

## Chapter 43 - Despair

Applejack cried out with all her might before slashing Silverbite in a wide arc and caught two thelocks across their necks. The cut was more superficial than anything, but Applejack learned quickly not to rely on the initial attack. She quickly dashed away from the two thelocks and turned her attention to a screamer that accosted Rarity. As the thelocks were about to give chase, the phantom blade inherent to Silverbite's enchantment slashed through their throats a second time, spilling thier blood all over the battlefield.

As Applejack approached, Rarity levitated her staff to parry the scratching claws of the screamer. "Foul monster!" she shrieked. "Get your utterly filthy claws away from me! I've had more than my fill of your kind!"

Leaping away with grace, Rarity leveled her staff towards the screamer as the crackle of static electricity illuminated her face. Applejack couldn't help but gasp and avert her eyes as a bolt of lightning struck the screamer straight in the chest. The screamer didn't even have time to belt out a response as the bolt sent it flying off the battlements.

Shale showed off her combat prowess merely by stampeding through the ranks of the ponyspawn. Any donlock or thelock unfortunate to be under her hooves were quickly and mercilessly trampled. Shale enjoyed herself despite the situation, much to Applejack's astonishment.

"This is great fun!" Shale said, stomping on the spine of a thelock. "Come, open up our defensive lines some more. I want to be knee-deep in the dead before sunrise."

Applejack took a deep breath and calmed her nerves while Rarity patted down her mane, now a little frizzy due to the lightning. "Ah see you're handlin' yourself just fine," Applejack said to her friends. "Still, we can't keep fighting like this forever. Where are Twilight and the others? We need to find a way to get that Archdemon varmint down here lickity-split, or else the battle is never gonna end!"

"We're here!" To Applejack's great relief, Twilight galloped up towards them. Applejack's smile dropped immediately as she saw the state her friends were in. Twilight was tired and covered in mud and ash, with a bandage wrapped around her left foreleg. She looked at Applejack with weary eyes, though her gaze often shifted to Spike.

He coughed into his claws, the visor of his helm still lowered over his eyes. Several plates of his armour seemed to have fused with his scales, black scorch marks leaving trails along the metal. *Shadowfire*, Applejack recalled. A new worry sprung to mind knowing that more than just the Archdemon could wield such destructive force.

Pinkie Pie appeared as the polar opposite of her own personality. Gone was the party pony, always bright and bubbly, for now she stood among her friends looking like a complete stranger. Her blood trickled down her face from the ugly scar along her snout, while her colouration remained dull and depressed. Her flat mane and tail only completed the image of Pinkie lost to despair. Applejack only wanted to hug Pinkie, who seemed to be on the verge of tears, when a loud roar from the walls took her attention away.

Following the roar came a series of beats against the walls of Trotterim. Applejack headed edge to the battlements with her friends following close behind her. As she looked down, she saw the four armed minotaur punch the wall with all of its fists, causing fissures to break all along the walls. Behind the minotaur leader trailed several groups of ponyspawn, all of them clawing at each other, vying for the first moment the wall was breached.

Twilight shook her head. "It's the Breaker. We either spend what little energy we have fighting it, or we let it breach the walls while we try to get some rest. We have to prepare for the Archdemon while the Breaker is tearing at the walls. We need potions, poultices, everything needed to fight, and Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy are not back yet, and—"

"Settle down, sugarcube." Applejack placed a hoof on Twilight's shoulder as the latter appeared to be on the verge of a breakdown. With an angry Archdemon so close, that would definitely not help matters.

Before she could continue, Applejack saw Shale walk over to the edge of the battlements, staring down the Breaker with an almost eager eye. "That minotaur would make such a terrifically thunderous squish, would it not?" Shale cocked her head. She looked as if she contemplated a jump.

"Don't be serious, Shale!" Rarity cried out. "That horrible monster is breaking stone with its terrible hands! You are *made* of stone. Think of what it will do if it were to take hold of you!"

"I am *more* than the stone of which I am made. You ponies have taught me that." Despite her haughty nature, Shale's voice could not completely hide her hesitation. "You ponies, whom I've come to call my friends. If I go down there, there is a very good chance I will not come out alive. You are right, prissy Rarity. That minotaur could turn me into pebbles."

"But this is something I chose to do. I have been given a gift most golems can never have. Not even our creator, Cairidan, when he became a golem was given the gift of choice. I have this gift, and I choose to fight the Breaker. I choose to do this to give you all a fighting chance against the Archdemon. I choose to win."

Shale stepped up towards the battlements. "I wish you all good luck," she said, then leaped from the top of the wall into the battle below. Applejack rushed to the side of the of the walls and

peered down to watch as the golem collided with the Breaker in mid-fall, snapping one of its horns clean off. Shale then used the horn as a improvised club, smashing the bones of any ponyspawn unfortunate enough to be caught in her warpath.

“C-come on, everypony,” Pinkie said as tried not to cry at what could be the last time she ever saw her stony friend. “Shale is buying us time. We need to try to get ready as quick as we can.”

Applejack nodded and moved to lead the others off of the battlements when the very foundations of the walls seemed to shake beneath her hooves. The small party struggled to stay on their hooves as the ground quaked with each passing moment. A growl from the distance grew louder as a massive creature drew nearer to the city.

“Look! Look!” Pinkie shouted excitedly. “A star teddy is coming! Great, big, furry, sparkly star teddy! And... and Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy are riding on it! Those lucky gooseses!”

