

I waited patiently, sitting in my grove and planning out my strategy. I had few resources left, no servants save for my dragon, and Rainy, though I certainly wasn't going to involve a child in all this, not like it was even possible to do so, mind you. That being said, without any undead to call to my aid I began to wonder if this was going to be the end of it all.

Quaking Yew's magic could turn my grove against me, while Honey Rays was quite adept at the destruction of my servants. I shrugged off such thoughts and focused on what I did have left, namely the plants both big and small that had pledged themselves to me. Their declaration of loyalty was not quite so straight forward as you may expect given the wording I just used however.

Rather it came with a whole host of strings, feelings, and words that were difficult to put in a way a normal creature could comprehend. For one though they fell under my command they did so out of self interest, though that was not a determinant. Trees have no concept of morality, or good and evil after all. Rather they gave themselves to me because I could and have given them much in the way of protection.

Now it was time to call in every favor I could, from the smallest bush to the largest of the old oaks that ringed the edge of my grove. Those eldest amongst my green council could not move quickly, their limbs hardened by decades or even centuries of life. I set these venerable elders to task, pointing out what stones near their roots were the loosest and easiest to throw.

The bushes poured the strength I had given them into sharpening their thorns, and lengthening their branches until they resembled whips. Those flowers and mushrooms that produced toxins readied as much of the potent payload as they could muster. Even the smallest of grassest hardened and grew sharp, acting as a million tiny caltrops ready to be tread upon.

At the back, standing before my true body and the enemy, was my draconic skeleton, acting as the final bulwark. The strange breathe based magic of his people were my final ace in the hole, one I hoped I did not need. I had not tested it much, using it mostly to speak over long distances, or conjure water when needed.

This would be my first true attempt at utilizing it offensively and I was not looking forward to it. I preferred either the dark word of poison or the more blunt application of physical violence. Trusting my safety to magic felt wrong for reasons I struggled to put to words.

My musings were interrupted by a sudden flash burning away a bush that had gotten in the way of the four remaining creatures. The earth pony was the first to emerge, his shield having been discarded at some point during the struggles. Next was commander Honey Rays accompanied by Quaking Yews, the deer's missing limb somehow completely healed over.

The injury still clearly caused her no small amount of agony, but between magic, and her own will, she was holding on. Noone else sported so grievous a wound, but that did not mean they

had emerged unscathed from it all. Everyone of them, even Honey Rays sported visible cuts, bruises, and dents in their formerly unblemished armor.

They stood there in the gap created by their blasphemous use of fire for only a second, quickly locating me across the grove. The moment their eyes landed upon my disquieting visage they lurched into motion, a command screamed from the lips of Honey Rays. Quaking Yew launched forward, whistling while hopping along on three legs, unsloved by her recent maiming.

With their meat shield leading the charge, the four survivors ran on, the lone unicorn loosing a spell from their back line. A fireball, conjured from not but a cinder flew from the tip of the caster's horn and streaked across the grove directly at me. My lone servant stepped forward, and using its innate magic, loosed a torrent of summoned water from its maw.

This weakened the fiery attack but did not dissipate it entirely, its last remnants hitting my servant and exploring. The blast was small, but still sent white hot cinders in all directions, the tiny flames finding no purchase on my wet bark. The burst of steam created by the meeting of water and fire may have distracted some, but I did not see in the traditional sense.

My vision was gained by a nearly a hundred tiny undead insects perched atop the many branches of the grove. Able to view them from every angle at once, I saw how all but Quaking Yew charged behind the cloud of steam created by their spell. I didn't know who decided on such a plan but it likely wasn't the deer, as she strayed behind and slightly off to the side.

Regardless of who had said what, they had made their first mistake, and with a silent command I ordered the first volley to be loosed.

Focused as they were on me and me alone, the four attackers barely even noticed as rocks were fired at them. Tiny stones barely larger then raspberry were slung alongside small boulders pulled loose from the stone wall behind me. Big or small, they were all aimed directly at the earth pony at the very front, the unfortunate male finding himself pummelled from all sides.

A hunk of shale hit him in the eye, blinding the orb and causing him to stumble. A good chunk of the rest of the attack merely bounced off his armor, deflected by enchantments or simple steel. It could not stop all of it however, and a trio of rather large stones struck true, hitting him in the neck where his protection was weaker.

He fell to the ground, gasping and clawing at his throat, armor bent inward and stopping him from breathing. It was a decisive blow, but one that wouldn't prove fatal unless I could drive it home before he found medical help. I did this by aiming a small boulder at his head on his blind side, sending him sprawling out, face first into a pile of poisonous flowers.

The vile fumes of the strangely named yellow tree poppy worked quickly, causing his air ways to close even further, the stallion to quickly asphyxiating. His allies were quick to try and help him,

slowing their progress in the precise location I had hoped they would stop. The unicorn knelt down and lit their horn, working their magic in a hurried fashion, eager to get their comrade back up.

