Kanathara stumbled and nearly fell, the branch of a young elm catching her before she could hit the ground. Breathing heavily, she fought to keep herself focused and to avoid collapsing into an undignified heap.

You alright, boss? Rainbow Dash gently asked.

“I’m…” Kanathara took a deep breath and straightened her back. “I’m fine. This little adventure has taken a lot of me, however.”

I can tell. There still isn't enough leftover power to reform my body, Rainbow Dash remarked in an exasperated tone. *Not that I’m complaining, but you know me. I don't like to sit still.*

“I know, Rainbow Dash, and it won't be long,” Kanathara replied, looking up towards where the cottage sat atop a hill. “Just gotta grab a soul and get your body back.”

And then we can both take a well-deserved break, Rainbow Dash finished.

Kanathara wanted to argue, wanted to remind the vengant of their contract as well as what would happen if they were to fail. Then her leg quivered, informing her that her muscles were so tired that even standing up was a difficult task. With such a poignant reminder of her own weakness fresh in her mind, it was hard to argue with her familiar.

Kanathara turned and quickly inspected her surroundings, curiously noting the changes which the cottage had undergone. A small wooden wall surrounded the entire perimeter of the property, and the hellish garden had grown to three times its original size. A few watchtowers were also going up, but at the moment were only a quarter or so done.

Even the air seemed different, and Kanathara could tell that was due to the invisibility spell having been altered. She didn't need to light her horn to know that it had likely been expanded, and overlaid with a notice-me-not spell, as that was exactly what she would have done. Knowing Tirek, that was also what he had done the second he had time away from whatever secret project he had been working on.

The shed Kanathara had noticed earlier had been replaced by a barn, and the small scattering of imps had at least doubled in number. Even now one of them was pointing down at her and shouting back towards his comrades, a move which initially made Kanathara nervous. When the short, hooved demon didn't raise his crossbow, Kanathara realized that her fears had been misplaced.

At least the cottage seems to be unchanged, Rainbow Dash remarked. *And the imps seem a little more well-trained.*

Kanathara nodded in agreement, watching as a squad of imps clad in splint mail trotted up to her. The small wooden home behind them did indeed seem the same, though Twilight got the

impression that its interior had been altered. After all, unless Pear Butter's new imp army all stayed in the barn, they would need a place to rest their heads.

And Pear Butter didn't seem the type to force them to sleep outside or on the ground if she could help it.

"Lady Kanathara. Do you require assistance?" asked a small, winged imp that trotted up to her.

The keeper of secrets briefly looked over the diminutive creature before shaking her head. "Just catching my breath," she declared in a soft tone.

The imp glanced back at his fellows before turning to Kanathara. "Are you sure? We could bring you some water or something if you need."

"It's fine, really. I appreciate it though," Kanathara replied.

They sure are polite, Rainbow Dash exclaimed.

Kanathara nodded and pushed herself off the tree. "I assume you notified Pear Butter of my arrival?"

"Of course. The boss should be out momentarily," answered the imp.

"Good. Return to your duties. I'll be inside in a moment," Kanathara commanded.

The imp bowed his head. "As you command, Lady Kanathara."

You think he used to be a pony? Rainbow Dash asked, directing their attention to the imp in question.

I doubt it. Though anything is possible with the Everfree, Kanathara replied, idly noting that the head imp did indeed seem to bear more pony-like features compared to the others, such as a pair of eyes larger than any of his kin. *Either way, that's not a concern of ours.*

Kanathara trotted slowly up to the house, her mind awhirl with thoughts of relaxation, right up until the door burst open. Frightened Pear Butter appeared in the entrance. Kanathara tried to decide between playing dead, running away and using what little magic she had to teleport inside.

Can you maybe step past her? Rainbow Dash asked.

I'm struggling just to walk the rest of the way, Kanathara replied.

As the charging wrath demon closed the distance, Kanathara could see tears budding at the edge of Pear Butter's eyes and a worried look crossing her face. Then Kanathara was swept up in the great golden mare's hooves and gently pressed against her chest.

"Oh, thank goodness you're okay," Pear Butter muttered. "When Tirek scried the diamond dog den and found out what happened, I couldn't help but fear the worst."

