As my greatest servant was making a beeline for the mountain, I consider my own safety. Though leaving myself so vulnerable may have made me a bit panicky at first, now I had far fewer concerns. I could, after all, sense nearly anything that entered my domain, and with my deer skull, I could survey the skies.

I was relieved to find that nothing was coming, nor was there a speck of golden armor anywhere to be seen. Not that I feared what a couple of pegasi could do, but rather I knew they would report the changes in the forest. A little hard to hide the sudden sprouting of a huge ghoul tree, and about a mile of the woods growing twice as wild overnight.

It would bring attention eventually, but I was hoping against hope that I would be able to process things one at a time. A little silly to wish for that when my experiences so far inclined me to believe otherwise, but wishful thinking is not logical. Nor was my appreciation for my corner of the forest, as I found myself awestruck by its beauty once more.

It was one thing to feel all that new growth, and experience it through the senses of a plant. It was another to actually beheld it with my eyes, or at least, the eyes of my undead servants. Who moved through the wood with surprising speed, the plants within parting before them like a crowd before their sovereign.

It made my metaphorical heart swell with pride, and a protective urge to build at the back of my mind. Though they were not truly intelligent and were just plants, I was getting fairly good at judging their moods. Though not true emotions as I knew them when I was human, there was a strange approximation that the trees felt.

Even the smaller bushes and grasses had a sort of desire to grow. When joined together with the larger plants they had a kind of intelligence that had a limited range of things it could feel. Still, it was there and was akin to how I felt about my dog in my previous life. I was protective of her, and knew she could experience pain, but was not truly sapient such as I.

They at least alleviated my loneliness somewhat, so it wasn't too bad.

My servants reaching the edge of my forest brought me out of my musings and forced me to pay attention. Standing at the edge of my influence I noticed just how stark the differences were when compared to my domain. The lands in which I was sovereign were verdant in the extreme, making the rest of the forest seem almost barren in comparison.

Where my territory was a mix of swamp, and temperate, here it was flatter, more deciduous. The air was dryer, and the sounds of life were less common, as were the bugs which were steadily moving in. It was almost a bit unpleasant to gaze upon all this space which could be filled with plant life, or other critters.

Putting that thought aside, I focused on my mission and reminded myself of why it was important. There were living, thinking things that required my help, and who would likely perish

without it. Though it may have just been my guilt talking, I couldn't leave them to their fate without at least making an attempt to help them.

Perhaps I would even discover who the filly's parents were, or at least a little more about her history. Regardless, I had a plan in mind, and I focused completely on it, ignoring everything else in my path. With all other considerations an afterthought, it took little time for me to maneuver my servant back to the mountain.

The dragon's instincts remained, meaning I didn't have to learn how to use a quadrupedal body. Rather I just had to urge it in that direction and the undead creature did as was commanded of it. A nice benefit, though not nearly as important as the fact that I felt no strain upon pushing the dragon further into the forest.

There was no rubber band feeling, and I could sense that my zone of control was now truly massive. I would need to test this out in the future, but for now, it was just another consideration for tomorrow. At the moment I need only reach the castle I had seen and crush the wolves that oppose me.

Within minutes, I had accomplished the first of those tasks, with my servant arriving at the base of the mountain. Soon after I had entered the dead city and begun to ascend the many steps up to the keep that stood atop it all. Once more my curiosity urged me to peek into the homes I passed, and once more I shut that urge down.

I would have time to map these halls and explore them fully at a later date. Right now I was needed.

The first sign of trouble came from a pair of wolves standing sentinel on either side of the bridge. Upon seeing me they released a synchronized howl and charged directly at me as they were programmed. They were essentially mindless and even with their programming served as little obstacle to me.

A swipe annihilated one, and the thump of my fist destroyed the other before they could even reach me. Not like wooden teeth would do anything against the magically reinforced bone of an undead dragon. Still, more came, and were also disposed of, allowing me entry into the castle proper for the first time.

