

“My Little Pony : Nightfall : The Shadowbolt Initiative”

By Lauren Rivers

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“Friendship is magic. It is the bond that holds us together in our darkest hours. From it we draw the most amazing strength, however there are times when it is not enough. It is in these times that we must stand together against the forces which friendship cannot reach.” It was the speech that Omega Directive gave when Lauren and the others were christened the Shadowbolts, Equestria’s newest and first line of defense against threats to ponykind. They had fought the Changelings for the second time and won. King Sombra had returned and been beaten back. For the first time Equestria had needed to survive without Princess Celestia watching over it and without the Elements of Harmony to protect the ponies of Equestria.

While this could have been a critical disaster in Equestrian history it was then that Lauren and a team of ponies from all across the land had joined together to stop the darkness from spreading. It was not without irony that it was noted that a zebra was the one to lead the charge to save Equestria, though she proved that one did not need magic or powers or a crown to save the innocent. All you needed was friends you could trust and a willingness to fight.

Since then they had been operating for two months with Celestia’s permission as an autonomous branch of the military. Lauren led the group from the airship. Her position as Director of the Shadowbolts was a large step in reuniting the ponies and the zebras from the long rift that had stood between them.

The airship rocked again as another volley of fireballs was launched in their direction. Sunset Shimmer braced herself as she blocked the assault with a force field spell. “NGGHH!!!”

“Are you all right?” Lauren asked her.

“I’m fine, that one just took me by surprise, that’s all.” Lauren walked up to Sunset and gave her a gentle touch of her nose before she returned her full attention to the tactical situation.

Lauren placed a hoof on the railing and kept an eye out for the dark blue uniforms of the Shadowbolts. Below her Aileron, Diamond Sky, and Muffins stayed in close formation as they approached the compound. The blue Pegasus with the wind swept hair flew closer until his progress was stopped by a sudden surge of the defenses below.

“It’s pretty thick down here!” Aileron’s voice came over the radio.

“Be careful! Can you find a hole in their defenses?” she asked.

“I’m working on it! Standby!” The pegasi attempted another approach vector and were once again turned away. *“No joy!”*

Lauren galloped up to the command deck where Red wrestled with the steering wheel. “Can you get us closer? We need to give them a diversion.”

Red snorted. “I can, but we’re going to take a lot of fire.”

“I know, we need to give them some cover. Sunset, do you think you can protect us?” Lauren asked.

The flame haired yellow unicorn nodded. “I can try.”

“I believe in you. Yuki, hold on!” She called out to the sissy unicorn that held on to the railing as the airship suddenly took a dive towards Obsidian’s compound. They dropped to within the range of the weapons below that immediately shifted direction to target them instead of the three pegasi.

“It looks like we got their attention,” Red said with some disdain.

“Door’s open, ladies and gentlecolts. Let’s get this done.” Lauren fell against the table as another ball of flame struck the ship. Now it was up to the pegasi.

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Aileron weaved between the fireballs with Diamond Sky and Muffins on his flanks. They kept in close formation as the three curved down and made it past the defenses that were aimed upwards at the airship. The blue Pegasus landed at a trot and ushered the others to follow him. “Be careful, we don’t know what sort of resistance to expect!”

“I’m going to say ‘a lot’.” Diamond Sky hurried after their squad leader as they made their way inside the compound.

Aileron cast one final look at the airship that continued to dodge the incoming fire. He hoped they would be all right until the job was done. Casting his concerns aside and trusting in his friends to handle themselves, he pushed on into the compound of the renegade unicorn known as Obsidian.

As his name suggested, the pony was black with a black mane. His cutie mark was of a fully eclipsed sun. They believed he had set up shop here and had been sent to bring him into custody. It was not going to be an easy task.

“This way! We’ve got to disable their ground to air defenses so the others can land and back us up.” Aileron turned down a hallway and rushed towards the sound of fireballs and ice archers launching projectiles up at the airship. The weapons so far bounced off of the shield that Sunset Shimmer was generating, but they had to take the heat off of her.

Aileron flew in first and knocked one of the ponies off of his seat. He took out two more in that same strike as he whirled around and hovered. Diamond sky had taken out a few ice archer’s bows that now lay useless on the ground as the Earth ponies that had manned them scattered in a panic. Muffins had weaved in and out of their line of fire in such an erratic pattern that none of the ponies manning the defenses could hit her.

Not wasting the opening, Aileron attacked the remaining ponies until finally the defenses ceased to fire. He gestured upwards to the airship at which he spotted Lauren offering a wave of her hoof. The airship descended into the courtyard of the compound and the ramp dropped open. Lauren and Sunset Shimmer emerged and jumped to the ground while the ship stayed airborne.

Lauren turned back to Red, who stood on the deck with Yuki. “You two stay here and protect the ship. Make sure nobody gets out, you hear me?”

“I’ve got your back.” Red offered a salute that Lauren was quick to return. He then flew above the zebra and the yellow and red unicorn as they hurried in to capture Obsidian.

Aileron had been part of Lauren’s team since before they even had a name. He had escorted her to Equestria right after Princess Twilight’s coronation. Though they had not known it at the time, they had their own destiny independent of the princess, and now they were pursuing it.

He knew that Lauren was the type to want to be with her team, even though she was the leader of the Shadowbolts. The name had been Princess Luna’s idea, since the Wonderbolts protected Equestria during the day, it seemed only appropriate that there be

a complimentary unit that functioned when Luna was in charge at night. It was with some irony that a zebra had been chosen to lead the group, given their distant history with the ponies, but he had never had any reason to question Lauren's heart. She was a gentle and honest soul with a generous spirit. Her kind approach to all ponies and loyalty to Luna and Celestia had earned her the position. He had never had a reason to question her motives.

She and Sunset Shimmer hurried to join the three pegasi in the center of the courtyard. "Are you three all right?"

"We're fine, though we must get moving," Diamond Sky said.

"Agreed. This way." Sunset Shimmer led the way with the rest of their party falling into line. Aileron did not know Sunset Shimmer as well as some of the others. She had joined late into their first mission. In fact, she had been siding with King Sombra and the enemy the first time. During the course of Princess Celestia's incarceration she had a change of heart and switched sides, helping them win a victory that day.

Some were suspicious of the unicorn mare. Certainly her abandonment of Celestia's teachings and her eagerness to side with King Sombra had been part of that, but he now understood that her choices were not out of malice. Her actions that day proved she was not truly evil. Many ponies had forgotten her part in the rescue of the princesses and only remembered that she had sided with the enemy. As such, few seemed to speak to her outside of the Shadowbolts. She had often remained in her room most of the time on board the ship or in the Shadowbolts facility in Cloudsdale.

Lauren had taken a special interest in the unicorn. He noted that as a pony that was considered somewhat of an outsider herself, the two had something in common. It was not more than a few years ago that even zebras were not welcome in Ponyville, instead being met with fear and distrust for little reason other than past events clouding present judgment. In addition their visit to the Crystal Empire had reminded Lauren that there were days when ponies and zebras had not gotten along. She herself had not met with a warm reception from those ponies that were a thousand years out of time with the rest of the world.

Aileron pushed his thoughts aside as the group pushed deeper into Obsidian's facility. He rounded a corner and hovered in the air as he looked down the corridor in surprise. "Ice archers!"

"Watch out!" Sunset Shimmer created a force field inches in front of a surprised Lauren, who had tried to back up but had not reacted fast enough.

"Thank you," Lauren said.

