure." A smile, much less fragile than it had been all those years ago, crept onto her face. "And that all the red tape was dealt with."

Blanche nodded. "Of course. The Ever was pretty happy about your choice, you know. Are you gonna watch him?"

Fluttershy sighed. "I am," she said, then chuckled. "No rest for the weary, eh?" Her long, pink hair, unchanged by time and experience, hung down over one of her eyes. "I wanted to speak with my friends, you know...when I reach the Ever."

Blanche looked down at the floor. "You'll get the chance," he said, "trust me. I did, even though I didn't have many friends." He chuckled. "They told me I always was transparent."

Fluttershy turned to roll her eyes at Blanche. "You say that every time."

Blanche snorted. "At least I have a sense of humor." He grinned cheekily. "Not like you, all serious and whatnot."

Fluttershy chuckled softly, and things fell silent for a time. The clouds drifting by the window of the shack looked as melancholy as today felt.

"Fluttershy," Blanche said, "are you sure about all this? I understand your successor agreed and everything, but...you were the best Death the Ever had." He smiled. "Definitely better than me. Do you think he can handle it?"

Fluttershy nodded. “My time has passed, Blanche,” she said, looking up at the sky, “long since passed, as a matter of fact. I should’ve set my date a hundred years earlier than this. Besides, he’s Twilight’s descendant—he has a perfect sense of responsibility, and he’s very understanding.”

The stallion in question was Tones, Twilight’s deep descendant. A quiet pony, not disposed to making friends, obsessed with reading...Fluttershy had watched him for a long time, waited until he matured. He was a lot like Twilight herself, although he had no idea who she was, aside from the stories about her that were passed down through the generations. Fluttershy had known after a little time watching him that he’d be perfect. His own children were grown and gone, and his wife had passed of an illness earlier in life, but he wasn’t so old that he’d be embittered by missing out on his shot at the Ever.

“Is that so?” Blanche said, “Well, maybe you should have. Then I’d still be the record holder.”

Fluttershy sighed. “As obsessed with that as ever, hmm?” She giggled. “Blanche, you need to learn to let things like that go.”

Blanche shrugged. “Sure, sure. You know how all this goes, don’t you?”

The pegasus nodded. “Yes, I’ve done my homework, unlike somepony.”

A blush crept into Blanche’s cheeks. “Hypocrite. Telling me to forget about my record, and then you turn around and tell me things like that.”

“As I recall, me breaking your record didn’t force you into a lose-lose situation,” Fluttershy said, though there wasn’t any malice in her tone.

Blanche tried to change the subject. “So...are you okay?” He asked it awkwardly, one hoof rubbing his foreleg. “With all this, I mean. I know you say it’s time to go and all, but...” he sighed. “I know it was kinda tough letting go, for me. There’s a lot to consider.”

Fluttershy nodded. “Of course, Blanche,” she said. “I’ve served my purpose here, under the title of Death. I’m giving this up with no regrets.” She shifted in her robes. “Looking back at everything I’ve had to do, the ponies I had to see into the Ever...really, I think anypony else...maybe they would have done it better than me. I broke the rules.”

Blanche smirked. “Silly,” he said, “you broke the rules within acceptable bounds. You had every reason to get emotional...” He swallowed. “What was it like? I never really had close friends...family, anything like that. I just did what I did...when I saw you do it, Fluttershy, there was so much more to it.”

Fluttershy sighed. “I don’t know, Blanche,” she said, “My friends and I may have all been fully-fledged mares, but...” She stopped a moment, reaching up to throw her hood back and turn around fully. “I don’t know how to explain it. We were grown, but we weren’t done growing up, if that makes sense.

“My friends and I ended up really maturing away from each other, under totally different circumstances.” A porcelain smile spread along her lips. “I watched my friends grow, learn, experience hardships, overcome those hardships...” Her head started to sink. “I saw them learn to love.

“When I saw how things were going for them...” Her head came back up, slowly. “I couldn’t have been happier. I’d felt happiness before, but...that was another kind of joy.

“When they got married, I was there. When they had children, I was there, too, and even for the birth of those kids, alongside all of my other friends.” Her smile wavered, but came back stronger than before. “They’d said their goodbyes when I came by for my last visit. Any time they had successes, I was there, too.”

Blanche stayed silent for a little while, digesting that. “I see,” he said, “I, uh...I’m going to go ahead and head back. Before I go, though, I wanted to tell you a piece of wisdom I got from an old account I read.”

He leaned against the doorframe. “May not mean much now, but it might help you before you head to his house. Uh...how did go again? Oh, right.” He tried to put on a wizened-looking grimace, but ended up just looking silly. “No matter how far away you get from home, you can always return there in your sleep.” He paused a moment, then added, “Don’t take too long, Fluttershy. It has to be today.” With that, he walked out of the room.

Fluttershy sighed deeply and flopped back onto her pillows—it was early enough in the morning that she could get away with a nap before she left to perform the final act in her time as Death.

She closed her eyes and thought about what it was going to be like, finally getting to see the Ever after all this time, and her friends, too...

Part of her was worried that Tomes wouldn’t be able to handle the duty—after all, it was a big responsibility to take on—but he seemed to take her suggestion in stride. In fact, he’d said he was honored to become the next Death, to inherit such a storied title.

To think so much had changed since Fluttershy’s inception as Death. Legends changed, minds changed, and slowly, Death became something that wasn’t meant to be feared, but rather something to be respected and loved, albeit not exactly looked forward to. The Ever was less of a myth now, though it still shared the floor with many other ideas about the hereafter.