There stood a dozen more wolves, who thought to ambush me by attacking from all sides at once.

They accomplished nothing.

A whip of my servant's tail destroyed two, the claws of my dragon destroyed six more, and the rest were dealt with soon after. Their attacks were feeble, and I took my time dashing them

against the castle walls using my overwhelming strength. It was an incredible feeling, and I relished inhabiting the dragon due to the power I felt coursing through its body.

Within minutes they were destroyed, and I was able to move further inside, stomping any wolf that blocked my path. Following the only real path large enough for my bulk, I soon found myself in what had likely been a throne room. There I located nearly a hundred of the bat-winged ponies gathered into a large circle at the center of the space.

Around them stood more wolves, half of whom looked ready to attack while the others stared inward. My servant's presence unnerved the creatures within, causing some to faint, others to scream and one to try running. Sure enough, one of the wolves moved to stop the pony but I put refused to let that happen and leaped upon it.

Crushing it flat, I then grabbed the pony, and placed him back amongst his fellows before he had a chance to squirm away. That seemed to confuse the throng of hooved creatures enough that they didn't try to flee again. Which was good, as the wolves attacked me the second I stopped moving, gnawing at my servant's bones to no effect.

I made a show of destroying the wolves one by one, tossing them against walls or stomping them flat. I even destroyed several by crushing them between my servant's massive jaws, turning them into splinters. In less than a minute the necromantic hunks of wood were once more inert, their bodies strewn across the room haphazardly.

When my gaze swung back around and landed on the ponies, they collectively stumbled back a step. I could sense their fear and was temporarily unsure of how best to banish that feeling given my servant's appearance. Talking was the obvious solution, but I wasn't sure how given that I had no vocal cords to speak of.

I did have magic, however, and with a bit of focus, I was able to use a ventriloquism spell on myself. The target could be anywhere in a hundred feet, but I chose to center it on my servant's mouth to replicate speech. This felt a little odd, as a dragon's magic was centered on their breathe, but thankfully I didn't actually need lungs for this.

Just a slow exhale while focusing on my servant's mouth.

This startled the ponies who were now pressing themselves against the far wall, but I ignored them.

"Test, test," I whispered to myself. "Alright then."

I cleared my throat, and plunked down in front of the herd of ponies, attempting to look less intimidating.

“Greetings, ponies,” I began my voice deep and rumbling. “I urge you to calm yourselves.”

That was met with more confusion than calm, but that was to be expected given their circumstances. So I just waited a few seconds until it seemed like no one was about to run away at least. Though no one was stepping forward to chat, I continued on, intent on building bridges.

“As you may have already realized I am not your former tormentor, whoever they may be,” I explained. “Though their bones stand before you, their mind is long gone.”

The room was quiet for several seconds before a rather diminutive and skeletal pony stepped forward.

“R-really?” they asked.

“Indeed. As you no doubt gleaned, they had made an enemy of someone. I am that enemy and I have bested your former draconic master,” I continued, placing a skeletal hand over where my heart would be.

That made the room fall quiet once more, and though I expected a cheer all I got was a quiet sense of relief. Shoulders slumped, long breaths were had, and the majority of the ponies stepped away from the wall. They did not, however, scream their praise from the heavens or anything, and still remained guarded.

“Who, or what are you? Zaxonis mentioned a tree or something before charging off,” asked another of the ponies.

I hesitated a moment, unsure of if I should divulge my rather… unique nature to them, but chose to be honest in the end.

“I am what is referred to as a ghoultree,” I replied.

Fear returned in abundance, but it was almost overpowered by confusion.

“A ghoultree? I didn't think those things were intelligent,” someone murmured.

“I am not an it,” I corrected, putting great pains to not sound offended, lest I startle them again. “Though essentially genderless at this point, you may refer to me as he, or by my name. Xathrid, The Blackblooded.”

Sure enough, they were intimidated by my name but didn't flee or back away at least.

“Uh okay,” murmured the young, nearly emaciated pony from before. “What exactly do you want now?”