Applejack could not believe their good fortune finally came. She gave a loud cheer at the sight of the legendary Ursa Major striding into battle, the very sight giving the unified forces of ponies a reason to rally. A resounding cheer erupted from the soldiers, who pushed ever harder to drive the ponyspawn back. From the back of the Ursa Major she could see Fluttershy adjust Rainbow onto her back, taking wing and flying ever so slowly towards Trotterim. While the cosmic bear began to tear into the ranks of the ponyspawn, Applejack could see that Rainbow was in terrible condition.

“Oh no... Dashie!” Pinkie helped Rainbow get to her hooves as Fluttershy set her hooves on the stone, guiding her friend towards the staircase that lead to the city. Applejack bit her lip before looking to Fluttershy, who merely shook her head.

“Rainbow Dash is really hurt, but thankfully Pinkie can get her the care she needs.” Fluttershy’s gaze wandered to the Ursa. “I still can’t believe Zecora was able to call upon something like *that* to help us!”

Applejack was about to agree when the roar of the Archdemon dominated the air. In the distance, the Archdemon spread its large wingspan to the fullest before finally taking flight. It flew towards the battlefield and specifically the Ursa Major. With a very audible gulp, Applejack quickly made her way down the stairs towards the city.

“We have to find Riordan and get his help fast,” she called out. “The Archdemon is here!”

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Shale felt the air rush by her as she fell from the battlements as the Breaker stared at her with anger and fury and prepared itself to catch the descending golem. Remembering how the blitzing Rainbow looked during a dive, Shale tightened up her body brought her legs in close and made

herself as narrow as possible. Such speed proved exhilarating, and Shale could not help but smirk as she neared the Breaker.

“This is going to end badly. For you.” Keeping her eyes on the foe, Shale crashed into the head of the Breaker. She inwardly celebrated as she smashed into one of his horns and enjoyed the sound of snapped bones. The Breaker roared, holding its ruined head while Shale landed on her hooves. She gave the horn one look as an idea formed in her head.

Taking up the broken horn in her mouth, Shale began to swing away at the minotaurs around her, smashing the improvised weapon into their bones. Knees splintered and bones cracked while Shale continued to exude the pressure on the minotaurs. They diverted their attention away from Trotterim’s walls all towards her.

“Well? Don’t keep me waiting.” Shale scraped a hoof on the ground before charging forth and bringing her weapon to bear. One of the minotaurs rushed towards her, only for Shale to deftly dodge its fist. She responded by raising her horn high and then slamming it into the back of the minotaur. It howled as it crumpled to the ground, only to become silent as Shale brought the horn down on its head. Grey matter spilled from the skull, and Shale smugly smiled to herself.

Her victory did not live long as she felt a great force pound into her side, sending the golem into the air. Shale tumbled on the ground and dropped her horn-mace before finally skidding to a halt. She shook her head in disbelief as she rose to her hooves, unable to comprehend that she, the indomitable and impervious Shale, was knocked down.

Groaning as her rocky hide rubbed together, Shale looked up to see the Breaker charging towards her, using his large fists to propel its massive frame. She braced for impact and called upon the old magic in her protective augmentation crystals. The viridian gemstones flared to life and encased her body in a shield.

The Breaker crashed into the shield, shattering it while still tossed backwards in the rebound. All of Shale’s protective gems broke as she was forced to take a few cautionary hoofsteps backward. Shale marveled at the immense strength of the Breaker before readying herself for the next attack. Without her defensive augmentation crystals, Shale would have to be careful.

The thought of care in battle unnerved her. For as long as she had traveled with the group of ponies, Shale stomped on caution as readily as she stamped on pigeons. Her strength had gone unmatched save for a few gigantic enemies, and her stone skin protected her from all but the most magical of harm.

Yet here was a creature three times as tall as she was, with all the strength and durability to match such a stature. As much as Shale hated to admit it to herself, though she fought most of her battles taking on the largest foes she could, they had all been by the sides of her friends.

Now, for whatever reason, she decided to play the martyr card and fight the largest and strongest individual ponyspawn on her own.

“It would appear I was not entirely mistaken,” Shale said, if only to hear herself over the noise of the battle. “I will not be leaving this alive, now am I?”

The Breaker replied with a roar and flexed all four of his arms in response to Shale’s defiant stand. If Shale could, she would have sucked in a breath of air to steady herself. As it stood, she scraped the dirt once again as the Breaker lumbered forward and readied his hands, eager to take stone within and crush.

Shale attacked first, galloping at full tilt towards the waiting arms of the Breaker. Her plan was to take out the Breaker’s legs; chopping the tree as it were. Without a vertical base, she could attack the weakened Breaker at her leisure.

As she neared perfect ramming speed, the Breaker raised two fists. It prepared to deliver a solid punch to where Shale headed. The Breaker slammed the ground and missed Shale completely, but the shock on the earth caused Shale to lose her balance. Again she was sent to the dirt, though she recovered quickly before speeding off towards the Breaker again.

Pivoting on her front legs, Shale twisted around and stretched out with her hind legs and slammed her hooves into the leg of the Breaker. Instead of the desired cracking sound of bone, the force of the Breaker pushed back her buck thanks to the solid hide of the massive minotaur. The Breaker turned one fist towards her in a powerful counter, blasting Shale off her hooves and into Trotterim’s walls.

