

"Laguuna - a demon most foul and dangerous. An intruder from another plane it is, whom arrived as a result of an opened tear between our reality and Astrum. The creature is uncommonly fast and strong, able to use Dark Magic to affect the mind of its victim. The laguuna's weakness is light of every kind, even coming from an unnatural source."

- The Witches Bestiary

Chapter III: Of Parochialism, Hipocrisy and Lasciviousness

Dark clouds blanketed the sky. The night was extraordinary dark, and to make matters worse, it kept on raining. Although "raining" might have been an understatement - it was a true cloudburst.

Chromia pushed forward. There was no place nearby in which she could hide from the rain. No trees or even bushes. Only empty fields and meadows. The one thing that gave her some protections from the rain was her black coat, soaked and heavy. She couldn't even light up her pipe.

Every now and then she muttered under her breath, cursing the weather and the things that ruled over the laws of this world.

After a few more minutes of getting soaked, combined with the occasional marching forward, she came across something - for the lack of a better word - strange. A cart. A small one, probably mercantile. Inside, under a large sheet, she found barrels.

She neared it and took a closer look. One of the wheels, broken. So that was the reason for the stop. But why was there no one nearby? A merchant would just leave his goods like that? It seemed suspicious, but Chromia excluded a bandit's ambush. A monster, perchance? Yet there were no signs of any in the area, and the cart also seemed practically untouched.

No. Someone must have left it here.

She did not pay much mind to it. And she didn't want to stop for too long as well. Not in this weather.

The witch did not wander too far away from the cart, when she saw a stone bridge. Her eyes allowed her to do such miracles, even in a night dark as the devil's soul. But as she approached it, she found something to be amiss. Her amulet vibrated strongly, heralding danger or magic. She thought of the former to be more likely.

She reached for her sword, hanging at her side, and slid it out of its scabbard. She peeked under the bridge with the corner of her eye. A canyon, few metres long, but empty, unless one counted a few puddles.

It was hard for her to hear anything in the rain's constant swooshing. She couldn't hear anything except it, to be honest. Chromia made a first, careful step onto the bridge, and then another one, and another one. Her medallion kept trembling, making her more and more anxious.

Something behind her shouted hellishly.

She instantly turned around, rising her sword, and jumped back. That was a huge mistake. Her hooves found no support, as they should have. She fell down like a stone thrown into a lake.

"Fuck!"

She thought the fall will be painful and might result in a broken spine, ribs or neck. And painful it was, true. She hit something hard, but fragile. It bruised and wounded her, but at the same time cushioned the fall.

Chromia hissed and tried to stand up.

"What the... branches?" she asked herself. The witch got up, rubbed her eyes and looked around. "Oh. Bones."

The whole canyon was filled with whitened remains of travellers, who, just like the witch, got tricked by the illusion. The skulls observed Chromia with empty eye sockets, their jaws twisted in a macabre parody of a smile. The bony hooves stood out from that horror, as if wanting to catch her and pull under, to add the witch into the dreadful image.

Chromia was lying on her back. She looked around, searching for her sword, which she was holding a moment before in her hooves. She found it quickly, and grimaced. The blade was impaled in the ground, just a few centimetres from her crotch.

"Oh no, you wouldn't do that to me."

She got up and stretched, and then lifted her sword. The ribs of some poor pony torn her cloak and injured her flank. Chromia cursed under her breath and took another look around. This time she managed to hear something more, than just the rains clamour. Someone or something was groaning not far from her.

She began searching for the source of these sounds, and found it quickly. A green earth pony mare, with a black and white mane, was lying in the bones, moaning painfully. She was wearing a heavy-looking armour, albeit not a plate one. When Chromia approached her, she looked at the witch.

"Foe or ally?" she asked weakly.

"Ally," Chromia answered immediately. "What happened to you?"

"I'm guessing the same thing, that happened to you. Au!" she cried and grimaced, and then cursed nastily. "Damn, that hurts."

The witch didn't hesitate and crouched next to the mare to inspect her injuries. Aside from a few scrapes and bruises, her leg was twisted at an unnatural angle, probably broken.

"Hm," Chromia muttered. "Looks bad... Is that your cart up there on the road?" she asked.

"Not exactly. I was part of its escort," the green mare seethed through clenched teeth. "The wheel broke, and I went with one of my companions to the village nearby to get help. But when we stepped on the bridge... it disappeared."

"Getting you out of here won't be easy."

Chromia's amulet started to vibrate again. She grabbed the hilt of her sword, held her breath and waited.

The phantom attacked out of nowhere. It appeared in a purple mist and fell on Chromia like an angel of death. The witch jumped aside and cut with her weapon, but the ghost vanished.

"Behind you!" the armour-clad mare shouted.

Only thanks to her warning Chromia managed to block the powerful strike of a sword. She backed up, but did not counterattack. Instead she took a look at her opponent.

The phantom was big. Very big, the size of a well-built earth pony stallion. But this impression was a little broken by the fact that the whole lower part of its body was missing. The marks in his midsection indicated that it had been most likely bit off. The spine was standing out from the phantom's "body", twisting like a snake. The beast lacked lips; they seemed to have been torn away. And of course the ghost did not have any eyeballs, only empty sockets, filled with purple-burning fires. The phantom emitted a terrible, purple aura, colder even than the chilly rain.

It bellowed beastily and span around a couple of times. The lying mercenary whitened and her eyes became as big as saucers.

The rain continued, heavy drops of water knocked on the skulls and bones. The witch took down her cloak. After a few seconds, she also brushed her wet mane aside.

The ghost attacked again, striking with a great broadsword, which he held in one hoof. Chromia jumped back and met the canyon's wall. She rebound from it, swinging her blade in a vertical strike. The phantom blocked the attack with ease, but seemed to take its time with a riposte.

The witch cursed under her breath, cursing the lack of space for dodges and pirouettes.

The phantom raised and tilted its head back. The green mare observed that with puzzlement, Chromia - with worry. Before the beast managed to scream, Chromia said the Word and crossed her hooves on her chest, making the Heliotrope Sign.

The phantom shrieked piercingly and loud. The heavy-armoured mare held her head, which was pierced by a sudden pain, compared to having hundreds of needles impaled to your brain and poured with vinegar. The witch's Sign protected her from the shock wave, but its force pushed her back a few metres. Chromia head also pulsed with pain; she clenched her teeth so strongly that she was afraid they would crack.

But the Sign saved her. Despite the headache, she could continue fighting.

The wagon's guard mare decided to act. Wounded she may be, but that did not relieve her from the duty of fighting - or at least so she thought. She started to look around for a corpse in an armour similar to hers. She knew her companion carried a crossbow with her..

She got up, trying to find support in the bones lying around her. She expected the search to be quick; there were only skeletons around, a steel armour should stand out from between them quite clearly.

The mare looked at the witch fighting the ghost. Chromia parried the phantom's strikes, intensely focused, but with grace and fluency that the armoured mare could only dream of. She cursed under her breath and crawled a few metres forward. She still couldn't find the crossbow. Or maybe the weapon was carried by one of the mercenaries, who were left by the cart?

She leaned against a stone, rising above the sheet of bones. She looked at the fighters again. Chromia shouted the Igni Word and set the phantom on fire. It shrieked horribly, but was far from dying once and for all.

The green mare nodded with respect and returned to her search. She cursed again; the task of finding her armour-clad friend in the sea of bones was beyond her skills.

“Saphire, you harlot,” she snarled. “You won’t hide from me... the crossbow and bits will be mine!”

Chromia avoided a vertical blow. The phantom’s sword impaled in the ground. The witch used the opportunity and cut the ghost’s hoof with her silver blade. The ghost roared painfully and backed up; its sword and part of its hoof vanished into thin air. Yet the phantom was still a threat. The likes of him are fierce and tough. And stubborn—when they make something their target, that something is good as dead. Luckily those beasts rarely wander this world.

Chromia breathed heavily, standing in a fighting stance and eyeing her opponent. The ghost pierced her with its demon-like eyes, as if gazing to her very soul. The witch shivered. She hated fighting with phantoms, they always filled her with that strange anxiety...

The monster tackled Chromia with “bare hooves”. She had nowhere to jump away, so she hit the phantom with the Aard Word. The spell did not knock it down, but it slowed him just enough to give the witch time to manoeuvre. She couldn’t roll over because of the bones lying everywhere. So she tried to jump next to the ghost as it brushed off the effects of the Word sooner than she thought that it should have been able to. The phantom hit her with a hoof, strongly enough to send her flying and hitting the canyon’s wall. Chromia’s sword felt out of her grip on a pile of ribs, breaking them.

The phantom’s strike, along with hitting the wall, knocked the air out of Chromia’s lungs. She fell to the ground, desperately trying to catch her breath. Her sword was lying not far from her, if only she could reach it...

Meanwhile the mercenary started to crawl to the mud-covered body of her companion. A smile appeared on her face, when she saw the crossbow lying next to the mare’s corpse. And the bulgy pouch hanging from her belt.

The mercenary laughed, when she reached her. “Saaphire, you poor bitch.”

Bolts lied around between the bones. One of them was impaled in the dead mare’s body, at a spot that wasn’t protected by armour.

The green mare picked up the crossbow—its string was wet from rain, but luckily the weapon had a lever, so she did not have to draw the string by hoof. She leaned against a wall and aimed. She had to hurry; the monster was getting closer to Chromia.