"Always." She and the unicorn locked eyes for a moment and their muzzles came close.

Diamond Sky barreled between them and took out an Earth pony that had drawn his bow back. The ice arrow flew wild and struck the ceiling, encasing it in a clear sheet of ice. The brown Pegasus with the blue and white hair bucked another off of his icy weapon and turned around. "We're almost there!"

Lauren turned her attention back to the mission and took the lead of the group. "Obsidian's command center should be just up ahead. We need to take him out before he does any more damage!" The zebra mare hurried down the hall at her top speed, with Sunset Shimmer at her side and the three pegasi above them in formation. They stopped

at a large wooden door. She reached out with a hoof. A green glow appeared in front of the door where her hoof made contact. "A force field."

"I can try to break through it." Sunset Shimmer leaned forward and a beam of energy blasted forth from her horn. She strained and spread her hooves to try and pour more magic energy into the beam.

Aileron watched the green force field flicker under the strain. Cracks had started to appear at the point the unicorn mare had targeted. After a few more seconds the field shattered completely.

Diamond Sky and Muffins moved to pull the doors open. Aileron, Lauren, and Sunset Shimmer hurried inside, stopping as they reached the center of the room. The black unicorn with the eclipsed sun on his flank stood before them. He was dressed in a full set of armor and flashed a malicious grin at the zebra mare that approached him.

"Obsidian."

"Lauren of the Shadowbolts. I thought Luna would send you after me. I suppose it was only a matter of time." He looked down upon them from an upper level that looked clearly designed to entertain an audience like royalty listening to their subjects petitions. Obsidian had nearly a dozen other armored ponies in the room with him of various types. Aileron silently considered their odds as the other ponies appeared to hold station until they received their orders from Obsidian.

Lauren appeared unphased by his casual attitude. "You know who I am. That also means you know why I'm here. You are in violation of Equestrian law. I am here to take you into custody to answer for your actions and to protect other ponies from harm. Surrender now, or I will take you in by force."

Obsidian laughed, amused by Lauren's declaration. "I would look around if I were you. I outnumber you two to one."

"It would not matter how many ponies you have at your side. I'm not leaving until you are in my airship's brig." Lauren lowered her muzzle and dug a hoof into the ground as if she were going to charge him.

The black unicorn sneered at her. "I could destroy you in an instant. Are you really so foolish that you think you and your friends could take me?"

"Let's find out." Lauren rushed forward towards an Earth pony and slammed into him with all of her weight. He was taken by surprise by her attack and stumbled backwards in a heap. Lauren bucked at the next pony to try and take her. The attack struck the unicorn in the jaw, knocking him out. "Take them all!"

Aileron leapt into action with a strong jump from his rear hooves launching him into the air. The Pegasus dodged several blasts of magical energy from both Obsidian and his soldiers. He ducked underneath an incoming energy blast and slammed into one of the unicorns that fell backwards into one of his friends.

Sunset Shimmer exchanged blasts of magical energy with a pair of unicorns that seemed to guard the top of both sets of stairs. She created a force field to block their next attack, but she and Lauren could not move forward while those two guarded the steps.

Muffins and Diamond Sky flew close to one of the armored Earth ponies. They drove him to run straight into the nearest wall as the two pegasi pulled up at the last second to clap their hooves together in celebration.

Aileron knew he'd have to create an opening for the two to deal with Obsidian. He looked at each of the unicorns in turn. He narrowed in on his target and dove for an attack.

The unicorn panicked and ran away with the Pegasus pursuing him until he'd disappeared around a corner. Aileron brushed past the other unicorn sending him into a spin. Sunset Shimmer capitalized on the opening and blasted him with her horn. He slammed into the wall, and she and Lauren hurried up the stairs on either side.

Lauren reached the top of the stairs first. She held her ground, blocking Obsidian's path. As Aileron looked around, it was obvious that almost all of his soldiers had been knocked out or fled. Lauren and Sunset Shimmer approached together. "It's over, Obsidian."

"You think that it matters that you've taken out my soldiers?" he asked.

Lauren kept her position. Her eyes remained hard in a stare against the black unicorn. He was twice her size and his horn glowed with magic. He scraped the stone floor with his hoof, preparing to charge her.

The black unicorn rushed towards her, tossing her aside with his magic. She slammed against the wall and fell to the ground, but just as he was about to reach Sunset Shimmer the yellow and red unicorn established a force field. His full weight struck the field sending her sliding back a few steps, but she held her ground.

Aileron and the other pegasi landed behind him. "You're not going anywhere," the blue Pegasus said.

Diamond Sky folded her wings against her body. "Stand down."

Lauren rose from her position against the wall. She limped towards Obsidian with a steeled expression, though Aileron knew that she was merely hiding her pain. She favored her left foreleg. "Your soldiers have fled and your fortress is shattered. You have no cards left to play."

Obsidian remained expressionless for a moment as he noted he was the only one left. His horn ceased to glow as he gave a hard look at the zebra.

Muffins affixed a magical restraining device around his horn as the three pegasi began to escort him towards the airship.

Sunset Shimmer and Lauren followed a few steps behind. Aileron walked beside Lauren and Sunset Shimmer. "Are you all right?"

"It's just a little ache, I'm sure my foreleg will be fine by the time we get back to Cloudsdale," Lauren said.

"Maybe you should have Doc Wagon look at that anyway," the yellow unicorn with the red and yellow hair said.

"No! I mean, no, that's not necessary. I'm sure I'll be fine." Lauren pretended to put weight on her foreleg, but Aileron suspected her stubbornness was part pride and part hesitation to trust her medical status to the rather peculiar unicorn that served as their chief medical pony.

Sunset Shimmer seemed to accept the answer as she wrapped a foreleg around Lauren. "One more down. Pretty soon, we're going to need to find a place to put them all."

"Let's worry about that tomorrow. For right now I'm glad that we all came out of this in one piece, I call that a win." Lauren touched noses to Sunset Shimmer's and trotted with her limp up the ramp onto the airship.

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The airship settled down on the landing platform at Canterlot Castle. Lauren stepped out with Sunset Shimmer at her side, the two trotting towards the entrance and the two guards that stood on either side of the door. Lauren bowed in respect to each of the stallions, a move that her companion repeated, before the two were allowed entry into the castle.

She walked down the tall hallway until she reached an office at the end with two large red doors. The only decoration on it was a golden nameplate with the occupant's name on it in large black letters. Omega Directive. Lauren had known he was a military pony that had been assigned to them to be their liaison to the princesses so that they could focus on their royal duties. While she had preferred to work with Luna and Celestia directly she could not find any reason to need to oppose the assignment. She knocked on the door twice with her hoof until the voice inside beckoned them to enter.

The doors opened before them and a brown stallion greeted them. He was an Earth pony with a dark mane and a stoic expression. He rose at their approach to his desk and took on a somewhat cordial smile. Though he attempted to make it seem natural, Lauren could not help but think that the expression was not common with him. "Omega Directive."

"Please, call me Omega." He walked around the desk to greet them with a nod. "How did the mission go?"

Sunset Shimmer answered first. "The capture of Obsidian went without incident. He and his soldiers were all either captured or fled as we locked down the compound. He has been remanded to our temporary custody until a permanent facility can be constructed." Her comment reminded Lauren that many of their facilities and operations were works in progress. As far as Equestria was concerned they had not had much need for an organization like the Shadowbolts or places to hold exceptionally dangerous ponies in the past. Things like that had all changed from the day Twilight Sparkle had encountered Nightmare Moon. It had set into motion a chain of events that would forever alter Equestria's destiny.

