

“My Little Pony : Nightfall : Redemption”

By Lauren Rivers

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Sunset Shimmer was still getting used to the cloud-walking spell that she and the others had needed to cast in order to walk around Cloudsdale. It seemed that even though Twilight Sparkle had pioneered this spell though a couple of uses several years ago it was still an odd sight to the Pegasi to see other types of ponies in their city. Certainly they were welcome, but it was just unusual. Everypony seemed to take it in stride as they went about their business.

Tonight it was quiet. Cloudsdale floated over a patch of ground nearby the borders of Equestria. Since the city moved from place to place it was often not in the same location in their schedule from one night to the next.

Walking on clouds was different than walking on the solid ground, for certain. Sometimes she thought it was like walking on a mattress. Once or twice she had needed to steady herself when the clouds gave ever so slightly under her weight. After some practice she had gotten the hang of it, more or less. However, walking on the clouds was not the only thing that felt odd to her tonight. She was in command while Lauren and a few of the others were taking care of business elsewhere. It felt strange being the one to give the orders but she had been reassured half a dozen times by the zebra that she would be fine.

Despite her reassurance she was still not certain she was ready to lead. Her past had left her with a great deal of anxiety as to her choices being the right ones. Without Lauren to provide her a bit of zebra guidance she felt a little exposed. She wondered if this was how Twilight Sparkle had felt once she had gotten to know Zecora. Sunset knew that she and the zebra did not have the same type of relationship as she seemed to have with hers, but they did appear to be good types of ponies to have around.

Sunset Shimmer thought back to the kiss they had shared on the airship deck and then blushed at the thought. A part of her was a little surprised that she had not only kissed back, but that she had enjoyed it. She had never thought that her special somepony might be another mare. For that matter, she still wasn't even certain if they were special someponies. Maybe it was just a fluke or something. She tried to push all of these thoughts out of her head as an armored unicorn joined her.

"Everything seems in order," the stallion said. His name was Sidereal Equinox, and he had transferred from a pony facility where they had kept one of the three fragments of the Star Blade. They had never met before his assignment with the Shadowbolts but he seemed to be efficient.

"Good to hear," she said.

"I've spoken with the city officials and several of the personnel here and they report nothing unusual." Sidereal Equinox had been gathering intel along with the rest of the team. He was the first to report back, a fact that did not surprise her. While the other two members of her team were good at their jobs, they were a bit eccentric.

She looked around for either one of them. "Have you seen Doc Wagon or Vity anywhere?"

"No, not since we left the airship." Lauren had dropped them off while she and some of the others had traveled on to someplace else with Omega Directive. The unicorn stayed close to her side as they walked down the main street in Cloudsdale. "Would you like me to look for them?"

Sunset shook her head. "That won't be necessary. They'll be back before long, I'm certain."

No sooner had she spoken than Vity approached with a wide grin. "I apologize for being late. I decided to chat up a few ponies and lost track of the time," he said in his decidedly Hoovesbury accent. It was a bit odd, but so was he. "I thought it was as good of a manner to gather information on the city's inner workings as any."

"I do hope some of the ponies you spoke to worked in the office of public works," she said.

"Oh yes, quite a few of them. They're rather proud of their weather factory, don't you know?" He smiled and fell into step with them.

Sunset Shimmer couldn't help but find his cheerfulness infectious. "I suppose they would be. I'd love to get a look at it sometime, but I don't think we'll have an opportunity this trip."

"A pity. There are always later chances, I suppose!" He smiled as the three walked in a row down the main street. Pegasi flew by them on their way to their respective destinations. "At times I do wonder what it's like, having wings."

"You could ask Twilight Sparkle. I suppose she has a unique perspective on that sort of thing," Sunset Shimmer said. It was still a bit odd that a year ago Twilight had undergone alicogenesis and become an alicorn. There was surprisingly little information on how such a process worked though it was reasoned that Celestia at least knew the basics. Nevertheless, it was one of Equestria's most closely guarded secrets. She was about to start asking after Doc Wagon when she spotted him in the distance, or rather the reflection off of his glasses.