The phantom hovered above Chromia like the shadow of death. The cold, emanating from it, run through her body, freezing her blood, bones, and even her very soul. Was she afraid? For her life? Was this the way death looked like?

She looked up, facing the monster. She could have sworn its lips-lacking mouth curled into a smile.

Something whirred for a second, something hit the canyon wall. The phantom's snout blurred for a short moment. The ghost turned around, facing the direction from which the shot came. Chromia immediately jumped for her sword and cut the phantom in the head.

The monster howled beastly and disappeared in a flash of light. Purple sand fell slowly to the ground.

Chromia sighed heavily, leaned on her sword, shook her head and spat. She heard someone laughing loudly.

"That was a splendid victory," the mercenary said, clapping her hooves. "I bow to your fighting skills, lady."

"Thank you," Chromia replied. "I owe you my life."

"Sure," the green mare snorted. "If that thing killed you, my chances of survival also would have changed a bit... Though I'm still not sure I even have any. This leg is driving me insane!"

The witch approached her, almost tripping over some bony hoof.

"You said something about a village nearby?" Chromia knelt next to the mare and started to check her condition.

"Yep, there's some rathole not far from here. A total scrub! If a village wants to survive, it sells some bollocks, right? Crops, skins, mares... this one has *nothing!*"

Due to the mercenary's heavy armour, the witch couldn't tell if her leg was really broken or just twisted. Though she thought the latter more likely. "How far?"

"Phew... Well, normally it would take us a few hours to get there... but we're at the bottom of a canyon, and my leg is... indisposed... . We should be able to get there by tomorrow morning."

Chromia cursed the whole world in her thoughts and sighed heavily. "Can you walk?" she asked.

The mare tried to get up. Chromia neared her and supported, helping her stand, though it was a tiring job. The mare's armour was quite heavy, and she herself also couldn't be compared to a feather. For an earth pony mare, the mercenary was big, almost matching Chromia—a zebra—in size.

"Oh, but where are my manners?" The green mare would have hit herself in the head with her hoof if only she could do that at the moment. "My name is Au Revoir! My friends call me Nightingale. But... Au is shorter."

"Chromia," the witch breathed. "A pleasure."

"Sure it is!" Au stomped her hoof, losing balance.

The witch tried to support her, but it didn't end up to well for them. The mare swayed towards Chromia, who tripped over a bone. The witch landed between ribs and skulls, and Au landed on top of her.

"Ouh!" Nightingale sighed over the witch's ear. "Sorry..."

The zebra tried to get up, but ineffectively. She managed to do that on the second try, with Au's help. The two mares started to walk. The mercenary was joking, cursing and couldn't stop the flood of words coming from her mouth. And Chromia listened carefully, not interrupting.

None of them noticed that the rain had stopped.

Clouds blanketed the sky, keeping the warm sun rays from reaching and drying the two mares. Tired and hungry, they exited the canyon only at the break of a new day. They had to walk a few kilometres down the canyon to finally get out of it. Chromia felt weak from exhaustion, but did not show it. Au panted heavily; each new step was becoming more and more difficult for her.

"You said", the witch breathed, "that this village is not far away."

"From there—yes. But we had to made quite a detour. But I think I recognize the surroundings." The other mare looked around. "Yep, we're close."

The mares walked pass a lonely linden tree, on which some woodpecker was busily cramming its bark, trying to reach his breakfast.

"I hope that village is still there," Au said. "I wasn't here for a couple of years, and this place is not far from Hollow Woods."

“What does the forest have to do with it?”

“What do you mean ‘what’? Does the word ‘Fox’ ring any bells to you?”

“Yes, it’s a small, red predator, it kills the peasants chickens, geese and...”

“Very funny. We’ll see how much you will laugh when we find only burned cinders. Or maybe not even cinders, but just arid ground!”

“What would the Foxes want from some peasants?”

“That’s the problem—they don’t need any motivation. They just attack a village, kill the stallions, rape and kill the mares, take what they can, burn the village to the ground and shout how they fight for the survival of their race and call the ponies racists. Hmph.”

The pair continued their walk towards the village, that supposedly was in the neighbourhood. During that Au shared her political, religious and social views with Chromia. The witch learned all of the mercenary’s opinions about the rulers, whores, priests and mimes. She also learned that Au’s family was having tax problems and that the mare can scare all the birds from a tree with just a burp.

After a few hours of marching, a settlement finally showed up on the horizon. Au spat vigorously upon seeing the first houses. She shook her head at the one-room buildings with thatched roofs.

As they got nearer, the mares saw the first of the townsfolk—peasants dressed in linen clothes, thatched hats and tacky headscarves. The stallions bustled about with rakes, mattocks, saws and axes, while the mares looked after the pigs, chickens and fillies. They all shared a tired face and vacant, vacuous eyes. The residents didn’t care for much outside of their work.

But the arrival of Chromia and Au made quite the commotion. The surprised peasants ran to them, to help limping Au and the witch that was holding her. Chromia felt truly surprised by such a reaction. She had expected being abused, having rocks and mud thrown at them. Au also did not hide her amazement.

“For all things saint!” One of the stallions grabbed his head. “You poor ladies look like something the cat dragged in!”

Both the mares eyes each other.

“But we can help you,” some chubby mare said, with a smile on her face. Au winced slightly; their benefactress lacked a few of her front teeth. “We’ll take care of you, give something to eat.”

“And will give you some warm milk!” another mare shouted. The witch and the mercenary looked in her direction. Au went pale; Chromia thanked the stars that she couldn’t, due to her mutations. The milk-offering pony with a grass-green mane and blue eyes was a dairy mare.

The witch looked around and scratched her head.

What the fuck is going on here? was the first that came to her mind.

Chromia was sitting on a simple chair, which looked like it had its best years behind it. The room was in no better shape. Walls eaten up by borers, a dirty hard earthen floor, windows full of holes and a stove lacking a few bricks. The rest of the furniture were also typical examples of poverty - the bedding was made of straw and looked as if it was going to fall apart any moment; the table looked as if putting anything on it would result in breaking it into splints. There was also a few shelves and a chest of drawers, both in the same poor condition as the rest of the furniture.

The owner of all this was Hoe, though everyone called him Old Hoe. He was the provost of this beautiful village known as the Reaches. Hoe certainly earned his nickname—he was a very old stallion, tired by life. His brown coat was dirty and covered in stains of unknown origin. Hoe’s mane was grey, but not perfectly white, like Chromia’s. His hazel eyes were misty, giving him the appearance of someone whose thoughts were far away from here.

He was wearing a liana shirt and woollen jacket with buttons. A green cap rested on his head, covering his ears and falling on his eyes; he kept straightening it all the time.

Behind him, at the other end of the table, stood three more ponies. One was a big earth pony with a dark-green coat and claret mane, wearing a brown, leather jacket. He eyed the witch with a steely look, but it didn’t bemuse her, since he looked at everything that way. His Cutie Mark was an axe.

Standing next to him was a skyblue earth pony mare, with a white mane and pink streaks. She was wearing a white dress, knees-long, though it was not of a highest caliber; the whole dress was stained and heavily patched up. The mare observed Chromia with inquiry and hope in her eyes. She had a goose-shaped Cutie Mark.

The last of the trio was a grizzled, young unicorn, with a grey-coloured coat and yellowish hair. One of his eyes was missing, and the other had a sickly green colour. He wore

himself just like most of the townsfolk: a shabby liana shirt and soft leather boots. His stare was something between the big stallion's gaze and the mare's look. A saw Cutie Mark was visible on his flank.

Excellent company, Chromia thought.

"Well? Say something, elder." The mare nudged the provost. He waved her off with a hoof and muttered something under his breath.

"Be silent, woman," he croaked. "I'm aware of our guest. Yes. Yes..." Hoe muttered and felt silent for a short while. "I'm not even going to ask, because it's clear that you are familiar with sword fighting, right, lady?"

The witch nodded.

"Good. Good... It's a strange thing for me, but our times look the way they look and I can't do anything about it. You and your companion... You could both greatly help us," he said, stretching the word 'greatly'.

"I'm a witch," Chromia admitted.

"What do ya mean?" the unicorn asked tentatively.

"You cast foul spells?!" the mare asked with fear.

"On the broom you fly?!"

"To the Bold Mountain?!"

"And delude good-hearted stallion?" the unicorn and earth pony asked, hope in their voices. "Misguide them you do, and then—"

They didn't finish; the big stallion was punched in the face by the mare, and the unicorn received a jab to his side. It took all Chromia's willpower to stop herself from smiling.

"No," she answered at last. "I fix problems that no one else can fix. So I'll ask you point-blank: what bothers you?"

"Haemorrhoids," answered the village leader without hesitation. An awkward silence filled the room for a long moment.

"Ehem," the witch caught. "And beside that?"

"There be donkeys in the woods," the stalwart earth pony grunted.

"And imps!" the mare shouted. "And hussies!"

"Ghosts," the unicorn added. "And werewolves, and niches, and nymphs and..."

"And storms!"

"True!" the unicorn agreed. "Hard to get home when drunk."

"And something scares the animals," the mare wailed.

The big stallion hit the tabletop with his hoof. The witch was amazed the table didn't break in half.

"And someone spoils our mares..."

Chromia waited to hear, what the provost will say. But he just sat, stubbornly silent, and when the mare poked him, he just waved his hoof. "But the worst things are the donkeys. And not once we'd seen strange lights in the forest. Heard howling and strange noises. The fillies are scared, the animals also... We're all afraid to even poke our noses out from our homes at night."

