



Binky Pie

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Prologue

Binky Pie

It had been a slow day at Sugarcube Corner. Mr. and Mrs. Cake were away on business in Fillydelphia, and had (reluctantly), left the shop in the competent hooves of their lodger and employee, Pinkie Pie. She had been up since the crack of dawn, baking and decorating the day's stock, and now stood to attention behind the counter, staring at the door and willing it to open, letting in a flood of hungry and soon-to-be satisfied customers. Pinkie's attention span was not perfect at the best of times, but she did possess a remarkable amount of patience.

However, it was now past lunch, and not a single pony had walked through the door. Even for her this was getting a bit much. Her stomach growled, drowning out the slow tick of the clock. Pinkie glanced up at it, and it suddenly struck her how hungry she was. She had been so intent on running the shop perfectly that she'd neglected to eat anything since she'd woken up.

Torn between her hunger and her duty, she finally succumbed to temptation and headed into the back room, where the Cakes kept the stock from the previous day that had gone a little stale, though still edible. As she tucked in to the cupcakes and confectionery, she heard the ringing of the bell above the shop's door. Gulping down one last mouthful, she skidded through the kitchen and back to the shop-front. There, facing away from her, was a pony browsing the shop's wares. She saw that the pony was wearing a hooded cloak, that hid it. Knowing of only one pony that regularly wore a hooded cloak in Ponyville, she jumped to the logical conclusion.

"Hey, Zecora! Need any help? You're the first customer I've had all-" Pinkie cut off as the hooded pony turned to face her. It wasn't Zecora. In fact, Pinkie certainly didn't recognize him. His coat was a brilliant, almost polished white, with a short-cropped mane and brilliant blue eyes.

"Oh, sorry! I thought you were Zecora, she normally wears a cloak in town. Hi! I'm Pinkie Pie! I haven't seen you in Ponyville before, what's your

name? Can I help you with anything?" She asked, brushing off her mistake. The pony paused for a moment, before answering:

DOOR. BILL DOOR.

The words seemed to enter Pinkie's brain without first going through her ears, and had a strange atonal quality, like the grinding of one rock against another. She took a longer look at the cloaked pony, and noticed that he seemed thin. Very thin. Gaunt.

"You look like you must be hungry. Here, I'll get some free samples!" She ran behind the counter and appeared mere moments later with a tray of cupcakes balanced on her head. She set them down on the counter and beckoned Bill Door over.

"Come on, try some! They're free! New customers always get a free sample, and so do new ponies! You're both, so you get twice as much!" She nudged the tray towards Bill Door, helping herself to one as well. She noticed Bill Door take a cupcake, and she noticed a few seconds later that it had gone, but she couldn't remember him picking it up or eating it. Pinkie had always been very perceptive of what was going on around her, even if sometimes it seemed like she had no idea. She could tell there was something... off about this customer. The way he stood, still as a statue. His eyes, a deep and blazing blue that looked like the depths of the ocean. His coat was unnaturally white. His voice was... Almost unreal. She felt like she was in the presence of somepony powerful, like Princess Celestia, or Luna, or even Nightmare Moon. She thrust the thoughts into the back of her head and kept smiling, determined to treat this customer properly, whoever or whatever he was.

"So what brings you to Ponyville? Where do you come from?" She asked, looking at Bill Door.

I AM JUST VISITING. I COME FROM A PLACE FAR AWAY. Bill Door answered, again in that strange non-speech. Pinkie was sure that his jaw didn't move. Conversation sat at a lull for a few seconds.

"Who are you visiting? I know everypony in Ponyville. I can help you find them!" Pinkie ventured, trying to stir her customer's interest a little.

THAT WON'T BE NECESSARY. Bill Door replied, again cutting the conversation dead. Pinkie felt him regarding her for a few moments, even though it seemed that his head didn't move. **TELL ME,** he said suddenly, **DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR GRANDFATHER?**

Pinkie cast her mind back, thinking back to her days before moving into Sugarcube Corner, when she lived with her parents and sisters outside Ponyville. She had never met her grandparents on her mother's side, they had died before she was born, but she remembered her Granny Pie fondly.

"I remember meeting him a few times when I used to visit Granny Pie, he was always busy. He was big and tall, and never looked old. He was white, like you! Very white, that I remember. Like Princess Celestia, shining. Granny Pie used to tell me stories about him, how he went on long journeys and fought monsters, but was always there to help everypony. He died when I was still a young filly, though. Dad never talked about him much. Did you know him?" She answered, bringing herself back from her memories and looking at Bill Door.

YES. VERY WELL. WE WENT ON MANY JOURNEYS TOGETHER, HE AND I. I DID NOT KNOW HE HAD PASSED AWAY. For a brief moment, Pinkie saw a flash of sorrow in the emotionless pony's eyes. Then his words sunk in.

"But you don't look that old! Then again, Princess Celestia is over a thousand years old and looks younger than Mrs. Cake, and Princess Luna is nearly the same age but looks younger than me. Are you related to them, Bill Door? A prince?" She asked.

NO. I AM JUST THE ONE WHO GATHERS THE HARVEST. THOUGH I DO NOT AGE. Pinkie suddenly felt uneasy. It seemed that the room had grown colder. She looked again at Bill Door, and gasped. There, before her, stood not the thin, white pony from before, but a hooded skeleton of a pony, polished gleaming white, with tiny blue pinpricks in its eye sockets that burnt like stars. She didn't feel scared. She never felt scared. She just felt strangely calm, and time seemed to slow, all around. She suddenly realised she couldn't hear the ticking of the clock.

... **YOU CAN SEE ME.** 'Bill Door' stated, without surprise. **YOU HAVE MORE OF YOUR GRANDFATHER IN YOU THAN I THOUGHT.**

Pinkie looked long and hard at the skeletal pony's eyes, those blue dots shining from a vast and unnatural blackness in the sockets.

"Who are you?" She said at last.

DEATH.

"Then, am I...?"

NO. I AM DEATH, BUT I AM NOT YOUR DEATH. YOUR GRANDFATHER TAUGHT YOU SOMETHING, ONCE, WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG. DO YOU REMEMBER? Death looked at Pinkie with those cold eyes and she cast her mind back once more.

Pinkie Pie looked out from behind her father's legs, up at her grandfather. He was tall, far taller than any pony she had met, and his coat was a brilliant white, as was his mane and tail. He looked down at her and smiled.

"So this is your youngest? Come on out, little one. Don't be scared of your Granny and Grandpa. What's your name?" He said, in a deep, rich voice.

"P-Pinkamina." She stammered, hiding behind her father again. Her grandfather chuckled, while her father just scowled a little, nudging Pinkie out and in front of her grandparents. Her two sisters just stood silently looking at their hooves.

"Well, Pinkamina, around here they always called me Binky. Binky Pie. Your Granny and I are happy to finally meet you." He smiled and nuzzled the little filly's straight-combed mane, frizzing it up a little.

She and her family stayed a few days with her grandparents, their home being much more vibrant and colourful than the drab existence she lived out on her parent's own farm. One sunny afternoon, her grandfather found her sitting out in the garden, enjoying all the colours and sights and sounds. They talked for a while, him telling her nonsense stories about the world, and listening to her talk about her life back home. Eventually he stood up and turned to her.

"Pinkamina- Pinkie. How would you like to see a little magic trick?" He said, winking at her. She nodded, vigorously. Her parents never allowed anything like that. All work had to be done by hoof and mouth, 'the

Ponyville way', as her father always said. Pinkie watched her grandfather walk up to a large rock sitting off to one side of the garden. He stepped behind it, his head and neck still visible from where Pinkie sat.

"Now you see me..." He said, and knelt down behind the rock. "And now you don't." He finished, hidden behind the rock. Pinkie frowned.

"That's not magic! You're just sitting behind the rock!" She got up and trotted over to the rock, and looked behind it. Her grandfather had vanished.

"Am I?" He said, suddenly appearing from behind a tree at the other end of the garden. Pinkie blinked in disbelief.

"How'd you do that? You're an earth pony like dad, how did you do that?" She asked, not sure what to make of her grandfather's display of power.

"You don't need to be a unicorn to perform magic, Pinkie. There are some types of magic not even they can do. I tried to teach your father, when he was your age, but he could never do it. Your sisters never showed any interest in the wonders of the world, so I never tried with them, but you, Pinkie, you're like your Granny. Full of joy and wonder, even if your father does like to keep a lid on it. Shall I teach you how to do this trick?" He said, walking over to Pinkie and smiling at her.

Pinkie nodded, slowly at first, but then with enthusiasm. His smile breaking into a grin, her grandfather sat her down and taught her how to perform the 'trick'.

Coming back to the present day, Pinkie looked back at Death and nodded.

"He taught me how to move around without being seen. It was scary at first, but Granny Pie and Grandpa Binky said there was never anything to be afraid of. He told me not to use it unless I really had to, though. ... I got into trouble a few times when I didn't listen to that piece of advice. But how did you know that? And what do you mean, not 'my' death?" Pinkie Pie said, her normally cheerful and care-free demeanour replaced with concern.

I AM NOT THE DEATH OF THIS WORLD. THAT IS NOT MY ROLE. I COME FROM ANOTHER PLACE, WHERE THE WORLD IS... DIFFERENT. YOUR GRANDFATHER, BINKY, WAS MY COMPANION

FOR COUNTLESS AEONS IN THAT PLACE, THOUGH AS HE GREW OLD HE WISHED TO LEAVE MY SERVICE AND LIVE A MORTAL LIFE. **HE** CHOSE THIS WORLD, AND SETTLED HERE. Death replied, his unfailing gaze never leaving Pinkie.

"S-Service? He was... Death?" Pinkie stammered.

NO. IN THAT WORLD I AM NOT AS YOU SEE ME HERE. THERE I WALK UPRIGHT AND STAND ON TWO FEET. YOUR GRANDFATHER WAS MY STEED, AND INDEED A GREAT FRIEND TO ME. Death looked away, finally, casting his gaze around the shop. **HE CHOSE AN INTERESTING WORLD IN WHICH TO LIVE OUT HIS DAYS.**

"So you came to... visit him?" Pinkie asked.

NO. I CAME TO VISIT YOU. Death replied, looking back at her.

"Why me?"

YOU BEAR THE SAME GIFT AS HE. HE LEARNT TO WALK THE PATHS BETWEEN SPACES WHEN IN MY SERVICE. HE TAUGHT IT TO YOU. WHY, I DO NOT KNOW. PERHAPS HE EXPECTED THAT I WOULD RETURN SOME DAY, OR WISHED TO TRAIN A SUCCESSOR. BUT I COME TO YOU WITH A PROPOSAL, PINKIE PIE. WILL YOU RETURN TO THAT WORLD, YOUR GRANDFATHER'S WORLD, AND SERVE ME IN HIS STEAD? Death's eyes seemed to bore right into her as he stood there awaiting a response. She was acutely aware that all noise outside had ceased. She could hear nothing except her own breathing.

She thought of her grandfather, trying to imagine him as Death had described him, but couldn't. Her smiling grandfather, always ready with a helping hoof, the steed and companion of Death himself? She thought of her father, and realised why he'd never spoken about 'Grandpa Binky', and why he was so insistent on doing things without magic. She realised that he had known, all those years, and had been trying to protect her and shield her. She thought of her friends, and all the joy and laughter they had shared with each other in Ponyville. The thought of giving all that up...

... It wasn't her.

"No. I won't. I can't. I couldn't live like that. I understand why Grandpa Binky came here. He wanted some joy and laughter in his life after all those long years. ... I'm sorry, but I won't come back with you." She said, for once completely sombre.

Death held her gaze for a little longer, then his shoulders moved a fraction, as if he was shrugging, or trying to shrug.

AS YOU WISH. YOUR GRANDFATHER WAS DEAR TO ME, AND I WOULD NEVER FORCE HIS GRANDDAUGHTER TO DO SOMETHING SHE DID NOT FREELY CHOSE TO DO. YOU HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR FROM ME. He turned, and headed towards the exit, the clomp of his hooves on the tiled floor ringing out like the ticking of the clock. Indeed, Pinkie noticed she could hear it ticking once again, and the noise and chatter of Ponyville outside the shop's windows washed over her.

Death opened the door with one hoof, and turned his head back.