After the adventure they had had previously coupled with the Sombra Incident, it was Aileron's suggestion that they recruit a full time doctor. The medical pony they had ended up with was a brown Earth pony with purple hair named Doc Wagon. He was friendly and knew his trade though he seemed somewhat oblivious at times to the patient he was treating. It wasn't a bad thing, though it did make some of the crew hesitant to submit to his ministrations.

"Doc!" Sunset Shimmer waved a hoof in his direction.

He waved back and started to approach when a group of shadows blocked the sun from above. The yellow unicorn with the fiery hair wondered what would be above the cloud city when her question was answered by a feral screech. The sky was filled with the silhouette of a half lion and half eagle creature known as a griffon. She had never known them to actively attack ponies though. Apparently that had changed.

"Take cover!" Sidereal shouted. The armored pony fired a blast of magic energy from his horn. The griffons deftly moved out of the way and dropped a pair of round silver balls towards the clouds. They exploded in a poof of smoke and suddenly there was a hole in the clouds.

Right behind the spot Doc Wagon had been standing was now empty. He whirled around to get a good look. He gritted his teeth and backed up on his haunches until another griffon moved to drop another one of those devices. The 'cloud bomb' landed beside him and narrowly missed sucking him in as the clouds disappeared beside him. Vity and Sunset Shimmer had taken cover under an awning, but she knew that it too was made of clouds.

Another griffon dropped a cloud bomb in front of Doc Wagon. "Why do they keep coming after me?" he asked, wailing. He jumped over the gap and it was only a

grab from Sunset Shimmer's hooves that caught him. She pulled him up and gave him a nod. "Thanks!"

"We can't lose our only doctor! Come on!" She turned around and started galloping away from the griffons. There were four of them, as far as she could tell. Their attacks did not appear random but she could not determine their object beyond general chaos. "Those things are disintegrating the clouds," she said.

Doc Wagon nodded and gestured at the holes. "We've got to stop them!"

The airship was too far away. They would never make it there at this rate. She generated a force field over herself as another cloud bomb struck it and bounced off. It exploded nearby and more clouds seemed to melt into nothing. She looked around and wondered how much damage the cloud city could withstand.

A white Pegasus mare ran for cover under an awning, though she seemed more in a hurry than frightened. She dodged another cloud bomb and whirled around just in time to see the clouds vanish where she had stood a moment ago.

Sidereal Equinox fired several more blasts of energy from his horn. He clipped one of the griffons wings and they went spiraling down towards the clouds. One of the others ceased his attack and went after his companion. The armored pony galloped towards them and reared just as he got close enough to them to see their eyes. He snorted and fired a magic blast hard enough to send the griffon falling backwards and dropping his saddlebag.

Vity caught it with his magic and pulled it closer to him, while the pair of griffons turned to retreat, abandoning their assault. He breathed heavily as he set the bag down. "What was that all about?"

"I don't have the slightest clue," Sunset Shimmer admitted. "Though I hope these things will tell us something." She levitated one of the objects out of the dropped saddlebag. It appeared to be inert, but upon closer inspection it was a silver sphere with a button to press on the top and a blue glowing band in the middle. She had never seen anything like this before, and certainly never anything that disintegrated the structure of the clouds.

"What should we do with them?" Vity asked.

"Take them back to the airship. I want to know what it is and how it works. Use whatever resources you need." Sunset Shimmer turned to Doc Wagon. "Are you all right, Doc?"

Doc Wagon nodded in a somewhat shaky fashion. "I'll be okay, once my heart stops racing. That was not how I intended to spend my night in Cloudsdale." The Earth pony adjusted his glasses on his muzzle and gestured towards Vity. "If you don't mind, I think I'll check to see if anyone needs help and then head back to the airship. I rather prefer the feeling of something solid under my hooves right now."

Sunset Shimmer nodded her approval. She trotted over to one of the holes and peered inside. What she saw shocked her to her core. The hole had gone clear through the city all the way down to the land below. When she considered how much cloud matter had been destroyed by a handful of these things she wondered what a larger version would do.

She then wondered why the griffons had attacked Cloudsdale. It was not their history to be friendly but they had never been especially aggressive either. They had never before attacked their sky neighbors, the Pegasi. There had to be a reason behind it.

They seemed to be well organized and coordinated in their attack. There was clear method in their attacks.