"Yes, that does sound like a job for a witch," Chromia said, more to herself than anyone else. "All right. I'll check those strange phenomenoms."

The provost straightened his cap, which has fallen on his eyes.

"I know," he started, "that the ones like you don't help for nothing. Tell us what you want now, before it turns out we will have to pay the debt with our blood."

Chromia started to think. Aloe and Erynia were both already there, where they wanted. She had no hope of catching them. And she needed food and rest, like everyone. She had no money and the last time she ate a decent meal was in Ponyville, four days ago.

"I want to rest, something to eat and something to drink. Some supplies for the rest of my journey would also be welcomed. And what about the mare I came here with?"

"What do you mean?"

"Will you help her?"

Old Hoe nodded. Chromia repeated the gesture. "I'll take care of everything tomorrow. Right now I would like to rest."

"The meeting's over," Old Hoe addressed the rest of the townsfolk. "You can get back to work."

The mare and two stallions bowed deeply to Chromia and went out. The witch was now left only with the provost. She knew he was not looking at her with blind trust, but with wariness and inquiry. It was clear he not a local. He held an office, but he was not born in this place.

Hoe sighed heavily and took off his cap, showing what little hair he had left, and started to rub his forehead.

"I have to admit, the locals are quite kind," the witch finally said.

"To Hell with them." Old Hoe cringed. "Those damn fools would host their own death. I cannot phantom how they managed to survive before I... had to move here."

"And you kindly decided to help them?" she mocked.

"No," he replied coldly. "But I had to move in here anyway, and a little help might do the whole place some good."

"Do you have any idea why are they so... helpful?"

"Because they're idiots! This rathole has no contact with the outer world. There's nothing here, nothing. No merchants, no soldiers. Only those damn donkeys made themselves a camp not far away." Hoe shook his head. "Those poor fools have no contact with the world. I try to help as much as I can."

The witch nodded. "All right... Where can I find a place to rest?" she asked, rising.

A smile appeared on Hoe's face, one she could not understand.

"Go and ask for Sweet Milk's house."

Au lied on a straw bed in a small, one-room house. Aside from the aforementioned bed, a table, cupboard, a few hairs and a stove the room was empty.

Au looked at her armour, lying in the corner nearby. She felt uneasy and nervous without it. Especially when the houselady was in her field of vision. She saw a lot in her life, and experienced just as much, but this mare...

The door opened. A red mare entered, dressed in a white apron, which did not cover what it was supposed to. Au felt a wave of heat washing over her.

"You're still not asleep?" the mare asked with a smile. "You should get some rest, miss. It will be good for your health and beauty."

The mercenary faked a smile. The mare who was taking care of here was not ugly. Truth be told, it was hard to find another mare with a natural beauty as this one. The whole problem was its negligence. The greasy and unkept mane was the smallest of her problems. The most bothering thing for Au was the mare's smell, for she smelt heavily like the livestock she undoubtedly took care of. Most likely cows.

At least that was what Revoir hoped.

"Ahem," she coughed. "Thanks for the help, but I can handle myself. And I'm not used to being asleep in the middle of the day."

"If you need anything, miss, just ask," the other mare said, coming closer. "I'll have some oatmeal ready in a moment, surely you are hungry, miss."

Sweet Milk adjusted Au's pillow. When she was so near, Au noticed that the mare's smell was not so full of the farm as she thought. Truth be told, it was rather pleasant. That was quite strange and didn't make Au feel more comfortable even in the slightest. As Sweet Milk ended adjusting the pillow, she unceremoniously lifted the quilt, unveiling Au's lower parts of the body. All the mercenary was wearing were simple underpants. She opened her eyes widely and only by a miracle stopped herself from hitting the plowing mare in the teeth. Au was no child, but she got red as a young adept looking upon a long and veiny thing for the first time.

"What the fu- fugde are you doing?!" Au shouted.

The mare, surprised by Aloe's sudden outburst, tried to get up from the bed, but tripped and landed on the floor. Sweet Milk's apron curled and Aloe had a chance to glimpse at the thing nature had so generously gifted her with. Very generously.

"Please, miss, I just wanted to change the bandage on your ankle..." the terrified mare said, after covering her charms and trying to stand up. "I didn't want to offend you, but to help, just like the elders ordered. Please, don't be angry at me..."

Au, feeling a little confused, wanted to help the mare stand up. She got up from her bed and tried to stand on her legs, but overestimated her strength; when she stood on the hurt ankle, she lost balance and fell, landing right on top of Sweet Milk.

It felt like lying on a warm, soft pillow. Au's hind legs encompassed Sweet Milk's figurative parts, and their lips met, as if in a shy kiss. Au could feel the mare's breath, which was quite nice, free of onions, cheese or rottened teeth. Still, there was something strange about it, something that made Au curious and terrified at the same time.

"Are you all right, miss? Can you get off me?" Sweet Milk asked hesitantly. Her face was red as a heated-up layer of steel.

Au stared into the mare's eyes for a few moments, unable to move or even think. She also was hot as steel in a smith's workshop. She was sweating intensively, her stomach started to ache.

She returned to her senses quickly, like a heated bar put into a bucket of cold water, when the door opened and a short, chunky stallion with a round face walked in.

"Good day, miss," he greeted her in a happy voice, just like Sweet Milk earlier. "How are-"

He stopped. Like a mosquito trapped in a sap drop. All signs of life left the stallion, his movements or any other reactions gone as if touched by a magic wand. One could say that time stopped. The only thing still showing that the pony was alive were his cheeks, which were growing redder by the second.

But it was most apt to say that the stallion was simply petrified.

"Sweet Milk!" he shouted with a mix of bewilderment, confusion and fear.

"Rake!" Sweet Milk squirted, almost burning from shame.

"Shit," Au muttered, terrified.

The stallion reddened a little more and quickly left, shutting the door. Au quickly got off the young mare, but it was already too late. Sweet Milk sat and started to cry. Loudly and miserably.

"Oh, the shame! What will the townsfolk think of me?!" Tears rained heavily off her eyes. "What will ponies say?!"

"Shit, shit, shit, shit..." The number of shits thrown by Au could easily fill the whole room.

"Listen," she said finally, "this was just an accident, right? You tripped. I would never touch you in my life! We'll just explain everything and it'll all be good, okay? Come on, boobs-chin! I mean, chin up! Och, sweet Creator..."

The mare continued on crying. "I know, miss... you have a kind look in your eyes... but what will the others say?" she wailed.

Au Revoire was a mare that could not stand tears. She never cried herself, and she couldn't bear someone crying in her company. But this situation was far worse, since she couldn't just hit the mare and tell her to calm down. The doors suddenly opened again, just like last time—with a thwack. Au nearly jumped, as two burly mares rushed into the house; they were even bigger than the stallion, who left a few moments earlier.

And they were, plainly speaking, ugly, with nothing in their appearance that even the largest desperate could find attracting. Square jaws, manes that were a crying shame, or the simply fat rumps could scare even the most hungry predators. Au felt a shiver run down her spine.

The first one had a greenish coat and dark-brown mane. A mole on her chin looked like she was in the process of growing a second head. The other mare was grayish and had black hair, shining from fat. They both looked at Au like she was a unusually large potato beetle.

One was holding a rope in her teeth, and the other one looked as if she about to lambaste Au with a club as thick as her leg.

"You perverted bitch! Gropin' our sister, are ya?!" the one with the club yelled. "Ladle, get her!"

Sweet Milk wanted to say something, but the mare with the club pulled her away from Au. Ladle, still holding the rope, tackled the mercenary. Au tried to defend herself, but her hurt leg made that difficult. Ladle jumped on Au and pinned her down with her own, fattened body. She twisted the mercenary's front legs backwards and started to tie them up.

Au tried to brake free, but to no avail. Ladle probably spend her free time wrestling bears in the local forest; after a few moments she managed to tie up her legs and threw her on the bed. Au's loud curses didn't bother her in the slightest.

The other sister, the grey one, caught Sweet Milk by the leg and dragged her out of the room, cursing and bawling her out with juicy epithets. Au was an experienced mare. She visited all of the three Central Dutches capitals and their many inns. She was a guest in small bars and big taverns. Poor and rich. She visited hostels and roadside joints. Slept in brothels and bawdyhouses.

Never did she think she could learn so many curses from some ugly village bumpkin.

“Listen up, ya rheumy cow,” Ladle waved her hoof in a threatening way. “We take ya to our house and help, and this is how ya repay us? By getting your dirty hooves all over our sis? An right in front of her fiance! You’re lucky that leg of yours is hurt, or Small Spoon would’ve hit ya so hard ya teeth would fall out ya snout! We’re gonna leave ya here, tied up, till dusk. Maybe then you’ll think twice about gropin’ other mares!”

She spat on the floor and left. Au felt anger growing in her. She started to gnash her teeth, her eyebrow twitched, and her hooves trembled. She was furious that some peasant managed to tie her up. She was mad because of the hurt ankle and cursed every insular settlement.

They’re gonna regret it, she thought. No one ties up Nightingale. No one!

Au started to wriggle on the bed, trying to brake free. Luckily for her, Ladle made a really sloppy job of her knots.

