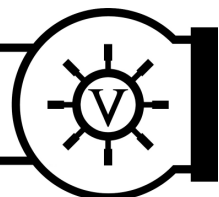


The Archer and the Smith

Sharaloth

PONY FICTION VAULT



The Shaper listened to the song of the steel as her hooves worked the bellows. It was a song of heat, a song of change, a song of hidden strength waiting to be revealed. The Shaper listened and heated the forge until that song reached its peak, the point where all potential was revealed and any more would lead to ruin. She slowed, letting the heat suffuse the steel without adding any more, until the whole of it was humming with its sweet music. It would not do to rush.

Carefully, using her mouth and a harness of her own design to hold the tongs, she removed the metal from the forge. It shone in the dim light of the smithy, the heat of it pushing against her eyes as she laid it on the anvil. It cast her in a fierce contrast between light and shadow, making the colors of her dark orange coat and red mane alternately stark or dull. Ensuring that she had the tongs secured properly in her harness she grasped the hammer in her mouth and waited, watching the steel. The song of the steel told her that it was ready, but still she waited, looking for the place where it would tell her to begin.

The glow of the metal was a painting, a landscape of metal, a portrait of what it would become. It told her where the strongest steel was, where the impurities lay, and how she could pound them out or use them to strengthen the whole. She waited for that painting to show her where the first hammer-blow would go, then the rest would flow properly like a raindrop sliding down a window pane.

The steel finally told her where to begin, and setting the hammer in her teeth she brought it down. The blow vibrated through her, even through the well-padded handle of her hammer. She didn't fear damage to her mouth, though. She was an earth pony, and even a direct blow to the face from a warhammer wouldn't loosen her teeth. So she struck the metal with no fear and no hesitation. A simple hoof-motion had her harness flip the steel, allowing her to strike the other side, which she did without a pause.

The Shaper worked. She struck the steel again and again, coaxing it with every blow to be stronger, harder. Periodically she returned it to the forge and heated it back to perfect malleability before returning it to the anvil and continuing her work. It was a conversation, the ring of iron and steel, each blow an argument made to persuade the steel to give up being what it was and become what she wanted it to be. This steel was receptive, and moulded itself to her will with an eagerness that made her smile inside.

It took hours, but her work always did. She could produce quickly if she wanted to, but every piece was important to her and every piece was forged to perfection. It meant her services weren't cheap, but always in demand. She quenched the metal, letting it cool to

the point where she could begin finishing it. Only then did she step back, letting the song of the steel fade from her awareness, and took a deep breath.

“I was wondering if you were just going to leave,” the Shaper said, turning to face her guest.

The green unicorn gave her a small smile. She had been standing in the corner of the smithy since just after the Shaper had begun, and had not done anything to interrupt the work the whole time. She had a light green coat, a mane of gray-green striped with white, and was wearing a strange leather harness that seemed to serve no purpose, over which she had a pair of saddlebags that hung heavily at her sides. “It was fascinating, watching you work,” she said. Her voice was light and musical, but the Shaper noticed a heavy edge in it. This was a voice that could be as pleasant as a summer afternoon one moment and cut you like an axe the next. “What was that? It looks almost like a spear head.”

“It is a spear head,” the Shaper replied.

The green unicorn’s eyes widened a bit. “It looked a bit weird. What’s it supposed to do?”

“It’s supposed to kill whatever you stick it into,” the Shaper dryly stated. “And not fall off when you pull it out again.”

The unicorn laughed. Like her voice it was a light sound, but it lacked the edge her words did. The Shaper didn’t often hear laughter like that anymore. The world had changed too much.

“Then it’ll be a good spear,” the unicorn said, her smile widening just enough to be noticeable. “I hear you’re the best.”

“I enjoy my reputation,” the Shaper said.

“They say your blades never dull, never break, that they only ever get sharper,” the unicorn said, orange-yellow eyes alight, almost cat-like in the way they reflected the light of the forge. “They say you can cut an apple in two with one of your blades, and then put the two halves together again so that they seal up as if it had never been cut at all. They say they can slice through stone as easily as through flesh.”

“They are lying to you,” the Shaper said. “All blades dull if not sharpened, and break if used improperly. Mine are no different. As to the rest? I don’t think anyone believes those stories.”

“They do,” the unicorn said. “You’d be surprised what ponies will believe, as long as it gives them hope.”

The Shaper scoffed. “Hope? I make weapons, I don’t have anything to do with hope.”

“You’d be surprised,” the unicorn repeated, her smile not faltering for an instant. “How do you produce such quality items, anyways? There are a lot of smiths around, but all of them agree you’re leagues beyond them.”

“Trade secret,” the Shaper said.

“Must be some secret.”

“What do you want?” the Shaper asked, tired of the word-games. “I assume you’re here with a commission. If not, I don’t take apprentices, and you’re too old for that anyway.”

The unicorn nodded. “Not my line of work, anyways. No, I do have a commission for you. Something special.”

“They’re all special,” the Shaper said. “I always do my best work.”

“I understand that,” the unicorn said quickly. “But you’re going to have to go the extra mile on this one. I need you to make me a set of arrows.”

“I’m a smith,” the Shaper said. “You want arrows? Go to a fletcher.”

“These arrows are going to need to be metal,” the unicorn continued. “Not steel, not iron. Something stronger, something that can withstand a lot of heat and carry enough force to punch through thick armor.”

“Metal arrows?” the Shaper asked, frowning. “Stronger than steel? I hope you have a bow that could actually fire them.”

“I do,” the unicorn said. “Or, I will.”

“Will,” the Shaper repeated, shaking her head. “Heat resistance, thick armor. What do you think you’re going to be shooting them at?”

“Ferriotrax Sanguinus.”

There was a long moment of silence as the Shaper closed her eyes and contemplated what she had been told. “Who else is helping you?” she asked.

“I’m doing this on my own,” the unicorn replied, the edge more clear than ever.

The Shaper took a deep, steadying breath. Finally, she looked back at the unicorn. “No,” she said.

The unicorn’s smile fell. “You’re the best, everypony agrees on that. I need you to make those arrows. I need you, Shaper.”

The Shaper stomped on the ground. “No! You’re planning to fight a Dragon with a hoofbow and arrows by yourself? Even my work will do nothing! If you’re close enough to penetrate his hide you’re close enough for him to kill you in an instant, and one arrow will not slay a dragon of Ferriotrax’s size, no matter how well placed.”

“Not a hoofbow,” the unicorn said. “I’m not going to use a hoofbow. I have something else, something better.”

“Better,” the Shaper said, doubt clear in her tone. “Even then, for an arrow to be able to overcome his hide and then last long enough to do damage.” She shook her head. “The materials alone would cost a fortune and take forever to acquire.”

“I’ve got the money,” the unicorn said. “And I’m not in a rush.”

“I don’t think you understand just how expensive it will be,” the Shaper insisted. “Kingdoms are ransomed for less.”

“I have the money,” the unicorn repeated. “Will you make me my arrows?”