Lauren had never believed in concepts such as fate. She had always thought that one's destiny was mostly in one's own hooves. Nevertheless, she considered it fortunate that she had been chosen to represent her people in their attempts to make peace with Equestria. The zebras and the ponies had a long history of being divided, but when the news of Twilight becoming the Princess of Friendship had reached her homeland it was determined someone should be sent to deliver an olive branch. She supposed it was equal parts her skills and her relationship with Princess Celestia that had gotten her the job.

After her arrival, she had been thrown into a trial by fire when King Sombra returned. Equestria had been forced to deal with a threat without either Twilight or the Elements of Harmony to protect them. Even though she had been there it had surprised her that they had survived.

"He was well armed. He looked like he was planning something, though I don't know what." Lauren kept her eyes on Omega Directive as he walked around them in a circle. "The airship took a few hits, but luckily for us we had Sunset Shimmer on our side." She gave a loving look at the unicorn mare.

“Well done. Princess Luna thanks you for your service to Equestria.” Omega Directive again smiled that unnatural smile. He turned away from the two mares for a moment and looked out the window. “I must say that I’m rather impressed with the work you and your team have done.”

“Thank you, sir.” Lauren bowed and gave an appreciative nod.

Omega Directive did not acknowledge it if he had seen it at all. He remained focused on the view of Canterlot outside. “I wonder, what is your view on Princess Celestia and Princess Luna?”

“I don’t understand.” Lauren raised an eyebrow.

The brown stallion resumed facing them behind his desk. “I mean, do you trust them?”

“Of course.” Lauren had trusted Princess Celestia implicitly. As a filly she had been a student of hers much as Twilight had though she had never really interacted with the future princess. She had only come to know Luna after her return as an adult, but from what she had seen Luna was not her old self. She was not the Nightmare Moon of stories past. The mare she was now was Celestia’s sister. She recalled the princess wistfully referring to her at times during their lessons. She could see that pony now whenever she spoke with the princess of the night.

Princess Celestia and Luna had been nothing but kind to her since her appearance during the Sombra crisis. She trusted them as much as anypony else. “Why do you ask?”

“How many threats have we neutralized since the Shadowbolts began operation?” Omega Directive asked.

Sunset Shimmer considered the question for a moment. “A dozen, at least.” The unicorn seemed as puzzled by his line of questioning as she did.

“Not to mention that we’re addressing more threats to Equestria all the time. Since Nightmare Moon returned Equestria has faced more threats than it has in the past thousand years. As far as we know, these things do not happen without a cause.” He rested his hooves on the surface of the desk. “If not for your intervention, King Sombra and the Star Blade may have destroyed us all.”

Lauren took a step forward. “We were there to stop him.”

“Yes, you were. We as Equestrian citizens are approaching a crossroads. Perhaps we are entering an era where the princesses are not enough to protect us any longer. Maybe even the Elements of Harmony are not enough.” He lowered his hooves to the floor and came around to join them again. “Celestia often does not see these things coming.”

Lauren shook her head. “She’s kept the peace for more than a thousand years.”

“She’s kept the status quo for a thousand years. When Nightmare Moon returned Celestia was not prepared for it and it was only due to Twilight’s intervention that she was restored to Princess Luna. After that happened, did she do anything to prevent Discord from breaking free, or Queen Chrysalis from infiltrating her inner circle?”

“No,” Lauren admitted.

Omega Directive came within a few inches of her face. “It’s time that we started being proactive instead of reactive. I think that our current style of leadership may be in need of a change.”

Sunset Shimmer turned her head towards him. “What are you suggesting?” She inched closer to Lauren.

“Perhaps being ruled by princesses is no longer in ponykind’s best interests. Change is inevitable, but with Celestia at the helm what has really changed in a thousand years?” he asked.

“Change is not always positive,” Lauren said.

Omega Directive nodded. “True, but a lack of change is worse. Without a reason ponykind will not move forward. If things stand as they are, we may not be prepared for what comes at us next. You can be certain that things are coming for us over the horizon. The question is, what will Princess Celestia do about it? What will Princess Twilight do? She may be the Princess of Friendship but she is only one pony and Equestria is a large place.”

“That’s no reason to lose confidence in them,” Lauren said. Her loyalty to all four of Equestria’s princesses had only become stronger since her arrival in Canterlot with the others.

The brown pony walked between them and then turned around. “Creating a new world can be scary. In order to forge a new Equestria for ponykind, the old one has to be torn down, and that makes adversaries.” He gave Lauren a hard look. “The Shadowbolts have stopped more threats to Equestria in two months than Celestia has in a thousand years. I need ponies like you who are willing to do what has to be done.”

Lauren looked at Sunset Shimmer and then to Omega Directive. She was not certain she liked what he was suggesting, though he had not said anything she had not thought before. The zebra knew she would never raise a hoof against Celestia, but what if a different form of leadership were in Equestria’s best interests? She had never considered any other way. The princesses had always ruled Equestria; that was simply how it was. No one had ever wanted them gone before nor had they ever done anything that had driven ponies to fear them as King Sombra had. However, just because this was how it had always been did not mean that it was how things must always be either. She wondered if someone asked Princess Celestia to relinquish leadership of Equestria if she would consider it.

She shook the thought out of her head. Celestia had always been kind to her and she had always promised to support her. She would not be here if the alicorn had not invited her to her kingdom. Celestia had extended a hoof in peace to her people. It was something they had needed for a long time. She could not betray that. It was unthinkable that he would ask her to side against Celestia, even if it were just an idea. Perhaps if one day Celestia decided to step down she would support the decision, but to suggest her removal?

“I’m not certain it’s time for such a step to be taken.” Lauren hoped that would diffuse the situation.

Omega Directive took on a different look to his face. “I see. Perhaps you’re right, it may not be the right time for such a suggestion. Nevertheless, I do hope you’ll think of what I’ve said.”

“I will.” Lauren said.

The brown Earth pony stepped up to Sunset Shimmer. “I had thought you might be more receptive to the idea.”

“I don’t know. I’m still relatively new to this place after having been gone so long.” Sunset Shimmer looked away for a moment. Lauren remained by her side, not wanting to leave her alone with him.

Omega Directive took a step closer. “Many people still see you as the pony that ran off after your turn as Celestia’s student. Still more remember that you sided with Sombra when he returned from the beyond.”

“I was a different pony then. I’ve changed. I helped Princess Celestia escape.” Sunset Shimmer backed up a few steps towards Lauren.

“That you have, but not everyone will see that. Not as long as Celestia and Luna still occupy the same positions they always have. If you came to work for me, I could change all that.” The brown Earth pony touched a hoof to her chin. “Are you ready for the world to see you as you really are? All it would take is one hoof in front of the other.”

Sunset Shimmer turned away from him. “I want to change things but not by going behind the princesses backs.”

“Fair enough.” He looked to both of them with equal interest. “Change often does not come easily and it is not without pain. It may not be the time now, but when it comes you had best make sure you choose the right sides.” He turned away from them indicating the conversation was over, and Lauren motioned for them both to leave. Neither spoke until the door behind them was closed shut.

“What do you think that was all about?” Sunset Shimmer asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t like it, though.” The zebra shook her head and pressed her face gently against Sunset Shimmer’s. “I don’t agree with what he said to you, either.”