A cloud of dirt and dust kicked up thanks to Shale’s collision, but the smokescreen was the least of her concerns. A large crack formed along her torso which proved a damaging fissure that the Breaker would easily exploit. It took far longer than Shale was comfortable with to stand, her body panged with aches as she tried to get back to a proper stance. As she stepped away from the rubble of the city’s walls, she looked up to see the frothing snout of the Breaker standing over her, all four arms raised for one final smash.

“What are you waiting for, you sickening pile of meatbags,” Shale dared. “I’m right here. If you fail to crush me now, I promise you won’t get another chance.”

As the Breaker lifted his fists for a final slam, a bolt of blue energy struck right between his shoulder blades. The Breaker growled and halted its attack on Shale as it lumbered around to see the new addition to his melee.

Shale looked up to see the Breaker step slowly towards Trixie, who fired off blast after blast of blue arcs into the Breaker’s chest. “Shale, you miserable sack of pebbles!” Trixie yelled. “How

dare you just come out here alone and... please, sweet Celestia, save me!”

With mouth clenched, Shale moved with purpose towards the Breaker and more importantly, to Trixie. Muttering every donkey and pony curse she could remember, Shale ran under the legs of the Breaker, keeping her head low, timing her approach right. Ignoring Trixie’s look of horror as Shale stampeded towards her, Shale quickly lifted her head as it went under Trixie and bumped the insufferable unicorn into the air and squarely on Shale’s back. Trixie’s staff floated next to Shale as she continued to run from a very angry Breaker.

“By the Stone,” Shale cursed. “You half-witted pony, what are you doing here? It is dangerous for your squishy meaty self!”

“While Trixie appreciates your concern for her well being, she was concerned with yours as well! Don’t you have any idea what’s going on? There is a giant bear heading this way and the Archdemon is coming as well!”

“I am trying to buy time for the others to prepare for the battle against the Archdemon!”

“By getting yourself killed?!”

Shale grumbled, but conceded to Trixie. Try as she might, Shale had to admit that she could not defeat the Breaker on her own. As she continued to gallop away from the breaker, Shale turned her head to see that the massive minotaur headed back towards Trotterim’s walls.

“If we do not stop the Breaker, he will destroy the walls. Then the ponyspawn will rush towards the city with little impediment.” Shale reared on her hooves, causing Trixie to yelp as she rushed towards the Breaker again. “Quickly, you imbecile. Use your magic to catch the Breaker’s attention. Once it is distracted, pour every ounce of your magic into my red augmentation crystals. Then I will defeat the Breaker.”

“Are you insane?!” Trixie barked back. “If you try that, your crystals will explode! Taking you with them!”

“There shall be no debate. This is a thing that must be done so the walls do not fall to the Breaker.” To push her point, Shale stopped suddenly and watched as Trixie tumbled to the ground, her pointed hat falling to the wayside. “I’m doing this to protect those I have decided to honour and call friends. That includes you. If the city falls, the ponyspawn will win. I will not allow such. Now, prepare yourself! I go!”

Before she could listen to Trixie’s protests, Shale ran off towards the Breaker once again. Already the golem felt her augmentation crystals ignite, her internal temperature rising until she appeared to be a golem of lava rather than simple stone. The Breaker showed no fear, instead

raising its mighty hands up for another fight with Shale.

Feeling her body burst into flames, Shale's aggression increased tenfold, her desire to see the Breaker little more than a smouldering heap now at full precedence. She opened her mouth and let loose a deafening warcry. She narrowly dodged the forceful fists and countered by slamming her head into the Breaker's chest. The forcefulness of the attack toppled the Breaker off his hooves of which Shale immediately capitalized as she pounced on the giant and trampled all over his body and face.

Shale continued her attack on the Breaker, watching her red augmentation crystals burn brighter as more of Trixie's magic was fed into them. Each strike of her hoof scorched the dull grey skin of her foe, but sure enough the Breaker would use all four of his arms to free himself. She had to detonate her crystals now!

Yet there was no increase in magical pressure, and definitely no explosion. Shale turned around to see Trixie fallen on her knees, looking up with pleading eyes. Tears streamed down her face as she shook her head.

"I don't want to lose you," Trixie said. "Please... run away..."

As a warrior, Shale knew hesitation on the battlefield cost lives. She turned to look at the Breaker once more, and considered listening to Trixie. To escape or try to fight with what strength she could muster. A difficult decision. Out of her vision, she could see the Breaker lift himself up with two hands, while another clenched fist sailed towards her.

As a friend, Shale understood why Trixie did not cast her spell. As much as Shale enjoyed the gory messes caused by her own hooves, even she did not want to see those she called friends explode into gibbets of flesh and blood. To see a friend blow themselves up to save them, it was not something Shale would have considered anyone doing for her.

Much less her doing it for anypony.

Without the detonation or the ability to dodge the incoming fist, Shale resigned herself to her fate. The fist of the Breaker slammed into her side, shattering stone despite her lava-like appearance. Shale's body rolled around the ground in pieces, though her head and chest were mostly still intact. As her form finally lay still, for once Shale was eternally grateful she could not feel pain the same way squishy mortals could.

She could still feel weak though. Drained of lyrium and having her limbs broken off made Shale feel utterly helpless. A foreign feeling to Shale, one she never expected to experience ever. If Shale could, she would smile still, as the Breaker took its time to stand again, clearly weakened by her attack.

“No!” Came Trixie’s scream, one that pierced the roar of the battlefield. “Stay away from her, monster!”