Emergency workers showed up to replace the clouds a few moments later. She turned away from the hole to head towards their temporary headquarters until Lauren returned. As she walked away she felt eyes on her from somewhere. It was probably nothing.

* * *

As the airship glided through the sky towards the new prison facility known as Dark Moon, Lauren kept her eyes forward. The ship traveled slowly as per protocols established by Omega Directive himself. He had insisted that she and her team send a contingent to accompany him on his first inspection of the brand new facility. It was here that ponies that proved to be a danger to the rest of ponykind would be held until such time that they could be rehabilitated. That was the theory, at least. She knew that there were some ponies that never would.

Her thoughts turned to King Sombra, who after even a thousand years to reflect on his choices had chosen to resume his path to ruling the Crystal Empire and Equestria with an iron hoof. Twice. Once when Twilight had defeated him and a second time when Lauren had stood in his way. She supposed that beings like him were why this place existed. To keep them away from where they could do damage. It was in an unoccupied spot in Equestria and the facility itself was constructed so no Earth ponies or unicorns could jump across. Built in a natural patch of land that was surrounded by an immense drop, the only way on or off the prison's grounds was by airship. A force field over it prevented any Pegasi prisoners from escaping or anyone from dropping in without prior authorization.

Aileron held the ship steady though it was clear that he did not enjoy flying the airship this slowly or low to the ground. It was again orders from Omega Directive. The ship stopped at the edge of the force field and the large brown stallion joined her on the forward deck.

"Take us in," he said.

Aileron acknowledged the order and slowly moved the ship forward. Just before it made contact a hole opened in the field large enough to allow the ship to pass. It glided through the opening and began to lower towards the landing pad outside the facility walls.

Lauren leaned over the railing to get her first good look at this facility. The walls were made of black stone on the outside. At eight points on each corner and halfway down each wall where large crossbows with ice arrows designed to freeze attempted escapees or if need be they could be turned upwards to defend the facility from someone trying to break a pony out. There was an unoccupied yard in the center where ponies could exercise or run.

While the general facility was a large square there were signs that there was more to the facility underground and a wing off to one side of the square that was surrounded with more defenses and walls.

"Is all of this really necessary, sir?" she asked him.

Omega Directive turned to her with some amusement. “Would you have asked me that if Nightmare Moon were still out there?”

“She returned to being Princess Luna, sir.” Lauren was certain he already knew that, but why he was testing her she did not know.

“Though what if she had not?” he asked. “What if the Elements of Harmony had not come into play as they did that day? What if Twilight had never come to Ponyville for the Summer Sun Celebration?”

“I don’t know, sir.” Lauren wished she had not begun this line of inquiry.

Omega Directive rested his hooves on the railing. “We would have to keep her someplace until we found another way to deal with her. This is what this place is for. It is to protect the majority of Equestria from those that would do it harm.” He waved one hoof dismissively. “We have jails for those that commit minor infractions. Those that would threaten the well being of Equestria must be controlled. Even if they were a King.”

She suspected his mention of the title of king was meant to remind her of King Sombra, and how she had stopped him with the weapon he had intended to use against Celestia. Lauren looked away from him for a moment and nodded her understanding. “Yes, of course.”

Omega Directive seemed to have nothing further to say on the matter. He turned towards Aileron and gestured with his hoof to take the ship down. Once their airship had settled down onto the landing pad they were acknowledged by two guard ponies that stood outside of the front door. The brown stallion waited until the ramp had been lowered and gestured for Lauren and Aileron to join him. Diamond Sky followed behind the trio with Obsidian. His magic disabled, he remained silent during the walk to the facility.

Lauren shot one final glance at Yuki who had remained aboard. At the moment she was starting to think she envied the unicorn. She followed Omega Directive down the hallway that led into the reception area, and from there two ponies in black uniforms took Obsidian into custody. Lauren did not make eye contact with him as he was led away.

“This facility is state of the art, designed with the latest in anti-magic spells and methods to prevent ponies from escaping before they are deemed rehabilitated,” Omega Directive said.

Aileron looked around with some curiosity. “Who makes that determination, sir?”

“The warden. Until the facility is up and running, I will make those determinations,” he said.