THE CUPCAKES WERE DELICIOUS.

With that, he closed the door behind him, and was gone. Pinkie looked down at the counter, and saw a shining gold bit sitting there. She picked it up in her teeth and placed it in the register, grinning to herself. Death liked her baking.

Chapter 1

Part Time Work

It had been a slow day for Gustav Gutsworth, proprietor of 'Gutsworth Pies & Pie Accessories'. His humble shop in the backstreets of Ankh-Morpork had its fair share of customers, and he had never been left wanting. He even spent money on such luxuries as importing real meat for some of his fare, instead of the State-Recognized 'Meat Product' that made up much of an Ankh-Morporkian's diet.

And well, while it had been a slow day, he couldn't help but feel it could have done with being a tad slower.

He stared in mild bemusement at his corpse, slumped over the counter, an assassin's dagger sticking out of his back. He noted, with the eye of a trained merchant, that it was one of those single-use disposable models that the Assassin's Guild favoured for... less-important clients.

Still, he was forced to admit he felt a sense of pride that he had been taken out by an assassin of the Guild, instead of a common thug. He supposed it might've been related to that recent incident in which he had, *accidentally*, mistaken the rat poison for the jar of Klatchian Curry Spices he kept on the same shelf when preparing a 'Gutsworth Kurried Kidney Pie'. To be fair, the two were interchangeable when it came to killing rats.

"Well... Now what?" He said to himself.

"SURPRISE!"

Suddenly, all around him were colours. Vibrant colours, impossible colours, fantastic colours that one certainly didn't see (legally) in Ankh-Morpork. He spun on a ghostly heel to see two figures standing before him. One he had been expecting. The other he definitely hadn't.

I AM TERRIBLY SORRY ABOUT THIS. SHE INSISTED.

The tall, slim, hooded fellow, Gustav supposed, was Death. He seemed to fit all the necessary criteria: scythe, dark robes, malnutrition, voice that entered one's brain without stopping by the ears first.

The other...

... Well... It. It was pink.

Very pink.

And suddenly it seemed to be standing right in front of him.

"Hi! I'm Pinkie Pie!"

And apparently it could talk. The colours flying around him solidified into streamers and confetti, that somehow managed to land on his ghostly form.

"I- ... Juh-... Wha-" He stammered.

"Aww, he's speechless! Oh, wait! I have some cake and punch here, and your complimentary balloon!" The pink thing, which Gustav realized was vaguely equine in shape, ran behind Death and reappeared a split-second later carrying on its head a tray, containing a slice of cake and a cup of fruit punch. Held in its mouth was a balloon suspended from a string. Death looked on with what could be called mild embarrassment.

Gustav found the tray shoved into one hand and the balloon in the other. The pink thing grinned happily.

"Y'see," it began, "I heard about what was going to happen to you today and I thought that, well, you might be sad about it, and that made me sad, and when I want to cheer up I throw a party! So this party is just for you, to help cheer you up, too!"

Gustav heard a rasping whistle and felt something touch his ear. He looked sharply to his right to see the pink thing standing there, now sporting a conical hat and blowing a party whistle.

He looked up at his balloon. It read: *Happy Deathday!*

He looked at Death in utter confusion. Death shrugged.

He finally managed to say a flat "... What."

The pink thing was now suddenly next to Death again, head leant against the skeletal figure in a somewhat affectionate matter.

"I'm doing part-time work!" It said.

IT IS A LONG STORY.

Albert stood in front of Death's desk. The sound of a billion hourglasses surrounded him, and was somehow drowned out by his sheer frustration.

"Master, gods know I've put up with a lot over the years, but I cannot abide this... This... Invasion of my personal space!"

BUT IT IS NOT YOUR PERSONAL SPACE. IT IS THE KITCHEN.

"Exactly! The kitchen! **My** kitchen! Do you know what she did?"

THE QUESTION IS RHETORICAL, YOU WILL TELL ME ANYWAY.

"She cleaned the pan! Cleaned it! Took me near a year to get the grease to just the right consistency and it's gone! What's more, she's been making... cakes! Muffins! *Baked goods!*"

DO THE BAKED GOODS OFFEND YOU?

"And outside! Have you *seen* outside?"

OFTEN.

"It's... Colourful! I don't know how she did it, but it's alive! Vibrant! **Real!**"

... **SHE SAID IT NEEDED LIGHTENING UP A BIT.**

"That's right! All that black was just creepy! Now it looks *much* better! I left the fields though, like you asked." Pinkie Pie was standing right there, next to Albert, tray balanced on her mane. Three bite-size pies rested on it.

"Oh! Here, try this! New recipe! I got it from that chef we met yesterday, the one who drank too much coffee!"

"And she keeps *doing that!*" Albert finished, exasperatedly waving a hand at Pinkie Pie as she scoffed her own sample. He sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose as he turned to leave, slamming the door behind him like a coffin lid.

"Aww, he didn't try the curried vegetable pot pie!" Pinkie said, looking at the door sadly.

IT IS RATHER GOOD. Death intoned, his sample having mysteriously vanished. KLATCHIAN?

"Yes indeedy!" She beamed in reply. The smile fell into a sad frown shortly after. "I'm not... Upsetting him, am I?"

ALBERT?

"Yeah. He seemed angry when I used the kitchen. I suppose I should've asked first, but I didn't think it'd be a problem..."

I WOULD NOT WORRY. HE DISLIKED MY DAUGHTER, AND MY SON-IN-LAW, AND MY GRANDDAUGHTER WHEN HE FIRST MET THEM. IN FACT, I BELIEVE HE DISLIKES EVERYONE. IT COMES OF HIS PROFESSION, I SUPPOSE. THEY CAN BE A DISAGREEABLE SORT.

Pinkie's ears pricked up and her eyes sparkled. "Maybe I should throw him a party!"

... I DO NOT THINK THAT WOULD BE WISE.

She deflated just as quickly. "Well... If you say so. Is there anyone else today?"

THERE IS ALWAYS 'SOMEONE ELSE', BUT YOUR WORK TODAY IS SUFFICIENT.

"Right. I'll see you next week, then."

There was the slightest suggestion of movement that indicated Death had nodded. Pinkie turned and stepped out of Death's study, re-emerging at the empty stable adjoining his house. She looked up at the walls (black), at the roof (black), and at the hay (black).

Death could not grasp the concept of colour, and despite Albert's complaints, Pinkie had actually done nothing to change that. It was merely that she was so *alive* that it brought even Death's imagined images to a kind of life. Every hoofstep was a splash of colour that spread out and turned a lawn a lush green, or made the fountain of white marble flow with cold and clear blue water.

Even now the walls of the stable had imperceptibly become whitewashed. The hay was a golden-yellow, and the roof timbers a rich oak, varnished and topped with red slates.

Yet, even as colours swirled and changed all around her, her own seemed to become dull. She slumped onto the hay and heaved a great sigh.

SQUEAK.

"Oh. Hi, you." She said to the little robed figure that had appeared from the hay.

SQUEAK?

"No, no, I'm fine."

SQUEAK?

"Yes, really."

SQUEAK...?

"... Well, alright, no, I'm not." She sighed again. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the roof, while the Death of Rats jumped onto her belly, looking at her intently with two tiny, blue pinpricks of light. "I dunno, it's just... This place is so *different* from Equestria..."

SQUEAK?

"What made me change my mind? ... Y'know, it's funny, he never actually asked me that."

SQUEAK.

"Yeah. I suppose. Well... After he visited me, I got to thinking, and then I thought about my cutie mark, and the promise I made to myself when I got it, and – Wait, did I tell you the story of how I got my cutie mark?"

SQUEAK.

"I really should sometime. It's a gem! But anyways, I was so happy when I discovered parties that I wanted to spread that happiness and make everyone as happy as I was!" She gestured with a hoof as a section of the wall suddenly bore the image of a rainbow.

"So I thought and thought and thought and thought and thought about it, and then realised, 'why can't I be in two places at once?' He never said I had to **stay** here to help."

SQUEAK.

"So I came over and asked him about it, and he offered me a part-time job!" She grinned to herself as she thought about it. She had almost forgotten the Death of Rats was even there, and was talking more to herself than to anyone else.

"It was pretty gloomy at first... People seemed so... Sad about it all. Back home we just... Well, we don't really think about it. Mom and Dad said that after it's all over we go to join everyone else in a new life, where everyone's always happy..."

She rolled over again, toppling the Death of Rats into the hay. There was a muffled and disgruntled **SQUEAK** as he dug back out.

"I asked him about it, but he said he didn't know. He's never been there. But it's gotta be something similar, right? It's nothing to worry about, at least. So I try to make things happier. I talk to them, I throw them a party, it's all in good fun! And I do love to have fun..."

SQUEAK.

"... You're right, I'm rambling. I should just get back home. See you next week!" Her perky demeanour seemed to re-assert itself as she got up and turned to face the wall. She readied herself for a leap, gave her rump a wiggle, and jumped through reality. All that was left behind was the imprint of two back hooves, burning with a bright pink flame.

The Death of Rats watched her leave, and shook his head.

SQUEAK.

"... And that's the lot. My, Pinkie, I didn't really put you down as such an avid reader!" Twilight Sparkle smiled as she levitated a rubber stamp over every piece of paper, slipping them back into their respective book jackets. A large stack of textbooks and reference books sat atop Twilight's study table, currently doubling as the library's front desk. An exhausted Spike was panting heavily for breath on the floor.

"But... I must say..." The unicorn continued, looking at the spines of the books. "... That's an odd selection y'got there. *'Burial Practices & Rites in Ancient Equestria'*, *'Ghosts, Goblins & Ghoulish Figures'*... And what was this one again? *'Necroponicon'*? Hay, I didn't even know I **had** half of these. Whatever do you need them for?"

"Research!" Pinkie beamed. When no further information appeared forthcoming, Twilight pushed for more.

"... About...?"

"Oh, it's... Something for the Harvest Festival!" She grinned disarmingly. Twilight seemed to accept this, to Pinkie's relief. She stacked the books on her back with the skill of a waitress balancing plates and turned to go.

"Wait!"

She stopped just short of the door.

"It's the middle of spring!"

"Oh-well-I-like-to-plan-ahead-you-know-anyway-I-think-it's-Harvest-in-uh-Stalliongrad-or-something-hey-I-think-I-hear-my-muffins-burning-see-ya!"

A pink streak shot down Ponyville's main street, leaving a baffled purple unicorn in its wake.

It had been a busy day in Ankh-Morpork's newest temple. Well, perhaps 'temple' is a little generous; it was really a front room hired from a kindly old woman who lived near the Temple of Small Gods, which had refused the application for a shrine.

The High Priestess, and currently only devotee, was the (Late) Aminata Odham, who, due to a slight quirk of Fate and a misplaced slice of cake, had found herself back in her body shortly after relieving herself of it, but with a firm resolve to make the most of unlife and preach what she had seen on The Other Side.

She had just put the finishing touches to the altar (a table covered in cheap gingham cloth, also on hire from a kindly old woman) and a statuette of the object of worship. It could, charitably, be described as equine in shape. It could also be described as very pink.

High Priestess Aminata Odham hammered the last nail into the lintel of the door, pinning up the new sign. She stepped down from the stool and looked, proudly, upon her handiwork.

" THE FURsT TEMpEL OF THE pINK pONY OF DEAf "

Chapter 2

Pink is the Color of Death

The sun was shining down on Ponyville for another beautiful spring morning. Foals ran through the streets, enjoying their mid-season holiday, while ponies finished setting up their market stalls in Ponyville's town centre.

Pinkie watched the town's busy life unfold from the window of her room atop Sugarcube Corner. Below her, she could hear the sounds of Mrs. Cake in the kitchen, making the stock for the afternoon's sales, while Mr. Cake served hungry customers at the front of the shop.

Part of her would rather have been out in the sun, enjoying the weather, or downstairs helping in the kitchens, but there was one task she felt compelled to complete before her shift began.

She drew back the curtain, shrouding the room in darkness. Filtered pink light barely illuminated her way as she plodded back across to the centre of her room. The table had been pushed aside, and in its place sat a small pile of sticks, a pot of jam, and a large, black book. The gold letters of the title glistened in the low light: *Necroponicon*. ... Or was it *Neighchronomicon*? They shifted whenever Pinkie tried to look at it. She didn't like the feel of the book, but it was a necessity for what she planned to do.