The morning sunrays shone through the tree branches, paiting fanciful patterns on the forest cover. The leaves rustled, bestired by the light, refreshing wind, and the air was alive with the many chirrups and tweets of singing birds. A woodepecker knocked on a tree in one place, in another a cuckoo cuckooed, looking for some birdish dupe to raise her hatchlings.

The witch welcomed the pleasant change, especially after her last adventures in Everfree. With a full belly and sharpened sword, she passed the many trees of Greencrown Forest. She was in a good mood, as it usually happened after a filling breakfast. Though the Reaches residents were not short of kindness, their obliviousness was a tad worrying for Chromia. How in Equestria did they avoid being deflated by thieves, the Foxes or the worst of plagues—tax collectors. On the other hoof, provost Hoe seemed to be much more discerning, even competent. That also haunted Chromia.

As well as the fact of leaving Au alone in Sweet Milk’s house.

The witch snorted quietly with laughter.

She passed the rottened trunk of a fallen tree, on which spiders the size of a mouse happily wandered. She turned north by a massive ash, went across a shallow stream, which turned in to a rapid river a few kilometres further, and continued going straight, as soon as she passed the tall statue of a unicorn that was green from moss and mildew and was missing a fair part of its back.

According to Hoe’s instructions, a few hunderd metres further she should find an old cementary, which was the first place worth checking. And probably the best one. But what would

the donkeys do there? That was the important question. Chromia had no idea as what to expect, apart from donkey juveniles, of course.

The forest was thinning out slowly; the trees were standing more and more apart from each other and it was getting brighter. Chromia noticed she was approaching the cemetery by the Gravewood growing here and there. At last the forest gave way to dirty and broken gravestones, statues and crypts, overgrown with ivy and mildew. The sunbeams and clear sky were in much contrast with the grim neighborhood.

It was warm. And terribly silent. All the forest's sounds, even the rustling of trees, seemed to simply not pass to the cemetery. Chromia passed the gravestones, looking for any signs of Foxes. But the mules and donkeys rarely left anything behind, for they could not allow themselves wasting anything. Not when they barely managed not to starve.

From afar, Chromia made out the sight of a large chapel made from once-white stone. Now its crushed and blackened walls awoke fear instead of calmness. The entrance was once locked by a metal gate, but now only one of its wings remained. The other one was lying a few metres away, standing next to a gravestone. The chapel was square-shaped, each of its corners was a perpendicular obelisk, and the roof was a large dome, on the top of which a rusty, sun-shaped emblem was located.

A choking, awful smell of blood and decay was coming out from the inside. Something surely died there, and quiet recently for such a place. Chromia suspected what it was.

A raven flew out of nowhere. It cawed, circled in the air and landed on the crypt's entrance. The bird looked at Chromia with its black eyes, tilting its head. The witch eyed the raven for a moment, not quite sure, what to think of it. A coincidence? She didn't believe in bad omens. Maybe it was a familiar? Of some necromancer, hiding below? That would certainly explain a lot.

She had no elixirs, bombs or oils. Only a few herbs, her sword, clothes and skills. She wasn't sure if that will be enough.

When she started to go towards the entrance, the words 'what for' passed through her mind, but she chased them off quickly. What for? Because she's a witch, that's why...

The inside surprised the witch. She expected to see a massacre, hundreds of corpses, piles of skulls. Yet all she saw was a grave. A grave, that once masked the entrance to the underground. Now it was moved aside, and small grooves on the floor implicated that some kind of mechanism was responsible for that. Or maybe it was a spell?

Spiral stairs, leading down, were located under the grave. They were long and dark, and Chromia was unable to see where they exactly lead to. A even more intense mixture of blood and corpses stank from the bottom. A normal pony would probably fell dizzy or start puking. But not Chromia.

She started to walk down, squinting her eyes and looking hard with her cat-like vision. The stone walls, covered in webs and mold, emanated with cold and dark, awaking a claustrophobic sense of unease. Each step Chromia took echoed in the darkness louder that the toiling of the temple's bell, calling for an evening mass, on which no one will appear.

She reached the bottom, walking into a corridor. At least that's what she thought, since she was unable to see anything pass a metre before her. By the echo she judged that the corridor was long and had many niches. She said the Igni Word, and a small flame appeared in her hoof, brightening the dirty and destroyed passageway. Parts of the ceiling and walls came down, the floor was covered in rubble... and blood.

Going down the corridor, Chromia came across a large pool of blood. A body lied in its middle. The donkey—if a bloodied scrap of meat with limbs could be called that way - was lying in a strange position. The blood stains were smeared, as if he was crawling on the floor, even after being skinned.

Even the witch winced slightly at the sight. What could have possibly beat him up so hard? Surely not ghouls; yes, his limbs and back had large chunks of meat missing, but the ghouls wouldn't do more damage than that. And the donkey was certainly tortured in some macabric way. So what was it? A vampire? Phantom? Lesi?

A bit further lied the donkey's curved sword and a pouch, from which a few coins fell out. Nothing interesting. The witch moved on.

The niches in the walls turned out to be shelves for sarcophaguses. Every ten metres, on both sides, the passageway had large holes in the walls, in which rectangular, stone cofins sat. Most of them were unnamed, but some had plates with names written on. There was no need to mention that most of the graves were ruined and some lacked half of their plates.

Chromia stepped across another body.

A mule. Cut in half, with eyes ripped out, and with his head sclaped. The blood splashed even the walls, which were now covered in fanciful patterns, that in the distant future will become know as "modern art". Chromia had a bad feeling about this. Two corpses, killed in a very brutal way. By who?

The witch walked with her sword out since some time now. She felt a presence here, someone's breath on her neck. Her ears started to catch alarming sounds. The smell of blood mixed with the choking odour of decay, and it wasn't coming just from the bodies.

Something was running her way. Chromia lifted her sword and stood slightly astride. Something gasped and panted, snarled and hissed. The sound of movement was getting louder and closer. Chromias started to breath heavily, holding her sword firmly in her hooves.

But it was taking too long. Judging by the approaching sound, Chromia was certain the monster would have reached her by now. Yet still she heard it running, but cought no sight of it. When the sounds were just next to her, she swiped her sword.

Nothing.

All went silent. The only sound Chromia could hear now was the echo of her blade hitting the floor. Aside from that the corridor was filled with heavy, terrifying silence. Chromia listened carefully, taking deep breaths. It was as if nothing happened, as if the monster—if there really was one—just vanished without a trace. She loved her sword and conjured a fire. The devastated corridor was empty, and its further part looked like the way to Hell itself, like the entrance to the Abyss.

She turned around to see if the mule's body was still lying on the floor. It was. She sighed with relief.

Her relief burst like a bubble, when she heard the stone slab's clamor. The echo carried the sounds of sarcophaguses being opened. Something roared, something crunched. Metal clank on metal.

"I don't know what else I expected," Chromia muttered. She cursed the lack of light and lifted her sword.

The first undead came from the way she was heading. It was covered in dirty, ripped pieces of clothing, and in its hoof it held a rusted sword. The empty eye sockets were burning with—how typical—red flames. Chromia started to wonder, why was it that red always happens to be the colour of evil. The skeleton swung his weapon at Chromia, but she thrust her sword through its spine and shattered it into hundreds of bony pieces.

More were already incoming. Chromia said the Igni Word and send a flaming arrow down the corridor. It hit a skeleton holding a club. The cloth remains started to burn, lightening up the passageway. The witch saw more skeletons, running towards her, armed with various, single-hoof weapons; swords, hatchets, maces, and clubs. All rusted and barely holding in one piece.

She waited for them to come closer, and when the enemies were near enough, she hit them with an Aard Word. The skeletons shattered into pieces and flew back with the shockwave. Chromia smiled slightly, but her magical attack took out the illuminating flames, and her smile vanished quickly.

Chromia turned around and parried another skeleton's blow. She cut it in the neck, and the undead followed its friend's example and fell apart.

More came, but Chromia didn't want to waste all her power to fight simple skeletons. She stepped back and blocked a hatchet's attack. The witch swung her sword, severing the undead's hoof and kicked, taking the skeleton out of the fight.

Chromia heard a strange whoosh. She tilted her head backwards just in time to avoid a flying hatchet. Were it sharp, her already shabby ear would look now even worse.

Another wave of undead reached her. Chromia started to battle the small army of skeletons, but it wasn't a fair fight; the witch kept destroying her enemies one after another. She had no room for her favourite tactic, which she called "the ballet", but it didn't matter.

When the last of the skeletons crumbled to the floor, Chromia sighed lightly. Even despite the surrounding darkness, she managed to defeat them quite easily. Too easily.

The bones started to shake and move, skulls rolled on the floor, the ribs jumped up. A red aura covered the bones, forming them back into skeletons. The undead rose again, rattling and cracking.

Chromia attacked immediately, not letting the bony ponies to form back completely. She managed to destroy four skeletons, before the fifth one cut her in the shoulder with a rusted blade. Chromia seethed with pain and kicked the undead. A red stain appeared on her clothes. The wound hurt badly, but aside from that it wasn't anything serious.

The undead started to attack her from both sides now. The witch stood up to their challenge, destroying them one after another. Still they managed to strike a few blows; Chromia got hurt in the cheek, arm and side. All those were just shallow cuts, but every one was bleeding strongly. She might have had trouble if it weren't for her potions. Time was essential for her.