The Shaper stared at the other pony, their gazes meeting and neither yielding. “You’re going to try even if I say no, aren’t you?”

“I’ll find another smith to make my arrows,” the unicorn said. “They won’t be as good as yours would be, but I’ll take what I can get.”

The Shaper sighed. “You’ll get yourself killed, and accomplish nothing in the process.”

“Maybe,” the unicorn said, a hint of her smile returning. “But there’s a lot less of a chance of that if I’m using your work.”

The Shaper hissed in irritation and turned away from the unicorn. She took up her tongs, drawing the now fully cooled spearhead out of the barrel of cooling oil. Without looking back she took it to her workbench and began the process of finishing the piece. It took time and attention, the spear head had to fit with the shaft well enough that it wouldn't come loose from being swung around. This particular spear head was also designed to use leather straps to secure it, and she had to make sure that nothing on the spear head would cut into those straps.

She worked for half an hour. Finishing a piece like this normally wouldn't take that long, especially since she wasn't polishing or sharpening it, but she spent her time getting it right and taking extra care. Finally she set it aside.

Hope, the unicorn had said. 'You'd be surprised at what ponies believe, as long as it gives them hope'. It had been so long since she'd known hope. So long since she'd seen it die at the hooves of the one she'd loved the most. She turned to the unicorn, who hadn't moved an inch. "He's the Sorceress's enforcer. You kill him, you'll be bringing her down on your head."

"I'll burn that bridge when I come to it," the unicorn said, her smile widening again.

"I'll need to see your weapon," the Shaper said.

"Once I've finished it," the unicorn agreed.

"How long will that take?" the Shaper asked.

"It'll be done well before you've got the material for the arrows," the unicorn said.

The Shaper grunted her acceptance of that. "Fine. Once I find out the price for materials I'm going to need you to pay that cost up front. I don't have the coin for something like this on my own."

"Not an issue," the unicorn assured her. "When will you know?"

The Shaper shrugged. "For this? Two weeks, at minimum."

The unicorn nodded. "Then I'll return in two weeks. Hopefully I'll have my bow by then, and you can see what you'll be making those arrows for."

"I'll need a retainer," the Shaper said. "Not the materials money, but something to show me you're serious."

The unicorn smiled as her horn lit up with a hard amber glow and a heavy leather pouch lifted from her saddlebag. It was set down on the workbench, opening just enough for the light of the forge to shine on the gold inside. “Good enough?”

The Shaper nodded. “Good enough for now. I’ll make your arrows, but before we close this deal I’ll know your name.”

“Lyra,” the unicorn said.

“Just Lyra?”

“I once went by Heartstrings,” Lyra said, then shook her head. “It doesn’t really apply anymore. No, now I think I’ll take on a new name. Lyra Archer. I think it suits my purpose.”

The Shaper snorted in derision. “We’ll see about that.” She turned away from the unicorn and to her stock of metal, already listening for the song of the steel. “Two weeks, Lyra. Be ready with that weapon.”

“I will,” Lyra promised and left as silently as she had come in.

The Shaper set the steel aside and began to add fuel to the forge. The call of her next work was already taking her concentration, but her thoughts lingered on the pony named Lyra and her crazy plan to slay a dragon. Hope, she had said.

This land was crushed under the hoof of the Sorceress, and she wasn’t even the worst of the monsters that had taken what had been a beautiful world and twisted it to their perverse ends. Hope was a dream or a delusion. Yet the Shaper couldn’t help but indulge in that dream, in that hope that something could be done to change this fallen world. And if this Lyra actually succeeded against all odds and killed Ferriotrax Sanguinus? Then she hoped the Sorceress would choke on it.

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“This is it?” the Shaper asked, examining the weapon Lyra had brought her. She had not spent the two weeks since their last meeting idle on the project, spending her money on improvements to her forge so that she could create the temperatures she’d need to create the needed arrows. Now that she saw the weapon they were to be used with she was wondering if it had been worthwhile.

“Yup,” Lyra said. She was still wearing her odd leather harness: not a saddle, not armor since it left her back and sides mostly bare, mostly covering her chest. She had added guards to each leg this week, and while the overall effect was that she was wearing protection, it was like none the Shaper had seen before.

“This won’t work,” the Shaper said. It was a weapon much like a hoofbow, but different enough to be unusable. It was curved and longer than a pony, made from wood lacquered black. There was a thick, elaborately carved grip in the middle, and each end was bound together by a strong cord stretched out between them. There was no crank to pull the string back or stock to hold it and the arrow. The Shaper examined it thoroughly, but could find no way for the bow to be both held and fired. “No. How would you even use such a weapon?”

“There’s a trick to it,” Lyra said with a sly smile. “Unicorns only, sadly, but doable.”

The Shaper snorted at that, rolling her eyes. “Is your Special Talent telekinesis? Otherwise I’ve seen unicorns try to aim with their minds, and it always ends with embarrassment.”

Lyra laughed. “No, I’m a... I was a musician. My Talent is in playing the lyre or a harp. I’m pretty good with any stringed instrument, really. You’d be surprised at how well that translates into archery.”

“I don’t doubt it,” the Shaper said. She sighed and took another look at the weapon, holding it with one hoof while the other tested the draw weight. “Assuming you can actually fire this thing and hit what you’re aiming at, it’s still no good.”

“Why not?” Lyra asked.

“It’s got a good enough draw for a standard arrow,” the Shaper said, pulling the string to illustrate. “You’ll get nice flight, probably greater penetration at longer range than a common hoofbow. If you can place and draw the arrow telekinetically you can have a faster firing rate than a hoofbow too. Aim will be all you, though. No sights to look down, and the steadiness of the arrow is completely dependant on whether you can keep it positioned properly.”

“I can do that,” Lyra said. “Don’t worry, I can use this bow just fine.”

“I’m sure,” the Shaper said, then drew the bow so hard that it creaked and threatened to snap in two. Lyra nearly leapt forward, her eyes wide and worried. “There’s your problem,” the Shaper said, easing up on the bow. “It’s got good draw for a normal arrow,

not the kind you're asking me to make. To get the same results with those arrows you'll need something more than ten times the draw weight of this one."

"That... might be an issue," Lyra admitted, backing off and taking a seat. "That's not the strongest bow I can make, but it's up there. I was anticipating the heavier arrows."

"To do what you need them to do, they won't just be a little heavier," the Shaper explained. "I'm making them out of heavy metals with high melting points. Tungsten, iridium, thorium, and a few others you've probably never heard of. One arrow is going to weigh more than this bow."

"That's impressive," Lyra said, grinning. "And I'll need a bow to match, huh?"

"You will," the Shaper confirmed. "Dragon hide isn't just thick, it's supernaturally strong. Ferriotrax is even worse. The Sorceress has put protective spells on him that turn that natural toughness into something stronger than most castle walls. I can forge an arrow that can go through that, but it needs to be fired from a bow that can handle it. This is not that bow."

"Huh," Lyra said, staring at the bow. She thought about it for a long time, her expression never changing.

Finally the Shaper had enough. She hung her head and sighed. "I can make a better bow," she said.