“Want?” I hummed to myself. “I would appreciate some company, but as for you lot. You’re free to go.”

“What?” muttered the thestral.

I stood to the side and extended an arm back to the entrance. “I only returned as I knew the wolves would not be destroyed and that you all were still in trouble. With that dealt with you may leave if you would like.”

“Just like that?” someone else asked.

“I like to think I’m a good pers… creature?” I scratched my servant’s head. “Regardless I like to think I’m not a monster anyway. So you are free to go wherever it is you desire, though if you’d like I have plenty of food and a dry place to stay.”

“So you are enslaving us?” another pony asked.

I sighed and planted my face into my skeletal palm. “I am offering it freely for anyone to take up or deny. I make no demands, and merely wish to help. If you think you will have a better chance here, or out in the wilderness then please, take it.”

Silence returned once more, this time it didn't last nearly as long, with a taller, older pony stepping out in front.

“Could you leave us for a moment?” he asked.

I nodded. “Absolutely. Just give me a shout after you’ve had a chance to discuss things.”

I then had my servant walk away before anyone could respond, making my way just barely out of earshot. Laying down on the cold ground, I watched as they closed the doors to the throne room and vanished from sight. Left with little else to do I began to worry but quashed that relatively quickly.

There was nothing they could do to harm me, or my servant so the danger was minimal. Heck, the only real danger at this point was that they would turn my offer down and I would be left alone again. Still, that wasn't too bad of a possibility, as at least I had my woods, and a good deal of stuff to do.

Exploring more of the dragon’s skills, testing the limits of my new zone of control, and mapping the area. I knew from Zaxonis that the area I currently inhabited was called the Elden Lands, which had once been the cradle of civilizations. The old pony empires had emerged from this place, only to be quashed when a monumental blizzard buried them.

Their survivors fled and established new kingdoms, while their previous home slowly warmed back up. His knowledge was spotty concerning these developments, but I could recall that other races had colonies or city-states here as well. Or at least they did at one point, though how many of them remained was anyone's guess given this place's history.

It was a bit odd though, as I could only recall bits and pieces. History was, after all, a mix of facts, as well as assumptions and educated guesses. I only received skills and facts from those I consumed, but even that second thing was shaky at times.

Perhaps in time, I could learn to take a creature's memories as well, but that wasn't a certainty. Still, it was something to muse over if nothing else, though I couldn't do so for long, as the doors opened once more. The elderly bat pony appeared once more, this time flanked by two, healthier-looking stallions.

"We have made a decision," he proclaimed.

"Would you like to deliver it here, or should I reenter the room?" I offered.

"The room. We have questions we would like to ask," he replied, trotting back into the throne room once more.

Though it felt a bit like I was walking back into an interrogation room, I continued on, head held high. Once inside I took the time to really look around, and inspect my new surroundings.

There I found that a great mound of pillows had been assembled where the throne had once been. This had likely served as the dragon's bed given its large size, though at the moment it was being used by numerous ponies. With danger having finally passed, several had gone to sleep or were finally relaxing on the slightly musty bedding.

In the corner was a pile of loot that ranged from silverware to gold bars. How I had managed to miss this the first time was beyond me, as it was a good few feet high at the tallest point. Next to it were a few barrels, while on the other side of the room there was a small mountain of bones.

Judging from the fact that the ponies gave it a wide berth I could only assume that some of their number had ended up in there. My first urge was to test my new abilities by raising one or two new skeletons but I waited on that. I didn't exactly feel like startling my potential guests or desecrating their loved one's bones, at least not without permission anyway.

The rest of the room was devoid of decoration, though I could tell there had likely been some at one point. Faded spots on the walls revealed that banners had likely hung from the ceiling, while smashed pedestals told that other trophies had once been displayed here. Now there were only blank walls, a pile of bones, pillows, and gathered valuables that could be found within.

"What exactly do you have to offer in the realm of food?" asked the elderly bat pony.