Several loud *pops* resounded after another, with illusions of Trixie formed around the Breaker. The real Trixie stepped between Shale and the giant ponyspawn, her horn set ablaze not by the familiar blue aura of Trixie’s magic. Instead her horn was wreathed in very real, very hot arcane fire fueled by rage.

One by one the Trixie-copies burst into flames, turning into furious fire elementals with the same body as their conjurer. The Breaker balked at the sight, and made an attempt at intimidating them by roaring and pounding his fists against his chest.

“Burn him,” Trixie commanded, and her flaming clones obeyed, leaping onto the Breaker and refusing to let go. The Breaker howled in agony while the flames consumed him, until the elementals converged into a living pyre, engulfing the minotaur general and his threat to Trotterim in a single blaze.

Trixie immediately forgot about the roasted flesh and bones that once was the Breaker, collapsing near Shale with tears in her eyes. Her horn, no longer wrapped in fire but by a gentle blue glow, collected the damaged pieces of Shale’s body and encased them in magic. Despite this, a red mark seared itself on her scalp. Trixie

“He’s gone, Shale,” Trixie said, grunting as she slowly made her way back to Trotterim. “He’s gone. We’ll get you back to the other unicorns. They’ll have lyrium, and then we can fix you.”

“Trixie... you... can’t fight and carry...”

“I’m strong enough to carry you. That’s all that matters.”

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The Ursa Major stepped into the field of battle for the first time since eras immemorial. To such a creature as she, this was a day no different than the hundreds of thousands she had spent in hibernation. Until she heard the zebra’s call to battle, the Ursa Major was content merely sleeping away the centuries until she heard the call from the Two again.

To have the call brought to her from a mortal surprised her, but in the end, it did not matter. She was tasked to defend Nature itself from all enemies that would do it harm, and that was something the Ursa Major would not allow failure in. All around her the abjurations hissed and gnashed their teeth, attempting to draw blood from her hide with blade, fang, and claw. These monsters, these ponyspawn as mortals called them, were unnatural and a product of the long standing feud between the Age of Chaos and the Dragons of Order. They were, in a sense, the perfect unity of both concepts. They were as destructive and chaotic as any army would ever



hope to be, yet still had a stiff structure similar to the law of the wilds. The strongest ruled, and to the ponyspawn, the strongest was their Archdemons.

It would be the Ursa's task to weaken the Archdemon for the sacred Elements to carry out their duties. To do that, the Ursa would have to attract the attention of the lord of these monsters. To this end, a culling was in order.

Despite her fearsome appearance of girth, fangs, and claws, the Ursa Major did not like the act of killing. She did not need to hunt for food, and she did not damage the land when she walked. Mere intimidation was enough to scare away any foolhardy adventurer that somehow managed to find her cave. For these monstrosities, simple force was all she needed to get her point across.

Nature would exterminate the disease known as the Blight, by any means necessary. The Ursa Major was that means.

Lifting her mighty paw, the Ursa swiped at the hordes of ponyspawn around her, elongated claws tearing through flesh and rusted metal with ease. The tiny creatures tried to fight back with their weapons, but the Ursa simply shrugged off their offense and resumed her attack. Any ponyspawn that was not shredded between her claws was stomped under foot.

The Ursa's attack seemed to inspire a new fighting fervour in the hundreds of ponies also battling against the ponyspawn. A great roar of cheers bellowed from the ponies, charging against their enemies in a flurry of steel and hooves. They fought bravely against the ponyspawn, something that the Ursa Major always admired from a distance. When riled into action, ponies could accomplish anything. They just needed a little help every once in a while.

Feeling her cosmic fur being pulled, the Ursa Major turned to see several of the larger ponyspawn called minotaurs attempt to climb onto their body. Their weight proved significant when added together, slowing her advance through the throngs of little monsters. The Ursa scratched at her boarders, peeling away their flesh and picking them off one by one, tossing their broad bodies into the ponyspawn under her.

The roar of the Archdemon split the sounds of battle apart, vibrating the Ursa's very ears. The Ursa turned to see the great ebon wings of the Archdemon slice through the sky as it circled overhead. The ponyspawn took the sight of their master as a source to rally behind, hissing and roaring in response to the shadow above. The Ursa Major looked up at her true adversary, staring at the winged figure overhead with trepidation.

She felt... fear. The Archdemon was once an Old One, a great and terrible dragon who wielded powers that were once used to create her. Like the Nature itself, the Archdemon was an aspect of the world; the feeling of despair, dread, and hopelessness was Uthemiel's domain. The Ursa took a tentative step away from the Archdemon. Even in her near ageless heart, she could feel the

same fear as any mortal pony would face with the sight of the Archdemon.

Everything seemed to simply cease when the Archdemon finally landed on the ground. With its black scales shining in the fires of the burning city, the Archdemon perfected its fearsome visage as it craned its long neck high to look into the eyes of the Ursa Major. The large, ornate brass plated bolted across the Archdemon's left eye shined in the pale light as its good eye exuded anger and fury at the Ursa.

Though smaller than the Ursa, the Archdemon was much longer, covering the field of battle with its tail, casually swiping at ponyspawn and pony alike. The Archdemon spread its black wings while scratching at the ground with massive claws. The Ursa breathed shaky breaths as she waited for the Archdemon to strike. There were scant few entities that could truly end her life. The Archdemon was one of them.

The Ursa Major reared her head back before letting loose an explosive roar. The shock of the roar caused the ground to shake, tossing pony and ponyspawn alike off their hooves. The Archdemon did not move or blink, seemingly unfazed by the show of Nature's fury. Lifting its head up and taking a deep breath, the Archdemon made its reply.