Lauren and Aileron looked at each other simultaneously as the doors into the prison proper opened at Omega Directive’s nod. Both she and the male Pegasus found themselves standing a little closer to Diamond Sky as they entered the dreary hallway leading to the first group of cells.

“I’ve never seen any place like this before,” Diamond Sky said.

Omega Directive nodded. “There has never been a place like this before. With a population as large as Equestria’s such a place would eventually be needed.”

Aileron folded his wings up close to his body as they walked through the first group of cells. Each one appeared to have a small window and a bed, as well as a place for a pony to address their personal needs. "Where are they supposed to bathe?"

"There is a shower stall down the hallway. Each one will be taken by two guards to clean themselves." Omega Directive seemed to nod at each cell as he walked by. At the moment they were all unoccupied save for wherever they had taken Obsidian.

"Where is Obsidian?" Lauren asked.

Omega Directive gestured for her to follow him. "Most of the general cell blocks are as you see here. There is a field at the doorway that will prevent any unicorns from using their magic and a netting between levels to prevent Pegasi from going where they shouldn't." Just when she was about to think he had ignored her question he gestured ahead of them. "This is the maximum security wing. There is absolutely no magic allowed in this area. Pegasi are to have their wings strapped to their bodies save for the guards, and all prisoners are to be secured and provided food within their cells. They are not allowed to mix with the general population. Obsidian will be it's first resident."

Lauren knew that he presented a genuine threat to Equestria but she shuddered as she entered the hallway that led to the maximum-security wing. She saw two guard ponies on either side of her that glared at each of them. Their steely gaze made her shift uncomfortably as she walked. They moved towards Aileron with a harness to secure his wings along when Omega Directive held up a hoof.

"We'll ignore protocol, this time." He walked through a scanner that analyzed him and placed a report on his scan up on the screen to the side of the room. There was another in front of the guard on the right. Lauren was next. She felt a tingle as the scanner analyzed her and her physical statistics including a small biography brought up on the screen. She wondered to herself if all of this information was necessary, but refrained from asking. She knew that Omega Directive would remind her that these were the worst in Equestria, and those that came to visit needed to be appropriately examined.

Aileron stepped into the scanner and the device noted his wings were not secured. The guard overrode the warning and allowed him entry. He appeared nonplussed by the scan and stepped through to stand beside Lauren.

Diamond Sky shivered as the scan passed over her and frowned. "I don't like this thing."

"Luckily you'll only need to feel it once," Omega Directive said.

Aileron trotted next to Lauren. "I'll tell you one thing, this place makes me never want to end up in here."

"That's the point, Aileron," Omega Directive said. "After all, we don't want ponies violating Equestrian law. We may not be able to stop the worst of the worst, but perhaps their fate will make others consider their actions more carefully."

Lauren wanted to remind him of Nightmare Moon who had long been a whispered about cautionary tale but thought better of it. She hesitated at thinking on whether or not she would have the strength of will to sacrifice someone she loved for the greater good. She hoped she would never need to make that decision.

"Here is Obsidian's cell." The black pony looked up at her with an evil grin. Omega Directive appeared not to notice.

"Hello, Lauren, come to visit me?" he asked.

Lauren stepped back until she bumped into Aileron. "I've seen enough,"

“I assure you, you are perfectly safe,” Omega Directive said.

“I said, I’ve seen enough. I have a job to do, sir, and I can’t do it here.” She walked back towards the guard post with Aileron and Diamond Sky in tow. The three all appeared somewhat disturbed by their tour, while Omega Directive remained a moment longer before following them back to the airship. During the entire walk back, Lauren suspected their presence had been a test, and if it was then she had failed.

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Emergency workers had nearly patched up all of the holes in the cloud city by the time Sunset Shimmer looked skyward. Princess Luna’s royal chariot approached with a pair of thestrals at its head. She noticed that Princess Luna was headed in her direction as she came in for a landing. The yellow unicorn with the flame colored mane gave her a respectful bow. She stepped onto the cloud city with a nod in return. Her wings folded against her body as she walked alongside her.

While one of the thestrals remained to keep an eye on the chariot the other moved to accompany Princess Luna. Noticing her interest she turned to introduce him. “This is Icarus. He is a member of my personal guard. It was determined that given the elevated level of tension in Cloudsdale at the moment it might be wise to have some security at all times.”