"Oh?" Lyra said, perking up. "I thought you weren't a bowyer?"

"I'm not," the Shaper snorted. "But I'll make an exception. If this is close to the strongest you can make, then you can't make what you need. I can forge a bow for you, something that will have the power needed. You won't be able to use it shaped like this, though, so I'll build it as a hoofbow."

"Don't worry about that," Lyra said, waving a hoof in breezy dismissal. "Make it like this one."

The Shaper blinked at the green pony. "The draw weight alone will be immense. More than six hundred pounds. If you're not a telekinetic Talent then you won't have the power to use it."

"Not an issue," Lyra insisted. "You make the bow, I'll take care of using it."

The Shaper shook her head, muttering about hard-headed unicorns for a moment. “Fine, but I warned you.” She laid a hoof on the bow Lyra had brought. “I’m going to have to keep this one as a reference, and I’d like to see how you use it. I might be able to improve the design to work with your technique.”

“Sure,” Lyra said. “I practice every day out in the Whitetail Woods. I’ll show you where.”

The Shaper nodded. “Good. Now, I have gotten a list of what I will need, and the amount of gold it will take to acquire them. I’ll have to add the materials of your new bow to that, but I can give you an estimate of the total cost for what you want.”

“Lay it on me,” Lyra said, eager. The Shaper told her a number, and Lyra burst out laughing.

“Why is that amusing?” the Shaper asked, irritated with her most expensive customer. “I warned you the price would be high.”

“It’s not that,” Lyra said, wiping her eyes and settling into a few giggles. “It’s just I was told in a place where everything is either truth or lies that the price would be that exact number. I had assumed I was being lowballed.”

The Shaper went still. “You’ve been to the Grove of Truth?” she asked, voice careful and quiet.

Lyra nodded. “Yeah. I’m surprised you know of it. Not a lot of ponies around here know much of the world outside the Sorceress’s domain. Not that I’d want them to know more about that place. The Grove of Truth, well, it was not nice.”

“Did you meet the Druid?”

Lyra nodded again. “She likes to talk to visitors. She knows things. Everything, maybe.”

“But you’re never sure if what she says is truth or lies,” the Shaper said, sighing. “Sometimes I think of going there.”

“It’s not a good place to find answers,” Lyra said, shaking her head. “You’ve got to be pretty desperate before you consider it.”

“And you were?” the Shaper asked.

“Oh yeah,” Lyra said. “I was.” She looked off into the distance, but whatever she was thinking none of it made it to her face. She smiled at the Shaper again. “I’ve got the gold you’ll need. All of it. How soon can you get me that bow?”

“It’ll take a month,” the Shaper said, letting what she had learned about Lyra settle into the back of her thoughts to be ruminated on later. “The material for the arrows will take longer. I don’t think I’ll have them all ready for a year. Maybe fourteen months.”

“Then I’ll have tons of time to practice with my new bow!” Lyra said, smiling happily as she hopped to her hooves. “Are you free now? I could show you where I live and practice.”

The Shaper contemplated what other work she’d been contracted for. She usually didn’t take time out of working for anything other than the basic necessities of life or business. This time the song of steel was distant in her mind, overpowered by her curiosity as to how Lyra used this strange bow. “Yes,” she said, removing her apron and forging-harness.

“Good,” Lyra said. “Now, do you have somewhere I can put all this gold so it won’t get stolen?”

After securing the massive amount of money Lyra had brought, the two ponies set out from the smithy. The town was bustling with the usual activity. Ponies buying and selling in the market or bringing in produce from the fields. Soldiers patrolled in groups of five, spears and hoofbows holstered but eyes wary for trouble. Lyra got a few reactions, waves and called greetings from ponies she knew. No pony waved to the Shaper as she passed. If they knew her, they knew she didn’t socialise.

“This is a good town,” Lyra said as they came to the gates of the walled community. “I never see a lot of fear here.”

“The Sorceress is harsh with those who disobey her laws,” the Shaper said, keeping her eyes down as they exited the town. She didn’t want to look at the horizon, where the Sorceress’s mountain home could be clearly seen. “Her pets are allowed to roam free, but most of them don’t attack settlements.”

“Heh, I know,” Lyra said. The Shaper nodded at that. Lyra wouldn’t be hunting Ferriotrax without knowing at least that much.

They walked in silence for a long time afterwards. The mid-spring sun was hot on their backs, but the Shaper was used to the roaring heat of the forge and paid it no mind. Lost

in her own thoughts, she was almost surprised when she looked up to find that they were surrounded by the Whitetail Woods. Moreover, she recognized the section of the woods they were in.

“We’re close to Ponyville,” she said.

“Oh? You know about Ponyville?” Lyra asked, giving the Shaper a curious look.

“I lived there, before everything changed,” the Shaper replied.

“So did I,” Lyra said. “Can’t say I remember you, though. Sorry.”

The Shaper shook her head. “No. I don’t remember most of the ponies who lived there. I was just a filly when it all went bad.”

“I’m sorry,” Lyra said, genuine sympathy in her eyes. “Have you been back since?”

“No,” the Shaper said. That was the last either of them said until they arrived at the small cottage Lyra was using as a home. It was an old place. Lyra had apparently been fixing it up but she couldn’t cover up the age of it, or the fact that it had seen a lot of hard winters of neglect.

In a clearing behind the cottage was where Lyra had set up her archery field. Targets were set at various ranges, some well into the trees and barely visible from the line Lyra had painted on the ground to indicate the starting range. Piles of small clay discs were scattered about the clearing, and the shattered remains of more littered its fringes. Each of the targets displayed the results of her practice, and it looked like she was doing fairly well.

“Okay, you wanted to see how I use the bow?” Lyra said, dropping her saddlebag off beside the house and putting on a quiver full of blue and purple-fletched arrows.

“Yes,” the Shaper replied, sitting down.

Lyra stepped up to the line, her magic drawing a bow similar to the one they had left in the smithy to her. She laid the bow at her hooves and closed her eyes. The Shaper could feel her gathering her energies, as if the world were holding its breath in anticipation.

With a burst of amber light Lyra’s horn released her spell. Crackling bolts of yellow and green lightning flashed over her body, and the Shaper could see muscles shift oddly beneath her coat. Lyra reared back onto her hind legs, balancing with unlikely ease. She

held out her forehooves and they were sheathed in light that bent and moved like the claws of a Dragon. Or the fingers of a monkey. The bow flew up to her translucent magical hands, and in a smooth motion she drew and nocked an arrow. She sighted on one of the closer targets and let fly. The bow made a dry snapping noise as the arrow shot towards the target, burying itself in the second outermost ring of the targeting circle.

Lyra turned to the Shaper, moving and standing on two hooves as easily as she would have on four. “So? What do you think?”

The Shaper blinked at the unicorn, considering. “I think your telekinesis will not be strong enough to let you use the bow I will make for you.”

Lyra laughed. “I told you, let me worry about that. I was asking about my method, any ways you could improve the bow to work with it?”

