A diamond dog awoke with a start, the small male scrambling around in a blind panic as his body struggled to catch up with his brain. After a moment of complete and utter confusion, his vision began to clear, allowing him to look around. To his increasing surprise he did not awake in a cage, cell, or open grave but what seemed to be a modest bedroom.

“What the-” he croaked, his voice failing after the second word.

Parched, and with a throat that felt like he had recently swallowed sandpaper he looked around for a glass of water or really any liquid at all. Sure enough, there was one sitting right next to the bed he was lying in and he snatched it with a paw. Chugging its contents, he found that it tasted a bit like pond water, but was still quite clean as well as pleasantly cool.

After downing the contents, he looked around again, this time paying attention to his surroundings.

The room he was in wasn't very large and was vaguely round for some reason. Stranger still, the walls, ceiling, and floor seem to be made up of living wood that had somehow been coaxed into growing in a spherical manner. The furniture was at least a little more normal, with the only weird part being the fact that it all looked brand new.

The strangeness continued as he noticed that the lone window which lay only a few inches away was made of thick glass. Despite just how much glass there was, it didn't warp the image behind it very much, or at least he didn't think so until something appeared on the other side. It looked like a squirrel, just one that was abnormally thin, painfully so.

“What the-” muttered the diamond dog before breaking out into another bout of coughing.

When he managed to eject some phlegm from his lungs, the dog looked back to find that the skeletal animal was gone. Everything else outside the window looked normal, at least for a very thick forest anyway. The foliage was so dense that he could barely see more than a few feet before darkness swallowed everything. Yet it was still enough to tell that it was mid-afternoon and that snowflakes were drifting down from above.

“Snow?” he whispered quietly to himself.

Pushing aside the rather rough but weirdly warm blankets, he stood up only to realize another strange thing. He was wearing what looked like a brown robe made from tightly woven reeds pressed into something close to cloth. It was heavy, and could probably be used as armor, but was still warm, and felt soft, as well as a bit like tree bark.

Stepping towards the door, the dog crept as silently as he could muster, only to stop when his paw reached for the handle. Something was off, something that made him both relieved and completely terrified. The answer sprung to mind, and his hand to his throat, grasping at where the collar had been what felt like a second ago.

Turning around and looking back at the bed he noticed that it was laying on the pillow he had been using a second earlier. Far from the menacing circle of unbreakable metal humming with energy, now it was little more than a hunk of brittle-looking iron. He gave it a poke with his finger, and when nothing happened he grinned despite the weird situation he found himself in.

Laughing madly, he did a little dance, pumped his fist in the air, and even threw in a couple of pelvic thrusts for good measure. His celebration ended abruptly when the muscles in his left leg suddenly began to cramp. Grabbing at the section of taut muscle, he tried to massage it away and help things along by whispering curses under his breath.

That seemed to do it, though it didn't help the feeling of near exhaustion that came with something so small. It felt almost like he'd been in that bed for far, far longer than he first anticipated. Shrugging off those thoughts he went back to the door and pulled it open, but just a single tiny little bit.

"Hi!"

He slammed the door shut and leaned against it, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Hey mister, I'm just a little filly. No reason to be scared. I ain't gonna bite ya," shouted a voice from behind him.

"It's just a pony child, nothing to be too freaked out about…" he whispered to himself.

"Yeah don't be scared. I don't want to have to ask Uncle Xathrid to bring you back from the dead if your heart explodes or something," yelled the thestral filly.

That made the diamond dog confused, but he ignored what had just been said and chalked it up to kids simply being kids. Pulling back open the door he peered down at the filly and studied her features closely for a moment. She seemed normal, had a two-toned mane of dark blue, grey fur, with eyes that matched her coat color. The cutie mark on her flank was of a dark cloud raining lightning bolts down from above, which fit with her leathery wings.

"I'm Rainy Day, but you can just call me Rainy," proclaimed the odd filly.

"I'm… Not sure," muttered the diamond dog.

"A little bit of amnesia is to be expected says Uncle Xathrid. Your name is Little Heart by the way or that is what everyone calls you," remarked Rainy.