“Of course,” Sunset Shimmer said, nodding to her bat winged guard. “I was going to submit my report to Omega Directive.”

Princess Luna nodded. “Yes, though since I am aware he is elsewhere at the moment I am here to take your report directly. Please fill me in on what happened.” The dark blue alicorn gave Sunset Shimmer an encouraging nod.

“Approximately three hours ago a group of griffons attacked the city. They dropped several spherical devices approximately this large on several locations around Cloudsdale. It appeared at least in part that some of them were attempting to hit us directly.” She held her hooves a few inches apart. “The devices when coming into contact with cloud matter caused them to vaporize and exposed the internal structure of the city. We managed to recover several of the devices though my people haven’t had time to examine them in detail yet.”

The princess observed the repair work being done. “Damage to the city?”

“Moderate, but nothing critical and no fatalities. Everypony made it through none the worse for wear, though I imagine Doc Wagon is reconsidering his next visit to the city. He almost fell through one of the cloud holes.” Sunset Shimmer guided her through the worst of the damage zone. “As you can see, they caused a significant amount of damage. Most of it has been repaired but several system checks need to be conducted.”

Icarus spoke up as they passed a work team. “Did you recognize any of the griffons conducting the assault?”

“I’m afraid not. They were all strangers to me but we don’t get a lot of griffons in Equestria these days,” she said.

“That may change soon enough,” Princess Luna said.

Sunset Shimmer raised an eyebrow. “Pardon me, your highness?”

“My sister and I have chosen to open negotiations with the griffons. At the moment it’s been difficult to get them to the table given that they’re currently in the

middle of a transition in their government.” Princess Luna appeared distracted as she came upon a spot the workers had yet to repair. The hole in the clouds still allowed one to see the land below and was an unusual sight for anyone that had visited the Cloud city before.

Icarus indicated the hole. “Did the griffons that did this have any markings on them?”

“Not that I noticed. They did not appear to be part of any organized group. At this time we believe they are renegades though we have no proof to the contrary,” Sunset Shimmer said. “Do you suspect the griffons of having a motive to harm us?”

Princess Luna shook her head. “Not as such. However, if it did turn out that these griffons had a connection to the government it would make things substantially more complicated.”

Sunset Shimmer led her away and towards the hospital as the work crew arrived to address the last of the holes. “I don’t know much about griffon politics.”

The blue furred alicorn nodded in agreement. “You know about as much as I do. I have asked Twilight Sparkle for some insight but her report was rather complex. I have still not had time to analyze the table of contents for the information I might find useful.” Twilight Sparkle did have a tendency to include too much information in her desire for completeness. Sunset Shimmer smiled at the thought of the report Luna must have received probably having a table of contents to the actual file.

“You must know something,” Sunset Shimmer said, prompting her for information.

“The griffon nation is presently in disarray. Their government has not had a firm hold on its people nor a direction to go in for quite some time. There has been some talk that it was the previous regimes fault but information is too spotty to know if that is truly the case. We are aware that at present there are two major factions that are currently attempting to consolidate their presence as the de facto government.” She went on to explain that the griffon economy was doing poorly with many of their citizens forsaking long term benefits for short term gains. In some cases they had been known to just make poor products and overcharge visiting ponies for them. Princess Luna’s expression became that of sadness as she continued. “The last time I visited a major griffon settlement it appeared that the entire town had been lacking in general care. Several roofs had holes in them and few griffons appeared to be out and about that weren’t trying to encourage interest in their wares.”

“You were entirely too generous with them, ma’am,” Icarus said.

“I did what I could to make things better. I offered them pony aid but they refused. Other than the food I gave them out of our supplies they did not seem to want help.”

Sunset Shimmer nodded. “It is difficult to help those that do not seem to know how to ask for it.”

“It is my thinking that they are so used to doing things on an individual level that they have forgotten what it is like to work as a team. I only hope that Celestia is able to convince them to come to the table before it is too late.” She stopped in the center of Cloudsdale. “At the moment we have approached both of the griffon leaders. We contacted them together in the hopes that they would accept us as a neutral third party. My sister hopes to help them find their way to peace. Helios appears to be more flexible

than Blackfang, but Blackfang is a charismatic leader. He may have the pull to convince enough regional leaders to follow him.”