She flipped open the book with her muzzle, stopping on a seemingly random page and tracing down it with her hoof. She nodded to herself, satisfied, and began to lay out the sticks in a pattern corresponding to a diagram in the book.

Flicking the lid off the jam jar, she dropped a spoonful of it in the centre of the sticks, nodding once again.

"That should do it... Now then..." she muttered, going back to the book and skim-reading. "Ah-ha! There we go."

She stood in front of the book and stick-diagram, and spared a glance at the curtained window. She had no idea if this would work or not. After all, she was an Earth Pony, not a unicorn, and this was magic she was dealing with. At the same time, hadn't Twilight told her that pegasi, and even Earth Ponies had a little magic in them, deep inside? Maybe they couldn't focus it without a horn, but it was still there.

It was worth a go.

She read the words of the book. They were in a strange and ancient tongue that, surprisingly, she found she had little difficulty actually pronouncing. Each word seemed to hang in the air, like a physical echo one could feel and see as well as hear.

The room began to blur. Pinkie could hear a dull rumbling noise in her ears. In the centre of the sticks, a dark form began to coalesce into the rough shape of a pony - featureless, nebulous, like a cloud.

Pinkie's head span and thumped like it was being put through a taffy puller. She felt herself slipping, not on the floor, but rather *through* it. The room dissolved into nothingness as she felt a sharp tug pulling her away...

In that same instant, the sticks were scattered as a skeletal pony materialized and solidified. It stood still for a moment, taking stock of its surroundings, pale blue pinpricks of light scanning every facet and surface.

Its gaze fell on the black book, the sticks, and the small puddle of jam smeared over its hooves.

... **OH BUGGER.**

A similar room. A different place. People shuffled about in the dim light, handing out plates and cutlery. From the centre of the room, a cracked voice spoke up.

"Guest Jenson, did you bring the punch?"

"Yes, Grand Hostess. It's the 'Spring Has Sprung' recipe. I made sure to remove the springs this time." Jenson shuffled forward and deposited the sloshing bowl onto the table.

"Well done, Jenson. And Guest Bonhomie, you were in charge of the cake."

"Triple-layer-vanilla-cream-jam-sponge, Grand Hostess. With butterscotch icing." Bonhomie placed the cake in the centre of the table, striking a match and lighting the five black candles arranged in a circle on top of it.

"Excellent! Let us all join together in the chant."

The congregation, dressed in their solemn pink robes and conical paper mitres, gathered around the cake. Grand Hostess Aminata Odham (she decided High Priestess was a little cliché) drew a knife from the sleeve of her robe. It glinted in the light of the black candles as she checked its edge.

She stepped forward, and raised the knife in the air. With one accord, the congregation drew a breath, and shouted:

"SURPRISE!"

The knife whistled as it plunged into the heart of the cake. The ceremony complete, Aminata proceeded to calmly slice and serve the sponge onto waiting plates, and they all sat and quietly chewed while discussing local news.

As they debated the rising price of onions and why it was affecting the stock cube market, Aminata checked over her order of service, making sure nothing had been left out. Since its inception, the Church of the Pink Pony of Death had risen from height to height. It was now well-known throughout Ankh-Morpork for the friendly atmosphere, free baked goods, and promise of a better, pinker life waiting for them on The Other Side. The congregation (referred to as 'Guests') had swelled, and donations had been so generous that Aminata had been able to afford to move into proper quarters.

They now had an entire Community Hall to themselves, which amounted to the entire ground floor of what used to be a pub. This was the Second Temple of the Pink Pony of Death. The First was kept maintained for religious reasons, and had recently started being honoured as the site of Aminata's glorious revelation.

Of course, this wasn't the case, but she wasn't going to spoil their fun by pointing it out. Besides, Hostess Beauregard, keeper of the First Temple, made excellent cupcakes. There had been some brief altercations with the leaders of the major religions of the Disc, and Aminata had been forced to invite Hughnon Ridcully, High Priest of Blind Io, over for a cuppa and a slice of cake to explain matters.

Once it was made perfectly clear that this religion was in no way infringing on the rights, intellectual property or commandments of the other gods, they were accepted with open arms into the wider ecclesiastical community. It didn't hurt that being undead gave one certain... advantages when it came to making the proper connections. Meetings usually went along the lines of "Oh gods please don't eat me take anything everything arrgh faint".

The Grand Hostess put aside the little booklet and adjusted her mitre, decorated in the finest colours the Alchemist's Guild could supply. She slipped through a curtain into the back room while the congregation finished off the sacrificial cake.

Through here it was, if possible, even darker. Not only were the curtains drawn, the shutters were closed for good measure. In the centre of this room was another table, on which sat the effigy of a horse, almost fluorescently pink in the darkness. A second figure stepped out of the shadows, pink robes obscuring a second robe underneath, and a paper hat fitted neatly over a wide-brimmed, conical piece of headwear.

"Guest of Honour Terrak Keksy. I trust you've acquired the items I requested?" Aminata said, smiling at the young wizard. Given that her jaw was beginning to slough off the bone, this was more than a little unnerving.

"I took advantage of the fact that today is the *Semi-Annual-Once-Centennial Hunt for the Megapode* and made myself suitably scarce. They won't miss me until Pre-Dinner." Terrak Keksy replied as he retrieved a bag of reagents from somewhere within his robes. He tipped the contents of the bag over the table, revealing some assorted candles, incense sticks, a skull (fine condition, only one previous owner), some bits of wood, and 4cc of mouse blood.

Aminata's eyes glistened in the dark. She watched intently as Keksy arranged the magical paraphernalia around the pony statue, quickly making

a sigil-like shape from the wood. He lit the candles and incense with a mumbled word and complex gesture, bathing a small area around the table in light. He nodded at the Grand Hostess, preparations complete.

"It's all ready, Grand Hostess. Just say the word."

"Summon her, Keksy."

The wizard smiled, pulling a roll of parchment from his sleeve and unfurling it. He squinted at the words on the scroll.

"... I don't suppose you could..." he said, sheepishly, nodding at the windows. Aminata sighed deeply as she drew back the curtain and opened the shutters, letting the light into the room. Keksy blinked as his eyes adjusted.

"Ah, much better. Now then..."

He began to read, the ancient words of the Rite of Ashk'Ente filling the air as it took on a distinctly oily texture. A dark and formless shape began to appear in the centre of the sigil. It held for a few seconds before unexpectedly vanishing, putting out the candles as it did so. Keksy frowned in confusion.

"... Is that meant to happen?" Aminata asked, equally as confused.

"Well... ... No, I don't think so. Should I try again?"

"May as well."

Keksy relit the candles and once more assumed the dramatic pose as he reread the spell. There was a short delay as nothing happened, but slowly a pink, fluffy mist began to form within the circle. It grew, coalescing as it did so, into a vaguely horse-like shape. With an audible snap, like an elastic band giving up the fight, the mist took on the form of Pinkie Pie, who fell onto the table, and subsequently onto the floor, with a loud thump.

HOLY MOLEY, I WASN'T EXPECTING THAT!

Three grey figures floated in the nothingness of oblivion.

One said, There has been a change.
One said, He has been meddling again.
One said, He has gone. She has taken His place.
One said, She has even more of a personality than He did.

The three paused their conversation.

Three said, This will not be tolerated.

Death was... Confused.

He wasn't often confused, but this was one of the few times he felt it was justified.

He was standing amid the remains of what had clearly been an attempt to summon him with the Rite of Ashk'Ente, but no one was present. The room was very pink. The curtains were drawn. Through the window, Death could hear the sound of voices and laughter. Below him he could hear voices talking amiably.

Oh yes, and he had hooves. This was unusual.

Clearly, someone had attempted to summon him, but whoever they were, they had since vanished. Secondly, he was clearly no longer on Discworld, judging by the sudden morphic change. He trotted, unsteadily, over to the window, and pulled back the curtain.

... **OH BUGGER.**

He stepped back and took stock of the situation.

Clearly he was back in Equestria. The realm was somewhat unmistakable. The view from the window of the streets below had been enough to confirm that the building in which he stood was Sugarcube Corner, where he knew Pinkie Pie lived. It was, therefore, a logical assumption that this was her room, and she had summoned him here.

That... Was a problem.

Not many people knew how to perform the Rite of Ashk'Ente. Fewer knew exactly why Death was summoned by the rite (a slightly embarrassing secret he preferred to keep to himself). Fewer *still* knew exactly how the spell worked.

The rite would summon and 'bind' Death. Most of its practitioners assumed that Death was bound to the circle he was summoned to, but this wasn't the case. Death was free to move wheresoever he willed, but was bound to the *plane* of his summoning, until released by the summoner.

Pinkie Pie wasn't here. And until he found her, he was stuck in Equestria.

Pinkie Pie blinked, looking up to find two people dressed in bright pink robes and wearing paper hats, bowing at her.

HEY! WHAT'RE YOU DOING? DID YOU DROP SOMETHING? I'LL HELP YOU LOOK FOR IT! she said as she jumped to her hooves, quickly dropping her head and staring intently at the floor. Her brain slowly made the connections, and she shot back up again.

HEY! MY VOICE SOUNDS FUNNY!

"O Bringer of Joy and Laughter, we are honoured by your presence!" Aminata began, smiling broadly. Pinkie looked at her and squinted for a few moments, before recognition dawned.

I REMEMBER YOU! YOU SLIPPED AND FELL BACK INTO YOUR BODY! I NEVER GOT TO GIVE YOU YOUR PRESENT! she said, bounding in place. **BUT YOU'RE NEW! HI! I'M PINKIE PIE!** she continued, turning to a stunned Keksy. He had heard the older wizards talk of Death as a hooded skeleton with eyes that bore into your soul and knew exactly how much time was left until it expired. The description was nothing like the creature that stood before him. Instead of feeling terror and a sense of impending doom, he felt happiness, and the desire to go out and seize every minute of life while he still could.

"... I'm Terrak Keksy. Wizard." he said, after a few moments of silence.

OOH! LIKE MY FRIEND TWILIGHT? SHE'S A UNICORN! SHE'S SUPER GOOD AT MAGIC, BUT SOMETIMES SHE SPENDS TOO MUCH TIME IN HER BOOKS AND NOT ENOUGH TIME HAVING FUN WITH HER FRIENDS! BUT WE LOVE HER ANYWAY!

Aminata cut in before Pinkie had time to go into more elaborate detail.

"Honoured Hostess, I seek your great wisdom on a matter of grave importance." she began, bowing again.

OH YEAH! I WAS MEANT TO BE HELPING YOU LOOK FOR SOMETHING! Pinkie fell to her knees and stuck her head under the table, searching for anything.

"No, no! A different matter! It's... Said that when the Rite of Ashk'Ente has been performed, you can ask Death anything. That you know everything?"

I'M NOT DEATH, SILLY! I'M PINKIE PIE! AND I DON'T KNOW ABOUT KNOWING EVERYTHING, BUT THEN IF I DID KNOW ABOUT KNOWING EVERYTHING THEN I GUESS I WOULD KNOW EVERYTHING WOULDN'T I?

"Your pardon, Great One, if calling you such offended you." Aminata said.
"I wish to ask... What awaits us when we're gone?"

I DON'T KNOW! BUT I BET IT'S GREAT! AFTER ALL... There was a twinkle in her eye. *EVERYONE'S DYING TO GET IN!*

Keksy choked back a laugh, taken off-guard by the pun. Pinkie giggled and snorted, an odd sound with her current tone of voice. Aminata stayed smiling, the sort of smile that showed quiet acceptance of what was being said, rather than any mirth or joviality.

OH, HEY! I HAVE SOMETHING TO ASK YOU, ACTUALLY! Pinkie said, leaning forward towards Aminata.

"I will endeavour to answer to your satisfaction, Great One."

WHERE AM I?

"Why, you're in the temple, of course." Aminata answered, gesturing towards the effigy of Pinkie Pie that had toppled to the floor with Pinkie's arrival. Pinkie's eyes widened.