“He’s right, though.” The yellow unicorn with the fiery hair lowered her head. “I’ve made some mistakes and you don’t get to walk away without consequences.”

Lauren trotted up next to her and took her chin in her hoof. “He isn’t right. He was just trying to scare you. Princess Celestia forgave you the moment we stepped back into Canterlot Castle, and I’ve been by your side since the moment you helped us in that final battle.”

“I know, and I can’t thank you enough for being there for me. I just don’t know if I can ever be who I was before I left Celestia.” Sunset Shimmer took on a forlorn look and moved her head away from Lauren’s hoof.

“Maybe not, but ponies can change and be who they want to be, if they choose to.” Lauren offered a smile to the unicorn, wondering if she felt the same way about her as she did about Sunset Shimmer.

Sunset Shimmer started to walk away, and something about her manner told her she should not follow. “What’s that they say among your people? A zebra can’t change her stripes.”

Lauren remained alone in the corridor until Sunset Shimmer disappeared around the corner. She wanted to run after her but what would she say that she hadn’t already said a million times before? The zebra had done her best to make her feel like she truly had a second chance, but she knew that friendship did not fix all problems. Some things could only be healed with time. Some things never healed at all. She lowered her head and started to dig at the floor with her hoof, thinking about what to do next.

The Equestrian criminals that the Shadowbolts had brought in were being held in a temporary facility in Canterlot. The cells were plain and other than a cot and some hay on the ground appeared fairly Spartan. They were not intended for long-term incarceration, but they would do until the facility that Omega Directive had commissioned was completed.

Aileron and Diamond Sky escorted the unarmored Obsidian down the hallway towards his cell. Another unicorn guard on each side flanked both of them. The blue Pegasus kept his eyes on the black unicorn until he had entered the cell and passed through the barrier that restricted his use of his magic.

"This isn't over, you know," he said.

Aileron did not appear impressed. "It seems to be over to me." He kept his wings close to his body and his goggles rested above his eyes holding his blue and mane in place. He kept himself in front of Diamond Sky who simply stood beside him.

Obsidian laughed. "As if capturing me ended the evils of Equestria."

"Perhaps not ended them, but set them back for a time, I'm certain." Aileron knew that the black unicorn was attempting to get a reaction from him. For what purpose he could not yet be certain. All he knew was that he was still dangerous even inside of a cell and with his magic restricted. "Your soldiers are scattered. Those that got away, we'll find eventually."

"You still don't get it," the black unicorn said. "You think that I'm the end but I'm simply the beginning. I am not the disease but merely a symptom."

"What are you talking about?" Diamond Sky asked.

"Do you think that because I surrendered to you that there will be nothing left for the Shadowbolts to chase? Perhaps you think there will be nothing new for the Princess of Friendship to deal with? If so you are sorely mistaken."

Aileron stomped a hoof. "Whatever comes at us, we can handle."

"Is that so? You and your zebra friend, is that it? I wonder how long it will be before she runs into a threat she cannot handle on her own." The black unicorn pranced arrogantly around his cell. Had Aileron not known better he would almost think that Obsidian was unconcerned about remaining in this cell until his debt to Equestria was repaid.

He attempted to maintain his composure in the face of the prisoner. "She won't be alone. We're her friends."

"Ah, and friendship is magic, is it? Or so I've heard so often. I had friends too, you know, and unlike you and your ilk they aren't looking to make more. Not ones that don't think the way we do, at least." He shook his head. "That's something you just can't understand, isn't it? That I would not want to be friends with you and yours."

Aileron said nothing. He knew that he did not need to stand here and let the unicorn lecture him on his friendship with Lauren or how they chose to go about their business, but he could not make his hooves move him away from the cell. Nor, did it seem, could Diamond Sky, who kept her eyes transfixed on the black unicorn before them.

"Not everyone is friends with each other, but everyone has to have friends. You yourself admit that you have them," Diamond Sky said, trying to find a middle ground. "Why did you choose to take up arms against Princess Celestia?"

He clapped his hooves together in front of her. “Wouldn’t you just like to have a simple answer to that? I’m sorry, dear girl, but some questions aren’t that simple.”

Diamond Sky shook her head. “Maybe not, but you’ll have plenty of time to think about it in there.”

“No doubt. However, if I were you I would start thinking about where all this will lead.” Obsidian turned around and flicked his tail at the two pegasi.

“If you’ve got something to say, I suggest you say it.” Aileron stomped his hoof on the ground.

Obsidian held his hooves together as he sat on his haunches. “All I need to say is that most ponies have a hard time seeing the future coming.” He laughed and leaned up against the bars of the cell, wrapping his forelegs around them. “Even after all this is over and done with that zebra of yours still won’t know what’s headed her way.”

Aileron held up a hoof. “That’s enough.”

“I would think you would enjoy a pleasant conversation.” The black unicorn turned away from them again.

“This conversation is over,” Aileron said. He motioned for Diamond Sky to walk away from the cell and forced himself to do the same. He had taken only a few steps when he had heard Obsidian’s voice again.

“I’d watch my back if I were you,” he said with an ominous whinny.

Aileron tried to shake the uneasy feeling he’d felt since the moment they’d entered the temporary facility. He tried to tell himself that it was nothing. Despite his best efforts to shake off the anxiety he caught his wings shaking as they exited the cellblock.

Diamond Sky had not said a word since they had left Obsidian’s company. He turned to face her as they walked. “Are you all right?”

“I was just about to ask you the same question, sir.” Diamond Sky stopped as they reached the outside of the building.

Aileron had to admit just being outside where he could spread his wings he felt much better. Perhaps it was just the feeling of being confined in there that was getting to him. “I think so.”

The Pegasus mare shivered. “Did you understand anything he was talking about in there?”

“Not really. I think he was just trying to rattle us.” The two resumed walking back towards the castle.

“Should we mention it to Lauren?” the Pegasus mare asked.

“Not yet. Obsidian is no longer a threat. We need to concentrate on what’s still in front of us.”

Aileron ran Obsidian’s words through his mind but could no more decipher their meaning than the moment he was standing directly in front of him. He tried to put it out of his thoughts. Equestria needed to be protected and his mind was better spent focusing on that goal than parsing the words of a prisoner.

* * *

Canterlot Castle was quiet in the late evenings with few being around other than the guard ponies that protected the palace. Sunset Shimmer was the only pony in the

upper tower as she climbed the steps to the chamber at the top. She opened the doors with her magic and took a tentative step inside. "Hello? Princess Luna? Are you in here?"

"I am here, Sunset Shimmer. Please, come in." The dark blue alicorn with the sparkling blue hair nodded demurely to the smaller unicorn. She was always so graceful looking, especially when the light hit her hair just right. Sunset Shimmer felt self-conscious all of the sudden in the princess's presence. "What may I help you with?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have interrupted you," she said, and turned to leave. The princess closed the doors in front of her.

"Please, do not go. I sense that something troubles you. It is never good to let these things remain unspoken." Luna gave the unicorn a reassuring look and motioned for her to approach her on the balcony. "I often come here to watch the sun set. It is when Celestia's duty ends and mine begins." She touched noses with the young unicorn and smiled. "What troubles you?"

Sunset Shimmer looked down at the stone floor for a long moment. She had not spoken of this to anyone before now, not even Lauren. The zebra had been her strongest supporter since she had chosen to side with Princess Celestia over King Sombra, but every time she tried to speak of it to her the words died in her throat. "I'm not sure where I belong."