“In which direction?” Sunset Shimmer asked.

“That is the question we are hoping that one of them will answer,” the princess said. Icarus preceded her into the center of Cloudsdale. There was little visible damage here and most of the Pegasi did not appear to notice them. Sunset Shimmer took up the rear as they approached the medical center. Her eyes were drawn to a white Pegasus that seemed to keep an eye on her as she passed. The princess’s hooves made gentle clicks as she walked onto the tile floor of the structure.

It did not surprise Sunset Shimmer that Icarus examined the immediate area before he offered a nod to the two women indicating he believed it safe enough for them to continue. She wondered if that was what the life of a princess was like. Always having someone to keep an eye on you seemed like most might envy it at first but she was not sure she would want that sort of life. She turned to the doors into the patient treatment center when Doc Wagon emerged. He fumbled with his glasses, pulling out a handkerchief to clean them.

“It’s been quite a day. Almost falling through the clouds and treating all of the wounded Pegasi is enough to make one glad one generally doesn’t encounter such things. At least my medical skills are of use here.” He finished cleaning his glasses and looked up to see Princess Luna and Icarus, who moved in front of her to check him out. “Oh!”

“He’s all right, he’s with me,” Sunset Shimmer said.

The thestral gave him a sniff and snorted some air in his face before he turned away and flicked his tail, resuming his post at Luna’s side. “As you say.”

“Doc, what’s your status?” Sunset Shimmer asked.

The brown pony with the purple hair touched a hoof to his chin. “Could be better. Everyone is okay, mostly a lot of nervous folks. A few injured wings but those will take a couple of days of good best rest and they’ll be fine. Beyond that, I don’t know what else I can do here.”

Sunset Shimmer touched a hoof to his shoulder. “You’ve done more than enough. Get some rest.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” Sunset Shimmer said. “He’s good at his job. Most of the time.” She watched the somewhat quirky doctor leave the hospital to be replaced by Sidereal Equinox and his armored form. “Sidereal Equinox, I was just coming to see you. I was giving Princess Luna and her guard a tour of the damage and a report on the incident.”

Sidereal Equinox gave Luna a bow and then acknowledged his fellow armored pony. “Of course. I’ve increased security in the area in light of what happened this morning.”

“A good idea,” she said.

Princess Luna turned to look at him. “Sidereal Equinox. I remember you,”

“Yes, ma’am. I was in command of one of the facilities that guarded the Star Blade fragment. I regret to say I was not able to stop Trixie when she arrived.”

“You did your best. I did not realize you had been reassigned to the Shadowbolts,” she said.

Sidereal Equinox nodded. “The transfer went through a short while ago, ma’am.”

“Carry on, both of you. I must return to Canterlot and inform Celestia of what I’ve seen here. If you learn anything more, contact me immediately.” The princess turned and left the two of them alone. Sunset Shimmer wondered if the griffons were in such a state of disarray, how had their attackers gotten such advanced weapons and coordinated their attack so well? Something else had to be going on in Cloudsdale though she could not figure out what that might be. She silently hoped that Lauren was on her way back. Command was not as easy as being her second.

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“Was anypony else feeling the weird vibes from that place?” Diamond Sky asked the others around the table. No pony seemed to want to be the first to speak. After they had returned to the ship Omega Directive indicated his intention to remain for a while and so the ship departed without him. That meant they had plenty of time to discuss it on the journey back.

Lauren shook her head. “That place is only for the worst of the worst. The gravest threats to ponykind.”

“I still don’t know if it’s a good idea,” Diamond Sky said.

Red placed his hooves on the table. “Whether it’s a good idea or not it’s happening. Omega Directive must have gotten the construction approved by Princess Celestia though I am certain it was not easy for her to agree to it.”

Lauren thought back to her meeting with him right after Obsidian’s capture. He was a rather skilled orator and she had almost been convinced when he had spoken to her and Sunset Shimmer. Part of her still wondered if Sunset Shimmer had not been at least partly swayed by his efforts to convince the two mares of his point of view. He had not said anything overtly disturbing but it had unsettled her nonetheless.