YOU MEAN YOU THREW A PARTY FOR ME? AWW! THANK YOU! She threw her forehooves around Aminata, embracing her in a tight hug. By this point Keksy had given up all pretence of seriousness and was laughing loudly. Aminata shot him a glare over Pinkie's shoulder, a look that reminded him he was in the presence of a greater power, and should show more respect. He coughed and tried to look solemn.

I'D LOVE TO STAY, BUT I HAVE TO HELP THE CAKES IN THE BAKERY TODAY, SO MAYBE ANOTHER TIME? Pinkie said, letting go of Aminata and looking genuinely sad at having to leave. The Grand Hostess nodded, still smiling.

"Of course, Great One. Do not let us keep you. You are more than welcome in these hallowed halls."

OKIE DOKIE LOKIE! Pinkie beamed, and with a hop, skip and jump, she was gone. The room, though filled with the light of the midday sun, seemed darker and more drab in her absence. Keksy and Aminata stood in reverent silence for a few moments, before the younger wizard turned to the undead priestess.

"... Bakery?"

"We are not privy to the thoughts and manners of the great powers, Keksy."

"Of course, of course..."

Pinkie landed her jump outside a whitewashed stone stable, looking out over a neat garden and connected to an imposing black house. The scent of lilies filled the air.

HUH. THAT'S FUNNY. Pinkie said to herself. **I WAS SUPPOSED TO GO BACK TO SUGARCUBE CORNER. WHY AM I HERE?** She turned and faced the wall, jumping into the air and vanishing.

She reappeared no less than a second later in the exact same spot. She frowned.

MAYBE MY HOOVES ARE BROKEN. CAN YOU GET THAT? I REMEMBER APPLEJACK GOT A STONE IN HER HOOF ONCE... HRM. OH, WAIT! I KNOW! I'LL ASK DEATH! HE'S BOUND TO KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON!

She bounced through the lawn, coming up to the great door that lead into Death's abode. She knocked three times with her hoof, for politeness' sake, then pushed it open with her muzzle. Death didn't keep the door locked. After all, whatever for?

HELLO? DEATH? IT'S ME, PINKIE PIE! I WAS WONDERING- OH, HEY! ALBERT! HEY! she cried, spotting Albert peeking his head around the kitchen door. He cringed.

"You're not meant to be back 'til next week! What're you doing here?" he yelled down the hall.

I DUNNO! I WAS TRYING TO GET BACK TO SUGARCUBE CORNER AND ENDED UP HERE!

"You di- ... Wait. Your voice, it sounds..."

YEAH, SOUNDS FUNNY DOESN'T IT? IT'S BEEN LIKE THIS SINCE I TRIED CASTING THAT SPELL I LEARNED FROM ONE OF THE WIZARDS!

The implications of 'THAT SPELL I LEARNED FROM ONE OF THE WIZARDS' sank in to Albert's brain, stopping briefly at the centres for panic and worry.

"... Oh bugger."

Chapter 3

Taking Up the Mantle

Albert sat hunched over the kitchen table, head in his hands, muttering and cursing to himself, stopping only to take a long drag from what was once possibly a cigarette, followed by half a minute of coughing.

CUPCAKE?

"No."

... **SURE?**

"Yes."

... ... **COMPLETELY SUPER-DUPER-ULTRA-WULTRA SURE?**

"Yes!"

MORE FOR ME!

Another tray of freshly baked confectioneries disappeared into the apparently bottomless stomach of Pinkie Pie. It was the third she'd baked since she'd returned.

Barely an hour ago.

But then, time isn't so much a law in Death's Domain as it is a suggestion. Despite this, Death's home contained possibly more timepieces than actually existed on the Discworld, constantly emptying, measuring, and meting out precious seconds of life. There were two timepieces in particular that afforded special interest out of the billions that occupied its halls.

The first was the great grandfather clock in the hallway. Looking upon it, an observer would get the distinct impression that they were gazing upon a very large object that was very far away, yet also right in front of them. It had no hands. Its scythe-bladed pendulum swung back and forth, killing Time.

The second was an egg-timer. One of many. What was unusual about it was its fundamental lack of use as a timepiece. After all, it had no sand in it. It was forged from solid black... *black*, decorated in the ever-present skulls-and-bones motif that permeated the rest of the house, and like all the others, had the owner's name emblazoned on its base in gothic block capitals; "**DEATH**".

Albert had, by now, given up trying to find it. In its usual place on Death's desk he'd found something far *more* interesting.

A balloon. With "**PINKIE PIE**" written on it.

Albert stared intently at an old grease stain on the table while his thoughts filtered, like cake crumbs, through the plughole of reason. Or, indeed, like sand falling in a timer.

The door of the oven slammed shut and Pinkie Pie was suddenly sitting next to Albert, gazing at him with deep blue, innocent eyes. Albert's brain briefly protested at the thought of a horse sitting upright in a high-backed chair, but was silenced by what remained of his sanity.

"... This is serious, you know." he muttered, at last.

REALLY? SUPER-SERIOUS OR JUST SERIOUS LIKE WHEN TWILIGHT SAYS SOMETHING IS SERIOUS AND USUALLY THAT JUST MEANS SHE'S OVER-REACTING ABOUT SOMETHING LIKE THAT TIME WHEN FLUTTERSHY STOLE THE PRINCESS' BI-

"Super-serious."

... **OH.**

"It's not like it's the first time. Gods know I've dealt with this before. Happens *everytime* he messes with mortals, whatever breed they are." he gave Pinkie a cursory glance up and down as he spoke. "He gets an idea in his head and off he goes, and who's left to pick up the pieces? Old Albert, that's who. Sometimes I don't know why I just don't take the damn job myself."

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

"I mean, he's vanished like this before. First time was with his 'apprentice', right bl- ... right old mess that was. Then there was the time he got fired... And that business with his granddaughter... and the Hogfather, gods, the Hogfather. One Backspindlewinter I'd rather forget."

OH, SO HE'S MISSING? I JUST THOUGHT HE WAS OUT.

"I don't know. What I *do* know is that *you* performed the Ritual of Ashk'Ente, gods only know how, now you're *stuck* here, *his* life-timer's gone, and in its place is one with *you*name on it! Offler's sandals, this isn't supposed to happen! There's fail-safes for this sort of thing! Like... Susan!"

THAT'S HIS GRANDDAUGHTER, RIGHT?

"Mmrh. The last time he properly shirked in his Duty she... 'inherited'. Like it was in the blood, but I always thought it was just that she was the most convenient person available. ... I guess, under the circumstances, that's you now."

HUH. SO... I'M DEATH NOW?

"It would explain the voice." Albert grimaced. Death's voice entered the brain without bothering to go past the ears, and had the same intonation as two tombstones slamming together. Pinkie Pie's new voice, on the other hand, reminded the listener of two balloons rubbing together.

Pinkie frowned, allowing a moment for this new revelation to sink in.

... DO I HAVE TO WEAR THE ROBE?

"Well... It's traditional. Folk put great store in tradition."

BUT IT'S BLACK!

"I'm sure we could find you a pink one somewhere oh gods what am I saying?" Albert pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling. "... No, we're going to find out what happened when you performed the Ritual of Ashk'Ente, and bring the Master back. You'll have to fill in for him in the mean time. He's explained the Duty to you, hasn't he?"

Pinkie grinned sheepishly.

"... Right. Well. Off to a good start, aren't we."

"Pinkie Pie? Are you alright up there, dearie?"

Death panicked as he heard Mrs. Cake's voice float up the stairs towards him. He attempted to click his fingers, before the realisation that he was currently somewhat lacking in digits sunk in. He briefly contemplated leaping from the window, but wisely decided against it, as this would likely cause a greater commotion than he currently felt equipped to deal with.

Mrs. Cake rounded the curve of the building's spiral staircase and stopped on the last few stairs, looking directly at Death with a mix of curiosity and confusion. From Mrs. Cake's perspective, she could see a tall, skinny, white-coated pony in a black cloak standing in the middle of a small puddle of jam on Pinkie's floor, and the pink filly herself was nowhere to be seen.

"... I didn't know Pinkie had guests." She managed, after a few moments of audible silence.

YES. GUESTS. I AM BILL DOOR. A FRIEND FROM... FAR AWAY. Death said, grinning. He was good at grinning. He could perform the entire gamut of human emotion with a grin. Pony emotion, too, apparently.

Mrs. Cake looked at him intently, eyes narrowing. Perhaps at this point in the narrative, it is worth explaining the concept of convergent evolution. The phrase defines the set of circumstances that causes two unrelated lifeforms to independently acquire the same, or similar, biological traits. One well known application of this is the '*parallel universe counterpart*', which has, by necessity, independently acquired a near-perfect copy of whomever it is acting as the counterpart of.

Less known, however, is that the same can also be true of non-parallel universes, and even universes with no real relation whatsoever. The multiverse is a strange place, and such things happen with shocking regularity.

You see, there lives, on the Discworld, a medium (really more of a small), known only as Mrs. Evadne Cake. Naturally clairvoyant, Mrs. Cake makes a living talking to the dead, which she finds an entirely natural thing to do.

Everyone dies sooner or later, but that shouldn't stop you having a good natter with them. This puts her at odds with most major religions, which is often seen as a blessing to the collective priesthoods of said major religions, as Mrs. Cake ranks up high on the list of divine punishments, alongside such old favourites as famine, pestilence, and loss of all left socks.

The Mrs. Cake of Ponyville was also clairvoyant. This was not widely known, as the question of the afterlife was one that most citizens of Equestria did not often contemplate. On the other hoof, being able to see roughly ten seconds into the future was an invaluable skill when your lodger was Pinkie Pie. It had saved Mrs. Cake's well-being (and Sugarcube Corner's fire insurance) more than once over the years.

I only pause to explain all this because the following conversation never actually took place. As both Mrs. Cake and Death possessed the ability to see into the future, both knew what the other was going to say before they said it, and indeed, even when they never did.

In fact, after taking a good long look at Bill Door, Mrs. Cake turned around and returned to the shop front without uttering a single word more.

If she had, it would have gone something like this.

"Bill Door? I remember Pinkie mentioning a Bill Door had come to see her some weeks ago. That's you, is it?" she would have said, arching an eyebrow at Death.

YES. he would have replied.

"Been in Ponyville long, Mr. Door?"

JUST ARRIVED.

"Might I inquire as to what you are doing in the middle of that puddle of jam?"

YOU MAY.

"What are you doing in the middle of that puddle of jam?"

Death would have looked down at his hooves.

STANDING IN IT.

"I see. ... Do you know where Pinkie Pie is?"

**I WOULD ENDEAVOUR TO SAY THAT SHE LEFT SHORTLY
BEFORE I ARRIVED.**

"Right, right... I'm not going to ask exactly *who* you are, or what you're doing in Pinkie's room, *or* how you managed to get up here without passing by the shop front when you obviously lack wings, because I feel I'm not going to like the answers."

The two would have locked stares for a brief moment.

... I'LL CLEAN UP THE JAM.

"Thank you." she would have said, and, as she would have turned to leave, adding as an afterthought: "Dearie."

Pinkie sat at Death's desk, neatly fitting into the groove in what was supposed to be a high-backed leather chair. In reality, it was more like rock. Death could create anything, but he tended to misunderstand the principles at work behind an object. He could create a perfect copy of the appearance, down to the woodworm damage or rust on the nails, yet somehow entirely miss the point, like creating a chest of drawers that cannot be opened, or an inflexible towel.

She stared at the small group of life-timers before her. Each one had a name. Each one was subtly different. From her time with Death, she was beginning to recognize the basic styles of each race. There were plain, no-nonsense human timers, wood and brass, with simple, clear glass bulbs. There were stocky and ornate dwarven timers, gold and steel, stained glass and rocky salt. Set apart from the others was a troll's life-timer. It was larger than the others, and consisted of two mossy stones enclosing a pair of smoky quartz bulbs, through which passed gravel, hitting the base of the bulb with a regular tok-tok-tok.

But even they differed within certain limits, much like their owners. Some taller, some shorter. Some more ornate, some plainer. The lives of kings decked in gold and red felt. The lives of paupers, cobbled together from broken wood and tied with string.

She glanced over at her own. Anywhere else, the pink balloon would have appeared cheery, but here it seemed out-of-place. She supposed that, over time, it would deflate, echoing the fall of sand, salt, rock, grain, eggshell and marble.