"How did you-"

“Know? Your tribe, or group or whatever is staying with us. Come on. I’ll show you to them,” Rainy offered.

“Wait what- hold on a second,” pleaded the diamond dog.

Rainy seemingly didn't hear him and continued bouncing along, leaving her follower to trundle awkwardly after her. After he caught up, he began looking around, the dog immediately finding himself struck by the increasing strangeness all around him.

Arrayed in a circle around them were a bunch of trees that had somehow been warped into the shape of primitive houses. Most were the reed kind that the diamond dog had been staying in, the many thin branches winding together to create a small home. The two at the end were different as they were made from oak trees, and though small were much sturdier-looking.

They weren't empty either, as the diamond dog could see movement, as well as the occasional shape of a pony. They all seemed to be thestrals, though they mostly stayed inside, seemingly avoiding the trickle of large white flakes that fell from above. His assumptions were proven true when one emerged from the shadow and landed nearby, giving him a wave before disappearing into their house.

The diamond dog awkwardly waved back.

“Not many ponies chose to move into the bulb houses. Most stayed underground, which makes sense but it's still a shame,” Rainy remarked. “Uncle Xathrid worked really hard making deals with these trees but apparently that's okay as they are prototaps.”

“Types,” corrected the diamond dog.

“Of what?” Rainy replied.

The dog sighed. “Don't worry about it.”

The filly shrugged and kept moving.

Leaving the small grove behind the diamond dog noticed that it was colder than anticipated. He also realized that he was walking on a fairly well-made road, albeit one that wasn't overly used. Going away from the small grove of tree houses, it lead into the woods, and eventually towards what looked like a large structure.

“So,” murmured Tiny Heart. “How many people live here?”

“A bunch, we got Crossed Swords, my parents Cracked Wheel, and White Iron. Burning Beaker, Crooked Coin, Pen Stroke, and Tall Order. Plus we got like, a bunch living further out. I think they were called Bushel, Candy Apples Apple something, and Myolnaan,” Rainy answered.

“That's not a lot,” pointed out the dog.

Rainy shrugged. “Those are the only ponies I remember. We got like, a ton more plus like fifty of you guys in the cave up ahead.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. Some of them are even alive too!” Rainy proclaimed.

“What?” muttered the dog.

“You’ll find out soon!” Rainy declared.

The diamond dog opened his mouth to reply but caught a glimpse of what looked like a skeletal pony in armor. Standing motionless amidst the dark underbrush, the creature was almost completely invisible. Only the slow movement of its head and faintly glowing eyes betrayed the fact that it was at least in some small way, alive.

It raised a hoof and waved, prompting the diamond dog to awkwardly return the motion. He continued waving until he realized just how far behind he was getting left. Then he jogged after the filly, catching up with her when they reached the large wooden structure built against a stone wall. No, not a wall he realized but rather a massive plateau of rock that jutted out of the ground and rose high into the air.

The natural formation was interesting, but the dog’s attention was grabbed by the building in front of him. It was unassuming, at least at first glance, resembling a warehouse of some kind albeit one with larger doors than what the dog was used to. Upon approaching the place, those towering hunks of oak barring their path were pushed open from the inside revealing the entrance to a mine.

There was also a bit of warehouse space present on either side, racks of ore just waiting for the furnace. A few mine carts were sitting around in various states of disrepair, a mechanic tinkering away with the things to the dog’s right. Though he too looked normal at first glance, a closer inspection revealed that his right arm was completely skeletal.

“What the-” the diamond dog exclaimed, only to grab his throat when he began to cough violently.

“He’s an undead, almost like what you ended up!” Rainy proclaimed.

The diamond dog continued to cough until he nearly vomited, his knees shaking hard enough that he almost fell over. Thankfully a bony hand caught him by the shoulder before he hit the ground.

“You alright there buddy?” asked a slightly ethereal, otherworldly voice.

Little Heart cleared his throat and nodded. “I’m okay. Just, really dry for some reason.”

“That's understandable. The spell that freed you from that damnable collar took longer than the boss anticipated,” remarked the undead dog.

“Boss?” asked Little Heart.