In fire.

A great torrent of shadowfire flew out of the Archdemon's maw on towards the face of the Ursa. She moved away, if barely, catching a few errant tongues of fire lashing across her face. The impossibly hot flames scorched her celestial fur, and the pain was nothing the likes she had ever experienced. Though the flames only barely scorched her snout, the Ursa felt the barbs of agony flow through her entire body.

The Archdemon swiftly took advantage, leaping on powerful hind legs, driving itself forward before clamping its jaws around the shoulder of the Ursa. While the Ursa Major did not possess a body of flesh and bone as most mortal creatures did, she could still feel her body being maimed by the sharp fangs of the Archdemon, her fur and flesh being torn apart as the dragon thrashed its head about.

With a grunt, the Ursa turned her shoulder in an effort to get the Archdemon to release its hold. Shifting her weight, the great bear pulled against the Archdemon, allowing her to be in position to fall on top of it. The Archdemon's teeth dug even deeper into her skin, but she ignored the pain in favour of allowing gravity to do the work.

The ground shuddered as the Ursa collapsed on top of the Archdemon, the fangs of the reptilian monstrosity finally being released. The Archdemon squirmed underneath the Ursa as she repositioned over it, lifting her jaw before plunging her own teeth into the neck. With a roar and a stream of black flame did the Archdemon inform the world of its pain, flapping its wings in a

futile attempt to dislodge the Ursa. The foul taste of the Archdemon filled the Ursa with disgust, dragging her teeth along the Archdemon's neck and made the wounds gape open and exposed to the world.

In a frenzy to escape, the Archdemon snaked its tail towards the Ursa, coiling the long appendage around her neck. The tail's strength proved too much for the Ursa, dragging her off the Archdemon and constricting her neck like a noose. The Ursa did not need air, and managed to tear off a fair sized chunk of flesh before being tossed aside.

The strength that the Archdemon showed surprised the Ursa Major greatly. Just the tail alone pulled her massive form off the leader of the Blight. The Archdemon suddenly lunged at her with scraping claws and caused the Ursa to fall back. Fury in her eyes, the Ursa struck back with a swing of her paw and caught the Archdemon in the face. The edge of her claws tore through scales before forcibly removing the brass plate attached to the Archdemon's face.

As the plate fell, the Ursa could finally get a good look at the Archdemon's face. Making no attempt to hide the disfigurement, the Archdemon glared at the Ursa with newfound hate. Without the plate in place, the Ursa could see a terrible unblinking red eye attached, if barely, by several grey tendons. The remains of a cut not unlike the Ursa's festered over the wound.

The single eye twitched and moved about erratically, looking in every direction it could while the single "good" eye continued to glare at the Ursa. She felt pity for the Archdemon for a moment, wondering how long such a creature had carried a wound such as this. Yet such pity faded to fear as the wandering eye pointed its red iris towards her. All attention was focused on the Ursa.

Opening its maw, the Archdemon unleashed another blast of shadowfire into the face of the Ursa Major. Ducking her head, the Ursa moved to the side quickly only to suddenly pounced by the powerful claws of the black dragon. The momentum from the tackle sent the Ursa sprawling to the ground, kicking up torrents of dust all around.

Pinned to the ground, the Ursa struggled to free herself from the claws of the Archdemon. It leered at the Ursa with its single deformed eye before finally opening its mouth, a ball of shadowfire forming within.

The Archdemon let loose all of its fury in a cascade of devouring ebon flames, smothering the Ursa's face in fire. The Ursa tried out of desperation and terror to fight itself free, only to have its thunderous growls silenced by the explosive force of the shadowfire. Her thoughts quickly turned rabid as all she wanted to do was escape.

The Ursa Major stilled her body, unable to take the strain of the Archdemon any longer. With a sigh, she gave in to the hopelessness of her battle. Who was she to challenge one of the Old Ones? She was nothing compared to their fire, to their fury, to their hatred. Nature would fall to

the Blight if Harmony failed to stop the Archdemon.

As the last vestiges of life fled the body of the Ursa Major, the Archdemon raised its claws before slamming them into the ruined corpse of Nature's guardian. The body shattered like crystal, sending shards of a once ancient and cosmic creature into the night sky.

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Pandemonium broke loose on the battlefield.

With the fall of the Ursa Major and the Archdemon now rampant on the field of battle, the common soldiery fell to pieces, running and screaming from the battlefield. The ponyspawn were pushing towards Trotterim nearly unmitigated. Only Loghoof and Arl Macintosh's forces remained to hold the Blight back. Unfortunately for all of Equestria, the Archdemon was not heading towards the last line of defense, but instead soared on black wings towards Trotterim itself.

"Everypony! Get to the city! We can use the buildings as cover!" Twilight's command was drowned out by the roar of the Archdemon, her body tensing as the black dragon's shadow covered the city before it landed on top of some buildings. Its claws dug into the shingles of a roof while it twisted its head to find easy prey.

Twilight could not help but stare at the pulsating right eye of the Archdemon. It darted to and fro without focus, desperately seeking something out while the rest of the body continued the Archdemon's massacre. For a moment she felt the eye stare at her, and the feeling of being spotted by the hateful presence of the Archdemon made her feel small, insignificant, and weak.