It was almost too much to think about—it was like Fluttershy was rewriting history. Ponies died with grace and civility—she hadn't gotten kicked or smacked by ponies trying to avoid Death for over a hundred years, now. It wasn't a sense of resignation she saw in the eyes of her charges, either—it was a look of eagerness.

As she mulled all this over in her head, sleep finally overtook Fluttershy.

Her dreams were filled with visions of her former life, something that seemed far too long ago to even consider, now. She saw the smiles and cheerful faces of her friends, heard their laughter. She smelled Pinkie's famous concoctions, felt the brush of Applejack's hoof wiping away her tears when she lost the herds of bunnies, watched Rainbow Dash perform her loop-de-loops in the air, multicolored streaks following her every move. She tried dresses on with Rarity and helped Twilight study, and even tended to her animals—it was like she'd never left.

The visions changed, however, as her subconscious seemed to take her through every bit of her life, even after she'd become Death. The relieved look on Old Bones' face flitted through her mind, as did Celestia's cold stare, the brokenhearted look on her friends' faces, Little Mint's calm demeanor and acceptance...and, of course, the deaths of her friends.

In such a short time, everything changed, and refused to stop changing, no matter how much anypony tried to stop it. But in the end, Fluttershy knew that it was all for the better.

When she woke, she knew she was ready.

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The house Tomes lived in was simple and neat, and stacked with plenty of reading material. He also had a habit of keeping his loft window open, and, with her robe tight around her and her heart light, Fluttershy slipped inside, her hood still off. The moon shined bright outside.

Tomes was busily reading in a rocking chair near his lit fireplace, looking pensive, but with a thinly disguised sense of excitement. Fluttershy touched down next to him, causing him to jump visibly.

"Oh, goodness..." he said with a nervous grin. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you come in, Fluttershy."

"I didn't use the door," Fluttershy replied with a smile. "How are you doing?"

Tomes set his book down and ran a hoof through his still-dark hair. "I'm fine, thank you," he said. "The nerves are getting to me a little, but trust me, I won't back out on you."

Er...this isn't going to be painful or anything like that, is it?"

Fluttershy chuckled. "Of course not," she said. "It's perfectly harmless. Though...have you decided on what you'll give up? I'm afraid that it has to be decided now."

Tomes looked shaky for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, of course," he said, "but...do you ever get it back?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "I'm sorry, but no," she said. "It's a sacrifice you have to live with until you reach the Ever."

Tomes let out a nervous laugh. "Heh, 'live with'...I see." He took a deep breath and nodded. "I've decided...to give up my ability to understand the written word."

Fluttershy's eyes went wide. "Are you sure about that, Tomes?" she asked. "I know you're a very big reader...can you deal with that?"

Tomes nodded, this time with more conviction. "Yes," he said, "I can. I've come to terms with all this, Fluttershy; you don't need to worry about me."

The pegasus nodded happily. "Good," she said. "Are you ready to hear all of the vital information? There's quite a lot."

Tomes simply nodded, and Fluttershy continued. "Alright. Firstly, you'll be expected to take the lives of ponies all around Equestria and beyond—it's a lot of responsibility, and if ponies don't die on schedule, it's not good.

"Second, your 'existence.' Your time as Death is self-dictated with a minimum service of fifty years to allow you to develop your own understanding of what it means to be Death and what it means to die, and so on. Once you pass fifty years, it will be up to you to eventually set your date of ascendance." She smiled. "Follow me so far?"

Another nod. "Good. Third, your body will still be intact, since you didn't want to give that up, and since you've said your goodbyes, you'll simply cease to exist—did you make sure to tell everypony who needed to know?"

Fluttershy continued on, listing every single thing involved with being Death, from the non-allowance in the Ever until the service period was up, to how to take a pony into the Ever, and even the small things, like transportation and dealing with the deaths of loved ones. When it was all over, she took a deep breath and smiled as wide as she could, her eyes watery.

"Well...that covers everything you need to know," she said. "I'm sure you can't wait to start."

Tomes nodded. “I won’t let you down, Fluttershy. I swear I’ll continue your legacy perfectly.”

Fluttershy shook her head. “It’s not about copying a successful Death,” she said. “Just be yourself and remember what it means to be a good Death. Always uphold the three rules of being Death, too.”

Tomes counted them off. “Be polite and patient to the victim, always keep on schedule, and most importantly, maintain a sense of ethics and morality.”

Fluttershy’s smile started to fade—she couldn’t believe she was really here...really about to join her friends in the Ever...

Tomes’ voice snapped Fluttershy back to attention. “Is that all I need to know?”

The pegasus nodded. “That’s everything!” she said cheerily. “And, of course, I’ll always be here to answer your questions—former Deaths are given the privilege of reading all the material in the Ever’s library, and are allowed to visit Equestria when they please, as long as they don’t slack off on their accounts. So you have that to look forward to.”

Tomes’ cheeks looked fit to split. “All that reading material...I can hardly imagine it! Is it possible to visit other corners of the Ever?”

Fluttershy nodded. “Of course, provided you don’t share out too much information. All ponies in the Ever are allowed to visit their loved ones.” She looked up at the ceiling. “Today is almost over...” She unhooked the cloak and gently set it down. “When you’re ready, put on the cloak.”

Tomes hesitated, but, after one last look around, snapped the cloak around his neck.

And in that moment, two things happened.

Tomes, as Equestria knew him, ceased to exist.

And Fluttershy, after hundreds of years of waiting, finally took flight.