“You’ll meet him soon. Best keep ‘er moving there friend. I bet you got some people that are eager to see that you are okay,” declared the other dog, who gave Little Heart’s shoulder a squeeze before releasing him.

“R-right. My squad was alive last I checked before…” Little Heart paused and clutched hush head. “Augh, why can't I remember?”

“Hey, don't stress it. It’ll return to you in time,” Rainy whispered in a low tone.

Little Heart smiled faintly, face still contorted in a wince.

He then pushed himself back up into a full standing position before gesturing to the mine shaft ahead. It proceed downward at a fairly steep incline at least for the first little bit but Tiny Heart could tell that it tapered out soon after that. Though he couldn't see just how deep it went, the diamond dog had the instinctual knowledge that it went fairly deep underground.

“Well then. Lead the way,” he offered.

Rainy grinned and did just that, trotting off down the tracks with a spring in her step.

“Oh, you’re going to like it here. Uncle Xathrid gave the whole mines to you guys after he made sure to clear out all the bad air,” Rainy declared. “We even found this other entrance so you don't have to go through the thestral lair and mushroom farm.”

“Lair? That sounds… menacing,” murmured Little Heart.

“Pfft, it's just a bunch of cave houses. It's not like we got a secret necromancer laboratory hidden away or anything,” Rainy exclaimed, the filly snickering to herself.

“You sure are a cheeky one, you know,” remarked Little Heart.

Rainy giggled. “Uncle Xathrid says I am this way because I have gumption. Mom says it's because I’m full of piss and vinegar. Which doesn't make any sense. I don't need to drink anything and I hated vinegar even when I was alive?”

“Wait, are you one of those undead as well?” Tiny Heart asked hesitantly.

“Well yeah. Didn't you notice I didn't grab a jacket or anything?” Rainy replied, glancing over her shoulder and cocking her head. “It is pretty cool out there despite not even being winter yet.”

“I may have been a bit distracted by the whole waking up in a weird place, wearing weird clothes, months after I last remembered,” muttered Tiny Heart bitterly.

“It's October by the way,” Rainy piped up. “Like, twenty-something I think. That doesn't matter though cus it's almost hollow weeners.”

Rainy paused and cocked her head, gaze growing distant as if she were engaged in a conversation Tiny Heart was not privy to the other side of.

“Sorry, Halloween,” Rainy exclaimed, shaking her head. “Augh Uncle Xathrid can be so annoying sometimes.”

“Is he here, with us?” Tiny Heart whispered, glancing around.

“Nah he's just in my head,” Rainy proclaimed. “Anyway, here we are!”

Tiny Heart was about to ask another question when he found himself struck by his new and strange surroundings. Though clearly still in a mine, the place had been redecorated to make it feel like the kind of burrow he remembered from his youth. Lanterns were strung across the ceiling, and torches flickered along the walls, illuminating a mostly circular pit.

Around the edges was a track fitted for mine carts, though there were also openings that lead to what were likely family homes. Round doors had been affixed over the entrances, and next to them were colored paw prints that indicated family association. Yet a lot of them were black, a color that was shunned because of its close association with a dishonorable death. Walking up to one such entrance, Tiny Heart traced a finger down the print, a confused expression crossing his face.

“Did you want to talk to miss Tara? Just a sec,” Rainy declared.

“No that's really not…” Tiny Heart’s repudiation gave way to curiosity as Rainy didn't knock but instead glared at the door. “What are you doing?”

Rainy remained silent for a few more seconds before spinning back around and grinning at the diamond dog. “She's coming!” proclaimed the filly.

“How did you do that?” Tiny Heart asked.

“We’re all connected cus we’re all dead!” Rainy offered helpfully.

“Huh,” Tiny Heart murmured.

The door opened a second later, and a large, broad-shouldered female diamond dog appeared in the opening. Wearing a heavy robe usually reserved as under armor worn beneath plate, the diamond dog looked ready for battle. Only she had no weapon and was already dead, evidenced by the faint glow to her eyes, and the fact that the inside of her mouth was visible through an unhealed gash in her cheek.