The mycelium running beneath the ground surged with energy, growing numerous fruiting bodies at my command. Seeing this, the rest of the squad retreated, though the unicorn didn't notice until it was too late. Millions of spores burst into the air, spreading enough of the deadly nerve agent to make escape all but impossible.

Quaking Yew attempted to assist with her perverse magic, and ordered the mushrooms to die, but they had done their work. The unicorn lay on the ground, experiencing the worst grand mal seizure imaginable to a mortal creature. She died at about the same time the pony she had tried to help did, the pair laying next to one another, twitching occasionally as their bodies shut down.

At this point, Quaking Yews, and Honey Rays were the only ones left, causing my confidence to surge, that was until they charged me. They had abandoned any hope of defence, and had even split up, with Quaking Yews going wide while the pegasus flew straight at me. Forced to choose between the more immediate threat, and the one circling around, I turned my dragon on the pony.

Though I had the size advantage, Honey Rays had enchanted magical armor, and a strangely unpleasant aura. Just being near her made my grip on the dragon become more tenuous, her presence slowing and damaging the undead. I had felt this before from her, but now it was increased through some unknown means.

Whatever had been done to her also made her armor glow a bright gold, the light from which stung my bark. It also provided considerable protection from my dragon, as its claws were turned aside despite the massive force behind the strikes. Even a cloud of black miasma conjured by the dragon's breathe magic did not seem to injure the pegasus.

Who charged forward and used her wing blades to remove several boney extremities from the dragon. She didn't rest with removing a few fingers though and pushed forward, inside my servant's guard. There she turned into a whirling dervish of blades, hacking off ribs, and hunks of bone with each swipe of her weapons.

I tried to crush her beneath the dragon's weight, but with the grace of a dancer, she avoided the attack. She then pressed her advantage, and nearly severed the enormous lizard's spine with a carefully placed swipe. Thankfully the naturally thick bones of the dragon turned the blade aside before it could essentially cut my servant in half.

Thankfully she had overcommitted, allowing me to slam the dragon's tail into her midsection with enough force to send her flying. Landing in a bush near the edge of my grove, she tried to get back up, only to have the plant she was laying against to begin lashing her with its thin thorn

covered limbs. I sent the dragon after her, intent on killing the pegasus, only to stop when I noticed that the other attacker had made her move.

Quaking Yews had appeared standing atop one of the cliffs near my central form, her whistle already blowing loudly. That same dark magic emanated from her, wrenching command of my grove from me. All at once I felt those deep connections I had created to the other trees begin to pull, draining me of my energy.

Forced against their will, they sapped me of my strength and weakened my ability to command them as well as my servant. I could sense immediately that there were few options open to me in that moment. I could not however, pull back my roots, or sever the ties that bound me to the rest of the grove and by extension the forest. We were held together too tightly to make that a possibility, leaving me with only a single avenue, remove the deer.

Charging at her with the dragon, I was intent on killing her quickly, or at least disrupting her slightly. I didn't get far before Honey Rays was upon me, removing one of the dragon's back legs and causing it to fall to the ground. Now missing two limbs, my servant did not move quickly, and was forced to turn on the pegasus lest it lose another.

I instantly launched an all out assault on the commanding officer of the ponies, hoping to knock her out. Unfortunately for me I had lost a significant amount of my energy already and my servant was too slow to hit the weaving mare. Every swipe, every strike, and every attempt at magic either went wide or was too underpowered to do any real damage.

It was enough to make me really consider the possibility that I may perish here. My leaves were beginning to wilt, my bark was losing what little color it had and I could begin to feel hunger start to gnaw at my mind. The two pronged attack was working, and with little control over the grove, and my draconic servant, the walls were closing in.

Evidently Honey Rays seemed to think the same, as I could see the mare smirk from beneath her helmet. Somehow she was confident, even after losing every single soldier under her command. It was an enraging sight and I wanted to raise her deceased comrades and use them to beat her to death but I didn't have the magic necessary.

I was helpless, with no weaknesses to exploit or aces up my sleeve, save maybe their own overconfidence. A thought which made me realize that a few of the older, more stubborn trees refused Quaking Yews call. Using what little power I had left, I ordered a distant alder tree to fling the rock resting next to its base.

The venerable ancient shook violently, struggling against the many decades of growth that slowed its movements. Despite its age, it was able to reach down, pluck the stone from the earth and with all the force it could muster, throw it at Quaking Yew. However, the attack was dodged quite easily by the three legged deer who ducked under the projectile.

Exactly as I planned.