There was a movement in the air in front of the desk. Or rather, there wasn't, but the universe was re-adjusted so that there had been.

A grey, hooded figure hung in the air.

It said, We have promoted you.

OH, HEY. TIME FOR EXPOSITION. Pinkie said, without looking up. Her voice seemed to lack its usual note of glee.

It said, Your predecessor has been retired. We expect you to pick up the slack. Any questions will be directed to a board of committee.

I DO HAVE ONE QUESTION. Pinkie raised her head and locked gazes with the shadowy form of the Auditor. Although it had no eyes, she was looking directly at where they would have been, and her own blue eyes had taken on an icy glow. Strangely, she wasn't smiling.

I... REMEMBER YOU. FROM *HIS* PAST. YOU'VE FIRED HIM, YOU'VE TRIED TO HAVE HIM ASSASSINATED, AND NOW YOU COME UP AGAIN LIKE A BAKED BAD WHEN HE'S MISSING. WHERE IS HE?

It said, That is not your concern. You will perform his Duty as his replacement. We are preventing travel between your world and this. Do not try to leave.

IS THAT A THREAT OR A SUGGESTION?

It said, Both.

Pinkie slumped back into the chair. Slumping is not something that comes naturally to ponies, especially in chairs designed for two-legged anthropomorphic personifications, but Pinkie had always had a knack of ignoring such petty issues as this.

It said, He always yearned to be understand what it is to be alive. It brought his work into question. The living show great aptitude in the Duty, despite the apparent weakness of personality. We will monitor your progress with great interest.

DON'T YOU HAVE PERSONALITIES? Pinkie asked, feigning ignorance.

It said, I'm a personification of physical forces and processes, why would I need a- Oh, blast.

It disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Pinkie smirked, and returned her gaze to the life-timers on the desk. Pulling one forward with her hoof, she read the name across the bottom carefully.

Terrak Keksy.

Frowning a little, she turned to the great jewelled globe that took up a good chunk of Death's desk. It was a perfect reproduction of the Discworld, set in gemstones, as it rested on the back of four elephants and the shell of Great A'Tuin. She peered through the spyglass affixed to the celestial arch, at the intricate model of the city of Ankh-Morpork.

She gasped, knocking over the timer she still held under her hoof.

OH NO.

Chapter 4

Death felt very out of his depth.

Of course, that's not to say he was physically out of his depth, even though he was currently up to his neck in warm, soapy water, in the baths of the Ponyville Spa.

It had happened rather suddenly. He remembered cleaning up the jam from the floor of Pinkie Pie's room, then carefully making his way down and out of Sugarcube Corner, the innate sense of all living beings to ignore what their eyes are telling them when they don't wish to see it enabling him to sneak past the busy shop front and out of the door, leaving no evidence of his presence beyond jammy hoofsteps, a trail of flour and sodden, torn party streamers.

The next thing he knew, he was swept along by a white unicorn with a purple mane and an affected accent, into the spa to clean *himself* up.

There are few things as unstoppable and irresistible as Death.

Rarity is one of them.

"I *must* say, you look so much better without that cloak, although it certainly does add an air of intrigue and mystery about you! What's the material?"

ABSOLUTE DARKNESS. THE FABRIC OF REALITY BEFORE THE UNIVERSE BEGAN. BEFORE THE FIRST RAY OF LIGHT BEGAN ITS JOURNEY FROM THE HEART OF-

"Yes, I can see it's black, but is it silk? Cotton? It's very unusual."

Death was a little taken aback.

... **SILK.** he lied.

Rarity glanced over at the cloak as it hung on the rails beside the tub. It certainly didn't shimmer like silk. In fact, it didn't shimmer at all. There were no reflections, and neither was there any sense of depth. It was like a

cloak-shaped hole cut in reality, revealing the darkness underneath. However, it was quite stylish. A touch macabre, perhaps, but it had a certain something.

Death himself was looking around at the spa, curious. The concept of bathing was barely understood on the Discworld as a form of necessary torture. The idea of taking that and making it into an act of leisure had yet to occur to even the most godlike and brilliant of minds. The water was pleasantly warm. Somewhere beneath the surface was a jet that gently churned the contents of the tub, creating bubbles from the various herbal soaps and mixtures that had been thrown in.

He had a bathroom at home, of course, because he understood that most wealthy, upper-class homes have one. Or at least an iron tub hanging above the fire in the living room. It was just that he'd never had cause to use it. Albert did, occasionally, and he recalled his 'daughter', Ysabell, having spent much time in there during her formative years. All thirty-five of them.

He observed carefully how Rarity acted, but had decided against attempting to emulate her behaviour. Despite her insistence, he could not quite understand the purpose in wrapping yourself in seaweed, placing sliced vegetables over your eyes, and then jumping into a pit of mud, in an attempt to get *clean*.

Rarity was busy observing *him*. He had such a beautiful, bleached white coat, and she simply couldn't bear the thought of it being covered in jam, flour, bits of party streamer, and goodness knows what else. Besides, he was rather handsome, in a tall, mysterious stranger way. She was *more than* happy to pay for his bath. He didn't seem to be much of a conversationalist, on the other hoof.

"So, where are you from, Mr. Door?" she asked, running a hoof along Death's cloak as she peered over the railing at him.

FAR AWAY. he answered, after a slight pause. The conversation once again sat a lull. Rarity tried her luck with another.

"And... What brings you to Ponyville?"

A SUMMONS.

"... Ah, I see..." Rarity replied, the gears of her mind whirring and trying hopelessly to fill in the blanks of the dialogue. "A legal matter, is it? Well, I won't pry."

Like all things, the conversation died.

Rarity scraped her hoof on the wooden boards.

"... I'm afraid that as much as I would love to stay here, I really must get on... Drop by the Carousel Boutique when you're ready, would you? I have something in mind for you. You'll love it, I'm sure! And I so rarely get to make clothing for stallions these days... Well, I'll see you there! *Au revoir!*"

And with that, she was gone. Death briefly wondered if he was meant to have interjected at some point. Mortals seemed to be such incomprehensible creatures, no matter what realm they hailed from.

Yet he had to admit... The bath was soothing. He could feel the warmth of the water soak into his coat, and the pleasurable shiver of the nerves that accompanied it.

He blinked.

OH. ... BUGGER.

The Third Temple of the Pink Pony of Death was in the process of emptying after a particularly successful high tea. The Reader of Etiquette said the final liturgy as the congregation filed out of the revolving door, each solemnly given, in turn, their little bag of leftovers.

As the Junior Hosts and Hostesses stacked the chairs on the tables and swept the floor of the hall, Grand Hostess Aminata Odham watched them with a practised gaze, the sort that long-suffering mothers give to their wayward children as they attempt to 'help' with the housework. You could have painted that smile on her face.

Beside her stood Guest of Honour Terrak Keksy, finishing his third helping of cake. It was a simple sponge with jam and cream filling, topped with a plain white icing and no extra frills. Remembering the reading from *The*

Book of Proper Nourishment, 2:24 ('thou shalt not talk with thy mouth full'),
he swallowed before looking to the Grand Hostess.

"I must say, this cake is absolutely delicious. To die for, even. So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

Aminata turned to him, a slow and steady movement that seemed to affect only her neck and head, leaving the rest of her body rigidly still.

"Oh, I just wanted to thank you for your continual service to our cause. Your magic has been of great use in spreading the word, and I know you've received some persecution from the University because of your beliefs."

Terrak paused. "Well... I wouldn't call it 'persecution', it's perfectly ordinary to wake up in the halls and find your slippers gained sentience overnight. And a taste for flesh."

"Regardless, I feel I ought to reward you. If you would follow me..." she cut off any further reply and swept through the curtain that separated the main hall from the Blessed Sanctuary. Or the broom cupboard, as it was more widely known.

Terrak shrugged, gulped down another mouthful of cake, and followed. As he stepped into the enclosed space, Aminata drew the curtain shut and, turning, took a flask from the shelf.

"Punch." she explained, at Terrak's clueless expression. "A special mix, using some of the rarest ingredients on the Disc. I'd value your opinion on it."

She poured out a glass of the stuff and handed it to the young wizard, who put his bowl on the shelf behind him and took it gratefully. He swirled it around in the glass, taking a sniff of the bouquet. Advanced Wine & Alcoholic Beverage Techniques was one course of the university's vast and eldritch curriculum that he excelled in.

"Definite hints of Howondaland Swamp Boil... A pinch of Djelibeybi Sherbet? Ephebian Wine... Yes, quite the mix you've got here."

Terrak knocked back the contents of the glass in one, a habit that all students of the Unseen University pick up eventually. If you linger with a

glass of wine at the university's dining hall, you'll find there's none left by the time you've finished.

He smacked his lips. "Odd taste. Almost a bit like..."

He paused when he realised Aminata wasn't looking at him, but at a point behind him. He watched as she smiled. She was always smiling, but unlike the usual grimace, this smile seemed to show some actual emotion. Somehow, he didn't like the look of it.

Without a word, she turned on her heel and walked away. Terrak made to follow, only to find himself brought up short after a few steps. He looked over his shoulder, his gaze following a thin, blue line tethering him to... to himself, lying on the floor, a smashed glass by his side and a very shocked expression on his face.

"... Ah." he managed, as his mind, (or at least, whatever part of his now incorporeal self did the mental calculating,) joined the dots.

Before realization fully sunk in, there was a faint shimmer in the air to his left which soon resolved itself into the unmistakable shape of a bright pink, and profoundly worried, pony. She looked around frantically, trying to take in the whole room in a single glance, and spotted the corpse.

NONONONONONONONONONO... she repeated, running over to the prone body and kneeling beside it.

"... Pinkie Pie?" The ghost of Terrak said, moving towards her. As she heard him, she whirled around to face him, halfway between relieved and deeply upset.

TERRAK! YOU DIED!

"Clearly."

THAT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN!

This took him a little by surprise. "... Whyever not? I mean, not that I *wanted* to die, but..."

B-BUT, I KNEW YOU! YOU BROUGHT ME HERE! YOU WERE *NICE*! WHY DID YOU HAVE TO DIE? WHY DO I HAVE TO DO IT?

"... Well, isn't it your... job?" Terrak replied, thoroughly confused. He knew, as all wizards did, that Death came to guide them personally for their first steps into the afterlife, but he didn't expect the reaction to be quite so... emotional. "Don't you do this all the time?"

YES! ... NO! ... I... I DON'T KNOW! I JUST HELP! I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO! I REMEMBER THINGS, BUT... Pinkie seemed close to breaking down in tears. She hadn't known Terrak particularly well, but even that made the difference. She'd met him. All the times she'd helped Death, she was meeting these people for the first time, and giving them a nice surprise to what was, normally, a fairly unpleasant event.

But this was different. This struck a chord, deep in Pinkie's heart. She'd never done **THE DUTY** solo, and the first time she had to, it was the pointless murder of a perfectly friendly and good-natured man who hadn't seen it coming.

She couldn't send him back. She didn't know how. But she knew... she *remembered*, what would happen if she did. She couldn't even share her own time, not now. She was Death, for all intents and purposes, and that balloon floating ominously in the Room of Hourglasses served as a constant reminder.

The ghostly mage laid an ethereal hand on her shoulder, breaking her train of thought.

"It's alright. Truth be told, I was finding university life pretty boring, anyway. Spend the rest of my days cooped up in that dusty old mansion, nothing but fat tomes and mouldering old men to keep me company? I'd rather see what's out there waiting for me. And personally, I'm glad you're the one to send me off."

Pinkie sniffed. **REALLY?**

Terrak nodded.

I'M... SORRY I DIDN'T BRING YOU ANY CAKE...

"It's alright, I've had plenty... Could go for a quiche, right about now. I wonder if you can eat in the afterlife?" he shook his head. "Anyway, first I think you have to do something about this..." he said, pulling the blue thread with his finger so that it went 'twang'.

OH. YEAH. RIGHT. ... UH. Pinkie concentrated, trying to will the scythe to appear. It seemed reluctant to answer her summons.

"... Maybe there's a pair of scissors... Or a knife?" Terrak said, helpfully. Pinkie found one in the pile of dirty crockery and brought it back, holding it in her mouth. She carefully angled the blade above the lifeline, and cut it gently.