“Oh, you’re awake,” rumbled the towering female, her voice carrying the strange otherworldly timber that the mechanic had as well. “I guess I owe Xathrid an apology.”

“Why?” asked Tiny Heart.

“Oh he just messed up the spell on your collar slightly and so it took longer for you to wake up than anticipated. Thankfully we were able to remedy this when we found and freed the others,” Tarashar declared.

“Wait, others? DidHalbrecht, and Castus survive?” Tiny Heart all but demanded.

“Yes, and no. It's complicated,” Tarashar muttered, a paw scratching the back of her neck. “Either way they should be down in their domicile at the bottom floor. You can talk with them down there.”

“Thank you. Rainy could you take me there?” Tiny Heart asked, grabbing the filly by the shoulders.

“Uh sure, follow me, mister!” Rainy proclaimed.

Tiny Heart stood back up. “Lead the way.”

“We’ll talk again once you’ve had the chance to settle in a bit,” Tarashar offered.

Tiny Heart gave the larger woman a nod before turning and jogging after the fleeing form of Rainy. Ever eager, the young filly raced down the mine cart track, using her hooves to grind on the freshly polished rails. Though he didn't have the filly’s unnatural grace or wings, the diamond dog following her had a long, loping gait that kept him from falling too far behind.

Down the pair went, passing by more doors, a common area, and the central spire where dogs looked on in amusement. Tiny Heart wanted to question them all, to learn more about this place, and his circumstances but his current dominant desire overrode that urge. Even the appearance of a stream, and what looked like a small market as well as a blacksmith on the second floor wasn't enough to make him slow.

Down on the bottom floor, he noted that there were a few more interesting things of note like a bridge, a communal eating area, and a simple hospital. He would check those things out later, right now he needed to see for his own eyes the fate of his family. He skidded to a stop in front of another round door beside which was a black hand, and a purplish blue one.

“Have fun talking to your partners!” Rainy proclaimed.

Tiny Heart could barely utter a thanks before the door opened and a large diamond dog appeared. So wide was the male that he filled the entire entryway, or at least he would have, if he wasn't missing an arm, the stump capped with a piece of steel. His deep-set dark brown eyes carried that same unnatural glow that Tiny Heart had seen in the other undead. The worry and fear that came with such a realization were washed away by the familiar smile that graced the larger diamond dog’s features.

“It is good to see you, dear heart,” he whispered in a low, rumbling tone.

Tiny Heart didn't think, immediately flinging himself into the larger dog’s arms and embracing him with a kiss. He ignored the faint taste of rot and something artificial on the other dog’s lips, focusing instead on the fact that Helbrecht still contained the warmth Little Heart had missed.

“Hey, save some for me,” exclaimed a voice.

Little Heart pulled back, immediately seeking out and finding the source of the voice. Who happened to be a slightly older female dog who had slipped out under Helbrecht’s side. Though not quite as tall as the towering, dark-furred undead, she was still quite large, with fur almost as dark but containing a bluish-grey tinge that set it apart. More importantly was the eye not covered by a patch, as it did not glow like the undead did but instead shimmered with the hint of a tear.

“Castus!” Little Heart shouted before leaping into her arms and embracing her as he had Helbrecht a moment earlier.

“Our little heart, it's so good to see you,” Castus whispered before kissing the diamond dog.

“It's so good to see you two!” Little Heart proclaimed, only to pause. “Wait, Little Heart isn't my name that’s what you call me… hey!”

Rainy giggled. “Sorry, but Helbrecht told me to!”

“Sell out,” Hellbrecht remarked while snickering.

“Could you give us some privacy for a bit Rainy?” Little Heart asked. “I will want to meet this Xathrid in a little bit so could you come back and help show me around in a bit?”

“Sounds good! I don't want to watch you three get all icky anyway,” Rainy exclaimed, the filly sticking out her tongue in disgust.

“Thank you, Rainy. Oh, and my name is Morus by the way,” Little Heart exclaimed.

“Yeah I know, bye,” Rainy declared before taking off.

As she scampered back up the ramp and left the three dogs behind, Rainy could hear them share a chuckle before retreating into their house.