She started to run up the corridor, almost blindly. The skeletons were rebuilding themselves again. Chromia stopped abruptly as a skeleton appeared in her way, a big one, clad in a rusty plate armour and wielding a sword and shield. Two greenish flames burned through its helmet visor.

His sword came down in a strike. Chromia parried the attack, but the undead knight spinned and slammed her with its shield. The witch hit the wall and fell painfully to the floor. The skeleton swung its sword again; Chromia rolled to the side to avoid it.

She got up and blocked another strike with her sword, then leaped back, not to get hit by the shield again. Chromia cut vertically, her blade penetrated the rusted armour with ease, but the skeleton was still standing.

Chromia hit the skeleton with an Aard Word, sending it flying backwards. The undead fell on the ground and couldn't get up. Then more skeletons came from behind, and the witch started to fight them. She was tired of constantly ripping those things to pieces. But she didn't want to be killed by them. She saw, what they...

...what they *didn't* do to the Foxes. The skeletons were not responsible for that massacre. Something disturbing was going on here. Something even worse than usually.

Does it really take such a brutal death to make me feel uneasy? Chromia thought.

She hit the skeletons with an Igni Word. The bones caught fire, bathing the passage in warm light. The witch herself started to run down the corridor, where the armoured skeleton was waiting. The undead hit its shield with its sword a few times and charged. Chromia, having nowhere to run, quickly said the Yrden Word, touched the ground with her hoof and jumped back.

The skeleton ran over the magic trap, activating it. Purple lighting started to strike its dead body, making it fumble around. Chromia approached it and thrust her sword in its back; the undead rattled and broke into pieces, held together only by its armour. The witch kicked the breastplate, which also fell apart.

Chromia moved on, running.

Dead end.

This is what met her at the ending of the strangely long corridor. She came across two more dead donkeys on her way, killed with similar brutality. Luckily there were no more signs of undead. Chromia was tired and the constant fights with skeletons would quickly drain her remaining strength.

But a dead end? That was a bit too much.

She started to look around, searching for a lever, a knob, a button... anything. She checked the cracked walls that lacked a few bricks. She looked inside the two nearest graves,

one labeled “Fancypants”, the other “Fleur de Lis”. The first one was empty, the second contained only the remains of a skeleton and a few gemstones, which Chromia took. For a noble purpose, of course.

She approached a flat wall and started to knock on it. She pressed her ear to the wall, listening cerfully, but with no results.

She decided to risk and hit the wall with an Aard Word. All she managed to do, however, was rise a cloud of dust. Coughting and rubbing her eyes, Chromia neared the wall once more. There had to be a passage here somewhere. Four bodies is not enough for a Fox commando. She had a feeling there would be more. But... maybe she was wrong? Maybe only four Foxes came down here, and the rest of their group is still hiding somewhere in the forest?

She leaned agains the wall, feeling defeated. “Plow this shit. And plow those skeletons too...”

“You give up so easily, witch? That’s unlike you,” a terryfingly familiar voice said.

Chromia jumped up, instinctly grabbing her sword.

“Hey, hey! Easy there. Don’t you like me anymore?”

“Veks?” Chromia started to stare with eyes wide open, her mouth agape.

A creamy unicorn, with a red mane and purple eyes smiled at her. He was dressed just like the last time she saw him: a red shirt with long sleeves, covered by a black, skin vest. And his Cutie Mark, perfectly visable—a tobacco leaf.

Yet it was not a pleasant sight for her. Veks died five days ago, after all.

Despite that, Chromia stayed calm. It wasn’t the first time she had met the soul of a dead person. More than once on those occasions she tried to convince them to leave this world for good, willingly or not. But the pony in front of her... was no ghost. No aura or astral afterglow surrounded him. He didn’t radient with cold. His voice was normal.

For the first time since a long time, the witch felt something creeping on her back, from the neck to the rear. Something wriggling in her entrails.

Fear.

“You look as if you saw a ghost!” Veks laughed. “Is everything all right?” She didn’t answer. “Hey, I’m talking to you!”

Chromia gazed at him for a long moment, still unable to believe her own eyes. "Veks..."

"Finally some reaction. How many potions did you take this time? I haven't seen you so woozy in a long time. Well," he sighed, "maybe aside from that time on the bridge to Old Baltimore. But you don't look too good." He shook his head. "You're bleeding."

"Yes, but... Veks, how did you get here?"

"What?" he asked. "What are you talking about?"

"What are you doing here, in this-" She looked around, wanting to show Veks the tomb. But she couldn't.

They were in Ponyville, back in the tobacco shop.

Chromia opened her mouth, but no words came out. She eyed the room with a confused and shocked look. She gazed at the counter and the shelf behind it, filled with many small bags. She had no idea what to think about the window, showing the next building. The witch felt strange when she looked at the stairs leading to the shop's residential part.

But all that was nothing compared to the felling she had while looking at her dead friend, who seemed to be not dead at all. Veks observed the zebra with mirth, but after a moment he also became worried.

"Chromia?" he asked carefully, nearing her. "Is everything all right? Chromia!"

The witch twitched. "Veks... Veks, I..."

"Plowing elixirs." Veks shook his head. "Come on, we'll get you upstairs, you need to rest. It's the bridge all over again, remember? You couldn't even get a word of yourself just after that fight. And don't try to bullshit me that it's only because of lost blood."

The stallion put his hoof around Chromia's shoulders. It was warm, hard, but gentle in a way. Veks looked her in the eyes, smiling exactly in the same way he used to smile every time she dropped with a visit. His breath stank with tobacco, but for Chromia, it was the most pleasant smell in the world.

She nodded and let him lead her. They went up the stairs and onto the first floor, and then walked down the corridor, entering into the last room on the right. It was Veks' bedroom, which he always lent to Chromia when she stayed for the night. He used to sleep in his office on those occasions.

The room itself was not too big and not too rich, though it was decorated with taste. Opposite of the door was a single window, in which the window of the neighbouring building could be seen. Chromia could never understand, what the architect had in mind when planning this.

Aside from the bed, a large wardrobe stood in the room, filled mostly with boxes of tobacco and a few crumpled clothes. There was also a dresser here, and Veks' pride—his collection of pipes. He had a vast variety of them: black, white, made of oak, lime, alder and willow. In different shades and shapes, sizes and proportions. They were the tobacco dealer's pearl, and he always boasted to Chromia whenever he added a new piece to his collection.

The walls were decorated with a few paintings, but the witch never gave them too much thought. One of them showed a beautiful white mare, with a elegant mane and sparkling blue eyes. Even Chromia had to admit she looked lovely.

Veks led her to the bed. Chromia sat on it and rubbed her forehead. She fidgeted a little; the bed was not the most comfortable one, but still probably the best in the whole neighbourhood.

"Lie down and have a rest. You're too good to get killed because of a few potions."

"Yeah... You're probably right," she answered. "Veks?"

"Yes?"

She thought for a moment. A long one. Veks managed to scratch his rear in the meantime.

"Nothing." She shook her head. "It's... nothing."

Suddenly something started to pulse in her forehead. Like a angry woodpecker, like a butterfly flying pass you when you're lying with a hangover. The slight aching was arising to something more irritating and lingering. At last the pain overtook her. The world disappeared in darkness, all the sounds were covered by a strange, constant buzz.

Something dripped on her leg. A warm and dense fluid, with a strong, familiar smell. A smell sweet and sickening. Suddenly the smell filled her whole world, took over all her senses.

She could smell, and even taste, blood.

She raised her eyes, and the memories pierced her like a poisoned arrow. Pain gripped her heart, tightened its claws on her throat. She opened her eyes and mouth, but didn't manage to say anything.

Veks' hooves grappled her around the neck. Blood poured out from his cut throat, like a waterfall, splashing on the floor, the bed, on her legs. The putrefaction took its toll, and now the once-handsome stallion turned into a pale, stinking shadow of his former self. Sunken eyesockets, blood dripping from his nose, mouth and the broad cut were just the tip of the iceberg. His purple eyes turned yellow and were covered with a fog.

But through that fog they still eyed Chromia with grudge, hatred and sadness. Veks clenched his hooves tighter around her neck; Chromia coughed and gagged, desperately fighting for a breath. The stallion rattled and gurgled something unintelligibly, spitting blood at her face.

And though it was impossible for any words to come out his cut throat, she still heard them clearly:

"You bitch! You ruined my life!" an accusing voice sounded in Chromia's head. *"You plowing muff! I gave you everything! Food, shelter... warmth! And you let them kill me!"*

She choked, trying to brake free from the hold, but her efforts were in vain.

"I thought that night meant something to you! I thought something changed! And maybe it would had even been that way, but because of you, I've lost everything! My whole wealth, my whole life!" Black tears started to fall from Veks' eyes. *"You ungrateful bitch... You traitor! You led your stinking sister and that lapdog to me! What did they offer you in return?! Why did you sentence me to death?!"*

The words stabbed Chromia's soul like daggers. She forgot about the lack of air, the physical pain faded into oblivion. When Veks was accusing her, made her aware of her mistakes, something in Chromia died. He was right... his death was her fault. If only she had reacted sooner...

"Prepare to meet the Creator..."

She winced. And finally understood, what was wrong. Chromia clenched her teeth and hit the undead in its head with all the strenght she had left. Veks stumbled backwards, letting her go. The zebra fell down on the bed and breathed the air greedily.

"Veks didn't believe in the Creator!" she hissed.