"Twilight!" She heard Spike yell. Twilight looked in the direction Spike pointed to, and gasped in horror as the Archdemon began its true attack on Trotterim. A stream of shadowflame poured from its mouth, setting entire city blocks ablaze. Those ponies who chose not to evacuate the city, and the guards trying to protect them, screamed as the flames devoured the city, only to become overpowered by the roar of the flames.

This madness had to stop, and quickly. The city would only become a burning funeral pyre for all of Equestria if the Archdemon was not stopped. High above them, Riordan dove from the sky, his body covered in ash and ponyspawn blood. He landed amongst them, appearing worn-out from the battle, yet still had an air of command about him.

"The Archdemon is where we want her to be," he said, immediately setting a brisk canter towards the city centre. "The ballistae I had installed on the highest points of the city will be the key to take the Archdemon down. Each bolt is attached to a long chain, with the head made of the finest and sharpest steel. Once the bolt pierces through the Archdemon's scales, we must reel

in the catch, much like that of a large fish. With two ballista bolts, we can immobilize the Archdemon long enough for you six to use the Elements of Harmony. Once the heart of the Archdemon is exposed, I will make the killing blow.”

Twilight looked at Riordan, appalled that he *wanted* the Archdemon to attack the city directly. She could not argue with his plan, however, especially since he had already consigned his fate to be the one to slay the Archdemon.

“I will need Rainbow Dash to help me,” Riordan continued. “Her speed and strength will be needed to make it to the ballista and back to all of you in a moment’s notice.”

Rainbow’s body did not agree with Riordan. Rainbow dryly chuckled as she tried to raise her broken wing, lifting it lamely while wincing at the pain such a movement caused. She shook her head in defeat.

Taking note of Rainbow’s wing and Riordan’s need for a pegasus, Fluttershy stepped forward. “I’ll do it,” she said. “I’ll help you use the ballista on the Archdemon.”

“It is not ideal, but this is the best chance we have.” Riordan turned, spreading his wings to take flight and waited for Fluttershy to join him. “You will have to distract the Archdemon long enough for us to use the ballistae. Celestia and Luna watch over you and everypony in Equestria.”

Fluttershy hovered in the air for a moment, looking at her friends with tears in her eyes. “No matter what happens... I’ve come to look at you all as sisters.” She took in a sharp breath of air. “I’ll see you soon, on the ground, or on the other side. Thank you.”

Both pegasi took to the skies, heading towards the ballista towers while the Archdemon continued to attack another sector of the city. Twilight stopped for a moment, keeping a careful eye on the Archdemon as it kept its wild eye on her. That strange eye made Twilight nervous, knowing that there was no true way to surprise the Archdemon. There was, however, the ability to taunt it, a means of attracting its attention.

With the Ursa Major dead, the Grey Wardens were the last true challenge to the Archdemon’s might, and it knew that. Uthemiel was not a fool, but if there was one weakness Twilight could exploit, it was the Archdemon’s vision that nothing could challenge it. With the Wardens the last threat to its existence, it was time Twilight made good on that.

“Everypony, get ready,” Twilight said as her horn flared to life. “I’m going to try to attract the attention of the Archdemon. We’re going to the middle of Trotterim and I’m bringing her to us.”

“This is it then,” Applejack muttered. She drew Silverbite from its sheath and readied herself for battle. “This is the moment we’ve been waitin’ for. For the Grey Wardens! For Duncan! Bring

that critter down!”

Rarity stepped forward, her horn arcing with lightning. “We came this far. This is the culmination of our journey. Let’s show this horrible Archdemon just what we ponies can do! Have at thee!”

“Enough pain! Enough suffering!” Pinkie readied her mace in her mouth. “Let’s make sure nopony is hurt ever again by this big, ugly, evil meanie! Come at me, Archie! I’ve got your number right here!”

“It will take a lot more than a broken wing to keep me from soaring!” Rainbow said, drawing her dagger. “I’m with these ponies until the end! Your end! Enough clowning around, let’s get to business!”

“To the end of all things! Until we can see the new dawn! Move out!” Twilight led the charge, galloping at full speed while a beam of light burst from her form into the skies above. Everypony looked up to see a beacon of light take the form of a grey shield, the mark of the Grey Wardens illuminating the sky. Six cutie marks donned the shield, all burning in a fiery spectrum of colour. To Twilight, it was open defiance to the despair Uthemiel wished to evoke on the world.

They galloped past Trotterim’s city Chantry, where the yells and screams of the Sisters who chose to remain. Twilight slowed down as she felt Spike tug on her mane. “Twilight! Let me down here!” he shouted. “I’ll help those Sisters escape!”

Twilight froze, the idea of leaving Spike alone in the middle of a terrible battlefield numbing her body. It was preferable to taking him to face the Archdemon, but at least she had the cold comfort that she could do anything to protect him. If he was elsewhere, anything could happen.

“You have to focus on the Archdemon!” Spike continued to shout. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine! The market square is just right there and the Archdemon is coming.”

Spike took advantage of Twilight’s stop to hop off her back, burning sword held deftly in his claws. “Spike...” Twilight was able to muster, only to receive a quick nod from her young ward.

“No matter what happens, I’m proud of you Twilight.” Spike turned his back, ready to run towards the Chantry. “I’m sorry for all this Twilight. This isn’t the life you wanted, and I pushed you into it. I hope... I hope you can live happy after the battle.”

Twilight’s eyes widened as she heard Spike’s words, only to be pulled away by Applejack. “Ain’t no time!” Applejack hollered. “The Archdemon got mighty riled at the sight of your beacon! Spike’s doing his best, and we’ve got to do ours! Let’s move!”