*It seems as though a friendly face helped keep the shock to a minimum, thank you Rainy.* Exclaimed a deep, and alien voice inside the filly’s mind.

*No problem Uncle Xathrid!* Rainy eagerly replied. *I love showing new people around even if he did get all icky at the end there.*

The filly zipped between the legs of a diamond dog and barrelled around the corner before he had a chance to blink.

*Would you like to get him a drink from Bushel? A little booze usually helps one adjust to changes they may not be ready for.* Offered the voice which seemed to echo forth from some deep primordial well.

*I guess, but doesn't that stuff just make you throw up a lot?* Rainy asked.

*It can but I doubt he's that much of a lightweight.* Replied the voice of Xathrid. *Would you mind bringing them some dinner while you’re at it? They haven't picked up any supplies in a while and I’m worried about them.*

*Oh, they’re probably just being silly.* Rainy exclaimed. *Mom says they are stubborn like mules but I’ve never met a mule before.*

*Maybe one day. Oh and Rainy, thank you.* Xathrid whispered.

Rainy grinned. *No problem Uncle Xathrid. Besides, they make some really good apple candies.*

*Ahh, that's right.* Rumbled Xathrid. *They might even be done making the new ones I asked them to cook up for Halloween.*

Rainy stopped. *New ones!?*

*I’ve said too much.* Xathrid stated slyly. *You’ll just have to go bug Candy Apples to find out more.*

The filly weaved around a mine cart, and turned around the final corner, entering the tunnel that ultimately lead to the surface. Rather than exit through the newly dug hole which emerged about a mile from Xathrid's grove, she hung a right. Going up a long flight of freshly made stairs, she reached what had once been a relatively unpleasant and narrow passage.

It wasn't quite as nice as the gently sloping entrance the diamond dogs used to reach their mine, but it was close. A bit of climbing later and the filly reached a freshly erected security door placed between the two areas. Serving more so to simply support the ceiling now that Xathrid's roots had retreated, it could be locked from either side in case of emergency. Though for now it was left unlocked, and partially open, allowing the filly to pass without even slowing her down.

After jogging up the last few stairs, Rainy turned a corner and was greeted with the sight of freshly cooked food. The cavern she currently stood in was fairly wide, and two-tiered, with the lower half being dedicated to preparing meals. A thestral canned mushrooms on one side while on the other a rather primitive oven was baking bread while heating up soup.

"Hey there Rainy," offered the undead thestral standing by the oven. "Off to bring some supplies to the Apples?"

"Yuppers!" Rainy proclaimed.

"I left the bag in the barracks in case anyone was heading out that way. Ask Quarter Smith, he'll know where it is," offered the thestral mare.

"Thanks, have fun with the soup!" Rainy proclaimed.

"Have fun with soup, ha! As if soup could be fun," laughed the mare.

Rainy shrugged and kept trotting down the path, passing by the rather expansive kitchen area constructed mostly out of stone. The second tiered section had several copper jugs connected via pipes sitting atop stone tables cut out of the wall. The filly didn't know what they did, but they sure smelled funny, almost like the container of chemicals she had been told not to drink.

On the other side, someone was working on drying out long strips of mushrooms on wooden racks. Several half-woven clothing items hung there, waiting to be completed with the addition of more strips. Rainy didn't know how that worked either, but she had seen a unicorn come around to help every once and a while.

Beyond the food and mushroom processing area was a narrow tunnel that wound to the left before opening up into a large cavern. Nearly as large as a city block and several stories tall, it housed dozens of families as well as a large mushroom farm. While the farm covered almost the entire ground level save for a path running through the middle, and one that went around the edges, the living spaces were almost all above.

Housing was mostly off the ground and built into the rock walls above but there were a few along the right side that Rainy could see. Wooden walkways and bridges connected the various homes to one another and the staircase built into the far wall. To the filly, it looked like an interconnected mass of string not unlike an enormous spider's web.

"Hey, Rainy, where you off to in such a hurry?" asked a passerby.

"Mystery dog is awake and I'm bringing him alcohol!" Rainy proclaimed.

The dumbstruck passerby stood there, a basket full of mushrooms clutched under one hoof.