'ERE. she mumbled through the handle, as the thin stream receded into Terrak. The ghost took a last look at his former residence.

"... Pity, that robe was new on six weeks ago. Could've saved myself thirty dollars. All those sequins going to waste. Eh well, I s'pose it'll go to the freshers for fire spell practise."

He walked around his body, examining it carefully, while Pinkie put the knife back. Despite the various Junior Hosts milling around the place, no one seemed to be able to see her, since, even in the Temple of the Pink Pony of Death, no one honestly expected to see the eponymous mare walking around with a cake-encrusted knife in her mouth. She returned to find Terrak amusing himself by waving his hand through the shelves, an activity he immediately ceased when he saw her returning, thrusting his arms behind his back, and taking on what he hoped was a dignified stance.

"What now?" he asked. Pinkie hesitated. She honestly wasn't sure.

I... GUESS YOU GO ON TO WHATEVER'S NEXT. YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN REINCARNATION, DO YOU? THAT CAN GET A LITTLE TRICKY.

"Nope, quite happy the way I am. Or was. ... Is there a tense for referring to oneself after you've passed on?"

PRESENT PERFECT. Pinkie replied, automatically. She blinked. ... **HOW DID I KNOW THAT?** she said, half to herself, rubbing her chin with a hoof.

"Ah. 'I am quite happy with the way I have been'. ... Yes, that works."

Silence descended as the conversation followed suit in passing on. Somewhere in the greater building, somebody coughed. Much like the little wisps of smoke from the boots of a man tragically struck by lightning, or the flaming wheel that rolls from the wreckage of a vehicle crash, the well-timed cough in a conversational lull is a fundamental law of the universe.

"... If it's too much trouble, I'm sure I can find my own way out." the wizard said, at length.

Pinkie just nodded, smiling at him gratefully. The ghost of Terrak Keksy nodded, bowed, and exited stage left, through a wall.

The Pink Pony of Death was left feeling drained by the experience, emotionally and physically. She knew just enough to do THE DUTY, but not enough to really *be*Death. Although, judging by the new 'memories' that flooded through her mind, that wouldn't be a problem for much longer.

The thought would have scared her. But Death was never scared. Instead, she thought about the young wizard who had been murdered, here, in a sanctuary built (or at least, cheaply decorated), in her name. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right.

THIS CALLS FOR EXTREME MEASURES.

She turned, the glow of her sky-blue eyes piercing through the curtain that separated the cupboard from the rest of the building beyond. Somewhere out there, she knew, was the person responsible for Terrak's untimely demise.

PINKIE PIE STYLE.

Chapter 5

In Which Death Gets a Suit

Albert sat in the kitchen of Death's Humble Abode, leaning back in his chair, feet on the table. The comforting sound of sizzling oil filled the air, as another defenceless lunch was mercilessly drowned in congealed cholesterol. Despite setbacks, Albert was already well on his way to reproducing that unique blend of fats and lipids that made every meal a heart attack waiting to happen.

Licking his thumb, he slowly and deliberately turned the page of the *Farmer's Almanack*. He'd read it so many times over the years that he could have reproduced it, woodcut for woodcut, whilst blindfolded, but decades-old habits are hard to break.

In precisely fifteen seconds, he would put the yellowing journal down on the table, get up, and turn over the sausage, adding another egg to the pan.

At least, that was the plan.

ALBERT!

The aged manservant fell to floor with a thump as his chair slid from under him. Quickly picking himself up and dusting himself off, he found Pinkie already standing there, glowering.

"You rang, mas- Miss?"

ALBERT. BRING A LANTERN.

Pinkie's eyes shone fiercely in the dim light of Death's home.

WE'RE GOING INTO THE LIBRARY.

Thud.

OW.

Thud.

OW.

Thu-

"My dear, what *are* you doing?" Rarity asked, pulling open the door and giving Bill Door a slightly worried glance.

He was still dripping wet, with a visible trail of soap suds leading away from him, back towards the spa. He had, it seemed, been trying to walk through the walls of Carousel Boutique.

I WAS... UH. Death didn't think it would reflect well on this pony's view of his sanity if he told the complete truth at this particular juncture.

... TESTING THE STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY OF YOUR WALL. He finished, lamely.

"... I... See." Rarity said, raising an eyebrow. "... Do you want a towel...?"

Death looked down at the pool of water at his hooves.

TOWEL. YES. IT SEEMS IN MY HASTE TO MAKE THE APPOINTMENT THAT I NEGLECTED TO DRY MYSELF. I DO APOLOGISE.

"Oh, it's nothing, darling. You needn't rush on *my* account. Here..." Rarity led him inside, and drifted a towel over, giving him a vigorous scrubbing. Satisfied, she whisked the dripping cloth away into the laundry room, bringing her attention back to the bone dry stallion standing in her shop front.

"So, Mr. Door, I *hope* you won't mind, but I've taken the liberty of putting together a little something for you..."

Rarity's horn lit up as the screen separating shop floor from podium slid aside, revealing a mannequin (pony-quin? clotheshorse?) modelling a dapper pinstripe suit, with tails, a black top hat, white shirt and black cravat.

"I know it may look a little... Macabre, at first glance, but when I saw you I just knew it would be perfect!" she smiled, a genuine, slightly nervous smile of someone who hopes their work is appreciated but isn't quite sure of the outcome.

Death looked at her. No one ever really *smiled* at Death. *He* smiled all the time. As has been noted, he didn't have much choice.

He looked at the suit.

He paced around the mannequin, examining it from every angle.

I LIKE IT. He declared. Rarity let out a not-particularly-ladylike squeal and pulled the screen back across, obscuring her and her client from view.

What followed was unlike anything Death had ever had the misfortune to experience. All he could recall was the room growing dark, a rustle of clothing, a sudden force, and then he was standing there fully clothed. His admirable mental faculties wisely decided to ignore the problem of how Rarity had managed to dress him without him moving or lifting a hoof, and instead moved to admiring the seamstress' hoofwork. Considering she hadn't been anywhere near him with a tape measure, it fit remarkably well.

... A little too well.

It took Death a few seconds to fully realize why.

He was flesh *and* bone.

"... Is it too tight?" Rarity asked, a little concerned that the stallion seemed to have blanked out, staring, pupils shrunk, at some point in the middle distance.

Death pulled himself together.

"No, no, it-" I MEAN, NO, IT FITS PERFECTLY, THANK YOU. He coughed, deliberately. HOW MUCH DO I OWE YOU?

"Oh, no, no, darling, there's no charge! I'm happy to provide for a stallion of means such as yourself! We couldn't have such a gentlecolt walking around town without looking his very best, now could we?"

Death glanced at his reflection in the mirror.

"No, I-" **I SUPPOSE NOT.**

Rarity gave him another look of concern, sidling up to him. "Are you sure you're alright, darling? You sound a little... hoarse."

"I'm fin-" **FINE. REALLY.**

"And you look awfully pale."

"That-" **THAT'S NORMAL.**

"And you're sweating."

"It's- It's the heat." Death coughed, again, this time less deliberately. Now she came to mention it, he did feel a little weak. And there was a gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach. It made him feel vaguely nauseous. "... I'm fine."

"Now you're swaying! Oh, darling, you must be coming down with something!" Rarity fussed, placing a hoof on Death's forehead to feel his temperature. This was a completely futile task as the insulating effect of the hoof meant she couldn't exactly feel anything, but it somehow felt like the right thing to do in the circumstances.

"We should go see my friend, Fluttershy, she'll have just the thing, I'm sure. She takes care of all the animals around Ponyville, and more than a few ponies, when it's nothing too serious. Or there's the hospital..."

Death winced. "No hospitals."

"If you insist, darling. Now, it's not far to walk, but-"

A thud made Rarity turn back around, to see Death lying splayed out on the floor.

"... You know what, you just stay *right* there and I'll be back *tout de suite*."

Death's Library was, perhaps, the largest collection of books in the Discworld. I say perhaps, because the dimensions of the library of the Unseen University have never been fully measured, and indeed, several cartographers have been lost to insanity, delirium, and malevolent tomes in the attempt.

Death's Library, however, contained the autobiography of every living thing on the Discworld, or at least, every sapient thing. Unlike the library of the Unseen University, it did have a finite beginning and end, but no mortal had ever traversed the full length of those dark, unlit halls.

The books wrote and organized themselves. When their owner's story had ended, they shifted down the corridors to the shelves and shelves of books that had long since ceased to record their tales. It was eerie, walking down the stacks, and hearing the hushed scratching of thousands upon thousands of lives being lived. Unlike the soothing noise of the falling sand of the Room of Lifetimers, the sound of the Library made the listener anxious. It was as if at any moment you might hear one book among many suddenly cease, and you would know another tale had drawn to its close.

Pinkie was making such speed along the stone flooring that she was nearly galloping, but, Albert noticed, in that strange, stalking gait the Master used. Indeed, the clip-clop of her horseshoes was even beginning to sound, to Albert's old ears, like the click-click of bone on tile.

Hurrying to keep up with her, Albert lurched along by the smoky light of an oil lantern, fearfully glancing up at the looming shelves. The last time he'd been in here, he remembered, that Boy and the Master's Daughter had presented him with his own life. Forcefully. To the cranium. From a great height. It was an experience he was not anxious to relive.

As the scratching became quieter, and finally ceased altogether, Pinkie suddenly stopped short in the middle of the floor, and Albert had to stop himself from running into her.

IT'S HERE. She said, the words falling into place in the silence like lead slabs.

"What is? Who are you looking for?" Albert asked, perplexed. She hadn't spoken a word since dragging him away from lunch, and given his prior experience with the pink pony, this was worrisome enough.

She didn't reply, but stared up at the shelves, her eyes blazing blue in the dark. Finally, she spoke again.

NORMALLY I SUPPOSE I WOULD CLICK MY FINGERS, BUT GIVEN THE CIRCUMSTANCES...

She raised her hoof, and brought it down on the stone tiles so hard that they crumbled into dust, the thunderclap echoing through the library and shaking the shelves. One single, solitary book slipped from its place, high above, and fell to the ground with a second loud thump.

Pinkie momentarily eyed the thin lettering on the leather cover. '*Terrak Keksy*'. She flipped it over with her hooves, nosing it open at the last page.

"... What's so special about this one?" Albert asked, leaning over her shoulder and peering at the text.

HE DIED. She answered, continuing to read.

"... Everyone in here is dead! All these books *are* records of the dead! Why's this one any different?"

HE DIED. BECAUSE OF ME.

Her eyes burned brighter than any torch.

AND NOW I KNOW WHO DID IT.

No less than fifteen minutes later, the door burst open, threatening the continued health of its hinges, framing the heroic figure of Rarity, flanked by Nurse Redheart and Fluttershy.

"Have no fear, darling, I return with medical help!" she cried, while the other two mares made their way around her and into the building.

Death was still lying where Rarity had left him, although with the addition of Opal resting on his head, curled up and quite content. He was doing a remarkable impression of a corpse, which wasn't too surprising, considering.

Redheart frowned and immediately went to check for a pulse, nodding to Rarity and Fluttershy some seconds later in confirmation that he was, despite all appearances, still alive. Rarity breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank heavens! I thought he might have... Well, it doesn't bear thinking about. Will he be alright? Oh, Fluttershy, be a dear and fetch a blanket for him, would you? Are you *sure* he'll be alright, Nurse- Oh, Opal! Don't get in the way! Tsk. Now, are-"

"Rarity, he's *fine*." the Nurse interrupted, smiling. "I can't see anything immediately wrong with him, but he's certainly still conscious, aren't you, sir?"

"... Yes?" Death answered, weakly. He wasn't too certain what she meant by 'conscious', given he'd never really been anything else and had nothing with which to compare it.

"And your ears are still working! Ah, thank you, Fluttershy..." Redheart continued as the pegasus gently draped the blanket over Death. "Now, I'll just perform a few simple tests, and we'll have you back on your hooves in no time, hmm?" She set to work while Rarity hovered nervously, eventually glancing up at the fashionista with a meaningful glance.

Rarity took the hint and scuttled aside, dragging Fluttershy (and Opal, resting on the pegasus' wings) with her.