Kanathara let out a sigh of relief when she realized the other demon wasn't about to crush her and gave Pear Butter a sympathetic pat on the back. "I'm fine. Just really, really tired," she whispered.

"And Rainbow Dash?" Pear Butter asked, holding the keeper at arm's length like she were nothing more than a doll.

Kanathara tapped her chest. "Here. Safe, but she took a beating, as did I."

"Wait until your mother hears about this. Oh, she is going to be so relieved," Pear Butter exclaimed.

Kanathara raised an eyebrow. "She was worried?"

"Of course she was." Pear Butter chuckled. "Even if she pretended otherwise, the mare was a nervous wreck after you didn't check in."

Kanathara sighed. "I would have been here sooner but with my own magic and Rainbow Dash out of commission, I had to walk."

Pear Butter hummed thoughtfully. "I want to say that you should have found a soul and revived her using its energy, but that was probably the best call. Wouldn't want to accidentally draw attention to yourselves, given the state you're in."

"So, can you let me down now?" Kanathara asked, kicking her dangling legs in emphasis.

Pear Butter blushed and immediately did just that. "Sorry, dear."

"No problem," Kanathara exclaimed, straightening her spine once more. "Now, we have a lot to discuss, and I don't want to repeat myself, so why don't we go inside?"

"Excellent thinking. Tirek was just getting your mother on the globe before I left," Pear Butter stated as she joined the other demon as she walked towards the cottage.

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“...and that pretty much brings us up to now,” Kanathara stated, folding her forehooves on the table.

The expressions on the other three individuals’ faces varied, though the one underlying commonality was a look of relief. Pear Butter, who sat to Kanathara’s right, was smiling, but the keeper of secrets could tell the wrath demon’s thoughts were a million miles away. As were Tirek’s, the old centaur stroking his grey bear in a slow, deliberate manner.

Velvet was perhaps the most expressive, with a strange zeal evident on her partly shrouded features. Even through the crystal ball which sat between Pear Butter and Tirek, Kanathara could still tell that the pony appeared oddly energized.

“This is excellent news!” exclaimed the unicorn. “With only two left, your contractual obligations are almost complete.”

“I suppose that part is good, but I still don't like to imagine what the Nightmare has planned,” Kanathara stated.

“I think that's something we can all agree on,” remarked Tirek in a slightly tired tone. “Whatever she has in mind for this world, it isn't going to be pleasant for its inhabitants.”

“We know darn well what she has in store for us,” Pear Butter stated, thumping her hoof against the table. “And it's the destruction of this whole plane of existence.”

Should we even bother thinking about her right now? Wondered Rainbow Dash. *We should be focusing on healing up and gathering our bearings.*

It couldn't hurt to consider, and don't worry, we’ll be relaxing soon enough, Kanathara placated.

“Speaking of which,” Tirek began, “you haven't discussed the contract in great detail. Do you happen to recall its contents? Perhaps we could discover a loophole.”

“I appreciate the thought, but that thing was ironclad. Not only that, but I’m so tired I don't even think I can recall a single thing about it,” Kanathara replied.

Pear Butter lightly punched Tirek in the shoulder. “Ease up on the girl. She just got back.”

The centaur nodded slowly. “I merely wished to get working on that while you recuperated, but it can wait.”

“As much as it pains me to say this, you look like garbage,” Velvet deadpanned.

Kanathara sighed. “Thank you, mother. I had totally forgotten about the several sleepless days spent maneuvering through the Everfree with barely any magic.”

Tirek rose suddenly. “Perhaps a short tour of your new accommodations is in order then. After you have had a chance to rest, we will discuss our plans in greater detail.”

“That is an… excellent idea, Tirek. I’ll be there soon to discuss things in pony, so to speak,” Velvet announced. “Enjoy your break, my dear.”

Kanthara nodded. “I will.”

Ask about the soul, urged Rainbow Dash as the crystal ball became clear once more.

Kanathara rolled her eyes. She stood up and moved to follow the centaur. “Rainbow Dash wants me to ask about the soul.”

“Oh, don't worry about that. We got a couple of goodies saved up for you,” Pear Butter exclaimed, patting the keeper on the back.

“Fresh ones, then?” Kanathara inquired, her mouth already salivating at the thought of a living sinner she could punish.