"I am familiar with this feeling." Princess Luna gave her an understanding smile. "Has anyone made you feel unwelcome?"

"Not in any way I can describe. I suppose it's just that while everypony seems to have forgiven me for my mistakes, I feel like they're still judging me for them. I know I have no reason to think this, but I can't help it. Lauren tells me that I have nothing to worry about and that I'm part of the team. I want to believe her, but she's an outsider here herself, in a sense." Sunset Shimmer knew that most ponies were not used to seeing zebras around. There was one living in the Everfree Forest, or so she had heard, but other than Lauren they had not been in Equestria for some time. Lauren hoped to change that, but it was a slow process. "I guess I'm afraid."

"Of what?" Princess Luna asked.

"Myself. I left Princess Celestia the first time because I was certain I knew what I was doing. I wanted power and I didn't care how I got it. All that mattered was that I needed to learn magic faster and she wouldn't teach me what I wanted to know. At least, that's what I thought back then. I know better now. I wish sometimes that I hadn't left in the first place. Maybe I'd be where Twilight Sparkle is now."

Princess Luna nodded. "Your feelings are much like my own when I first returned to being myself and no longer Nightmare Moon. I wondered how I could possibly repair all I had done to my sister and the fear that people had of me when I first returned as the princess. No pony trusted me that first long year. It was not easy, even though my transformation back to my old self was comparatively fast. The process of healing was a slow one."

"How did you survive it?" Sunset Shimmer asked. "I feel like there's something inside me like a caged dragon wanting to get out. I'm afraid because that's what drove me to join Sombra in the first place. I don't want to let my dark side win."

Princess Luna wrapped a wing around the yellow unicorn. She looked down into her eyes with the look of someone that had been there before. "You are not alone in that

fear. In fact, though many ponies do not show it, I think all of us have that fear from time to time.”

“I don’t understand?” she asked.

“Sunset Shimmer, a conflicting nature is not something only you must deal with. We all have two voices inside of us telling us opposite things. One voice advises against conflict and one voice advises us towards it. Neither is right or wrong on its own. It is only together that we can find our own path. Total good is no better than total evil. Simply put, we need both halves in order to function. The core of the matter is not to let either side control you.” Princess Luna looked up at the setting sun.

Sunset Shimmer lowered her muzzle. “Like the sun and the moon.”

“Precisely. What would the sun be without the moon to balance it on the other side? It is why when I was no longer able to perform my duties Celestia continued the cycle rather than to make the sun the dominant force in the sky as she could have if she’d wished. She understood the concept of balance, something you and I have struggled with in the past.” Princess Luna rested her hooves on the railing with a forlorn expression. Sunset Shimmer had not studied the legend as well as she should have, but she knew the basics. Nightmare Moon had been jealous that the ponies slept through her night and seemed to only appreciate life during the day. While there were some ponies that preferred the night it had become harder and harder for Luna to see that. When her jealousy had overpowered her love for her sister she had surrendered to the other voice completely and Celestia had been forced to banish her own sister to the moon.

“Yes, we have.” The yellow unicorn had been so certain that Celestia was to blame for her shortcomings that she had been the one to kidnap her when King Sombra had been resurrected. It was only when she was face to face with her for the first time in years that she knew that this was not the case. While she did not understand it consciously for some time, seeing her old teacher and her new student had reminded her of the good times under Celestia’s instruction.

“Without the moon, ponies could not get their rest and they would lose their ability to carry out their daily tasks. Just as without the sun, ponies could not grow food or know when to rise. Without both, life as we know it simply could not exist.” When the sun had dipped below a certain level, Princess Luna’s magic glowed around her long slender horn and the moon began its gentle rise into the sky.

Sunset Shimmer did not speak until the glow around the alicorn’s horn had faded. “I still don’t know if this is where I belong. I wish I knew that this is where I was meant to be. Am I fulfilling my life’s purpose? Should I have followed the same path as Twilight?” She lowered her head. “What kind of Princess of Friendship would I have made?”

Princess Luna placed a hoof under her chin and raised her head to meet her gentle glance. “These are all questions that many of us spend a lifetime trying to answer. I do not know where you belong. I do know that you chose to free my sister and return to us when you did not need to. As far as we are both concerned you were always welcome here. It simply took you some time to realize it.”

“I know I should not compare myself to Twilight, but I cannot help but wonder what if?” Sunset Shimmer had seen the stained glass window in Celestia’s throne room that depicted Twilight and her friends the day she had returned to the castle. She had

pretended not to notice it but she had returned to stare at it for hours after everypony had gone to sleep.

Luna removed her hoof and gave Sunset Shimmer a supportive touch of her muzzle. “As have I. It will always be a regret of mine that I spent a thousand years in anger and rage rather than by my sister’s side, as I could have. Celestia has forgiven me. She would have the day I had become Nightmare Moon if only I had not allowed my other voice to rule my emotions. Had I controlled myself then, I would not be where I am now. However, what you must remember is that if that were the case, I would not have made the same choices I made since I returned. I was a different pony then.”

“Yes, but you are a princess,” the yellow unicorn said.

“That makes no difference. We are all the consequences of our own choices. This does not change regardless of who we are. Your decisions shaped you for good or ill. Bad decisions do not have to be curses if you learn from them. You make a mistake. Do you do the same thing again?”

“No,” Sunset Shimmer admitted.

“You learn. As do we all. Comparing yourself to Twilight serves no one. She is not you nor are you her. If you had remained with Celestia would Twilight have ceased to be?”

“No.” Again Sunset Shimmer nodded in agreement.

“Had you remained with Celestia, she, Twilight, and you would have all made different choices, and where we are now may have been a very different place. Perhaps you would have been a princess, perhaps not. Alicogenesis is rare for a reason. For some it is not a destiny they would want. In either case, it does not change who you are nor would it mean if you had made one choice differently that the entire world would not have done the same.” Princess Luna walked inside the room and climbed up onto her couch.

Sunset Shimmer remained standing before her. “So you’re saying that I’m worrying over nothing?”

“I’m saying that wondering what if is fine for idle curiosity, but it is what you do that defines you, not what you may have done if things had been different. The past is the past, and although only Starswirl may have known how to change it, eventually he and everypony since has needed to learn to live with the choices they make. What matters is what will you do now, Sunset Shimmer?”

“I think I’ll go find Lauren and let her know that I’m part of the team and here to stay.” She gave Luna a gentle smile as she opened the doors with her magic.

“A wise decision.” Princess Luna gave a gentle bow from the couch before she turned her attention back to the moon.

Sunset Shimmer allowed the doors to close and headed towards the airship landing pad on the roof of the castle. Tonight would be another routine patrol starting in Canterlot and making the route over Ponyville. She hurried towards the airship and jumped to catch the ramp just before the airship pulled up towards the sky.

Lauren smiled at her. “Good timing, we were just about to head off.”

“Sorry, I got busy.” She approached her and rubbed up against her.

“I’m glad you made it.” Lauren smiled and headed up to the wheel where Aileron had moved the ship away from the castle. “Time to keep Equestria safe.”

* * *

The airship cruised over the open spaces of Equestria at a comfortable speed. The wind wafted over the deck as Aileron piloted the ship towards the first stop on their patrol, Ponyville. They had been traveling for almost an hour and would be upon it in a few minutes. Lauren had to admit she was curious to return since the last time she was there it was before Twilight's castle had appeared on the edge of town. She had heard descriptions of it in the days and weeks following Twilight's coronation but there was no comparison to see something first hoof.