Once safely out of earshot, she gave another worried glance over at Death, then turned back to Fluttershy, grinning broadly.

"What luck! Handsome, unattached stallion, and he's ill in *my* boutique!" She said, making darting glances back and forth. Fluttershy blinked.

"... P-pardon?"

"Oh, Fluttershy, it's wonderful! I mean, not that he's *ill*, that's terrible, and I wish him the best of health, but now he'll *definitely* remember his visit here, and more importantly, me!"

"... I... see?" The yellow pegasus replied, perplexed.

"And he's a *lawyer*! Oh, after that *awful* affair at the Gala, I had feared that I'd never find the stallion of my dreams, but there he is! In my boutique! Being nursed by another mare-" Rarity stopped, and frowned. "... Well, anyway, what do you think of him, Fluttershy? Be honest with me now, darling."

Fluttershy looked over at where Death was being helped up by Nurse Redheart.

"... He's... Nice."

"*Darling.*"

"W-well, he's... J-just not my type, Rarity. I'm sure he's lovely, though!" Fluttershy said, trying to dig her way out of the conversation.

"Hmph. Oh, he's back on his hooves!" Rarity observed, rushing back over. She was about to open her mouth when Redheart stopped her.

"He's fine, before you ask, Rarity. And he's not ill, either! He collapsed because he hasn't eaten anything in days!" The medic said, smiling. "Stallion of your size, too, can't think how."

"... I had a lot on my mind." Death replied.

"Oh, you poor dear! Let me whip something up for you! Fluttershy, Nurse, would you care to stay for a late lunch?" Rarity asked, zipping over to the kitchen door.

"Oh, that would be lovely, Rarity, if it... If it isn't too much trouble, I mean." Fluttershy replied.

"No trouble at all, dear! Three can feast as easily as two! And you, Nurse?"

"Thank you, Rarity, but I should probably get back to the hospital. Drop by later if there's any other problems, though!"

They waved Nurse Redheart off, and Rarity began preparing a meal. Death and Fluttershy stood in awkward silence in the shop front.

"Oh, I nearly forgot! Have you any requests, Mr. Door?" Rarity called across from the kitchen.

He thought for a moment.

"I could murder a curry."

Chapter 6

The Problems of Duty & Curry

"But Mas- Master! Listen to me! Thousands die every day, it's fate! You can't change that! Not even you can do that! Gods know you've *tried!*" Albert entreated, hurrying after the Pony of Death as she made her way out of the library. The tiles cracked under every beat of her hooves, the stacks shook as Death's creation responded to the anger of its new Mistress.

NO! I CAN CHANGE IT! HE DOESN'T HAVE TO DIE!

"You've got his memories! Think back to Mort! He tried it, too!"

I CAN *CHANGE* IT! IT'S NOT **FAIR! IT'S NOT *JUST!***

" *'There is no justice!'*"

Pinkie stopped, and turned her burning eyes on Albert.

" *'There is no justice'*. That's what you said. What *HE* said. *'There is no justice, it's just me.'* " Albert's old, waxy features entreated her, nearly desperate.

IT'S JUST ME.

Pinkie's eyes dimmed, and her head drooped.

JUST ME.

Albert stepped forward, but she held up a hoof.

I... NEED TO THINK.

"Yes'm. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

Minutes, hours, or perhaps days later, she was sitting, curled up, in the great leather chair that stood in Death's Office, deep in thought.

She wasn't feeling herself.

... She wasn't feeling *anything*.

Resting between her hooves was a lifetimer, the wooden frame painted pink, and inscribed with the name '*Aminata Odham*'. She turned it over and over, the sand constantly flowing from one bulb into another, no matter which way up it was.

She remembered once, when she had been Him, that she had turned a life timer over and granted someone their life all over again. That wasn't happening now, though. Perhaps the gods reserved such things for their own amusement.

She exhaled the sound of air escaping the hooded cloak more like a death rattle than a heartfelt sigh.

I COULD DO WITH SOME AMUSEMENT. she thought, out loud, the tone of her 'voice' vanishing into the all-encompassing hiss of sand falling through glass.

How long had she been here, in this world? Two days? Two weeks? Time stood still in Death's Country, and Pinkie had been too busy with The Duty to keep track.

It was all becoming a blur, swallowed up in the vast recesses of her memory. His memory.

Their memory.

She remembered being in Ponyville, but she also remembered having never been there. She remembered Sugarcube Corner and her job, but she also remembered the slow aeons of watching the Disc turn, and The Duty.

She didn't feel sad, or lonely. She just felt... Empty.

She'd noticed, when she stopped to look, that even the colours of the garden had faded away.

Everything was black. Her coat stood out in the darkness like a light from a candle. Her eyes burned brighter than any flame, but that was all the colour in the world.

She looked at the hourglass again, with the creeping realization that even what she had thought of as pink paint was really just a pink shade of black.

Suddenly, there always had been three grey, hooded robes floating in front of her desk.

THE FIRST TIME YOU SHOWED UP, I COULDN'T FEEL YOU DOING THAT.

One said, Doing what?

ADJUSTING THINGS. THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE, REALLY, ISN'T IT? ADJUSTERS. YOU TWEAK AND CALIBRATE AND CLEAN UP.

One said, That is one way of putting it.

THEN WE'RE NOT THAT DIFFERENT, ARE WE?

One said, No.

One said, We are not.

DEATH, THE REAPER. I CLEAN UP AFTER EVERYONE'S GONE. NO TIME FOR THE PARTY. THE STAFF DON'T GET INVITED.

One said, This is what you chose.

One said, Do you regret it?

Pinkie glared at them.

I DIDN'T CHOOSE THIS. YOU CHOSE IT. YOU ADJUSTED.

She looked back down at her hooves.

IT'S NOT FAIR.

One said, The universe isn't fair.

One said, But it continues.

One said, As do we all.

And then they had never been.

Death realised she hadn't breathed back in.

Meanwhile, Bill Door was living through another strange new experience. It was not one he was entirely unfamiliar with, but he couldn't truly say he'd ever *lived* through it before.

He scuffed his hoof on the carpet, aware of the overbearing silence weighing down on him, broken only by Rarity's humming as she cooked. He glanced up, occasionally, to see the yellow pegasus standing there, hiding behind her hair and similarly scuffing her hoof.

Curiosity forced him to look up again, and their eyes met as she did the same.

There was a spark there, something he had never felt before.

He felt flushed, exposed, and far out of his depth.

In short, he felt acutely embarrassed. Despite himself, his rational mind was intrigued by this new sensation and immediately went to work studying it. The rest of him decided its time was far better spent by ignoring it entirely and focusing on something else.

The cat, for example. Opal had sidled up to him and was now rubbing herself against his legs, in that affectionate, I'm-hungry-and-you're-not-doing-anything-important manner of felines. He reached down with the intent to pick her up, but realised half way there that his current, four-legged frame was not conducive to the picking up and cradling of small mammals.

He settled for rubbing Opal awkwardly, yet gently, with his hoof.

"O-oh, you like cats?" came a timid voice to his side, breaking the silence. He turned his head to see Fluttershy staring at him, wide-eyed with enthusiasm.

"Um. Yes. I like cats." he replied, feeling more at ease with this level of conversation.

"Me too! They're just so huggable and soft and friendly and..." Fluttershy trailed off when she realised the stallion was staring at her. "... uhm. Nice."

"Do you have a cat?" he asked, trying to prevent another long, awkward silence.

"Oh, n-no. Well, kinda... I look after animals, you see, it's my special talent. I have a few cats I take care of but they're not mine, a-as such." she watched as the stallion continued to stroke Opal, the normally violent little beast as tame as a manecore with a freshly de-thorned paw.

"I'm surprised, Opal's usually so shy around strangers." she said, at last (there followed a little hysterical giggle from the kitchen). "You must have a way with animals yourself, Mister... Uhm, I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Door. Bill Door."

"I'm... Fluttershy."

The two stood and stared at each other, while Bill Door idly continued to stroke Opal. He felt that flushing feeling from before, and slowly realised that he was feeling a burning sensation in his cheeks.

His brain's initial panic of 'why are my cheeks on fire' soon melted into a sense of mild euphoria as he continued to stare, silently, at the yellow pegasus. Internally, his mind was racing, facing the unfamiliar assault of sensory information, a plethora of commands and demands from his own body, and, perhaps most unfamiliar of all, hormones.

Her delicate figure, her long mane, her lush coat, her eyes...

"Lunch is served!" Rarity called from the kitchen, interrupting Death's train of thought. He realised he hadn't been breathing, and took a sharp gulp of air. As Fluttershy trotted past him to the kitchen, he found his gaze wandering, taking in her, fine, shapely...

Death shook himself. This was not him. He was not 'Bill Door'. He reasoned that he was just still... feeling a little ill. Nothing to do whatsoever with the apparent reversal of his natural anthropomorphogenic field and sudden loss of reality by means of his assistant taking over his job.

... Again.

The Pink Pony of Death swung the knife, cutting another cord and releasing another soul to their afterlife. The scythe still refused to obey her, so she was making do with one of the knives from Albert's cutlery draw.

The spectre said something to her, but she didn't hear it. She watched the last glimmer of their soul fade as it flew away, and felt no emotion.

She hadn't asked who they were.

She hadn't listened to their questions.

She took another life timer from her robes, watching the last few minutes of sand ebb away. She realised she no longer cared where she would find this soul, or why they had to die. They were just grains of wheat, a part of the great harvest, and she was merely separating them from their chaff.

She turned, and the world melted beneath her hooves into a swirling, seething mass of nothing. This was The Duty. She had performed it for a thousand years, and a thousand again, since the Disc had been turning. She would dance the *danse macabre* until the last spark of life was snuffed from the universe, until Great A'Tuin itself came to journey's end.

Swing. Cut. Bind.

Swing. Cut. Bind.

Swing. Cut. Bind.

Swing. Cut.

Swing.

The strong scent of tomato, coriander, cream and paprika rose from the dish. Bill Door just sat there a moment, savouring every sensation. The delicate hint of the spices, the stewed vegetables, the rice... It smelt *real*, **vibrant**.

He was quite a fan of curry, of course, and often stopped in the famed Curry Gardens of Ankh-Morpork after work. He realised now that perhaps the reason he'd taken to it was the rich explosion of flavour it contained, no matter which sauce or stock it used. Back then, even his poor imitation of sense was given a treat, but now that his senses were *really* working, (indeed, now that he *had* senses), they were nearly overwhelmed. He caught himself almost drooling at just the sight and scent of the meal alone.

Rarity, too, was happy to show off her skills in cooking. Sweetie Belle, like all foals her age, just wanted crispy carrot nuggets and chips, or other such simple staples of childhood. Her palate certainly couldn't stand the rich and refined foodstuffs that Rarity preferred to eat, but she never enjoyed cooking such elaborate meals for just herself, and barely had the time to entertain guests.

She wouldn't dare admit it, but the moment Bill Door had asked for curry, she'd made a hasty exit through the laundry room and galloped to the market for the right ingredients. The dish was nearly unknown in Ponyville, but was quickly becoming a fad among the upper crust of society, and like always Rarity kept her hoof on the nub of fashion.

Fluttershy had never seen the dish before, and was not entirely sure how to react to it. Or indeed, how to eat it. Given the large amount of sauce present, diving in muzzle first didn't seem entirely sensible, but the pegasus was largely lacking in means of operating cutlery.*

Bill Door had encountered the same problem. His instinct had been to reach out his hoof and grab for the provided fork, but this had run into difficulties at the second step of the plan. He'd then thought of attempting to eat it out of his hoof. After all, that was the traditional way of eating a curry back in Klatch.

He hesitated, and looked around at the kitchen. Despite having *just* been used, it was as pristine as if it had been freshly installed. The table cloth was embroidered silk. Bill Door just knew that if he attempted to eat with his

hoof, he'd drop something on the cloth. Similarly, he understood, at the very core of his being, that this would be the worst. Possible. Thing.

Instead he settled for occasionally glancing at Fluttershy, hoping she would begin eating and give him a cue as to what he was *supposed* to be doing.

Unfortunately, she was glancing at Bill Door with the same intentions. Both plates remained untouched.

After a few minutes of observing this in polite silence, Rarity gave in.