The Shaper nibbled on her lower lip as she thought about it. Lyra took the time to practice more, adding movement to her shooting routine. She was acrobatic, in excellent shape, and somehow able to run and jump on her hind legs without straining herself or falling over like any other pony would. Her shots hit their targets more often than not, though it was rare for her to catch the bull’s-eye.

Finally, the Shaper stood. Lyra stopped and turned to look at her again. “Yes,” the Shaper said. “I can make some improvements. But your magic will have to be much, much stronger.”

“It will be,” Lyra promised, grinning. “See you in a month then.”

The Shaper nodded and left without another word.

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Forging a bow was not the same as forging a spear or sword, and required special concentration and attention from her. She finished her other projects first, then refused all other commissions while she worked on the bow. She spent days hammering out new variations, and while each one was in itself a perfectly usable bow, none of them had the strength she needed. Bows were not meant to be made of metal, and their greatest requirement was the need to bend and spring back to their original shape. So she started with spring steel and began to refine the technique.

She needed a bow that was hard enough to take the strains that would be put on it, giving enough that it would bend under pressure and elastic enough to return to its original

shape instantly when the pressure was removed without permanently deforming. Most metals that hard were brittle. Most metals that bendable weren't hard. Most metals that elastic couldn't take the pressures she needed them to.

In the end, when the first shipment of her ordered materials arrived, she found the right balance. An alloy of titanium, tungsten, steel, and nickel, plus a few others in small quantities, made the right kind of metal. A cord of the same material served for the bowstring. A lesser smith couldn't have forged such a bow, even with the aid of unicorn magic, but this was the Shaper's Talent. This was her art, and she was a master of it.

While the final product would not be called beautiful, it had a certain simplicity of form that made it elegant. It sang even after she finished it, the metal impossible to block out as it begged to be used. Even with earth pony strength the Shaper could not string it without the aid of a machine, and though she strained she could not draw it fully. It passed every test, though, and so she unstrung it and carefully treated it to resist the elements before taking it out to Lyra's cottage.

When she got there she found the unicorn practicing her archery, but this time she was also holding a dozen bags of sand in the air at the same time. She was moving erratically back and forth behind her firing line, her magic gripping those scattered clay discs and flinging them into the air. Every time one went up she fired an arrow. Four times out of five she hit her target. The bull's-eye targets scattered around also showed the payoffs from her practice, most of the holes now clustered in the inner rings.

The Shaper waited patiently, watching the unicorn as she worked. It was mesmerizing, seeing her use that bow. Finally Lyra slowed down enough to notice the orange earth pony and ended her practice. She set all the heavy sandbags down and walked over, looking hungrily at the wrapped bundle that was her new bow.

"Right on time!" Lyra said, smiling. "I've heard you closed up shop to work on this. I hope I'm not ruining your business."

"It's not in any danger," the Shaper replied. "I have your bow." She held up the bundle, unwrapping it to show the weapon and its cord to Lyra.

The unicorn whistled, drawing the weapon out with her telekinesis and examining it. Unstrung it didn't look like a bow, the design making the ends curl outwards so that it looked like a large metal 'C'. Lyra knew it for what it was, though, and grinned as she spun it around. "This is impressive. And heavy. I'm assuming I shouldn't practice with this and normal arrows?"

“That would be foolish,” the Shaper agreed. “A normal arrow would disintegrate under the stresses applied to it. Here.” She laid out a pair of covered quivers. “I made steel arrows. They aren’t the arrows I’ll be making for you, but they have about the same size and weight so you can use them to practice with.”

“Incredible,” Lyra said, then took the string and began readying the bow. It took her minutes, her face showing her strain as she carefully used her telekinesis to pull the bow into the right shape and set the string. The Shaper was impressed; she hadn’t thought the unicorn would even get that far. When she finished Lyra puffed for breath, sweat staining her coat. “Okay, you weren’t kidding about that draw weight.”

“No,” the Shaper said dryly. “I don’t exaggerate.”

“Let that be a lesson to me,” Lyra said, chuckling. She drew one of the steel arrows and nocked it. She took aim at the same target she had used the first time she had shown her archery magic to the Shaper, using the sight the Shaper had included to line up the shot. When she drew the bow her mouth set itself into a grimace of effort and her horn began to glow with radiance enough to outshine the sun. She let out a long groan that rose in pitch to a yell as she forced the string back, her hooves shaking in agonized exertion. Finally she pulled the bow to full draw and let loose.

The arrow blasted forward, cutting a screaming line through the air that completely missed the target and slammed into a tree a hundred feet beyond it. The bark of the tree exploded as the arrow tore through its trunk, birds taking flight and squirrels screeching as it began to fall. Lyra was pitched forward into the air as the snap of the bow nearly tore it from the grip of her telekinetic fingers. She flew half a dozen paces before crashing face-first into the grass.

The Shaper rushed up to the unicorn, concerned. Lyra’s horn winked out, leaving spots in the Shaper’s vision and eliciting a pained groan from the unicorn. “Lyra, are you alright?” the Shaper asked, not knowing if she should touch the unicorn to be sure or not.

“Yeah,” Lyra groaned, coughing. She slowly got to her hooves, once more standing on all four of them. “That’s got some crazy kick. I’m going to have to figure out a way to compensate for it.”

“Your foreleg,” the Shaper pointed out.

Lyra looked down and saw the leg that had been holding the bow was bleeding badly, coat and flesh stripped from it along one side. “Yeouch! I’m going to need a better wrist guard.”

The Shaper contemplated this as Lyra magically grabbed some bandages from inside the cottage and began to bind her wound. She supposed she could design something that would protect Lyra from her own weapon. It would be yet another service for this unicorn on a mission she didn’t even believe she could complete. Still, she was going to do it anyway. “I’ll make you a better one,” she said.

“Really?” Lyra asked. “That’s great!” She gave the Shaper another wide grin.

It was just for a moment, but the Shaper felt her own lips twitch up in response.

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The fall made the Whitetail Woods a riot of colors. In the old days it would take ponies running up and down its length to make the leaves drop from the trees, but after the change they never needed the help anymore. The sun was going down, and the slanting light was pouring through the trees so walking through them to Lyra’s cottage was like swimming in a sea of red, gold, yellow and brown while stray breezes swirled the leaves into tornados of fire. The Shaper saw the colors of heated metal in the leaves and heard distantly the song of the trees, something she hadn’t listened to since she was a filly.

It was cold, especially so for a pony used to the heat of the smithy, and so she had bundled up. When she got to the cottage she saw that Lyra had not done the same. The unicorn was, in fact, sweating badly as she fired her metal bow again and again. The wrist guard the Shaper had made for her was scored deeply from its repeated abuse, close to being destroyed. It was why the Shaper had come out here, to provide a replacement. Most alarming was the blood that was seeping from the place where Lyra’s horn met her head.

The old targets hadn’t been able to stand up to the force of Lyra’s bow when she managed to hit them, so alternatives had been devised. The straw piles that served her now were loose and didn’t explode quite so violently when hit, but left the clearing and much of the forest beyond carpeted with straw to the point where finding dirt or grass was a chore.