They made their way to the center of the marketplace in short order, only to be halted by the roar

of the Archdemon. Flying towards them, the Archdemon landed in front of Twilight with a thunderous crash. The impact shook the ground and caused buildings to collapse around it. With the sight of their foe directly in her face, Twilight could not help but shiver as Sophia removed itself from its scabbard and floated next to Twilight in a violet aura.

Both of the Archdemon's eyes focused on her, yet despite the chaos of the battlefield and the crackling of a hundred fires, Twilight could hear the Archdemon's heart with perfect clarity. She suspected Applejack and Rainbow Dash could hear it as well, the looks on their faces determined yet grim.

For a moment, Twilight had to blink to make sure she did not see an illusion. Standing on top of the Archdemon's head was a transparent image of the unicorn form Uthemiel used in the past. The spectral form of Uthemiel glared at Twilight with unbridled fury, her teeth clenched while her single unobstructed eye blazed with shadowfire. Twilight blinked again, and the image of the twisted unicorn vanished as quickly as it came.

The Archdemon opened its mouth as a large ball of black fire formed within. Twilight's stupor ended at the sight of the attack and she quickly brought her shields to life. The first attack was a simple, if very large fireball, and it flew from the maw of the ebon dragon with tremendous force and speed. Her friends dove for cover, while Twilight watched as the fireball came hurtling towards her.

With her horn and her sword glowing in tandem, Twilight focused both sources of magic at her command to strengthen her shield into a single point. In her mind's eye, she told the shield to be a concussive force, and as the fireball neared, Twilight squatted low to the ground, her buckler-sized protectivespell ready for the oncoming attack.

Before the fireball could incinerate her, Twilight gave a shout and raised her shield at just the right the angle. The orb of black fire deflected off the shield and sailed into the air before exploding above all their heads. Twilight gasped as the strain of the spell weakened her already racked body. She fell to one knee, but satisfied that her plan had worked.

The Archdemon growled and flexed its capable jaw. If flame failed, it would continue the attack with fangs and claws. The great head of the Archdemon lunged towards Twilight, jaws opened wide to take her as its next meal. Twilight's eyes widened in horror as the impossibly large neck stretched towards her, ready to chomp down on her weakened body in a single bite.

Before the Archdemon could devour Twilight, Applejack flanked the head from the left, bringing Silverbite against black scales. Each blow Applejack made against the Archdemon was dealt double, as the phantom blade tore through the hardened scales with surprising ease. Twilight remembered what Flemeth said when she was wounded by Silverbite, of which the sword was made of a metal called moonsteel and proved quite effective against Archdemons and Dragon

Gods.

The effect of Silverbite against the flesh of the Archdemon was immediate, with several cracks and fissures lined along the wounds. The Archdemon arced its head and unleashed a terrible roar of pain into the air. Applejack did not slacken her pace, moving around on powerful legs with quick and effective strikes.

Frustration mounted within the Archdemon as it turned towards Applejack, ignoring Twilight completely and brought down one of its mighty claws in a swift and powerful strike. Applejack cursed as she ducked down, only to scream as the claws glanced off her dragonbone plate. She rolled away from the force of the blow, only to take a quick look at her hide. While dented, the armour held strong, with only a minor tear leading into the chainmail.

Rarity's horn exploded with electricity and sent several bolts of lightning into the sky. "Quickly! Move out of the way!" she yelled, as the skies rumbled with the sound of thunder. Weaving her horn around in the form of a sigil, a large glyph took shape around the body of the Archdemon, the light of Rarity's magic illuminating the terrible visage of the dragon's face.

One by one the lightning bolts crashed into the earth followed by a deafening thunderclap, the lightning passing through the Archdemon while also providing power to the glyph. The Archdemon roared in agony as its claws grasped at the ground with its claws as it attempted to brace itself for the attacks from above.

Despite her broken wings, Rainbow still galloped on swift hooves and sheer determination. She leaped onto the Archdemon's ruined hide caused by Applejack and used the broken scales as hoofholds. Holding her long dagger tight in her mouth, she pierced the flesh of the Archdemon. She dragged the blade downward and removed several scales, with black blood spewing from the wound like oil.

After the impromptu flaying of the black dragon, Rainbow sank her dagger into the Archdemon with quick rapid strikes. Each poisoned blow sent the Archdemon into a frenzy, but the combined attacks of all the ponies made it near impossible to counter. Twilight could not help but smirk. For all the Archdemon's strength, it was still one creature, one dragon. They had experience fighting titans like it.

"Everypony! Get clear and cover your eyes!" On the end of Pinkie's tail bounced a much larger flash grenade than normal, and in her mouth was a lit bomb ignition ready to set the fuse alight. Knowing full well what Pinkie planned, Twilight turned around and ran towards a pile of rubble for cover.

The others did the same, taking refuge behind broken homes and shattered structures as Pinkie tossed the flash grenade into the eyes of the Archdemon. The grenade exploded into a starburst



of white light. The Archdemon roared as both eyes were blinded, its good eye rapidly blinking while the deformed one spun on its tendrils rapidly in every direction. In its fury, the Archdemon unleashed a torrent of flame that streaked past the party. It singed hairs but little else save for setting the buildings behind them alight in the shadowfire.

If this could be construed as a signal to Fluttershy and Riordan on the ballistae above, they took advantage of it. Riordan aimed his ballista at the Archdemon. He unlatched the mechanism that held the bolt back and watched as the chained projectile flew. The large arrowhead embedded itself into the Archdemon's hide, causing no small amount of pain as the monster roared again. Riordan then began to work the reeling device, tightening the chain until it was firm and the Archdemon was secure.