The dead "Veks" calmly got up, still splashing blood on the floor, and looked Chromia in the eyes. His already slightly decayed lips curled in a mocking smile. His eyes flashed with brownish green. He looked like a shattered soul, rotten and corroded.

Chromia clenched her teeth angrily. She said the Igni Word, sending a flaming arrow at the undead. The missile covered the distance of two metres in less than a second.

And then...

She opened her eyes.

At first she wasn't aware what was going on. Everything happened in the fraction of a second. The coldness of the tomb hit her in the shoulders, and darkness looked into her eyes. She panted and was covered in sweat. Her clothes were soaked with sweat, the wet mane stuck to her head.

She was standing at the very spot, where she saw Veks, Two graves were by her side. She checked; one of them was Fancypants'es. Her head was aching and her legs were shaking. She leaned against the wall and sighed heavily.

"Fuck," she said, and cursed meanly.

Chromia trotted further along the corridor and walked down another set of stairs. Above her, on the archway, she saw strange writing, in a language unknown. The stairs led to large chamber with pillars. Aside from the dirt and dust, the chamber appeared to be in a good state. Most of the pillars were whole, as well as the ceiling. The square room was illuminated by enchanted lanterns, one in each corner.

Amazing. For how long have those things have been alight?

The lanterns light unveiled one more thing, something that did not fit the chamber at all. Three things, actually.

Two mule corpses lay in the centre of the room, butchered just like the previous ones. The first one's throat was ripped so badly she could see the neck bones. The other one had his head chopped off and large chunks of meat missing. Blood stained almost every part of the parquet floor.

She heard him.

His breaths were heavy and unstable. Striated with gurgling and rattling.

She approached the donkey, which lay against one of the pillars. The blood marks stated that he crawled up there from the place his dead companions were lying. He rattled, crepitated and cried awfully. The donkey's injuries were so severe Chromia felt pain herself,

when she saw him. The gouged out eyes were the least serious of his wounds. The worst thing was a hole in his stomach, through which one could see his whole entrails.

She approached him and crouched down. The donkey became frightened when she touched him. He wailed painfully, but a second later looked astonished.

“Warmth...” he panted. “I feel... warmth... So close... so far...”

“Who are you?” Chromia asked calmly.

He coughed and spat blood mixed with saliva. “I... don’t... Huno. M-my name... Huno.” His head fell down, as he started to rattle again.

“What happened here? Who... *what* did this to you?” Chromia asked calmly.

“We made a mistake... We provoked forces that we don’t understand, that we can’t compass with our senses. Yes... A force that doesn’t like to be bothered... We awoke him, and this was his revenge... He spared no one... At least I think so... I... can’t feel anything. The sun rays, the wind... Where are they?”

“Who is he?” Chromia asked, worried. “And what the Hell were you doing here? What is this place? Whose tomb is this?”

“Hers... the Saviour’s...”

“Saviour? Who are you talking about? Huno? Huno! Damn...” she cursed, letting go of the dead donkey.

She passed the two mules and turned her steps towards a grave located at the end of the chamber. The obsidian sarcophagus, covered with runic writing and glyphs looked, plainly speaking, just strange. Such things were typically built out of marble or some other decorative stone. But obsidian? The runes also seemed a tad queer to the witch. Five pegasi skeletons in rusted, dark-blue armours lay around the sarcophagus. By their build Chromia judged that only one of them was female. She started to wonder about the Foxes’ fate again. About the thing that killed them. And she was sure it had something to do with this grave.

But what exactly?

As she approached the sarcophagus, she heard a whisper. Chromia turned around, lifting her sword, but failed to see any danger. Her medallion didn’t give her any warnings either.

Another whisper, this time a different one. And then two more.

She understood them...

"She's dead," someone said in a low, sad voice. "She's gone... What shall we do now? Without her, we have no chances of-

"True," a strong and deep voice agreed. "Without her, Equestria will fall... to its own inhabitants. And we can't do anything about it. We failed her."

"So?" a mare's sharp tone filled the air. "Are you going to sit down and cry? Hide somewhere and wail? Now, when our country is in the greatest need? There will be time to mourn her loss, to prepare suitable ceremonies. But for the gods sake, now is not the time! Now we must fight!"

"With who?" another voice asked, male again. "You really believe we can do anything? That we can restore the Old Equestria by throwing ourselves against armies that outnumber us by hundreds? I tell you, such a fight is pointless! For it is the greatest honour to die on the battlefield, yes, but such a sacrifice must have sense! And now we have to act carefully, like cats."

"So what do you propose?" the mare asked in a scornful tone.

"I... do not know."

"Ha! But I know what to do: rebel! We should gather everyone who is still loyal to the Sister's ideals and end the tyranny with their help! Ponies who loved Celestia and Luna shall rise and storm the barricades! They will trot over the usurpators, their servants, spies and snitches! Ponies will overbear the slaughterers and free themselves from the overseers chains! It shall be the day of glory, my companions! The day of glory!"

"You are deaf and blind!" another stallion sharply cut in. "What rebellion, what revolution? Who will come to aid us? If the ponies wanted that, those rats wouldn't have won in the first place! But they did, and now they hold Equestria in their iron tongs. No one will rise against them, and you know why? Because they have no choice. Because those plowing usurpators are all they have left! If the ponies didn't want them... no one else would help them. Equestria's looks the way it does, because that is what the citizens wanted."

*"So are we suppose to sit here and do nothing?!" the mare wailed. "We will allow all of our ideals to die just like that?! Are we to forget about everything **she** died for?! That's not what she would want... she would fight."*

"But she is gone." the last voice joined the debate. A stallion. He sounded commanding, but also proud. Simply speaking, he sounded like a leader. *"Gone. And Archlight is right, it is our fault. We failed. And we cannot help Equestria... but we can honour Her."*

"But..." the mare started to cry. *"Our Equestria... our home... is dying."*

Silence fell. Chromia knew that the "vision" was not over yet. It was merely stopped for a moment by heavy silence.

"I know," said the leader. "I know, Daisy."

"Still," he continued, *"we took an oath, to protect our Lady till death. Till our death. She may be gone, but we live on, and that is why we shall continue to protect her! We will stand guard next to her, just like our Order did for centuries! We shall honour her and our fallen brothers and sister, that had been taked by the Great Treachery and the Great War! We shall honour their sacrifice!"*

The guards started to cheer and stomp their hooves on the floor. They shouted as if going to war, placed at the tip of an army that was marching towards the enemy.

"For we are the Night Guard!"

Just when the leader said those last words, a terrifying scream pierced the air, like a breach in the realm, like the shout of world ending. A spear of fear pierced Chromia's heart. The earth started to shake, the lanterns swang furiously in the four corners. The runes covering the sarcophagus lightened with a dark-blue colour.

Chromia instictly backed away and rised her sword. This place was the epicentre of all those strange phenomenoms in the tomb, and now the conclusion was about to come. Despite her wounds and the lack of elixirs, the witch felt confident. She took a few deep breaths and watched.

Black smoke poured out of the sarcophagus. But it was unlike typical smoke, coming from a fire or chimney. No, this one was dark as the Abyss itself. Chromia suspected what she was about to face, but hoped she was wrong. The smoke started to form something resembling a large pony wearing a black, ripped cloak. From the darkness, a big skull of a male deer emerged, with no lower jaw, but with great horns. Two green flames burned in the beast's eyesockets. Bony claws formed, ended with sharp talons. The phantom hovered above the grave, looking at Chromia and making terrifying, undescrivable noises.

A laguuna.

Chromia had the feeling as if some kind of slimy worm started to wiggle in her entrails. Now she understood all the supernatural phenomenons that had place here. She knew what this ghost, or demon, was capable of. Chromia was nervous, but not without hope. She met a beast like this one twice before. She ignored the fact that each time she was strengthened with her witch elixirs.

The laguuna shrieked demonically and charged at Chromia, cutting furiously with its claws. Chromia tightened the grip on her sword; she parried the strike and jumped back. The demon continued its attack, striking blindly, but with great force. Chromia blocked each of the blows, but at the same time was forced to constantly back away. She made a mistake and didn't manage to parry one of the strikes; sharp claws hit her in the leg and wounded her chest. The witch winced from pain, and the laguuna attacked again, this time with the back of its hand. Chromia was send flying into a nearby pillar.

The witch breathed heavily and eyed her wounds, that were dripping with blood. She cursed and got up, ignoring the burning pain. The laguuna attacked again, this time from above. Chromia managed to shout the Igni Word and send a fireball straight at the demon. The fire itself didn't do too much damage to it, but the heat and light made the laguuna shriek in agony. From the inside of its body, white light blinked. The laguuna backed away.

The witch charged with all her might, wanting to strike the demon. She reached the laguuna in three jumps and cut widely, from right to left. The sword pierced through the black smoke, with no effect, as it seemed. But the laguuna shrieked and white light flashed again for a second. Chromia didn't waste her chance and cut again, striking another blow. Now it was the demon that was forced to protect itself, parrying the witch's attacks.

The laguuna swang her claw again, aiming at Chromia's legs. Chromia jumped up in the last moment and cut her enemy while she was still in mid-air. The laguuna backed away to the other end of the chamber. It started to change its stratety, and itself as well. The deer head and claws vanished. A pegasus mare started to form from the black mist. Her coat was dark and she green eyes with vertical pupils. The tips of her pointy ears were covered with hair. But the most unique thing about her were the wings, resembling those of a bat, not a pegasus. The mare wore an armour identical to the ones in which the skeletons around the sarcophagus were lying.