Rainy didn't bother explaining and merely ran on, sprinting into the third and final cavern before reaching outside. That final room was much different, as it was devoted mostly to a barracks, though Rainy didn't know what that word meant. To her, it was the fighting room, where thestrals and diamond dogs trained with swords, making sure not to hit one another too hard.

Near the exit to the room a raised barricade with spikes jutting out the front waited for any would-be invader to come charging in. Though no one had tried yet, her uncle Xathrid had insisted on its construction just in case such a thing occurred in the future. Rainy didn't get it, but there was a lot she didn't get, so she stopped at the lone wooden structure was located.

Sitting nearby, with a grin on his face was an older thestral that Rainy had seen many times. The stallion was almost completely white, but sure didn't act old, as he hopped off his chair and approached the filly.

"Well howdy there little one," he greeted. "The boss tree sent along word that you're looking for a care package. It's sitting in the armory. Go ahead and grab it."

"Okay dokay. Thank you Mister Smith!" Rainy proclaimed.

The older thestral smiled and sauntered back to his rocking chair.

Leaving Rainy to enter the building, pluck the bag of goods from the table, and leave without even glancing at all the weapons and armor hanging all over the place. Though she didn't notice it, an undead squirrel watched from the corner of the room, observing the filly as she went. Rainy also didn't know that upon entering the room several magical defenses powered down, powering back up only to come back online after she left.

Tossing the saddlebags over her back, Rainy ran past the barricade, and the undead thestrals manning it. She skipped along, humming to herself as she exited the cave, leaving the pleasantly warm caverns behind. Though she didn't mind the change in temperature, Rainy still took note of the change, enjoying the brisk cool breeze of fall on her coat.

She waved to the handful of ponies that were working near the exit to the cave. With hammers and axes they were assembling a large door that once completed would fit perfectly in the entrance. Right now it was just a pile of wood in Rainy's opinion, though her uncle Xathrid had told her about how the entire thing was inspired by some story about a ring and a lord.

She didn't get it.

Breaking into a run, she began flapping her wings before leaping into the air. She hung there for a moment before hitting the ground, and rolling into a bush, getting herself covered in burs in the process.

*Need help controlling your magic?* Xathrid inquired.

Rainy pulled herself from the underbrush, checked her bags, and was about to reply with a firm no only to stop herself.

*Yes.* She glumly replied.

*Don't feel bad. This is going to take some practice remember?* Xathrid calmly asserted.

"Yeah," Rainy muttered aloud.

*Come on, get those wings moving.* Xathrid encouraged.

Rainy felt the urge to cry coming on for a moment, but a firm sniff banished that urge before it could manifest. She then took a deep, and completely unnecessary breath before breaking into a sprint, wings pumping hard. Once she was sure she was running as fast as possible, she jumped into the air and tried to activate her magic.

Alone, she couldn't quite muster it, but with Xathrid's help her wings began to grow warm and her body lightened. After a moment of freefall, she felt her momentum shift and she started to ascend. Slowly at first, but as soon as she had breached the tree cover the filly started to pick up speed.

In only a few seconds she was flying high above the ground with only her wings and a helping hand keeping her up there. The joy of flight brought a smile to her face, and the filly wanted only to speed up, but resisted that urge. She needed practice and so rather than pouring on the speed she decided to simply fly normally.

*There you go.* Xathrid encouraged.

Rainy's smile grew and she idly glanced about the forest as she flew towards her distant destination. The dense brush and towering trees indicative of Xathrid's forest had grown far, nearly engulfing the entire immediate area. In the distance, Rainy could see where her 'uncle's'

influence ended and the chaotic tangle of branches gave way to plains. Beyond that was the pass that lead to her old home, while to the left lay the deer lands though it all looked the same to Rainy.

Turning her wings, she began to glide down towards a more orderly mass of trees hidden away in a small valley. As she descended, the filly took note of a few other clearings she could see from her current vantage point. She recalled that Xathrid was experimenting with something, and testing some kind of building technique but she couldn't recall more information. The filly didn't make a concerted effort to do so either, her attention span quickly running out after thinking about it for a few seconds.