“Lyra,” the Shaper said, making the unicorn pause in her training. “You should rest.”

“Hey,” Lyra said, giving the Shaper a bloody grin. “Good to see you again. Don’t worry, I’m almost done.”

“How long have you been practicing today?” the Shaper asked.

“Since about noon, why?” Lyra replied, swaying slightly on her hooves.

“It’s nearly sundown,” the Shaper reminded her. “You have been practicing for too long. You need to rest.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” Lyra said, smiling. But with her concentration broken by the Shaper’s arrival her body finally put the lie to her words. Her magic flickered out in a burst of amber light, the bow falling to the ground with a dull ‘thunk’. Lyra’s eyes bulged as her body started reporting how painfully awkward her two-legged stance actually was. She fell to the ground, hissing in pain and twitching as her muscles rearranged themselves back to normal. Finally she looked blearily up at the Shaper, who watched all of this impassively. “Okay, so I’m not completely fine. Would you like to stay for supper?”

The Shaper nodded, and after a bit of work the two of them got the bow unstrung and they headed inside. Lyra was in no condition to actually make dinner, so she lay down to rest while the Shaper did her best with the meager stores the unicorn had. In the end she put together a simple stew that would be filling and hopefully help Lyra recover from her fanatical training. For her part the unicorn ate it up with gusto, declaring it the best stew she’d ever had. The obvious hyperbole brought the faint touches of a smile to the Shaper, who found herself relaxing in Lyra’s presence more than she had around another pony in more than a decade.

“Why do you try so hard?” the Shaper asked as the night wound on and the two ponies relaxed after their meal.

“Lots of reasons,” Lyra said. “Mostly, because it’s what I want to do.”

“You want to kill a Dragon,” the Shaper said, searching the unicorn’s face, though for what she wasn’t sure.

“Yeah,” Lyra said, her usual smile fading. “I really want to kill a Dragon.”

“Why?” the Shaper asked.

Lyra chuckled. “Why? Because he’s *there*,” she said, reaching out with a hoof as if to grasp a lofty and distant concept. The Shaper gave her a steady stare until she dropped the hoof and laughed. “Usual reasons, I guess. Revenge is a big one. Arrogance. Love of glory. That’s a good one, there are entire ballads about that one. Mostly, though, I want to spit in the Sorceress’s eye, and I can’t really do that in person.”

“No, I suppose you can’t,” the Shaper agreed.

“Why are you helping me?” Lyra asked.

The Shaper considered that question for a long moment before answering. “Hope,” she said. “You want to hurt the Sorceress, and you give me hope that it can be done.”

Lyra watched her as the Shaper sat in silence, gaze turned inward as she examined the motivations that she had revealed. “Who did you lose?” Lyra asked, pulling the Shaper out of her reverie.

“Everyone,” she said.

Lyra nodded. “Me too,” she reached into a cupboard and pulled out a bottle of wine, filling two cups with it and sliding one over to the Shaper. With a grin she took up her cup. “A toast, then. To spite and hope.”

“To hope and spite,” the Shaper repeated, and they tapped their cups together and drank well into the darkness of the night before falling into peaceful slumber at each other’s side.

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Winter’s deepest cold had frozen the land into stillness, but still Lyra kept to her training. She didn’t use the metal bow exclusively, instead building up her telekinetic powers by training with a normal bow while also lifting as much weight as possible. The Shaper often made the trip out to watch her, finding her comfort around the unicorn growing with every passing week.

She had begun to hear the song of the trees more often as well. In her smithy all was steel and heat, but out here she could feel the slumbering trees waiting for the sun and warmth to return so they could flower with leaves once again. She had been afraid that the more she heard the trees the less she would be aware of the steel, but that hadn’t happened. Instead she had found that listening to both improved her abilities. She was working metal better than ever, and her trips out to Lyra’s cottage were soothing. There were entire days that she didn’t go home at all.

Lyra never seemed to mind the company, always greeting the Shaper with a smile. In fact the Shaper seemed to be having a good effect on her as well. She no longer trained until she was injuring herself, and her strength and technique were improving greatly because

of it. She was able to string and fire her bow without straining now, though she still had a ways to go before she was as proficient with it as she was with a normal bow.

This night the air was crisp and harsh in the Shaper's lungs. She missed the heat of her forge, but welcomed the night to be spent in Lyra's company. When the unicorn was done her training she helped her put away all of her equipment before speaking. "I have the materials to make the first arrow," she said.

"That's great!" Lyra said, eyes alight with excitement. "How long will that take?"

"I don't know," the Shaper said. "I think two weeks."

"Two weeks for one arrow," Lyra said with a low whistle. "That's a lot of time."

"They aren't normal arrows," the Shaper pointed out. "The materials they will be made from are very hard to work with, and will require a great deal of forging before they are the required purity and mixture. Furthermore I can't just create a mould and produce them en-masse like I can the steel arrows. Each arrow will have to be crafted individually, balanced perfectly and made to match the bow."

Lyra laughed. "I trust you," she said. "You don't have to give me all the details."

The Shaper paused. "Oh," she said, dropping her eyes. "I was rambling. I didn't realize."

"No, no," Lyra said, pulling the Shaper's chin up with a hoof. "You're not rambling, you just like to talk about your projects. All the little details of metal working. It's fine. It's cute."

"Cute," the Shaper repeated. The word tasted like copper in her mouth, but it brought a faint smile to her even so.

"Yeah, it is," Lyra said, giving her a warm smile. "So what you're saying is that you'll be locked in your workshop for the next two weeks at least, and I shouldn't expect to see you until you have the first of my arrows?" The Shaper nodded. "Well, then let's make this night special."

And it was.

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The arrow was a thing of beauty. The Shaper couldn't help but admire it as she handed it to Lyra. It had taken three weeks to get it right. Three weeks of near-constant labor while her improved forge was raised to its highest temperature possible. The hardest part had actually been keeping herself from getting dehydrated or catching fire. The metals that had went into the creation of the arrow had almost spoken to her, their song was so clear. She had known exactly how long to heat them, exactly how much of which elements could be alloyed to create the greatest strength and heat resistance.

"Wow, how did you get my cutie mark on the arrowhead like that?" Lyra asked, poking a hoof at the blemish on the arrow that was indeed a perfect replica of her lyre cutie mark.

"Trade secret," the Shaper said.

Lyra laughed. "Fair enough. Can I use this to practice with, or is it one-time-only?"

"It's one-time-only for a Dragon. For target practice you could shoot it through trees all year and it would be fine," the Shaper said.

"Then that's what I'm going to do," Lyra said, slipping the arrow into her quiver. "How long will it take to make the others?"

"I will make them as I get their materials," the Shaper said. "Now that I know exactly what I'll need I can order more of it, but there's not a lot of some of the metals available. I think I could make a dozen by summer sun."

"A dozen," Lyra mused, looking up into the winter sky. "Will that be enough?"

"I don't know," the Shaper said. "I don't know anything about slaying Dragons."