Lauren stood at the front of the ship with her forelegs resting on the railing as she took in the view. She had not noticed as Red joined her.

"Enjoying the view?" the Earth pony stallion asked.

"I am. Everything fine with the engines?"

"They're working for now. I can't say it'll stay that way but if it starts acting up I'll give it a swift kick." The large brown stallion leaned up against the railing. "Big day."

"I guess," Lauren said.

"No, really. I mean, we captured the first big threat to Equestria today as the full fledged Shadowbolts. There's a lot more of them out there. Ponies and other creatures seeking to threaten life as we know it. Somepony has to do something about it. Who better than us?" Red asked.

Lauren laughed. "I was supposed to be a diplomat."

"I don't think Twilight anticipated becoming a princess," Red said.

The zebra sat on her haunches and smiled. "A fair point. I must admit it's been an interesting journey so far."

Red nodded. "It's not over yet. Not by a long shot. I figure we've still got a fair amount of work to do."

Lauren knew that keeping Equestria safe was a big job. At the moment she was trying to figure her way through it as much as she imagined Twilight was adjusting to being a princess with her own castle and the whole bale of hay. She knew the burden she had taken on was far more than she had planned on when she had come to Equestria on behalf of the zebra nation. They had sent her due to her time spent studying under Celestia but she had not anticipated having to battle King Sombra and Queen Chrysalis upon her arrival. It was only due to the combined efforts of her team that they were able to prevent disaster. As a result of those events it was determined that Equestria needed a line of defense in case the Elements of Harmony were ever put out of play again.

Lauren let out a sigh. "Miles to go before we sleep."

Red leaned closer and put his hoof around her. "As long as you keep leading the team, I'll make sure the airship gets where she's going." Red turned to look over the railing. "Looks like we're coming up on Ponyville. I can see Twilight's castle."

Lauren shook her way out of the embrace to get a good look at the castle as they approached. The building looked like a beautiful crystal tree that had grown out of the ground. She observed the iridescent shimmer of its surfaces as the airship moved around the structure.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Red asked.

“It’s remarkable.” Lauren was about to ask Aileron to swing the ship around for another view of the structure when she looked down to see a red pony with a dark mane and a light blue Pegasus with black hair approaching the castle. “Aileron, hold position.”

Red leaned over and turned to her. “Do you see something?”

“Maybe. Aileron, bring us down for a closer look.” She waved her hoof to indicate a requested drop in altitude. A moment later the airship complied with the command and dropped down to the level where she could almost make out their cutie marks. “They seem to be in an awful hurry.”

Aileron’s called out from the steering wheel. “Maybe they’re just seeking an audience with Twilight?”

“This late?” Lauren asked. The ponies threw the doors to the castle open and dashed inside. The zebra motioned for the airship to land. “I’m not taking any chances. Red, Sunset Shimmer, Diamond Sky, you’re with me.” The airship touched down with a firm thud. The moment the ramp slid out Lauren’s hooves beat the dirt as she rushed to catch up to the mysterious ponies. With the others behind her they were at the palace doors in a moment.

The staccato rhythm of their hoofbeats echoed against the walls of the castle. “Does anyone see them?”

“There!” Diamond Sky pointed and flew ahead at blinding speed. She tackled the Pegasus with the full weight of her body. The two crashed into the opposite wall with a loud thud. The red pony whirled around and stared down Lauren and Red.

“Identify yourself and explain your purpose here!” Lauren knew she was not as physically imposing as Red beside her but she maintained her stern expression. “If you do not explain yourself in five seconds I will remove you from this castle.”

The red pony looked at his companion as they considered their options. “While I will admit that you do outnumber us two to one I’m afraid I can’t allow you to interfere in our operations.”

“My name is Lauren and I am the director of the Shadowbolts,” she said.

“Never heard of you,” the black haired Pegasus said.

“We’re new.” Lauren took a single step forward. “This is your last chance. Stand down and surrender or be taken by force.”

The red pony that had a cutie mark of red flames on his flank again consulted his companion before turning to her with a smirk. “I decline.” He pulled something out of his saddlebag and threw it before them. Red pushed her out of the way just in time for a ball of fire to appear right where she was standing a moment ago. Another popped in the air above Sunset Shimmer with an ice effect.

Sunset Shimmer grunted as she hurriedly created a shield to protect herself and Diamond Sky from the effects of the magical grenade. “That’s a new trick.”

“Is everyone all right?” Lauren asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” Sunset Shimmer said.

“After them!” Lauren hurried down the hall and stopped as she saw the doors to the library wide open. Fearful that Princess Twilight might be inside and in trouble doing some late night reading she hurried in only to see those two ponies waiting for them.

“Have a little light reading!” The pegasi threw several thick volumes at Lauren, who dodged at the last second. A big book hit Diamond Sky and sent her crashing into a

bookshelf. Sunset Shimmer created a force field to block the books they threw in her direction.

Red blocked several of the books from hitting Lauren as she got up. The red Earth pony removed another fire grenade from his saddlebag. "Watch out!" Red threw her on his back and hurried out of the way as the fire grenade exploded and partially burned the left door.

Once Lauren slid back onto her own hooves she couldn't help but think it would be handy to have a few more unicorns around. Rather than dwelling on what could be she returned her focus to the situation at hand and jumped up on a table before launching herself into the air. She crashed into the Pegasus and sent them both flying into a bookshelf. The resounding clatter was probably heard throughout the entire building. Lauren could hear another door open in the hall as she bucked the Pegasus into the wall and tried to hold her down.

The blue Pegasus was too strong for her and bucked her off in seconds. Lauren momentarily wondered if this is what pegasi felt like when she slammed into Red. The large Earth pony fell backwards and shook his head to clear the dizziness in his eyes.

Diamond Sky flew after the blue Pegasus as she dashed out the door with her saddlebags. The brown Pegasus was gone a moment later as the two headed back towards the front of the castle.

Lauren faced the Earth pony again as he moved towards the door. "You're not going anywhere."

"Then I hope you're fireproof." He reached into his saddlebag and brandished five of the red crystals in his hoof. Lauren commanded her legs to move but she could not bring herself to stop him. Neither Red nor Sunset Shimmer moved until he had disappeared from the door.

The trio hurried after him but all three stopped short when they met Princess Twilight and Spike in the hall. "Did you see which way they went?" Lauren asked.

Spike rubbed his eyes. "Which way who went? What was all that noise anyway?"

Princess Twilight shook her head. "We didn't see anyone." The purple alicorn had a sleeping cap on and like Spike was attempting to clear the sleep from her eyes. "Report."

Lauren offered a salute. "Princess, we observed a pair of ponies entering the castle on our nightly patrol. Uncertain as to their intentions we pursued them in here. We were concerned about your well being so we hurried inside to inquire as to their intentions. When we caught up with them they attacked us. After that we found you." Lauren motioned to Sunset Shimmer. "Secure the palace. Red, you go with her."

The large Earth pony nodded and the two trotted off to make certain there were no other intruders in the castle.

Princess Twilight nodded her appreciation. "What were they doing in here?"

"I'm not certain. I'm just glad they didn't harm you," the zebra said.

Spike's eyes grew wide. "You don't think they were after my gems, do you?" He hurried back towards the direction of his room and returned a moment later with a bucket full of gems. "Phew."