Fluttershy took aim as well, though her target was a different one. Once she was sure of her shot, Fluttershy let loose the ballista bolt, though she fell over due to recoil. The bolt sailed into the wing joint of the Archdemon and shattered several bones, locking the joint in place. The Archdemon tried to flap its wings, pulling against the ballista and dragging towards the top of the tower.

Fluttershy leaped onto the wheel and pulled with all her might to cause the chain to reel back into the ballista. Seeing that she could not pull it on her own, Angel popped out of his bag at Fluttershy's side, jumped across to help her push against the mechanism. With their combined efforts, the chain was pulled in and left the Archdemon helpless to against them.

Riordan and Fluttershy joined the others as they stepped in front of the suffering Archdemon. For a moment, Twilight felt a surge of pride. They had done it. They won. The Archdemon was at their mercy, ready to be slain by the Grey Wardens. Soon the despair would be at an end.

"This is the day we Wardens have been training for all our lives..." Riordan lowered his head as he spoke, despite the blinded, thrashing Archdemon before him. "I am prepared to give my death meaning. I am ready to strike the fatal blow. I ask only that you do not forget me, and all the other Wardens who died to make this day happen."

"We won't forget, Riordan," Twilight said. "No matter what, we won't forget."

Gripped in her violet aura, Twilight drew the last of the Star Strands. Despite its grievous wounds, the Archdemon froze its throes of pain. The rabid eye stilled as it gazed into the pale moonlight of Luna's remains. Twilight could have sworn that the Archdemon took a cautious step away from the divine light. The Archdemon of Despair showed fear.

Before she uncorked the phial, Twilight heard screams from behind her and the collapse of wood. Twilight turned her head, eyes shrinking to pinpricks as she watched those Chantry sisters who could flee their house of worship. Her mind raced as she thought she saw Spike try to

escape only to have the entire roof cave in from the immolating shadowfire.

Time came to a crawl as everything around Twilight happened quickly. Spike was in mortal danger, his tiny claws trying to push past the debris. Her heart snapped in twain as she saw the metal of his plate armour melt into his very scales. His face twisted and contorted in pain as the steel of his helm fused with his face, the shadowfire showing no mercy, even to his flame-resistant scales.

“Twilight! We need to finish this now!” Twilight blinked as she could hear the sound of Riordan shouting at her, but his words meant little. Spike was in danger. She needed to go to him now. His wounds could be cured by the Star Strand. She would find another way to defeat Uthemiel. There was always another way.

All that mattered was saving Spike.

“I’m sorry,” Twilight whispered, before turning around reach Spike. Riordan shouted to her, only to have his voiced drowned out by the roar of the Archdemon.

The Archdemon pulled against its chains, dragging the ballista Fluttershy used to the ground. The weapon crashed, giving the black dragon enough strength to pull the other ballista from its tower. Freed from its bonds, the Archdemon stared down Riordan who could only watch his nemesis regain its strength.

“My death has no meaning,” he muttered, before the Archdemon opened its mouth and let loose a veritable tidal wave of fire. The fire consumed Riordan without a scream. The ponies dove out of the way. Applejack watched Twilight gallop as quickly as she could towards the burning Chantry.

“Twilight, no! Get away!” Springing to her hooves, Applejack pushed herself as quickly as she could, digging into the reserves of strength in her legs to carry her faster than she ever ran before. She jumped into a strong tackle and collided with Twilight. She forced both of them to narrowly escape the stream of shadowfire as it blasted the Chantry.

“No!” Twilight’s half-sob, half-scream ripped from her lips as she collided with the ground, rolling in the ash and blood and dirt of Trotterim until she finally stopped. The Chantry burned in black fire, but such a hazard didn’t matter to her. She tried to get up again only to feel Pinkie and Rainbow hold her back.

“Spike! Spike! Let me go! I have to save Spike! Let me go!” Her horn sparked with powerful magic, only to feel the drain of anti-magic applied to her. She shot Applejack a glare that could have made mountains moved, while her fellow Warden closed her pitch black eyes. Dark tears fell without abatement.

“Ah’m so sorry, Twilight... but he’s gone.” Applejack tried to suppress a sob, only to fail. “Spike’s gone... Spike’s gone, Twilight. But right now, we... we need to focus on the Archdemon.”

“I can heal him!” Twilight screamed. “I have my Star Strand! He isn’t dead, he isn’t...” She felt around her magic for a moment, trying to find the Star Strand. Without the Star Strand, all was lost. She would not be able to heal Spike, and if Applejack were even remotely right, they would not be able to call upon the Elements of Harmony without Luna’s magic.

Yet try as she might, she could not call onto the Star Strand. Cold realization gripped Twilight as she looked back to the scorch mark where the Archdemon’s shadowflame left its mark. When Applejack tackled her to protect her, she must have dropped the relic. Now it was nothing but ash in the wake of the evil it was meant to defeat.

Twilight fell to her knees as the final piece of the twisted puzzle fell into place. Spike was gone. The Star Strand was gone. As the Archdemon hobbled away to heal its wounds, the only thought Twilight held was that she failed. She failed the Grey Wardens, she failed her friends, and most of all, she failed Spike.

As despair gripped her heart, Twilight cried in the middle of a ruined city, surrounded by her scarred friends while the world around her burned in black fire.