"... Is there something wrong, darlings? You've not even touched your curry!"

They looked at each other. They looked back at her, and opened their mouths to reply.

"I-"

"Uh-"

They looked at each other again, and finally Fluttershy took the initiative.

"Uhm, I'm sure it's lovely, but... I don't want to make a mess." she whispered, hiding sheepishly behind her fringe.

Rarity blinked.

"Oh! My poor darlings, I'm so sorry, I didn't think! Let me get you some napkins... In fact, you're right, I'm being far too formal, aren't I? I'll just take away that cloth..." before Fluttershy could protest, their plates were hoisted into the air as the cloth was whisked away, folded mid-air, and neatly placed into a waiting open draw. As that one slammed shut, another slid open, and a stream of white linen cloths danced out, arranging themselves in a pile on the table.

It was Bill Door's turn to blink. Why didn't the Wizards ever use their magic for tasks like that?

Rarity returned the plates to their proper places, and lifted her fork to begin. Half-way to the plate, she realised that this would be a little rude, given the circumstances, and slowly placed it back on the table. Smiling at Fluttershy

and Bill Door, she gulped, summoned up her courage, and dove face-first into the plate, ignoring her brain screaming at her that she'd never get those oils stains out of her coat.

Satisfied, Fluttershy began taking tiny mouthfuls and chewing demurely. Bill Door remained looking perplexed, unaccustomed to the idea of eating a meal with one's face without an intervening step involving the limbs in some way. Fortunately, he was spared further thought on the matter when Fluttershy leapt up from her chair and began flying around the kitchen, fanning her mouth and repeating *'Oh-my-goodness-oh-my-goodness-oh-my-goodness'*.

Rarity sighed. This wasn't going to plan.

Chapter 7

It's Always the Quiet Ones

Swing. Cut. Bind.

The Pink Pony of Death reaped the harvest, never looking up from her work. All around her were the golden fields of wheat, each ear waiting to be cut and bound. Some ears were young, some old, some were trampled and some wilted, but each ear had to be brought in. The reaper's job was to take in the harvest, no matter the state of the crop.

Then she saw herself at a party. The guests were all laughing, enjoying themselves as music filled the air and bright colours lifted the mood. She watched through a pane of glass as she worked in another room, preparing the food, pouring drinks, making the decorations.

The images clashed. How could she be the caretaker of the living and the gatherer of the dead? The Auditors demanded cold efficiency, but her mind and her heart said something different. What pieces of Pinkie Pie still remained made her feel sympathy and empathy for the Harvest, accentuated still by Death's memories of aeons of loneliness.

Her mind raced. Wasn't a party just a gathering of the living? Wasn't 'The Duty' being the caretaker of the dead?

Could she be both?

A petulant little voice echoed in her head.

It said: *Is there a difference?*

The Pink Pony of Death stopped, and looked up at the emptiness that surrounded her. But it was not quite empty. There, on the edge of sight, hung three grey robes. Her head dropped, and she looked at the knife in the cup of her hoof.

NO.

The knife fell from her grip, vanishing into the darkness.

NO. she repeated. The world writhed beneath her hooves.

NO! she screamed, the full, blazing fury of her gaze banishing the nothingness as it was directed at those three grey robes.

The sky tore apart and was replaced by the starry dome of the Discworld. The void below took shape, quickly forming the great twin city of Ankh-Morpork. The lights of the city's nightlife shone as bright and numerous as the stars above, and in the darkness, one could be forgiven for wondering which way was up.

Her cloak billowed in the night winds, as she stood with her hooves firmly planted in the air. The three grey figures descended and hovered before her.

One said, You renounce The Duty?

I RENOUNCE YOUR VERSION OF IT.

One said, Death is impersonal.

One said, You cannot play favourites.

One said, You cannot have personality.

She grinned.

HOW DID HE PUT IT? 'WHAT HOPE DOES THE *HARVEST* HAVE, IF NOT FOR THE CARE OF THE *REAPER MAN*?' WELL, REAPER MARE. YOU WOULD HAVE ME APATHETIC TO THEIR PLIGHTS, THEIR CARES, THEIR LOVES AND THEIR LOSSES. WHAT KIND OF '*DUTY*' IS THAT?

One said, This is unacceptable.

One said, Your insubordination has been noted.

The Pink Pony of Death held out her hoof, silencing them. The air shimmered as the scythe appeared by her side, its blade glowing as it cut the starlight and moonlight that fell upon it.

IF A PART OF THE **CROP** IS SICK, SHOULD WE NOT TEND TO IT? IF A PART IS TRAMPLED, DO WE NOT ATTEMPT TO REVIVE IT? IF THE **CROP** FAILS, DO WE NOT MOURN ITS LOSS?

The Auditors remained silent.

AND IF A GUEST IS UNRULY, IS IT NOT '*THE DUTY*' OF THE **HOST** TO DEAL WITH THEM?

She didn't move. The universe moved around her. A line of fire arced through the air, and the three robes fell, severed.

OH, THERE'S NO JUSTICE. **BUT** THERE *IS* ME.

Mrs. Cake was beginning to grow suspicious.

Not worried, however. Pinkie may have been missing for a number of hours, and a mysterious stallion stranger had been in her room (standing in a puddle of jam, no less), but Mrs. Cake wasn't *worried*. One didn't *worry* about Pinkie Pie, at least not when the young mare had been your employee for goodness knows how long. Pinkie Pie had a knack of looking after herself that allayed all such fears for her continued welfare. It was, in fact, your *own* continued welfare that you worried about.

However, she *was* suspicious. It was not like the girl to remain this quiet for this long.

"Dear, you haven't seen Pinkie Pie today, have you?" she asked her husband, a tall, thin colt with a yellow coat and mop of orange hair.

"Nhhro dhearh." he replied around a mouthful of pipe-bag.

"She's been awfully quiet."

"Yhres dhearh."

"I think I'll go check on her."

"Jhusht ash yhou shay dhearh."

Mrs. Cake made her way slowly up the stairs of Sugarcube Corner, towards the loft apartment that her young employee 'rented'. Strictly speaking she was more a live-in guest, as she paid through her work in the shop, but it made her father happy to know she was making something of herself and being independent.

Nudging open the door, she found the room to be absolutely spotless - Bill Door had done a fine job of cleaning. It looked far cleaner than Pinkie herself usually left it, for a start. No leftover bits of cake, or errant streamer, deflating balloons and the like.

Mrs. Cake shifted her hoof the moment before a little green alligator leapt for it, and instead found himself sucking on the floor. As will be noted, Mrs. Cake possesses a rare gift, *temporal hyperopia**. It has (and will) come in handy a great deal in living with Miss Pie.

Pushing Gummy gently aside, Mrs. Cake made a quick sweep of the room, looking for any indicator of Pinkie's current whereabouts. Nothing seemed out of order (other than being *in* order), and she could find no notes or letters. Frowning, she crossed the bedroom again, making a more thorough search. Something caught her eye as she passed by the bed.

She reached down and pulled it out with her teeth, revealing a glossy leather-backed grimoire, with golden lettering on the front that shifted when she tried to read it.

She felt a chill from the thing, but instinctively knew that this was nothing to do with Pinkie Pie. She barely read books at all, let alone large leather-bound tomes of questionable origins.

Clearly then, she deduced, this must have been something left behind by Mr. Door.

Picking it up and balancing it on her back she headed back downstairs, after giving Gummy an affectionate pat. Placing the book in her saddlebags, she slung them over her shoulders and called out to Mr. Cake in the kitchen.

"She's not in her room, and her guest left something behind, so I'm going to go out looking for them. Mind the store, would you, dear?"

"Mshh honhey bhun."

In the city of Ankh-Morpork below, as the lanterns and torches were lit and the 'late afternoon' trading began, an evening service was about to take place in the city's newest and most popular place of worship.

"Welcome to the First Cathedral of the Pink Pony of Death, please take a complementary *canopé* and order of service."

The Junior Hosts greeted newcomers off the streets, handing out drinks, *entrées* and party hats to the faithful. Many of the established followers of the Pink One were decked in their robes of rose and fuschia, conical hats held high as they made their way to the inner sanctum of the cathedral, a newly purchased building that was once a temple of Offler the Crocodile God. Ankh-Morpork was always quick to jump on a new idea, and this new faith had gripped the city in a party fever.

Her Generousness, The Grand Hostess Aminata I, looked down from the balconies at the gathered congregation below, and was pleased. From their humble beginning barely weeks before, her little flock had leapt from a mere death-cult to a mainstream belief, rubbing shoulders with such established favourites as Blind Io and The Great God Om.

Taking up her place at the stand, she opened *Glod Glodsdottir's Book of Essential Party Songs* and waited for silence. A reverent and expectant air swept through the building, bringing with it the smell of fresh cake.

"Honoured guests!" she began, voice echoing off the cathedral stone even without the aid of amplification.

"Honoured guests! We all are gathered here today in blessed community to share in the warmth and spirit that resides in each of us! We thank the Pink Pony of Death for showing us that the afterlife is worth living, but that there is also no reason to wait! Now join with me, as we sing our opening chant; *For She's A Jolly Good Fellow*."

The congregation (at least, those who were still mostly sober) stood, and their voices swelled and croaked with the first strains of song. By the time they'd reached the third verse, it was nearly in tune.

"... For she's a jolly good fellow, and so... say..."

The song died in their throats as, suddenly, a figure hung in the air before them. Four legs. Pink. Wearing a black cloak, and carrying a scythe.

It couldn't possibly be anyone else.

She stared at Aminata, locking the dull, dead eyes of the Grand Hostess with her own, burning bright as the stars.

SURPRISE.

"Fluttershy, dear, you need to come up for air."

The yellow head submerged in the water trough outside Rarity's laundry room only bubbled in response. Sighing, Rarity gently tugged on the pegasus' mane until she broke the surface.

"Better?" the unicorn asked.

"Haaaah... Haaah..." Fluttershy replied, taking deep gulps of air and still 'fanning' her mouth with her hoof.

"I could put some mango on it to cool it down a little, dear."

Fluttershy nodded gratefully, although truthfully she was understandably nervous about trying the dish again, no matter what Rarity did to it.

She dried her face on a towel and followed Rarity back indoors to find Bill Door had already finished his serving, and the plate was remarkably spotless. The stallion was staring at the other two plates with longing.

Fluttershy saw her chance to squeeze her way out without upsetting either party, and seized it with both hooves.

"O-oh, if you're s-still hungry..." she mumbled, nudging the plate towards Bill Door. He blinked at it, then at her, then smiled gratefully.

"That's very kind of you, thank you. I hope your tongue isn't burnt."

"Oh, no, I'll be fine. I'm just... I wasn't expecting it to be so spicy." She caught herself and glanced nervously at Rarity, who seemed oblivious of the conversation. "Not that I don't like it or anything! I thought it was v-very nice, but I... Uhm..."

She was interrupted from digging herself deeper by a sudden knock on the door. Rarity swallowed her mounting frustration and forced herself to smile, walking back through the shopfront and swinging open the door.

"Oh! Mrs. Cake, do come in, what can I do for you?"

"Rarity, dearie! I wasn't sure if you were in. I've been looking for Pinkie Pie's guest, a Mister 'Bill Door', and Lotus and Aloe told me he might be with you...?" Mrs. Cake asked, stepping inside Carousel Boutique. Rarity blinked.

"... P-Pinkie Pie's guest? I... See."

"You've met him then, dearie?" Mrs. Cake replied, raising an eyebrow.

"I have, yes. If he knows Pinkie, that might go some way to... Explaining things."

"Like what?"

"Well, earlier he kept walking int-"

Rarity was cut off by a yelp and a loud crash coming from the kitchen. Rolling her eyes, she ran back across the shopfront, followed by Mrs. Cake, and peeked her head through the kitchen door. Her jaw fell agape.

The table had been knocked over, the curry now decorating the kitchen floor, and the chairs were knocked aside. Fluttershy was entwined with Bill Door on the tiles, wings outstretched and mane draped over his chest, pinning him down. Bill Door was lying helpless on his back, his suit unbuttoned and thrown open..

They both looked up at Rarity and Mrs. Cake, faces rapidly going crimson.

"... I swear this isn't what it looks like."

"... I... Uhm... We... Eep!"