Chromia felt sad. She was damn sad about the fate of those five warriors.

The mare, into which the laguuna changed, held two daggers in her hoofs, both about twelve inches long and richly decorated. The blades were marked with dark-blue runes, and their hilts looked like a crescent moon.

The laguuna started to charge at the witch with amazing speed. She jumped up and attacked. Chromia dodged the attack, but the mare was now dangerously close. The witch's sword was sixty inches long, and couldn't be used for proper defence at such close ranges.

But the lagunna underestimated Chromia's speed.

The zebra spinned around and kicked the demon in the back. She managed to gain enough distance to protect herself. The lagunna attacked again, whirling her daggers around so fast that an untrained eye would fail to even see them. But Chromia saw them, and quite well at that. With the very tip of her sword. The clinking of metal hitting metal echoed in the corridors, right up to the tomb's entrance.

The mare whirled around in the air, cutting with her daggers. Chromia jumped back and swang her sword in a wide arc, aiming for the neck. The mare reclined back, bending her spine at almost ninety degrees. Chromia's attack missed, and the lagunna didn't give her time for another one; it jumped up and kicked the witch in the head. Chromia stumbled back a few steps, as the world around her got dark for a moment. The mare rushed at her, wanting to impale her daggers into Chromia's throat. The witch parried the attack, and both fighters clashed against each other.

The demon stank with blood, decay and death. In the mare's green eyes Chromia could see pure evil. A chill run down her spine.

Not for long.

Chromia kicked the mare in the stomach, throwing her backwards. The lagunna bended in half and the witch immediately used the opportunity and simply thrust her sword through the demon's body.

The mare shrieked shrilly and faded into black smoke, that flew away from Chromia. At last the lagunna returned to its true form. The demon hovered in the air, eyeing the witch with pure hatred. Chromia answered with a similar look.

The lagunna howled and changed shape. This time it morphed into a tall stallions with minty eyes, holding a long spear.

Chromia cracked her neck and rised her sword.

And then they lunched at each other.

Au lied freely on the bed. The rope, which Ladle used to tie her up, laid nearby. Ladle was quite strong, yes, but at the same time she lacked accuracy and diligence. It took Au only a few minutes to free her front hooves, and after that freeing herself totally was easy.

Au lied and wondered, what to do next. Should she wait for the witch? What if she doesn't come back? And what exactly are those insular stinkers up to? Nightingale wasn't known for showing mercy and forgiveness. And now Ladle landed on her black list. Au fought with many enemies in her long career, many monsters: manticores, timberwolves, scalendomorphs, and many other countless shit. She faced other mercenaries, murderers, bandits, renegades and marauders. She even fought with a few regular soldiers.

And still, she never wanted to hurt someone more than that fat village bumpkin.

She tried to get up. Her ankle was still screaming with pain, but Au Revoire was not about to give up. She thought she might somehow get used to the pain and manage to leave, before she will hurt Ladle for real.

Though she was furious, she managed to think reasonably. Attacking one of the villagers could end up pretty bad for her. And in a way she realized that Ladle didn't really deserve any of the treatment Au was thinking off in the last few hours.

The mercenary rised from her bed and clutched her teeth, trying to stand still. Then she started to walk slowly, taking easy steps. She wanted to reach her weapons and armour. Her ankle hurt like Hell with each step, but she moved on, like a stubborn mule pulling a plough on his field.

She sat next to her armour, thinking that so far she was doing quite well. Au sighed quietly and pulled out her sword—Guerrier. The blade has been passed down in her family from father ot son for generations. Au was an exception, because both of her older brothers had been considered by their father unworthy. One of them was an extraordinary drunk, and the second one became a priest, so he had no use for the sword anyway.

Dissapointed by what his sons turned out to be, Au's father decided to teach his little daughter the art of killing.

The mercenary eyed the sword with a smile, thinking about her dad.

The blade was uniquely smooth and crystal-clear, like a mirror. In fact, many a time Au used it in that way. But the real pride was the handle, in the shape of a lion's head, holding a ruby in its jaws. It was painted gold, just like the cross-guard, which resembled a pegasus wing.

Au calmed down immediately, her stress and anger vanishing as if touched by a magic wand. Quite the irony that she regained calmness by looking at a tool created for hurting and killing.

Something was amiss.

Au could sense such things. She could tell when a brawl was coming up, when blood will be spilled. She was always prepared for a tavern fight or a bandit's ambush. Though here experience turned out useless on that bridge.

But now things were different.

Something grasped her insides, in way way most uncomfortable for her. She felt hot, her eyes were circling between the doors and Guerrier. She had a really nasty feeling about this.

Old Hoe stood in the middle of the village, looking at its working inhabitants. He was concerned with an incident of which he was reported just a moment ago. He liked the Reaches and the ponies living here. He was satisfied with his job. But he also knew these ponies were not the brightest bunch and often tended to make a mountain out of a molehill.

He suspected that this was the case again. Of course he couldn't simply deny everything, for the villager's conjectures and accusations surely had to be based on something. Still, accusing a mare of lust, lasciviousness and dark magic seemed a bit unreal to him. Especially, since the accuser was a stallion.

The day was sunny and very hot.

Hoe looked at a stallion pulling a cart filled with turnips, and later at a few young mares, carrying jugs of water, who eyed the same stallion with great interest. A dun cat run under the hooves of Woodchop—the local lumberjack and a member of the village's council. Woodchop was carrying many wooden bricks on his back, and the cat made him lose balance and trip over, which resulted in Woochop shouting a bunch of curses.

In another place, a group of foals played with a rag doll, making quite a racket. Hoe looked at them pensively, and then looked around the village again.

Over here, a mare was washing some clothes in a washtub, over there, a stallion was chopping wood, somewhere else somepony was cooking something. The Reaches were vibrant with their own life and did not care about the outer world's problems. Hoe felt very grateful for this kind of *status quo*.

He started to slowly walk towards Sweet Milk's house. He wanted to straighten out this unpleasant situation and apologise to their guest.

Sweet Milk's house was located at the far end of the Reaches. Near the house itself, a small stable stood, in which Sweet Milk kept her cow. Next to it was a grassfield and a fence that outlines the village's borders. A road, unused since a long time, passed near the barn. The

last time Old Hoe saw somepony on it was seven years ago, when an alchemist got lost on his way from New Baltimore to Ponyville.

That is why his amazement was even bigger, when he saw someone using that road again. His fear was even greater, for that someone was not alone.

A group of six ponies traveled down the road, behaving quite loudly. At the top of the group was a tall and well-built earth pony stallion with a dark-brown, almost black coat and a mane in the colour of decayed bones. He was wearing a leather jacket with metal plates on the shoulders. A large, double-edged axe was thrown over his back.

Next came a gray mare with a dark-yellow mane. She was wearing a liana shirt and a belt with two daggers tucked under it.

The next three stallion looked almost identical: thugs in light, leather armours, headbands and armed with low quality swords.

Following the five ponies was a mysterious character in a black monk's habit, his face hidden under the hood.

A shiver run down Hoe's spine, his heart started to beat furiously. The provost's stomach twisted with a monstrous feeling of fear.

The Reaches were about to meet the outside world's true face.

Hoe stood vis-a-vis the six travelers. The villagers started to observe with curiosity and naivety. They had no idea what was about to happen, they did not know that in a few moments they will be terrified more than ever.

The travelers stopped before the village leader, as he took a deep breath.

"Greeting, provost," a large stallion said. "Beautiful day, isn't it? A shame, that even on such a day, monsters and rascals run freely, where and how they want."

"What monsters are you talking about?" Hoe asked.

"The dangerous ones, old man!" a mare answered mockingly. "The dangerous ones!"

"Exactly. We've been searching for such a beast for a few days now. It's with no doubt hiding somewhere in the area. Maybe even in your village, old man."

"Hunting monsters," said Hoe, "is usually a witch's job."

“Phoo!” the gang’s leader spat. “Witches are foul beasts and devilish hags. Have the gods left you? To hire a witch is the dumbest of ideas! Especially when there are groups like ours, who can handle the same problems with ease. Right, gals?”

The three stallions and mare shouted loudly in confirmation.

“I understand.”

“So what do you say, old man?” the mare snorted. “Can we make a little recun- recons-”

“Reconnaissance?” asked Hoe.

“Yeah, exactly!”

Three of the stallions burst into laughter. The mare grimaced and hit the closest one so hard he fell to the ground.

“Please forgive her, provost. She’s a tad nervous. So, what it’ll be? It won’t take long... Maybe we’ll even buy something, hmm?”

Hoe eyed the group, and the looked around the village. The peasants were all gawping at them. The provost cursed them in his thoughts, for their stupidity and helplessness. This group obviously won’t stop just at a “monster search”. Instead, a few young mares were bound to loose their virginity, and a few stallions—their lives.

He had to do something. He prayed the witch will be back soon.

“What is this monster, you are searching for? And what did it do, that such a valiant group was sent after it?”

“Best don’t ask about it, old man, or you’ll be having nightmares. The beast is most foul and hideous. Just let us do our work and keep out of the way,” the group leader said, clearly irritated. “You’ll thank us yet.”

He started to walk, but Hoe stepped in his way. The thug punched him with his hoof, making the provost fall to the ground. The villagers, upon seeing that, took fright and became still as statues. They didn’t do anything, but simply watched the incoming gang.