“Very,” Tirek stated simply.

Together the trio made their way into the basement and was treated to a surprising sight. Namely the fact that they stood in what looked like a regular old cellar complete with dust-covered jars sitting on equally dusty simple wooden shelves. For a moment Kanathara was about to ask what had happened, but knowing Tirek’s penchant for building secret rooms, she simply waited.

Sure enough, he touched, turned, and pulled a seemingly random number of jars before finishing by pushing one of the exposed bricks on the sole wall not adorned with shelves. Kanathara expected that same wall to swing open and reveal a secret tunnel or series of rooms, but that wasn't what happened. Rather it was the one to her right, which was absolutely covered in glass containers, that swung outwards.

It revealed a sloping tunnel that went downwards into the earth, the sides of which were completely smooth. Running a hoof across the closest one, Kanathara silently marveled at how quick they had accomplished all of this. It hadn't been long at all, and though she knew Tirek’s magical ability was significant, she had assumed such a task would take weeks at the minimum.

“How deep does it go?” Kanathara asked, staring downwards into the sixty feet of gloom which her eyesight could pierce.

“Until we are about two hundred feet beneath the earth,” Tirek explained. “It's a decent walk, but that's by design.”

“‘Cause of all the spells and junk Tirek put on the entrance,” Pear Butter explained.

“Though an inelegant way of putting it, you aren't wrong,” agreed the centaur with a small smile.

Kanathara lit her horn and only briefly scanned the dense web of magic which hung over her. Sure enough, she detected multiple identification spells, warding against all manner of scrying, and more than a few traps. She wanted to delve further, but the beginnings of a headache sapped her enthusiasm.

“Lead on,” Kanathara remarked, gesturing to the tunnel.

“Right, follow me,” Tirek stated.

The trio walked deeper and deeper with the only change being the sound their echoing hoofsteps made.

“Say, what about Velvet’s teleportation circle?” Kanathara asked.

“It took a lot of effort, but we moved it into the cellar where it's invisible until activated,” Tirek explained.

“Ahh,” Kanathara murmured.

I wish you could just slide down this thing. I want to eat already, Rainbow Dash grumbled.

“We’ll be there in a moment,” Kanathara whispered to herself.

Sure enough, it didn't take much longer before the trio reached the bottom, exited the tunnel, and walked into a wide open room. One which was filled with greenery and lit by a great collection of white crystals that grew from the highest point of the tall ceiling. It felt almost like a natural cave, though with the addition of mature trees, several bushes, and a carpet of lush grass.

“*Woah,*” Rainbow Dash thought, and Kanathara said.

“I know right?” Pear Butter eagerly exclaimed. “This was all just down here the whole time! Apparently Velvet wanted to excavate it, but never got the chance.”

“It used to be a temple of some kind,” Tirek began, waving a hand towards the other side of the vast cavern. “To what we don't know, but now it is our home.”

“Fascinating,” Kanathara murmured.

After tearing her gaze from the wide open space, she noticed the distinctly church-like entrance on the other side. A short series of stairs rose up to an alabaster outcropping supported by four large stone pillars and a set of large double doors. Just about everything looked like it had been carved from marble, though the finer details had been worn down by the passage of time.

The keeper walked over and pushed open the two doors, noting that despite their hinges appearing to be quite rusted, they moved soundlessly. Once inside, she found herself in a long hall of expertly cut white stone lined with more pillars. If the space had stained glass windows rather than colorless walls, it would have definitely looked the part of a cathedral.

Further down, Kanathara could see four rooms leading off the hall, as well as another set of doors which sat at the end.

“What's down there?” she asked.

“These four rooms used to serve some religious purpose, but they are bedrooms now,” Tirek explained, waving a hand to the end. “Down there is a chapel of some kind, and behind that is the barracks for our budding imp army.”

“It's really convenient, lemme tell ya,” Pear Butter began. “Room enough for fifty of the little buggers with space left over for a cafeteria and a recreation area.”

Neat. Now where's the food? Rainbow Dash whined.

Kanathara rolled her eyes. “Where can we find our room, and will the soul already be there?”

“First door on the left,” Tirek explained. “Your meals should be waiting for you there.”