As she slowly glided towards the ground, Rainy took note of the small orchard and shack that stood in its midst. There was no nice way of putting it, the ramshackle home was little more than a fancy bunch of lean-tos, but it seemed to suit the four inhabitants just fine. Bushel could be spotted working on the outer wall, while his sister Caramel Apple assisted, and Mjolna sat off to the side, rotating the hides of some beast they were intending on turning into winter jackets.

“Where’s Candy Apples?” Rainy shouted in lieu of a proper greeting.

“What? No hey, how's it going? Just straight into seeing my wife, huh?” Bushel asked.

Caramel Apple chuckled, punching her brother in the shoulder. “Can ya blame her? Zombie or not, a kid’s got the nose of a blood hound when it comes to candy.”

Rainy landed near the house and stopped in front of Bushel. “Oh, and these are for you. Uncle Xathrid was worried you were going to starve out here.”

“We can make it on our own just-” Bushel started only to be interrupted by Mjolna.

The quiet mare plucked the bags from Rainy’s back and walked inside, shooting the lone male a glare as she did so.

“I can take a hint,” Bushel muttered to himself.

Caramel Apple chuckled.

Mojolna stood inside the entrance to the shack and gestured for Rainy to follow her in. Something the filly did immediately with a squeal of excitement. Once inside she was hit by the scent of something sweet cooking somewhere very close by. It wasn't hard to find the fireplace and the mare who was sitting next to it, tending to the bubbling cauldron with a close eye.

“Is it almost ready?” Rainy asked.

Candy Apple looked over to the voice, expression softening when she laid eyes on the filly. “Almost,” Candy Apple offered. “I gotta say though, your uncle sure does have a good mind for treats considering the fact that he's a tree.”

“That's because he lives viscously through me,” Rainy proclaimed.

“I think you mean vicariously,” Candy Apple offered.

“That's what I said,” Rainy replied.

Candy Apple and Mjolna shared a gentle chuckle which just confused Rainy.

“They’ll be done in time for your uncle’s celebration,” Candy Apple offered. “Speaking of which. I must ask as to why he seems to have so much love for such a grim tradition.”

“It's not grim,” Rainy retorted. “It's fun! We get to dress up and eat candy, and the adults get to drink booze.”

Mjolna couldn't help but giggle.

“I suppose any excuse to forget our troubles and imbibe a little mushroom brew is a good thing,” Candy Apples murmured while stirring the pot absently. “And perhaps a little fake horror will offset the real horror we’ve seen this past year.”

“Do you have any liquid courage? The sleeping dog is finally awake,” Rainy half asked half stated.

“Oh absolutely, here you are,” Candy Apple replied, handing back the filly’s saddle bags now with a small jar of a dark yellow liquid inside.

“Kay, bye now!” Rainy announced suddenly.

“Thank you Rainy,” Mjolna exclaimed, waving to the filly as she departed.

Rainy grinned, and took off at a sprint, calling on her magic as she did so. Though again she needed a little extra help, the filly was soon airborne once more and heading back the way she came. The apples she passed by barely gave her a glance, both having focused once more on their work.

This time Rainy’s short attention span got the better of her and she tried to push a bit more magic into her wings, hoping to speed things up a little. Though successful in this endeavor, she realized that after clearing the distance, speeding up was one thing but stopping was another. She flared her wings in an attempt to stop but didn't shift her magic as she did so, leading to her not actually slowing down one bit.

“Oh crud!” she cried, hooves flailing.

*Gotcha.*

A nearby tree reached out with a branch and plucked the filly out of the air before depositing her gently on the ground.

“Thanks, Uncle Xathrid,” Rainy exclaimed.

*No problem. Just remember to clean that oak tree’s bark. It's got a bit of an invasive growth on the west side.* Xathrid replied.

“Kay!” Rainy proclaimed.

Walking towards the mine entrance, Rainy stopped abruptly, the door opening just as she was reaching for the handle. Emerging from the dark interior was a familiar canid face, one that seemed aged since last Rainy had seen him. Despite the fact that he looked burdened in some way, he wore a satisfied smile that made Rainy grin right back.