“All right, lads!” the mare shouted to her companions. “As a reward for such a difficult task, everyone gets to have a little fun today! Ha ha ha!”

The three thugs answered with a loud cheer and started to wonder in different directions.

“Find him,” the stallion, who had his face hidden under a cloak, said. “That’s the most important part.”

The Aard Word threw the demon—a stallion armed with two kukri—at the wall. When he fell, Chromia cut him with her sword and the lagunna turned into black mist again. The demon reappeared next to the sarcophagus, moving sluggishly. The witch managed to destroy another of the lagunna’s forms. It was getting weak.

Blood dripped from Chromia’s wounds, but she stood firmly on her legs. She was a witch. She was beyond that.

The lagunna rose higher above the ground, but Chromia didn’t wait. She was tired, injured and weak. She wanted to end this as soon as possible. The witch charged at the demon; it swang its bony claws, but Chromia rolled under them and hit with an Igni Word from behind. The lagunna shrieked painfully, and Chromia cut with her sword. The blade went through the mist and a brilliant, white light blinked again.

The demon started to scream in agony. Chromia cut vertically, slicing through the stag skull. The lagunna’s scream became even louder. The walls started to shake, small pieces of the ceiling started to fall down. Chromia protected herself with the Heliotrope Sign. Light emerged from the puffs of black smoke.

The light flooded the room, the lagunna’s scream stunned Chromia, and the shockwave threw her backwards, despite her protective Sign.

When all went silent, Chromia shook off the dizziness and looked around the chamber. The room was so bright now, as if it had large windows. The witch sighed with relief and sat down. A drop of her blood fell on the floor. Chromia looked at the place where the lagunna died.

And couldn’t believe her eyes.

An astral projection of a mare stood there, the same mare, into which the lagunna changed at the beginning of the fight. The ghost smiled with relief and gratitude.

“Thank you.”

The mare dissolved into thin air, and Chromia smiled. She approached the spot and looked at the parquet floor. A black, obsidian diadem lay there, shining like it was just crafted

and polished. The witch picked it up. She had to admit this was the pretties adornment she ever saw.

"Hmm, no. I don't think it'll fit me..."

Her medallion started to vibrate when she picked up the diadem.

"Interesting."

She put the diadem into her bag. Chromia hissed, when one of her injuries pulsed with pain. Her clothes were ripped and blood-soaked. She was feeling cold and breathless.

Time to get back, she thought, and started to walk towards the crypt's exit.

Mares and foals were the ones, who screamed the loudest. She knew something like this was likely to happen, she felt it. She also heard the crude laughs of a few stallions. It was those laughs that stroke up her anger, the inner fire that made her boil inside.

"Whoresons."

Chaos ruled outside, the villagers were running in all directions, fleeing from something. Au limped in the direction of Hoe's house, to the middle of the village. She avoided the fleeing villagers, or rather they avoided her. They probably saw her as yet another threat.

Au looked towards the centre of the village.

Three stallions were appereantly having the time of their lives, running after the fleeing mares. Those that managed to catch they carried to one of the houses. A mare in a liana shirt, sitting on a barrel, was applauding loudly for her comrades. Beside her stood a stallion that observed the show with laughter.

Au thought she glimpsed the shape of a hooded figure, wandering beetwen the houses, but she could've been wrong.

"Come on, boys, move it! Ha ha! " the sitting mare kept on shouting, waving her hooves in excitement. "The more, the marrier!"

One of the thugs managed to catch a young mare. The sky-blue mare with a dark-blue mane couldn't have been older than fourteen years. The stallion held her in his front hooves and lifted her up. She kicked and screamed, but was unable to free herself from his hold.

"No, please! Let me go!"

“Come, come, pretty bird!” her tormentor laughed lasciviously. “This is your chance to become a grown mare! I’ll-“

He didn’t finish. His hold on the mare lessened and she managed to break free and run away. The stallion’s friends also stopped having fun and looked at him. The laughing mare felt silent, and the gang’s leader stopped smiling.

The stallion swayed, moaned and tumbled to the ground. He convulsed and rattled for a moment, until he finally felt silent for eternity.

Au tossed the crossbow aside and pulled out her sword and shield. She rose on her rear hooves, supporting the weight off her body mainly on her good leg. She hit her shield with the sword a few times, and seethed: “I wanna become a grown mare too!”

“Kill that whore!” the mare sitting on the barrel shouted angrily.

Two of the bandits lunged at Au, who took a deep breath and raised her sword. Her ankle was on fire, but she clenched her teeth and ignored it. She wanted to ignore it.

The first incoming stallion attacked with an upper cut. Au shielded herself, parrying the blow, but her ankle pulsed with pain. She seethed and blocked another strike, and countered with a stab, hitting the thug in the shoulder. The stallion hissed from pain and jumped back, making way for his friend. The other stallion started to attack with a storm of weak, but fast strikes, forcing Au to defend herself.

Au backed up with her shield raised. The pain blackened her vision, misted her mind. She could have sworn she had a dull, rusted nail driven into her ankle. But she fought. She was Au Revoire, dammit! Nightingale! She never gave up!

Clutching her teeth, she took one more step back and swung her shield. She hit the stallion square in the snout; the thug’s teeth rattled from the force of impact. He backed away, wailing painfully. His companion supported him and attacked the mercenary. This time she did use her shield, but parried the attack with Guerier and stabbed right after. The stallion jumped aside and tried to attack from above again. Au managed to shield herself again, but her leg gave up to the pain. The bandit used the opportunity and kicked Au, sending her to the ground.

“Now give her what she wanted! Today we grant wishes, like fairies!” the bandit mare, now standing on a barrel, laughed.

The thug landed on Au, pinning her to the ground. He grabbed her hooves and smiled mockingly and insainly. Au was much lighter and could not free herself.

"What now, precious? I'll show you, where you belong..."

He started to lower his head to lick Au's face, when suddenly he was thrown away for a couple of metres. The strike was sudden and strong, surely magical.

"About damn time, witch," Au breathed, trying to rise. Someone offered her a hoof. Au looked up and saw the last pony she expected. "You... but..."

Hoe sighed heavily. "There's no time, mercenary. Come on, get up."

Au got up with his help and leaned on her sword. Two of the stallions watched all this with disbelief, like a pair of foal looking at cat eating a mouse. The mare on the barrel seemed to be boiling inside. She took out two daggers, cracked her neck and stood next to her two companions. The hooded stallion remained in the back, looking at the mercenary and the old mage.

"Kill them," he ordered, and disappeared between the buildings.

"Done," the mare laughed.

The mare started to charge, screaming wildly; it was clear she was out of her wits. Hoe started to mutter a spell under his breath. Au stood before him, tightly gripping her sword.

One of the stallions attacked with an upper cut. Au dodged the blow and cut the thug in the flank; he yelled in pain at the same moment, in which the first drops of blood fell to the ground. Au didn't have time to even take a breath, as she was already being attacked by the dagger-wielding mare. Nightingale shielded herself, but the mare rolled over and jumped on her like a mad wolf. Au instinctly kicked her with her hurt leg; she screamed in pain, and her vision blackened for a moment.

The second stallion rushed at Hoe, with his sword raised and battle-screaming. The provost stood calmly, muttering an incantation. The bandit was just before him, ready to strike. Hoe saw fury and bloodlust in his eyes, the eyes of a madpony. But the strike never reached the mage, for Hoe hit the stallion with a lightning bolt, bisecting him. Blood spashed on Hoe's clothes and face.

Au cringed from pain. The other mare saw her chance and pinned the mercenary to the ground. She hit Au in the face with a hoof and raised her dagger to deal a deadly blow. Hoe pointed her hoof at the mare and threwed her off Au with a spell. The other stallion, who had been cut by Au earlier, slammed Hoe in the face with his sword's handle. The provost crumbled to the ground. He wanted to rise, but a kick in the ribs rolled him onto his back. The thug stood above him, blood dripping from his side, and readied himself to stab with his sword.

Hoe closed his eyes, waiting for death to come.

It didn't.

Old Hoe suddenly felt a wave of heat surge pass him, like someone lit a fire just next to him. Then he heard the thug screaming. Hoe opened his eyes and saw the stallion running in circles, burning like a mare accused of performing spells. Au and the mare she was fighting also looked at him. The stallion, for obvious reasons, had no idea that he was now in the limelight.

His agony was literally cut short by a quick, efficient move of a silver blade, held by a zebra in a ripped and blood-stained vest.

Chromia stood vis-a-vis Au and the mare with daggers, eyeing the second one with a tired and angried gaze.

"I'm having a bloody bad day. I'm soaked with sweat, blood, I'm wounded, and I need to take a piss. Think you have a chance with me?"

The mare smiled and charged at the witch.

"They'll never learn..."

The psycho jumped with her daggers raised, while Chromia stood calmly as a statue. Au and Hoe held their breaths. The zebra had no time to block or dodge.

They couldn't believe their eyes when Chromia cut the attacking mare in an impossibly fast move. She twirled around and stopped in place, as the bandit crumbled to the ground, whining like a little foal. A moment later the mare stopped crying and became still.

Hoe got up slowly, not to hurt his old back even more. Au supported herself with her sword, unable to ignore the pain in her ankle any longer. They both looked at the witch that was gazing into the empty space between the houses.

"Chromia?" Au asked.

The witch swayed and fell to the ground.