For the cliff she was standing on was not solid stone but rather an outcropping of loose shale. Something that wasn't readily obvious when you looked at it, but was plain to see when you had the instincts of a tree. The small boulder impacted the ground next to the deer and crushed what little held the cliff to the wall of stone.

Caught completely unaware, Quaking Yew couldn't jump out of the way before she was already caught in a landslide. Several tons of dislodged shale joined the many rocks into a roiling mass of debris that cascaded down towards the grove. The moment her footing was gone, her magic vanished and like a whip cracking back I felt control surge back to me.

Energy coursed through my form, immediately giving the dragon a burst of speed that caught Honey Rays unaware. The pony barely processed what had happened to her ally before she was suddenly slammed in the side by a tail whip. The attack wasn't overly strong, but was quick and sent the airborne pegasus into the trunk of a nearby tree.

The relatively young oak immediately wrapped its great limbs around her midsection and squeezed hard. Enchantments flashed, and metal groaned, the pony releasing a startled cry of surprise as the tree compressed her. She wasn't completely out of tricks however, and with a muttered word, her armor flared one final time.

All of the magic used to maintain the enchantments exploded outward, blowing off one of the oak's branches and freeing her. She then launched herself forward, but made it only a few feet before running face first into a wall of angry bone. The dragon caught her in mid air and with a titanic slam, smashed her into the ground with enough force to leave her embedded in the wet earth.

By then the brief rockslide I had caused ended, with Quaking Yew somehow emerging relatively unscathed. Battered, bruised, and injured, her strange deer dexterity had saved her from the worst of it though. Limping out from behind a boulder, I saw her sweep her gaze across the grove, searching for her ally.

I aided her search by pulling honey Rays up, and into view, a boney hand gripping the feathered appendages on her back. I then plucked her wings with a single jerk of my hand, taking no small amount of pleasure from the scream that ripped from Honey Ray's throat.

"Doom, doom unto you vile creature!" Quaking Yew shouted. "You may have won the day, but I will return and when I do I will bring the fury of the sun with me!"

She then leaped into the shadow of an oak and disappeared from sight. I attempted to track her, but the whistle scrambled my insectoid servants as well as the senses of my plant neighbors. This enraged me, but I stifled my anger by reminding myself that although the victory was not total, it was still a victory.

Pinning Honey Rays back against the ground, I ignored her continued screaming mixed with curses. I focused instead on my grove, and the trees that had gone against my will, their shame immediately evident to me. It was not shame as any creature of flesh and blood may know, but to me it was like a thousand whispered apologies.

My first urge was to punish them, to drain them as they had me, but I resisted that desire. They had been made slaves against their will, and I could not in good conscience impune them for a choice they did not make. Instead I merely allowed them to return what they had stolen, noting that they gave more than what they had taken.

The process took several minutes, but in the end I was returned to about the same level as I had been before this entire debacle begun. Still, it was nice to confirm that my assumption about the grove being like a battery was indeed a correct one. The hunger was gone, my leaves had returned to life and I felt as though I was back to a sort of normal.

"Now then," I muttered through my draconic servant's mouth. "What to do with you?"

I hefted Honey Rays from the ground and looked into her bruised and bloody face. Tears ran down her cheeks, an eye had swollen shut, and her breathing was hoarse, her chest unable to expand fully due to her dented armor. It was a far cry from the supremely confident pegasus that had so passionately declared she would end me only a few minutes ago.

"Celestia damn you," she wheezed through broken teeth.

"It was not Celestia who damned me to this fate," I replied before chuckling darkly. "Though I will be the one to damn you to yours."

"Wait," called a voice.

I turned to the source of the voice and saw that Whispering Alder had appeared beneath the shade of a Yew tree. Exhausted, and covered in sweat and grime, she was relatively uninjured save for a few scratches. Staring up at me with not hate, but caution, I felt a bit of the anger caused by her appearance to sputter and die.

"Forgive this foolish child of the day," she called. "She does not know the forest or our ways."

"What excuse does Quaking Yew have then, hmm?" I retorted.

That seemed to shake the deer more than anticipated, the elder's face growing pale. "She has always been a dark child, prone to isolation and loneliness but... that is no excuse," Whispering Alder murmured. "That doesn't matter now."

"Oh, doesn't it?" I questioned.

"You should release me," Honey Rays mocked. "I promise to never return here."

I could sense the insincerity in her voice as clear as day and judging from Whispering Alder's expression, the deer could detect it as well.

"You are not helping, commander," Whispering remarked. "Please be silent while I plead your case."

"Ha," Honey Rays wheezed. "This abomination is not so naive as to let me go. Though it hardly matters. In the end, my superiors know of my mission and know where I have gone. They will come, and when they do they will finish what I started."

"That's quite enough out of you," I remarked.

My servant then slammed her back into the ground and held her there, a cry of pain muffled by the mud she was now neck deep in.