"Well, it'll have to be, I guess," Lyra said, shrugging.

The Shaper felt the winter's breeze cut into her. "You're going to fight him this summer?"

"Summer sun," Lyra said, nodding. "I know where he'll be then. I'll have surprise on my side, it's my best chance."

"Are you... are you ready?" the Shaper asked, suddenly feeling a pit open up in her stomach. She remembered the sensation from long ago. It was a prelude to loss.

“I’ll have to be,” Lyra said. She noticed the worried look on the Shaper’s face and smiled. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve got your bow and all this training I’ve been doing. That Dragon won’t know what hit him.”

“Do you have to do this?” the Shaper asked, wishing for the heat of the forge and the weight of her hammer.

Lyra’s smile turned sad as she nodded. “It’s what I’ve been working towards for years. It’s all I have left.”

“You,” the Shaper began, but her voice trailed off as she realized she didn’t know what she was going to say to that. “I see,” she said instead. “I will make sure you have your arrows, then.” She turned and began the walk back to her smithy.

“Shaper,” Lyra called out to her. She turned slowly, her expression blank as she looked back at the unicorn. Lyra’s mouth worked, one hoof stretched out to her, but she spoke no words. Instead she let her hoof fall and set a smile on her face. “I’ll see you,” she finished, almost mumbling.

“Yes, when I have more arrows,” the Shaper said and continued on her way home.

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The arrows were finished. The cold and dark of the winter had given way to the bright warmth of the spring, and even that was now waning into the long heat of summer. The Shaper had finished a dozen arrows for Lyra, and while she still had material left over she wouldn’t be able to complete another before the day of the summer sun came. They sat in their quiver, filled with the purpose she had given them in their forging. They yearned to kill a Dragon.

That bow and these arrows were without a doubt her finest creations. Even now she could almost feel the bow, its song like the sound of sweet music the next house over. Loud enough to be just on the edge of her awareness. It sang so loudly because it was being used. Lyra had become so proficient with it that they were practically one entity. The arrows and the bow called to each other, one incomplete without the other, both intent on the purpose of their master. If anything could bring this Dragon down, they could.

Yet there was no guarantee that it would be so. Her craft was flawless, she knew that, but so was the magic of the Sorceress. She had done all she could to make the weapons worthy, but would it be enough?

“Hope,” she said, staring at her smithy. ‘Hope will burn you every time.’ A pony she had trusted had told her once. It had proven true thus far, one of the few things that had.

She should just deliver the arrows and let it go. Lyra would fight her Dragon and either win or lose. Most likely the latter. The Sorceress might be angry at her for providing weapons that could hurt her enforcer, but the Shaper had also provided weapons to the Sorceress’s enemies in the past and had never been chastised for it. It would be best to just be done with it, to return to her forge and her life of working steel. It would be best if she forgot the pony named Lyra and her phantom hope.

“She will win,” the Shaper found herself saying. It was a conviction with no basis. It was foolishly absurd. A lone pony taking on a full-grown Dragon? No pony believed those stories.

‘You’d be surprised what ponies will believe, as long as it gives them hope.’ The words were an echo more than a year old, but still vivid in her memory. More memories joined that one. Lyra’s laugh, Lyra’s smile, Lyra’s dedication, Lyra’s eyes as she talked of spiting the Sorceress. ‘You give me hope’ she had told the unicorn. That hadn’t been a lie.

“She will win,” the Shaper said again, this time on purpose. She turned to look at the stock of heavy metals she had left over from the arrows. There wasn’t enough time to make another, but a plan was beginning to form in her mind.

She slowly tuned herself into the song of the metal, letting it wash into her. She was going to need more than just that, so she reached out to the forest beyond the walls of the town. The twin songs of metal and wood twined together, a harmony that spoke of solidity and growth, of eternity and the cycle of life and death. She listened to the songs, finding the places in them that she could shape to her will, and they offered themselves up to her readily. She was an earth pony, and all things of stone and soil were her domain.

Then, with a determination she hadn’t felt since her youth, she set to work.

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“Thirteen arrows,” Lyra said, sliding the last into her quiver. She had two of the leather quivers hanging from her back, one with the special Dragon-slaying arrows and the other full of the standard steel arrows she’d been practicing with. “Almost a shame to put beauties like these into a monster like Ferriotrax,” she mused, but then shrugged. “Ah, well. I’m sure they won’t mind.”

“No, they’re eager for it,” the Shaper said. She stood with Lyra outside the unicorn’s cottage on the day of the summer sun. She wore her smithing clothes and her hammer was in its holster at her side. Lyra hadn’t commented on this, but had certainly noticed.

“Well that’s good,” Lyra said. She took a deep breath and her eyes drifted to the sky where the sun was just making its ascent over the treetops for the longest day of the year. “I’d hate to make them do something they don’t want to.”

“Do you want to do this?” the Shaper asked. Lyra gave her a surprised look. “You don’t have to,” the Shaper said.

Lyra huffed out a weak laugh. “Would that it were so. I’ve invested all of myself into this. I can’t back out. Not now. Not ever, really.” She shook her head and smiled once more, a soul at peace with its destiny. “No. I want to do this.”

“Then I’m coming with you,” the Shaper said.

“What?” Lyra shouted, jerking her head to meet the Shaper’s gaze. That stare brought her up short, the steel in it stronger than Lyra’s bow. For a moment it looked like the unicorn was going to resist, but then her smile grew wider and she let out another genuine laugh. “Even in the fallen world there are wonders,” she said. “I hope you’re not planning on fighting the Dragon with me.”

The Shaper shook her head. “No, I won’t fight him. But I’ll be there with you. For you.”

“Stay off to the side,” Lyra warned. “He’s going to be spitting fire. He’s cruel, so if he thinks it’ll distract me he’s going to try to burn you.”

“I can take heat, Lyra,” the Shaper said.

Lyra laughed once more. “I’m sure you can,” she replied, and the two of them set out.

The place Lyra had chosen for the confrontation was the field that had once been Ponyville before the world had changed. The Shaper had steeled herself for the painful memories the place would conjure up, but to her surprise none came. It was just a field now, no different from any other she had seen. Perhaps it had once been the site of her home, but that was long ago and felt far, far away.

They waited for hours as the sun made its way high into the sky. The Shaper avoided looking at the sky, it would only lead to staring at the castle of the Sorceress as it hung

from the tallest mountain in the distance. So it was that she spotted the shadow of the Dragon moving towards them before Lyra did.

“He’s here!” she called out, scurrying to get some distance between herself and Lyra. She hoped her plan wouldn’t be needed, that Lyra could end this quickly, but she felt the plates held beneath her smithing apron to ensure they were there just in case.

Lyra enacted her spell, standing tall on two legs while her magical hands held her bow at her side. There she waited, watching as the huge form of the Dragon descended on them.