Lauren gave him a curious look wondering why he looked at the gems as if they were a delicacy. Her questions were answered a moment later when he took a bite out of

one and rubbed his stomach. Dragons apparently ate gems. She wondered how their economy worked.

Princess Twilight folded her wings close to her body. "I appreciate your quick response."

"I'm afraid I can only credit that to good timing, ma'am. We were flying over Ponyville on our patrol route when we spotted them. If we hadn't been here when we did I don't know what would have happened. Perhaps you should reconsider Omega Directive's recommendation that you install palace guards at all of the entrances." Lauren knew that Twilight had declined the suggestion before. She had generally left the palace open for any visitors though tonight's events concerned Lauren since she knew she could not be there all the time to protect her.

"No, I don't think that will be necessary. Thank you for the input. Secure the castle for now and we will address the issue at a later date. I'm simply not certain if it would do for the Princess of Friendship to have guards around her at all times," the purple alicorn said.

Lauren resisted the urge to point that out all three of the other princesses had guards in their own palaces. She knew that Twilight was new at all this but she also knew that she would have to do things her own way. The zebra simply nodded her understanding and turned as Diamond Sky returned.

"I'm sorry, I lost track of them a few miles outside of Ponyville. I couldn't keep up and decided that I should return here." The brown Pegasus nodded her respects to the princess.

Lauren walked up to Diamond Sky. "It's all right, you did your job. Did you see what direction she was headed?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. It was too cloudy and she was too fast for me. She threw one of those ice grenades at the clouds and nearly froze me into a pony-sicle." Diamond Sky lowered herself onto her rear.

"Do you need a medic? I could have Doc Wagon look at you," Lauren said.

"NO!" Her eyes got round. "I mean, no. I'm fine, really, not a scratch on me." She flexed her wings to prove her point.

Lauren nodded. "Princess, I can't guarantee that this won't happen again."

"I know that. I also know that I can't be jumping at shadows. I realize you're just doing your job but I do not want guards. Spike and I will be fine." She stomped a hoof in a way that made it clear the topic was no longer open for discussion.

Spike stood up and puffed out his chest. "If anyone tries to hurt Twilight I'll give them a face full of dragon fire."

Lauren turned to the princess who she noticed had disappeared into the library. The zebra hurried after her and trotted up beside her. "What is it, princess?"

"One of my books is missing." Princess Twilight pointed to the empty shelf.

Lauren looked around in confusion. The library was an utter disaster with books everywhere. She had no idea how the princess could tell that a single book was missing in all of the chaos. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, and it's an unusual choice. They didn't steal any of the books on Starswirl the bearded. They just took a book about the history of Cloudsdale."

Lauren and Diamond Sky looked at each other as the princess and Spike set about restoring order to the library. She excused herself and headed back to the airship to continue their nightly patrol.

* * *

Shadowstar landed on all four hooves and waited for her companion to arrive. When the red Earth pony joined her a few moments later he looked behind himself to be certain they had not been followed. "Did you get it?"

"Of course I did." Shadowstar pulled the book out of her saddlebag to show him before she returned it to its place of safekeeping.

"So now what?" he asked.

"Now we wait for instructions. We deliver this book to the drop zone and await a signal." She folded her wings up against her body.

"I don't see why we have to do all of this waiting," he said.

Shadowstar found ponies whose cutie marks had something to do with fire often resulted in their personalities being somewhat inflammatory and not friends of patience. She however, understood that many things took time. "Nevertheless, we must wait. To act now would be to show our hooves and we don't wish to do that until all of the pieces are in place. We are but one small part of a giant machine with many moving parts. Now that we have done our part we must wait for others to do theirs."

"I still don't like it." He stomped a hoof.

Shadowstar flew and dove to land in front of him, asserting herself in front of him. "I don't care what you like. You will obey your instructions, is that clear?"

"Yes," he said.

"For now, we must wait until called upon again. I know that you're eager to build a new world, but before that can happen we must prepare for the fall of the old one. The Shadowbolts stopped us once, they won't do so a second time." Shadowstar had heard that the first attempt had involved sending some of Equestria's greatest enemies against it in a combined attack that almost certainly should have taken down its leadership. It should have crippled their government and left them open for a move. When that failed it was evident it would take far more than a single massive strike to take down Princess Celestia's reign.

Shadowstar had nothing to do with that first attempt but she had heard of it when it had all gone down. Celestia and Twilight had gone missing and it was believed that without her and the Elements of Harmony that Equestria would fall before its adversaries. For some reason it did not. An airship crew had intervened and prevented King Sombra from completing his plans. Now Queen Chrysalis was in custody and her hive all but destroyed.

The airship crew had become the Shadowbolts, Luna's personal force designed to protect Equestria from those things that went bump in the night.

Crimson Fire shook his head. "Why don't we just attack Princess Twilight directly?"

"You do recall that failed last time rather spectacularly," Shadowstar said.

"I'm aware of that. Nevertheless, we were able to breach the castle without much trouble tonight," he said.

Shadowstar shook her head. "Don't be foolish. Attacking Twilight will bring an aggressive response far more quickly than anything else. No. We must leave her alone for now."

"What about Obsidian?" he asked.

The blue Pegasus turned to him in annoyance. "Obsidian is right where he needs to be. His surrender was not an accident but part of a carefully orchestrated plan. Now stop asking foolish questions and accept that we are to do nothing for the time being but wait."

Crimson Fire grumbled. "Fine, then give me the book to take to the dead drop. I'd rather be doing anything right now other than sitting around."

Shadowstar handed him the saddlebag and shook her head. "Do as you like, but do not lose that book."

"Of course not." He turned away from her and trotted off without further comment.

Shadowstar thought back to the battle in the library. She reasoned that there was little chance that Twilight knew of what they had taken. Even if she did it was doubtful that she would come to understand its significance. It was a difficult volume to find though not one of any significant intrinsic power. As she had told Crimson Fire, they were ordered not to take any of the other books despite the potential power they held in their pages.

The book they had removed would be all they needed. It was to go to the pony they followed, a stallion she had never seen directly. All she knew was that he was seen in shadow and had a vested interest in taking down Princess Celestia and Luna. Indeed, he seemed to want to take down all four of the princesses. She did not know whether it was a personal vendetta or if he simply disliked royalty.

In either event, he had offered her power. More power than she had ever wielded before. The library that night was the first time she had ever seen it in action. She had thrown their new portable magic weapons at her enemies and they had worked spectacularly. They would continue to do so in battles to come.

Now that she had seen the zebra and her group first hand she understood why they were so dangerous to their plans. It was not the zebra herself for she was just another pony. Her team was coordinated and functioned well as a unit. When they acted together they were the greatest threat to her. She recalled how the unicorn protected the others with magical force fields. When the zebra had been threatened both she and the large Earth pony had moved to protect her. No doubt to them protecting their leader was important.

While the EUP had been the first organization showing cooperation between all three types of ponies, perhaps it was the introduction of the zebra that made this group so much of a threat. By herself she was no different than any other Earth pony but with her team she was a significant force to be dealt with.

It would make sense, given that Twilight by herself was incomplete. It was only with her friends that she became something more.

Shadowstar mused how ironic it was that perhaps friendship would be the thing that would destroy Equestria this time. Friendship is magic indeed. She laughed to herself as she imagined the look on Princess Twilight's face when she realized all that they had planned.

* * *

Stars shone brightly in the sky when the airship slowed to allow Princess Luna to land on the center of the table that bore her likeness. She climbed down to meet Lauren and Sunset Shimmer both of whom bowed in respect. Lauren gestured for her to take a seat around the table as she and the yellow unicorn sat beside her.