I focused on him a little closer, committing his description to detail. Tall, thin, wiry, he had a dark purple mane and tail, with eyes of brilliant gold. His tattoo, which I recalled was referred to as a cutie mark, was of an old-fashioned ink well pen dashing across a page.

“Before we continue, what is your name?” I inquired, sitting back down.

“Pen Stroke,” he replied.

“Well Pen Stroke, I have a veritable field of Pauper’s Dinner to offer,” I replied.

Several bat ponies groaned but were silenced by a fierce glare from Pen Stroke.

“That would at least alleviate starvation but do you have anything else?” he pressed.

“I have not had the chance to catalog all that grows within my grove and territory, but it was considerable,” I paused and wracked the deer’s skills for their names. “Pink Colwort, Giant Sorrel, Pamfons, Snakeberry, Ragweed, and Dragon’s Bite. Are the ones I’ve noticed thought here are no doubt more.”

That got a few mouths salivating, and more than a few on board with my plan.

“Interesting,” Pen Stroke exclaimed. “And you mentioned you had accommodations?”

“To be honest it's just a cave, but it is illuminated by plenty of bioluminescent mushrooms, and it's warm,” I answered.

“Acceptable, but not ideal,” he muttered.

“I’d sleep in a pit of filth if it meant I did so without a growling belly,” someone offered.

That got a murmur of agreement from the group.

“I’m assuming your former… tormentor didn't exactly have a large stockpile of supplies?” I reasoned.

“No,” Pen Stroke replied with a frown. “He wanted to make sure that no one could steal any and run away.”

“Not like that stopped a few anyway,” remarked a rather crestfallen pony.

“I see,” I exclaimed. “Well, it seems as though your path is set then.”

I stood back up. “You should come back with me, or at least send an envoy to collect the food I offer. Then either return with it or remain in my lands until you’ve had a chance to recover a bit.”

“That does seem logical, but I am unwilling to risk everyone,” Pen Stroke reasoned.

“I would suggest sending a few of your numbers to return with me. I will gift them all the food they can carry, and if you like what I have to offer, then I would say you should return,” I continued. “After you’ve had a chance to rest and recuperate you can either continue on or return here if you so choose.”

“We were originally hoping to settle here,” Pen Stroke confided. “Before that bastard found us.”

“Then I believe you know what must be done,” I exclaimed, stepping forward. “Do you mind if I took a few of these rather pricey-looking items for myself?”

“Pardon my frankness, but what does a tre have need for gold?” Penstroke inquired.

“Me? Nothing,” I replied. “But it could entice some visitors, and it is rather lonely. Plus you never know what a trader may have. I would love to collect some rare seeds.”

“That is... Fair,” Pen Stroke coughed into a hoof and gestured to the pile. “Help yourself.”

“Most appreciated,” I exclaimed, bowing slightly with my hand over my heart.

I walked slowly over to the mound of loot and selected a few things from the pile after a few minutes of searching. Which included a bag of gems of various sizes and qualities, a bone chalice of rather disturbing design, a fur-trimmed cloak, a couple of books, a rod of some kind, as well as several scrolls kept within finely made glass tubes and stoppered with gems. There were other interesting things, but I chose to leave them for the ponies, much to their apparent shock.

“That's all your taking?” one of them asked.

“Would you like me to take more?” I replied.

“N-no,” he stuttered.

I tied the small bag of loot to a rib and walked back over to Pen Stroke, who had gathered a small group of volunteers. They were certainly an eclectic menagerie, though they were all at least healthy, save for one older mare. She was sickly and barely seemed able to walk, her fur having nearly lost all color leaving her resembling an albino.

“They will come with you,” Pen Stroke offered.

I counted only seven total, though they at least all had empty saddlebags, save for the older mare. I decided not to push matters, as I had already mentally decided that I would assist them in hauling food back. This was mainly just a trust exercise after all, so their comfort was the most important thing.

“Well then,” I began. “Follow me.”