Ferriotrax Sanguinus was one of the largest of his kind. A red Dragon, his scales burned crimson in the sunlight. His eyes were like volcanic calderas, smouldering in their sockets. Atop his enormous head was a crown of horns, many adorned with ornate rings made of the bones of other Dragons. His wings reached out with batlike fingers so far that their span could have stretched from one side to the other of the town where the Shaper lived. His claws were black, covered in soot and char from the burned things he devoured. His teeth were like swords, gleaming with dripping saliva. His long, lashing tail ended in a knobbed, spiky tip like a fleshy bone-mace. Around his neck he wore a stone torc that looked like gray granite in the light, but glinted pale blue in the shadow. He was a monster that inspired nightmares throughout the Sorceress’s domain, and everything about him was gargantuan and deadly.

He landed in front of Lyra, shaking the ground like an earthquake. The Shaper planted her hooves and called on her earth pony nature to keep her stable, while Lyra, long practiced with staying on her back hooves, barely swayed. The Dragon reared up and looked imperiously down at the green unicorn that stood before him.

“You are not the one I seek,” Ferriotrax said. His voice boomed out over the land, shaking trees and frightening away any animal brave enough to not already be running. **“Leave, little pony, before I make a snack of you.”**

“Wrong, moron,” Lyra said, wildly grinning. “I’m exactly who you’re looking for.”

Ferriotrax growled, the sound like an avalanche in progress. **“You test my patience. I say again leave. My mistress does not like me tasting ponyflesh, but neither does she condone insolence.”**

“Oh? So you don’t want this?” Lyra plucked something from her archery harness with her magic, floating a small gem out in front of her. Ferriotrax’s eyes narrowed and his body tensed. “Got your attention, huh?”

“How do you have that?” Ferriotrax demanded. **“It is *mine*, return it to me and I will spare your life.”**

Lyra laughed. “I don’t really care whether you get it back or not,” she said, returning the gem to its pocket. “I’m just giving you incentive to stick around and see this out to the end.”

“See what out?” Ferriotrax boomed.

“This,” Lyra said, then with a fluid motion almost too fast to see nocked, drew and loosed. The arrow, one of the Shaper’s special Dragon-slayers, flew with a sharp hiss towards the Dragon. He absently swiped a claw at her as soon as she started firing, but she had trained herself to shoot on the move and was gone before his claw reached her. The arrow caught Ferriotrax in the shoulder, punching through his magic-enhanced hide and burying itself in the bone.

The Dragon let loose a shrieking roar of pain, recoiling from the unicorn and clutching at his injured shoulder. Blood, white and glowing like molten steel, spurted out of the wound, causing the grass it fell near to catch fire. He whipped his head around to face Lyra’s running form and spat a glob of fire at her.

She leapt into the air, curling into an aerial somersault as the blob clinging flame splashed into the ground where she had just been running. She came out of her flip with another arrow nocked, and loosed just before she crashed to the ground in a roll that saw her back to her hooves and running in an instant.

The second arrow blasted through the Dragon’s wing, tearing a hole in the membrane but accomplishing little else. Ferriotrax whipped his head forward, snapping at her. He aimed high expecting her to jump again, but she rolled under it, coming to her hooves and drawing another arrow to fire it point blank into the side of his jaw. The arrow went through one side of his jaw and exploded out the other, shards of intensely strong Dragon bone flying from the exit wound.

Lyra threw herself into a backwards roll to avoid the spurt of molten blood that followed her shot. The Dragon roared in agony but reacted faster than a creature that size has any right to, bringing his wing down in a battering smash that would have crushed Lyra beneath it.

The green unicorn had been improving her telekinesis for over a year in order to wield her bow, and that came with some side benefits. She encased herself in a shell of magic

that took the brunt of the wing slam, though the left over energy was still enough to force her to her knees with a pained grunt. She leapt back to her hooves the moment the wing had lifted, sprinting for the Dragon's tail. She drew and loosed again. This arrow struck the Dragon's wide hip, but not in a place that would cripple him.

Ferriotrax jerked from the latest wound. He was quickly growing wary of the power of this pony's bow. He curled in on himself, swinging his tail in from behind while his head swivelled on his long neck, forming a one-monster pincer attack on the lone unicorn.

Lyra saw the tail coming and dropped to skid on her knees, bending her body backwards in a way no pony should have been able to so that she was almost lying on the ground as the tail passed barely an inch over her. The wind of the tail's passage caught at her mane and she couldn't help but laugh with exhilaration as she came back to her hooves with another arrow drawn, aiming for the Dragon's spiked spine.

Ferriotrax's head appeared over his tail, injured jaw spilling his lava-blood out from between his teeth. He spat another glob of fire at her, and she had to dive to the side to avoid it. Her shot missed by a wide margin because of that, sailing over the Dragon and out of her reach.

Ferriotrax spun in place, his tail whipping towards Lyra low enough to the ground that she couldn't go under it and his bloodied jaws following it up high in case she decided to jump. Lyra chose neither option, leaping in the direction the tail was swinging and catching herself on it. She stood on the side of the tail, parallel to the ground. The speed of its motion made it as stable as any ground to her practiced hooves. She took aim and fired into the base of the tail, catching the spine and paralyzing the limb.

The force of the moving tail going still threw the unicorn, and she spun through the dirt for a hundred feet before coming to a rest. She didn't have time to gather herself, though, as the Dragon roared in pain and rage and stomped towards her. Lyra rolled away as a massive claw slammed down into the dirt where she had lain. She flipped to her hooves and shot an arrow into the Dragon's wrist.

Ferriotrax pulled the injured limb back and snapped at her, spraying blood. Lyra rushed away from the bite but some of the blood caught her flank, causing her to stumble in pain as it burned into her. She grit her teeth and kept going, ignoring the agony in her leg. She pulled an arrow and shot at him.

Ferriotrax flinched, but in her pain she had accidentally pulled one of her steel arrows, and though it was shot from her powerful bow it did little more than shatter and melt

against his scales. The Dragon grinned and spat another glob of fire at her before rushing in, using his wings as secondary legs to compensate for his injured forelimbs.

Lyra swore and dove under the first attack, rolling in the dirt to fire another arrow from her side into the Dragon's chest. It buried itself deep, cutting into one of Ferriotrax's lungs. Lyra didn't have the opportunity to gloat over her good shot as the Dragon tried to drop and crush her with its weight. She kept rolling, barely making out from under him before he had squashed her.

With a graceful spin she was on her hooves again. She took the opportunity of a moment's inattention from the Dragon to leap on his injured claw and run up his arm to his wide, spiky back. She fired into his uninjured shoulder joint, taking a moment to aim so the shot was perfect. Ferriotrax shuddered and this time Lyra wasn't able to keep her balance, tumbling from his side. She managed to land on her hooves and spun to fire another arrow into his heaving chest.

The Dragon's kick caught her by surprise, but it was only a glancing blow. It still hit with enough force to crack several of her ribs and send her flying through the air to crash hard on her back in the dirt. Her arrow had hit Ferriotrax, but in the thick muscle of his arm instead of his weakened lung as she had been aiming for.