Kanthara lifted an eyebrow curiously, but noted that the fear demon had a certain look about him. One that told Kanathara that she wasn't about to get any answers unless she walked right in there and found out for herself. Which was exactly what she did, not even pausing to marvel at the solid stone door or the shining bronze handle.

Stepping inside, Kanathara found herself standing within a modestly-sized bedroom of high quality. A curtained off area to the right contained a washbasin and a toilet, while a four-poster bed dominated the central area. There were other small amenities like a bookshelf and a few pieces of furniture, including a rather luxurious couch, but none of that mattered.

For there, sitting in the middle of the room, was a cage just large enough to fit two rather downtrodden unicorns. Both of whom were male and looked nearly identical, save for the fact that one of them had a moustache while the other didn't. Their light yellow fur was slightly unkempt, as were their wavy white and red manes.

Despite looking slightly untidy, they didn't smell, and their emerald eyes contained a certain gleam that told Kanathara that they hadn't been treated too poorly. The last thing she noted before turning to Tirek was the fact that they both had apple-themed cutie marks, one of which was a single slice while the other appeared to be the apple from which that slice had been removed.

“What in Tartarus is this?” demanded Kanathara.

“Oh, someone new!” began one of the stallions.

“Perhaps you can speak to these two and get us out of here,” added the other.

“We would be most appreciative!” stated the first.

“In fact I see several vouchers for free admission to our resort in your future!” declared the second.

“Quiet!” barked Pear Butter.

The two ponies immediately closed their mouths and scooted back in their cage.

These two don't smell right, Rainbow Dash remarked. *Someone seeks vengeance on them. More than a few at that.*

“These two are vile criminals we picked up recently. We thought they would make for a good present. Something to satiate that hunger of yours,” Tirek continued.

“I thought you said you didn't eat ponies!” shrieked one of them

“I said be quiet!” Pear Butter yelled.

The two ponies gulped and held one another tightly.

“As I was about to say,” Tirek began, turning to Kanathara, “these two are unrepentant criminals guilty of a laundry list of crimes. Such as trying to drive the Apple family out of business and taking their land.”

Pear Butter snorted a thick ring of smoke into the cage. “These two little shits tricked my daughter into a competition she couldn't win, but with her friends’ help they came close. This caused them to nearly destroy the farm with their infernal machine, and though victorious, their cider was undrinkable.”

“That is pretty mean, but not exactly get-your-soul-devoured mean,” Kanathara remarked.

“Oh, that's just the start,” Tirek warned.

“They then dug up my corpse in an attempt to find the deed to the farm, which was weird to find out, let me tell you. When that didn't work, they took off running to the next town over where they sold snake oil,” Pear Butter exclaimed. “Snake oil which ended up paralyzing three ponies, including a foal from the neck down!”

No wonder so many ponies want these guys dead, Rainbow Dash remarked. *I can barely resist attacking them, and I don't even have a body right now.*

I know. I can feel your rage, Kanathara replied.

“That wasn't enough for these two though,” Pear Butter stated, clopping a hoof against the top of the cage. “They then buried the injured ponies in legal paperwork, forcing them to give up their suit.”

“I think I’ve heard enough,” Kanathara stated, eying the two stallions coldly.

“That's not even all of what they had done, however,” Tirek interjected. “They also stole a considerable amount of money from their next employer, causing the old resort owner to declare bankruptcy.”

“Before their crimes were made public, they purchased that same resort with the money they stole from him and opened a fake university,” Pear Butter continued, glaring at the pair. “Which they used to scam poor families out of their money, driving at least one mother to suicide in the process.”

“There is a bunch more, but that's the majority of it,” Tirek finished.

Kanathara nodded. “Thank you very much, Pear Butter, Tirek. I would like some time alone with my meals, however.”

“You earned it,” Tirek exclaimed, briefly touching her shoulder before leaving.

Pear Butter gently punched Kanthara’s other shoulder. “Take your time. Noone is going to be looking for these two losers.”

“I will,” Kanathara remarked.

With the door closed firmly behind her, the keeper of secrets slowly trotted up to the cage, eying its inhabitants. “And what do you two have to say for yourselves?” Kanathara asked.

“It was all perfectly legal!” shouted one.

