*Malice, Magic, and Murder*

A sleepy town called Jarkun lies at the foot of the northernmost mountains. The only reason it exists still is because of the expeditions that come there to investigate the mountains and their strange histories. The town feeds off the explorers as they wander through, bleeds them for all the money it can and then lets the mountain consume the leftover husk. The explorers, scientists, and even some seeking ancient forgotten powers come to the mountain. This is not a story about any explorer, scientist, or treasure hunter though. This is a story about a magician and a stranger.

The town awoke one morning to find the town square covered in flyers. The paper posters plastered over every possible place told of a great magician hailing from Pingwin had come to the town. The posters said nothing of why she came but most assumed it was to perform magic. This assumption is right but for the wrong reasons. Another person, not involved with the magician, had come to the town two weeks prior. He did not speak to the townsfolk but would often purchase supplies at the stores. He bought ice picks, sturdy shovels, and meat that kept well in the cold. The townsfolk often saw him climbing up the mountain but few ever saw him come down.

The day after the flyers were posted a cart rolled into town with all the pomp and fanfare of a funeral. Drab banners hung off of it like cobwebs and no pony seemed to be pulling the vehicle around. It stopped in the town square and remained there for the rest of the day. The stranger did not go up the mountain that day. He crouched on top of the general store and watched the cart.

The next day, sometime in the afternoon when most of the townsfolk were outside, the cart began to rumble. It continued rumbling, getting gradually louder and louder, until it drowned out every other sound in the village. Then, once all eyes were on it, the cart changed. The drab banners turned from moth eaten scraps of cloth to beautiful tapestries of dazzling reds and deep blues. The ramshackle cart straightened and bent itself out, wider and wider, until it seemed to be almost a house on wheels. Stars made out of tin popped out all along the roof and twirled gently around. The cart rumbled more, louder even than before, and sparks began to fly from the roof as the stars twirled faster and faster. The creaking of wood, the sharp smell of gunpowder, and the dazzling tin stars whirring in the air so fast they threatened to tear off the cart and into the frigid air.

The Stranger watched all this as he crouched on the snow coated roof of the general store. He watched and he smoked and he stared with eyes that did not blink. The cart blew apart in a shower of multicolored sparks and sent debris flying everywhere. Once the townsfolk looked again they saw an immaculate stage complete with curtains and floor lighting with a slender young unicorn in a black tailcoat standing at the center. The unicorn ran a hoof through her mane as her horn glowed with an indigo hue. Her hooves tapped out a strange dance as she smiled manically to the crowd. Instruments wrapped in the same glow as her horn dragged themselves into view and began playing a strange tune that matched her fevered steps. The townsfolk found themselves entranced by the mare and watched in awe as she cantered around the stage to the music. The Stranger smoked seriously from atop the general store.

Minutes flew by as the peculiar mare danced and the ponies of the town began to join in. Stomping and twirling along with her and the devilish tune as best they could. Then just as suddenly as it began, the music ended. Instruments shuffled back into the unlit corners they were summoned from and the mare gradually came to a stop. She turned her eyes upon the crowd, eyes filled with passion, filled with madness.

“Glad to see you’ve all got a pulse in your heart and a skip in your step everypony, no offense to any penguins or goats or stonies about.” She smiled like a knife as she spoke or perhaps she did not so much smile as bare her teeth. “Now that we’ve all warmed up to each other I ought to introduce myself.” The mare struck a pose that sent her tailcoat into a flurry and activated pyrotechnics that turned the entire stage red like the bowels of hell. “I am the Lady of Fire.” The stage went dark save for the glow of her horn. “I am the one who cloaks herself in Midnight.” Darkness lifted gradually and revealed the svelte unicorn again. “I am Miss Tilly Crow master of magics and showmareship.” She bowed for a moment before producing a top hat and holding it upside down in her hoof. “Great magicians like myself cannot operate alone however so I must also introduce my assistant.” Her horn glowed brightly for a moment before she reached confidently into the top hat and pulled out, nothing. She upended the top hat and shook it vigorously but only air fell out. “Where is that good for nothing penguin now?” Miss Crow muttered as she looked around the stage. She turned around for a moment and looked behind the curtains. The top hat shook for a moment where it had been left on the stage and a penguin dressed in a sequin coated purple tuxedo with a paisley bowtie popped out of the hat with a muted poof. The penguin picked up the hat and waddled over to Miss Crow and tapped his foot behind her. She turned around and looked at him exasperatedly before taking the hat and mashing it onto her head. “One day I will understand how you do that.” She said. The penguin put his flippers on his hips and raised one disbelieving eyebrow. Miss Crow grabbed him and took him back to the center of the stage. “Stallions and gentlemares this is Mister Karl he is an excellent, if mischievous, assistant to my eminence and as you all saw, he is not without his own tricks.” Miss Crow set the penguin down and patted him affectionately. “The next show will be tomorrow at the same time and be sure to wear helmets everyone because it will blow your minds.” With that said Miss Crow re adjusted her top hat and the entire stage groaned and creaked. It shifted slightly in preparation, and then imploded itself back into a simple cart. However, a small box with the word *Donations* carved into it now dangled from the front of the cart.

The Stranger smoked and stared at the cart for a long while after everything quieted down and all the townspeople finished their business and went home. He smoked his pipe until only ashes remained and still crouched there in the snow on top of the general store. He rose a few minutes before midnight, stretched his limbs with a chorus of cracks, and then he walked up the mountain again.