Lyra lay stunned from the blow, trying to force air into lungs that weren't cooperating. She rolled to her hooves, her motions slower, pained. She looked back at the Dragon and found that he had taken to the sky. Finally managing to catch her breath, Lyra drew and loosed at the beast. Her arrow was badly timed, and missed the dragon by a foot.

The Dragon circled and spat fire down at Lyra, forcing the green pony to run a zig-zagging evasive pattern as his liquid flame splashed down all around her. She leapt and rolled, dodging each attack as the Dragon strafed by. Finally Ferriotrax was forced to turn to come around at her again. Lyra drew and sighted, making her pained breathing settle into a calm, even rhythm by force of will. She judged the distance, the motion of the Dragon, the speed of the wind, and when she had the perfect moment she loosed.

The arrow flew straight and true, punching through the bone of one of Ferriotrax's wings near where it met the joint. The wing failed and the beast spiralled down, crashing into the ground with a sound like the world falling apart. The ground bucked at the impact, far worse than it had when he had just landed. Lyra was sent sprawling and had to use the bow to help herself back to her hooves.

The Dragon stared at her from a hundred and fifty feet away. There was rage clear in his eyes, and also surprise and pain. What really brought a smile to Lyra's face was that buried under the anger and the pain there was a hint of fear. The Dragon feared her. She reached back to her quiver and her elation fell away. She had only one arrow left.

She took a deep breath and nocked the arrow. It would have to be a perfect shot. Anything less and the Dragon would live. The problem was she didn't have that perfect shot to take. Ferriotrax had huddled in on himself, denying her the opportunity to hit his chest and go for a heart or lung shot. She could probably aim for his brain, but at this distance even her arrows might not penetrate his thick skull. Aiming for the eyes was possible, but he would flinch away the moment she fired and spoil any such attempt. She had to close the distance. It was the only way.

She was about to do just that when Ferriotrax opened his mouth wide and sucked in a huge breath, his body expanding like a croaking frog. Then with a defiant roar he poured out Dragonfire. The wave of liquid flame rushed across the field separating them with all the inevitability of a freight train rolling down the tracks. Lyra closed her eyes, body relaxing in resignation.

The fire never touched her. The Shaper was moving the moment the Dragon inhaled, tearing her apron open and pulling out the strange wood-and-metal plates that she had hidden within. She galloped to the green unicorn, arriving just in time to place the plates between the fire and them and use her hammer to drive the wooden roots attached to them into the ground.

Instantly the small tree sprung to life. Each of its branches was grown into the back of a polished metal plate made up of the same alloys as Lyra's arrows. At the Shaper's direction the tree lifted the plates into position, locking them together to form a reflective shield that caught the fire and saved both ponies from annihilation. Even as the plates heated to a red glow the tree was growing, converting the heat energy into the stuff of life. Flowers blossomed on the side of the tree facing the ponies, each bloom blowing cooling air at them to protect them from the convection heat of the flames that were flowing to either side.

"You," Lyra said as she opened her eyes and beheld what the Shaper had forged. "How is this possible?"

"Trade secret," the Shaper said, smiling up at the unicorn. The flames cut off and the tree relaxed its shield. The area around them was charred completely black, nothing left of the grass or topsoil of the plain. The peace was short-lived, though, as the Dragon took

another huge breath and let loose a second gout of Dragonfire. The tree immediately put its shield back into place.

“Must be some secret,” Lyra said, watching the tree at work. She turned her gaze back to the Shaper. “Why?” Lyra asked as the inferno raged all around them.

“Because you’re not alone,” the Shaper said, having to shout over the roar of the flames. “Neither of us could do this on our own. But we don’t have to, because we have each other. Hope and spite, remember?”

“Spite and hope,” Lyra said, her grin returning. “I’ve only got one arrow left.”

“I know,” the Shaper said. “This shield will only protect us one more time before it dies. Make it count.”

Lyra took a deep breath of the cool air the shield-tree was providing, then drew her bow to its fullest extension. The metal nearly vibrated in her magical hands. The arrow nocked was the first one the Shaper had made for her, the one bearing her cutie mark. It gleamed in the firelight, sharp and deadly and straining to find its mark.

The fire ended and the tree let down its shield, but she did not fire. The Dragon drew in another breath, but still she did not fire. Finally, when Ferriotrax stretched his long neck to them with his mouth wide open and the flames already spilling out of his throat, she loosed.

The arrow flew from her bow to its purpose. It hissed across the blasted space between them and into the raging flames of Dragonfire. The arrow had been forged in greater heat than that, and was barely warmed by the inferno. It flew down the throat of the Dragon, stretched straight as he unleashed his deadly breath. Then, unimpeded by the mystically thick scales of the beast, it tore through the Dragon’s black heart.

The fire cut off immediately as the Dragon reared back, clawing at his chest and letting loose a piteous cry of anguish that reached all the way to the distant mountains. He shuddered violently, reaching for the stone collar around his neck. Then with a terrible gasp that ended in a long, choking rattle of breath he fell to the earth and lay still.

Ferriotrax Sanguinus was slain.

Lyra and the Shaper stared at the fallen Dragon for a long moment. Then, for the first time in years, the Shaper laughed in simple, genuine joy. Her laughter was infectious and

Lyra quickly joined in, dropping her magic and setting the bow down. Soon they were both rolling on the small patch of uncharred earth, giggling like a pair of fillies.

“Do you think she noticed?” Lyra asked when she could talk again, jerking her head at the distant castle.

The Shaper looked up to the castle and for the first time didn’t feel despair at its sight. Blue light was shining from its windows, a dark cloud gathering above it as the Sorceress vented her anger. “Yes, she noticed.”

“She’ll be coming for us,” Lyra warned. “You and me both.”

The Shaper nodded her agreement. “I knew that when I decided to help you.”

“She’ll probably catch us and kill us,” Lyra continued.

“Not if we run far enough,” the Shaper said, getting to her hooves.

“If we’re not dealing with her, then it’ll be one of the others,” Lyra pointed out. “I’ve met the Druid and the Tempest, and neither of them are as easy to live with as the Sorceress. The other two are even worse than that.”

“I don’t care,” the Shaper said. “We bloodied one of their noses, I say we do it again.”

“Now that’s spiteful thinking,” Lyra praised.

“I prefer to think of it as hope,” the Shaper replied. “Hope that we can make a difference, even in this fallen world. Hope that they can be fought, and, even if it’s only in a small way, beaten.”

“I think I like that hope,” Lyra said, grinning. She got up and quickly unstrung the bow before strapping it to her harness. She winced a little as the extra weight pulled at her cracked ribs, but a small application of telekinesis eased it up enough that it wasn’t a pain. “Now, where to?” she asked.

“That way,” the Shaper said, pointing a hoof in a random direction.

“So,” Lyra said as the two began walking. “What were you called before you were the Shaper?”

“Oh? I thought you knew,” the Shaper said. “After all, you’ve met my sister.”

“What?” Lyra asked, staring at the other pony. “Who was it?” The Shaper laughed, walking away. “Aw, come on! Who is it?” Lyra asked, grinning as she trotted to catch up.

And side by side the Archer and the Smith walked into the summer afternoon.