“Except the grave robbing part, though we eventually paid that particular fine!” yelled the other.

“It's not our fault those poor ponies couldn't afford their lawyers,” remarked the first.

“Why, we even sent them coupons to our esteemed establishment. After we acquired it, of course,” finished the other.

Kanathara had already tuned them out, however, as she was having a different conversation at that very moment. *Are they guilty?* she asked.

Super guilty, stated the vengant. *They aren't the least bit regretful about it either.*

I don't know. They seem awfully repentant to me, Kanathara remarked with an amused snort.

“Besides, that whole tuition thing was totally my brother’s idea. Why, you could even say he forced me into it!” shouted one of the unicorns.

“Why, I never! You were the one who thought up our entire marketing blitz. If anything, it was you who forced me!” screamed the other.

And now they are turning on one another, Rainbow Dash remarked. *So, are you gonna eat 'em now?*

Yeah, but I like basking in their fear, explained the keeper. *It makes the soul taste better.*

As if basting a turkey in fear, Rainbow Dash added with a chuckle.

Which we will then proceed to consume. Kanathara smiled. *Bones and all.*

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Kanathara belched before proceeding to spread all four of her legs as wide as they could go, sprawling out on the mattress. Potent energy swirled in her guts, finally killing the burning hunger which had plagued her for several days. Even the gnawing headache that had been bothering her was now gone, replaced by a joy one only feels after finishing a rather large meal.

Now alone, the keeper of secrets nearly fell asleep, despite the two withered corpses curled up only a few feet away. All the color the two unicorns had once had was gone and their skin was now stretched taut over their bones. Their mouths hung open in silent agony and their lifeless eyes stared off into the void, the desiccated cadavers serving as a silent monument to all their sins.

That was fantastic, Rainbow Dash purred. *I feel like we should find a pipe or a cigar.*

“You can do that as soon as you reform. I, however, will be abstaining,” Kanathara murmured. “I think a long nap is in order.”

The familiar black smoke billowed out of the keeper’s pores and slowly solidified, taking on the proportions of a certain vengant. Though the process took longer than normal, a few seconds later the other demon had regained her physical form. The first thing Rainbow Dash did was immediately stretch like an oversized cat, her wings opening as wide as possible.

Kanathara brushed one of the offending appendages out of her face and snorted. “It's nice to see you too.”

After making her back crack a dozen times, Rainbow Dash chuckled and fell to the bed which squeaked loudly. “Yeah, yeah, you know I love ya,” Rainbow Dash remarked.

“I know,” Kanathara murmured, closing her eyes.

The pair merely lay there, enjoying the silence for almost a minute before Rainbow Dash finally spoke up.

“Thanks, by the way,” muttered the vengant. “I know we agreed to find out a way to break the familiar contract, but…”

“It's fine,” Kanathara quickly stated, rolling over and facing her lover. “I’m sure that given time, we can come up with some way to get around it while also still ensuring you can escape any permanent harm.”

Rainbow Dash relaxed visibly, a soft smile crossing her face. “Thanks. You always know just what to say.”

“That's just because your poker face is trash,” Kanathara remarked with a smirk.

“Yeah, yeah, and yours isn't much better, you know,” Rainbow Dash retorted, poking the other demon in the chest. “Especially when it comes to rare forms of magic.”

“I can't help it! It's a part of being a keeper of secrets,” Kanathara shot back, a smile crossing her face. “It's like getting between you and some unrepentant murderer.”

“You know what they say, do not come between a vengant and their prey,” stated Rainbow Dash.

Kanathara’s smile grew, and she gently placed a hoof against her lover’s chest. “I know we are up against a lot, and I know this sounds naive, but I think we can do it.”

Rainbow Dash gently pulled the other demon closer and nestled her muzzle between the bed and Kanathara’s cheek. “Oh, and whysat?” whispered the demon.

“Because so long as we stick together, we can accomplish anything.” Kanathara chuckled. “And if all else fails, we’ll just tell Pear Butter and Velvet that the Nightmare hurt my feelings.”

“I don't know who's scarier in that situation,” murmured Rainbow Dash.

“You'd think it would be the demon, but I’m not totally certain about that,” Kanathara whispered back.

“Hey, boss.”

“Yes, Rainbow?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”