Whispering Alder sighed. "I suppose it's pointless to ask that you spare this foolish creature."

"You dare ask that I free her, even after you have seen what she has done to my grove, to my forest, and to my council of trees?" I retorted a bit louder than I had desired, gesturing toward the damage done. "She doesn't deserve to live, but that is lesser when compared to the debt she must repay to the forest."

I stood straight and looked down my draconic nose at Whispering Alder. "And this debt will be repaid," I declared. "With blood, and death."

"I understand," Whispering Alder murmured, bowing her head slightly.

Seeing such a display of supplication, I felt the last vestiges of my rage die. In response the canopy above the deer's head opened, allowing light to enter the formerly pitch-black grove. I had barely noticed the change but clearly, the rest of the forest had felt my anger and had reacted empathetically, looming over the deer in shared frustration. I pushed that out of my mind however and urged the plants near our guest to retract their reaching limbs.

"I apologize for all of this," I began. "I never intended on hurting anyone, and I hope that you can forgive me."

There was a long pause before Whispering Alder raised her head. "The wound is too fresh to forgive so soon, but I believe that in time, I may be able to do so."

"All I ask for is the opportunity to prove I am not the monster they make me out to be," I replied.

Noticing that Honey Rays had stopped thrashing, I pulled her head out of the mud and allowed her to gasp for air.

“Say goodbye Honey Rays,” I exclaimed.

“I go now to my-” Honey Rays coughed and spat a wad of bloody mud at the ground. “I go to the warm embrace of Sol herself. Do not think you have done me a cruelty.”

“Foolish creature, Death offers no warmth, nor do I,” I replied.

I then turned and flicked her limp body at my roots, where she fell, crumpled into a bloody heap. Honey Rays started to rise fairly quickly, pushing herself upward using her one unbroken forelimb. She didn't make it far before I activated my magic and pulled. Her muttered grumblings of pain immediately turned into an unholy scream of utter agony.

Her skin slowly peeled off her body like old paint, coming off in small strips and sections. I did not consume her quickly, nor did I do so equally, focusing mostly on her extremities first. Muscle and tissue were pulled from her legs while she was left alive to cry out and give voice to the suffering I inflicted upon her.

Though I wished to torture her more, to return her cruelty tenfold, I stopped myself before I could continue any further. Another firm tug ended her cry, her internal organs liquifying and pouring out into the growing pools of viscera. A moment later and there was nothing left but the pony's bones, and the broken remnants of her equipment.

I drank what had been Honey Rays with quiet ecstasy, savoring the taste of my former enemy and the many skills she had obtained in her life. The majority of which were fairly standard, with those being small unit tactics, upkeep, and repair of arms and armor. Tracking, leadership, camp maintenance, supply line management, flying, air combat, and the like were also there.

There were also several other skills that felt as though they didn't belong with the others. That being a long list of rituals that I knew existed for a religious purpose. They felt strange, doubly so since they were stripped of their context due to the nature of my skill-stealing ability.

I couldn't know why I would need to mix a lantern with the correct amount of oil, and lavender yet I knew how to do so. I also knew the necessary steps to ensure that the arms and armor of no more than five soldiers were blessed by the sun. In addition, I knew several prayers and incantations but they were incomplete as if they were half skill, half memory.

Regardless, it was clear that Honey Rays had been one part commander, one part inquisitor, and another part holy leader. It was an odd realization, but not one that was altogether surprising given what else I had learned about the ponies. This sect or cult of sun worshippers had many rituals, prayers, and things they had to do in order to ensure they stayed in their god's good graces.

It was strange, but not surprising, so I put it out of my mind and commanded my new servant to rise. After she did so, I ordered the two others to do the same, silently a little disappointed that I hadn't had the chance to devour them so I could take their skills too. Unicorn magic would be particularly interesting, but that would come with time, for now, I had at least three new servants to join with the dragon and I suppose Rainy.

Wait, Rainy, I thought to myself.

*Uncle Xathrid are you okay?* Came the panicked thoughts of the foal.

*I'm alright. I'm sorry for pushing you away. Some bad ponies attacked me.* I replied.

That seemed to ease the child's worry somewhat. *That's good. Were they the mean ones in gold?*

Yes. I answered.

There was a short pause before Rainy piped back up. *Mister Pen Stroke is going to want to hear about this. He got very nervous when I told him you were fighting someone.*

*Just hold on a minute Rainy. I need to do some cleanup before I speak with them again.* I replied.

*Okay, but hurry. Everyone is giving me weird looks.* Stated the foal somewhat nervously.

I chuckled to myself and made a note to not leave Rainy in the dark like that again, the young pony was clearly a bit unnerved. That would come later though, for now, I was bubbling with more energy than I knew what to do with and I had repairs to complete.

"Right," muttered the dragon. "Let's get to work."