“Here!” Rainy announced, plucking the jar from her bag and shoving it into Morus’s paw. “Uncle Xathrid said this would help.”

Morus chuckled. “Thank you, Rainy. Hellbrecht mentioned you had something special for me.”

A twist removed the top of the jar, allowing the dog to sniff the contents. Though his nose initially crinkled in disgust, a smile quickly replaced his dour expression. Taking a quick swig made that smile grow even larger, a sigh of contentment escaping the dog.

“That's good,” Morus remarked.

“Feel better?” Rainy inquired.

“Quite. Would you lead me to your uncle please?” Morus inquired.

“Kay!” Rainy exclaimed.

Without waiting for even a moment, Rainy took off, jogging down the path. The diamond dog following in her wake after a second to put the top back on the jar.

With Rainy out in front, the pair made their way along the slightly winding path. The filly didn't bother to take in the sights as she had walked the same passage dozens of times a day. Morus glanced about though he kept his curiosity in check lest he end up left behind by the excitable filly.

Within a few short minutes, they arrived rather abruptly at their destination. Having broken through the tree cover, they emerged into a large grove dominated by enormous shade trees. Cast in permanent shadow, the palace was oddly intimidating yet still inviting for reasons that Morus couldn't quite understand.

The pond in the center was fresh and clear, its banks surrounded by alien flowers that Morus had no name for. Strange plant life that Morus didn't recognize were everywhere, making the grove feel more like a strange greenhouse or museum. Then his gaze settled on the grove's owner and he immediately felt as though it were more like a church.

Every blade of grass, every bush, tree or leaf seemed subtly turned toward the towering entity that sat at the clearing's edge. Nestled between two large stones, with its back to the ridge, the tree was massive, dwarfing even the undead dragon that lay at its base. Though the skeletal remains of the black dragon were filled with dirt and covered with plant life, it still oozed menace, at least in the diamond dog's opinion.

Even then it was not half as intimidating as the mammoth tree that rose above all others, extending its branches to the heavens. Though its bark looked to sport the faces of agonized creatures beyond counting, and it loomed over its surroundings Morus felt his interests become piqued.

"It really is a ghoultree," he murmured to himself.

"That I am," spoke the dragon, its voice so deep that Morus felt his bones rattle inside his body. "Though you can call me Xathrid."

"Apologies," Morus hastily replied, ducking into a shallow bow. "I had assumed they were simply mistaken when they told me of your nature. Ghoultrees were assumed to be smart but not truly intelligent."

"I am a unique breed," stated the dragon. "But perhaps we can discuss that later. For now, I was hoping to hear your decision."

"What decision?" Rainy asked.

"If I would stay, and help him," Morus answered.

"If you would help your own," Xathrid corrected. "Now that I have a bit of company I have no desires unmet, and no wants left unfulfilled."

Morus chuckled. "That is fair."

"This sounds boring. Can I go now?" Rainy asked.

The dragon chuckled. “Yes you may Rainy, thank you for your help.”

The filly didn't respond as she was too busy sprinting off into the woods, her mind already set on the next fun thing she could do.

“Now then, have you given it some thought?” Inquired Xathrid.

“I mean obviously I’m staying,” Morus answered. “But I think the real question is if I would offer my skills in botany to you.”

“No pressure,” Xathrid offered. “Your mates have just told me so much about you that I can't help but be curious about what we may be able to do if we put our heads together.”

Morus nodded slowly. “It would be the opportunity of a lifetime, and one I would be crazy to pass up on so… of course I’m going to say yes.”

“You almost had me going for a sec there,” Xathrid pointed out with a chuckle. “You sure have a flair for the dramatic you know.”

“I can't believe Helbrecht didn't tell you about that,” Morus exclaimed.

“Oh he did, but his warnings don't quite do it justice,” declared the dragon.

Who uncurled itself and trod slowly over to the diamond dog before extending a clawed hand.

“To new partnerships and new opportunities,” Xathrid offered.

Morus smiled, and took the claw, shaking it as best as his diminutive stature would allow. “To a bright future.”