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Tilly Crow hung up her tailcoat in the hall closet and flopped onto the couch. Karl sat across from her with a leather knife roll and a sharpening stone.

“So Karl, why am I not to use your first name again?” Crow asked. The penguin looked up from his work for a few moments and wakked out an answer.

“Why would anyone recognize the name Bonnie?” This question was met with another series of waks. This time they were slightly slower. Tilly Crow sat up a little bit straighter and stared at the tiny penguin cleaning his knives for a moment. She settled back down after a moment and pushed her head into the couch cushions.

“I don’t believe you. The Reaper is supposed to be an agent of darkness the likes of which the world hasn’t seen since King Sombra. He’s supposed to be made of shadows instead of flesh and bone. He’s supposed to be without mercy or forgiveness. I don’t think he could be a tiny penguin with a love for women and poetry.” The penguin shrugged and rolled up his knife sheath. He pulled out a small belt filled with thick glassed vials containing mostly colorless liquids.

“You’re far too cute to be much of a killer.” Miss Crow said. Karl chuckled and shook his head again as he fiddled with a peculiar device attached to a leather harness. Being cute had never stopped the little penguin before, and it wouldn’t now.

Miss Crow continued to lounge on the couch and watch the little penguin tinker with his equipment. She grew bored and decided that she needed to fill the silence hanging in the air with conversation. “So what did this Professor Crawley do to get so much attention from Pingwin?” She said while hanging her head off of the couch and looking at Karl upside down. “Steal a book, piss on the noble’s dining table, or ask for more funding that would cut into the budget for whores?” Karl just shrugged. He didn’t get paid to ask questions, he got paid to kill people and make sure they stay dead. Tilly had grown frustrated trying to talk to the little penguin and just decided to try and get some shuteye. Conjuring up an entire tune, exploding things, imploding things, and dancing all the while was no easy task.

Tilly woke up with something soft leaning up against her stomach. Karl had finished working with his gear at some pint and gone to sleep with her as his pillow. She had to admit the sight of his head rising and falling as she breathed gave her the warm fuzzies in her stomach. She put an arm around him and then closed her eyes again.

Tilly woke up later to find her sleeping partner had gone. She found a note pinned to the table with under a cup of now cold tea. She picked it up and read the typewritten text.

“*Tilly, I spent some time with one of the villagers and found out that an individual who matches the Professor’s description has been buying supplies here and going up the mountain. I am going to tail him and see what I can find. Distract the townsfolk as best you can. If I do not return by midnight assume I’m dead and send for backup.”*

She read the note calmly while sipping the cold tea and wondering what she should do to entertain the villagers. Eventually she settled on card tricks and sawing herself in half. Ponies this far out probably didn’t expect much and she wanted to be ready in case the penguin came back with bad news or worse company. She sipped the tea for a few more minutes and enjoyed the bitter coolness it provided before she picked up her tailcoat and started making preparations.

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On the mountain surrounded by snow and frost the Stranger entered a cave. He walked slowly to a pool of water and rekindled a fire that had burnt out next to it. Then he waited for seven hours, motionless, not even seeming to breathe, until he felt a knife in the curve of his throat. He straightened up slightly but otherwise did not move.

“So you’ve come for me at last have you.” He said to the air in front of him. “Come to kill me, to keep me from uncovering the secrets of the mountain?” The Stranger cleared his throat noisily. “Unfortunately, for both of us, you are too late.”

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The next morning Tilly awakened with a bottle in her hoof and a foul taste in her mouth. The penguin had not come back and she had begun to worry. What could have happened to him, how powerful was this professor, and was she next to be killed? She had decided to drink to forget as much as she could, but the booze only delayed the responsibility. Now she had to make a choice, follow the instructions Karl left or go find out what happened to him. She poured herself another drink.

Tilly readjusted her scarf as she climbed up the snowy incline. The townsfolk told her about the Stranger’s frequent trips up the mountain and gave her a rough direction to head in. Halfway up she found strips of flesh, bile, and ten knives. Tilly expected to find little else but she saw a light up ahead radiating out of a cave mouth and trudged resolutely towards it. When she reached the entrance she pulled the scarf off her face and looked inside. Something lay next to the smoldering embers of a fire. Upon closer inspection she found it was Karl, bloody, heavily lacerated, and unconscious but alive. She brought him back with her and coaxed him back to consciousness with a bit of healing magic and liquor wafted under his nose. He drank for an hour before he would speak and then he could only tell her of worms, red worms that had infested Crawley and driven him mad. Acid melted Crawley’s flesh away but the worms stayed. Slicing daggers coated with virulent poisons hurt them badly enough that they took Crawley’s body out into the snow to get away. The worms had cut him, forced their way inside him, but he had managed to avoid succumbing to them by poisoning himself. Once he was sure the worms inside him had died he administered the antidote, but by that time enough damage had been done to force him to sleep soon after. He had not expected to wake up.

Tilly Crow took it all in and calmly held the maimed little penguin in her hooves. She wished she could forget the sight of the half corpse on the mountain and the sight of small holes in the snow. She could not, but she finished up show for that day and announced their departure. She made sure the penguin slept well, though her mind was plagued by thoughts of crawling red worms and could not rest. She began the journey back to Pingwin the next morning. Jarkun continued to be a sleepy town at the foot of a mountain of horrors.