“We apologize for disturbing you in the middle of your duties, Princess Luna,” Sunset Shimmer said.

“Something as significant as an attack on Twilight is more than worth the diversion,” Luna said.

Lauren shook her head. “It was not accurate to say that Twilight was attacked, your majesty. They did not seem interested in harming her. The two ponies that forced their way into Twilight’s Castle stole only a single book and not a book of power, either. Not as far as we can tell.”

Princess Luna gave a look of confusion, the same look that Lauren and Sunset had worn in the library a few hours earlier. “I do not understand. Why would they not want one of the spell books that the library holds?”

“We don’t understand it either. Twilight said that all they stole was a book on the history of Cloudsdale.” Sunset Shimmer shrugged and placed her hoof on the table. “There were several powerful spell books they could have taken a few shelves away. Whatever these ponies are after it wasn’t anything obvious.”

Lauren trotted a circle around the table. “I might have considered it to be some sort of foolish game if they hadn’t broken into Twilight’s castle. I doubt anypony would force their way in there without an agenda. Though I admit I fail to make the connection between the book and anything useful they could do with it.”

Princess Luna nodded. “From what I understand the history of Cloudsdale has never been a mystery. Though its construction did not occur until after my banishment on the moon I know that my sister Celestia ordered it so that the Pegasi could have a formal home.”

“Where did they live before Cloudsdale?” Lauren asked.

Diamond Sky and Aileron joined the conversation from up by the steering wheel. “The Pegasi were largely separated into small clusters. Many of us lived in either small villages or roaming tribes before Cloudsdale was established,” Aileron said.

Diamond Sky nodded in agreement. “My own family was living in a small cloud village over the crystal empire. I was living in the same place where they discovered the first snowfall ages before I was born there.”

“As for myself, my ancestors roamed the plains of the lands to the west before they found Equestria and began to compete with the Earth ponies and unicorns for the new land they had found.” Aileron descended the steps and joined the others at the table while Diamond Sky maintained their course.

Lauren remembered some of what both of the Pegasi had mentioned. Diamond Sky’s story of the first snowfall was one she had learned from Luna in one of the conversations she had with the princess of the night. The story went that a young filly that lacked the ability to see had crafted a beautiful snowflake so that snow could be gentle and not harsh as they had been in the winters that came before.

The other story she remembered as being part of the Hearth's Warming Eve pageant. It was a story that gave Lauren hope. She knew that the Earth ponies, unicorns, and Pegasi had once distrusted and envied each other as the ponies did with the zebras and yaks and other lands beyond the central expanse of Equestria. She knew that there had been talk of later in the year trying to make peace with the yaks.

Lauren did not know much about them, just that they were somewhat loud and took a lot of getting used to. She hoped nevertheless that she would be able to encourage friendship with her own people and the ponies. In a way she was still on her ambassadorial mission to Equestria, seeking to lead by example and win the ponies over to seeing her kind more often.

The crew and the princesses all accepted her easily enough, though she particularly felt the sting of distrust when she visited the Crystal Empire. Lauren preferred not to leave the airship when it landed in Cadence's territory since while the princess herself was the most generous and cordial pony she could hope to meet; the alicorn was one of the few.

She could not blame the crystal ponies for holding on to their prejudice of her. After all zebras of a thousand years ago were angry and oppressed by a unicorn lord and lashed out at the ponies as their only way to express their emotions. It was wrong, diverting their anger to the wrong target, but one zebra from her own tribe had fought and won their freedom.

She knew that it would be a long process, but she was willing to try. She only hoped that one day she could bring herself to have the courage to step hoof off the airship when she did.

Aileron noticed her distraction and wrapped a wing around her. She smiled at him as he spoke. "Whatever the case may be, no pony does anything without a reason. They may not be aware of it, for that matter, but no one does anything randomly."

"Pinkie Pie does," Lauren said.

"Pinkie Pie is the exception to a lot of things." Aileron smiled at the comment. They had met the rather peculiar pink pony on a few occasions, most notably at the 'Thanks For Saving Equestria and Stopping the Combined Forces of King Sombra Queen Chrysalis Trixie and the Formerly Evil But Now Our Friend Sunset Shimmer Party'. The banner had been so long it had stretched out across all of Ponyville. When she had asked Princess Twilight about her odd behavior the alicorn had simply said 'that's Pinkie' and left it at that.

Lauren found her somewhat perplexing but she could not deny she had her heart in the right place. "That being the case, we still don't have a bead on their identities."

"We also don't know where they went after we lost track of them," Sunset Shimmer said.

Lauren knew that Sunset Shimmer felt a little guilty whenever she saw Twilight. The zebra was not certain if it had to do with being responsible for putting her in danger during the Sombra Crisis or if it was due to her wondering about where she would be had she made different choices. Perhaps it was both. Either way, she was certain she was frustrated at losing the ponies that had forced their way into Twilight's castle and could have gotten to her before they did.

“We’ll find them. Equestria is a big place but they can’t hide forever. Not with the Wonderbolts after them by day and the Shadowbolts by night.” Aileron gave Luna a proud nod.

Princess Luna nodded in agreement. “I know that you will. The Shadowbolts have made me proud since the moment I asked you for your help.” The dark blue alicorn gave Lauren a gentle nose touch and smiled.

“Thank you, ma’am.” Lauren admitted though she was once Celestia’s student she had developed an equally close relationship with Luna. The princess of the night was a gentle and kind soul and was often unnoticed in her equally pivotal role in keeping Equestria running. Lauren knew how important it was to feel needed. “We’ll keep you informed through Omega Directive if we learn anything new.”

“Well done, all of you,” Princess Luna said.

Aileron raised a hoof. “There’s something else I should mention as well. In the confrontation they used these crystals that would shatter on impact and release a powerful burst of magic energy. We’ve never seen anything like it before.” The Pegasus flung his hooves wide. “They were well armed with them. Whatever their source, we should keep an eye out for more of them.”

“Indeed. Perhaps it was some way to allow Earth ponies and Pegasi to use unicorn magic.” Lauren paused. “Or even alicorn magic.” The statement hung in the air for a moment as they all considered the ramifications of the potential change in the balance of power.

Princess Luna stood up from the table. “Thank you for your report. I’ll be certain to share this information with my sister.” She turned to Sunset Shimmer and gave her a nod. “Celestia bids you well, Sunset Shimmer.”

Sunset Shimmer blushed deeply and nodded her thanks.

Lauren walked off beside Luna as they headed towards the front of the airship. “Ma’am, I know that whatever their plans are it does not stop with the theft of one book and a few magic bombs thrown at us.”

“I fear you are correct, Lauren. They will be back.” Princess Luna looked up at the stars. “The question is, from where are they getting their orders?” She turned back towards the zebra. “You’ve assembled a strong team here. I know you’ll do your best to protect Equestria.”

Lauren nodded. “I just hope it’s enough,” she said. She received one more nod from Luna before the princess leapt into the air and flew back to her carriage that had been cruising alongside. A moment later the chariot and its bat winged Pegasi had turned away and were gone.

Lauren remained up at the front of the ship for some time wondering what was coming next. She knew that she could not see what the future held, but at times she wished she had a hint. She felt Sunset Shimmer trot up beside her and place a hoof on her shoulder. When she turned to look at her their eyes locked, and for the first time in front of the rest of the crew, they kissed.