She considered that he had probably made a strong argument for it perhaps using Trixie as an example. If she had been held in Dark Moon then she never would have been able to bring King Sombra back a second time. He never would have joined forces with Chrysalis, and he never would have launched a full-scale assault on Equestria. Of course it was easy to know these things now that they had already happened. No doubt whatever he had said to her it had been convincing.

“Try as I might to think otherwise I can see how it is a necessary measure,” she said.

Diamond Sky shivered. “You can’t tell me that you think anypony will be helped by that place.”

“I don’t know. Is Dark Moon any different than when Princess Celestia was forced to banish Luna to the moon?” she asked. Princess Luna’s banishment was well known in Equestria even before the return of Nightmare Moon. She knew that for a thousand years the lunar princess was alone up there. She could only imagine how lonely she must have been. She also knew full well that had Celestia not done so she might have been forced to kill her to protect the rest of ponykind. Given the options of imprisoning Luna and killing her, there was no choice. Celestia did not kill.

Aileron held his hooves up to interrupt. “The point of that place is to protect the citizens from anypony that proves themselves to be a direct and continuous threat to Equestria. Most ponies will never see the inside of that place.” He leaned against the

table where the illustration of the two princesses showed them dancing in an eternal cycle.

“I suppose,” Diamond Sky said.

“Not to mention that not every threat to Equestria is beyond help. Sunset Shimmer, Princess Luna, and Discord all used to be threats to Equestria until someone redeemed them. They don’t all follow the path of Sombra, Chrysalis, and others like them.” Aileron folded his wings up against his body. “Those that we can help, we will. Those that we can’t, maybe we need a place for them.”

Diamond Sky shrugged. “I still have this feeling that there’s something about Dark Moon that we just aren’t seeing.”

Red touched his hoof to his chin. “It was Omega Directive’s idea, wasn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes, it was.” Lauren did not know what had prompted the idea but after they had captured Chrysalis she had been taken to a small facility not unlike the one where King Sombra’s energy had been contained. Needless to say due to her magical abilities more than the usual precautions needed to be taken. Omega Directive had assured the princesses that she was under control and that he had a plan in place to take care of such threats going forward. It was possible that Dark Moon was part of his idea.

The stallion Earth pony heard a rumbling from the engines and walked back to the access panel. He opened it and gave it a good buck before the sound went back to a gentle vibration. “Darn finicky engines. Anyway, do you suppose a place like that will get much use?”

“It might, with the sort of things we’ve been dealing with lately. Obsidian appeared like he was ready to fight to the last pony when we arrived, though he surrendered after we’d taken down all of his men. We also don’t know what those ponies that broke into Twilight’s castle were up to. I can’t imagine they were interested in the library for it’s own merits. They wanted something though we still don’t know what possible use that book they stole could be to them.” Lauren wondered if perhaps something hadn’t started the day that Nightmare Moon returned. Perhaps there was a reason that more villainous ponies had started to emerge. If there were a pattern she was certain Princess Twilight would have noticed it. That said, it did not mean that there was not something building up to a fever pitch.

Aileron walked around the table in a circle. “I can’t help but feel that we’re two steps behind. I know everypony has secrets but we’re supposed to be Equestria’s first line of defense when the sun goes down. How can we defend it if we don’t know what’s going on?”

“By doing the best we can,” Lauren said. “For now, Dark Moon is a work in progress. We won’t know if it works as Omega Directive intends or not until it’s been running for a while. If it can convince Obsidian that he’s making the wrong choice than maybe it’ll prove it’s worth.” She doubted that the black pony would change his mind but at the same time she wanted to believe that everypony could follow Sunset Shimmer’s example and found their way back to the magic of friendship.

Lauren knew she was hardly impartial when she came to the yellow and red mare. She had been willing to give her the benefit of the doubt when she helped Celestia escape during the Sombra incident though many only recalled that she had been the one to capture her in the first place. The zebra pony believed in second chances and gave her a

chance to prove herself as a member of her team. As far as she was concerned, Sunset Shimmer was not an evil pony by any means. She had simply become lost without a good friend to help her through the times she was not sure of herself. Lauren knew she still harbored doubts about her place in Equestria. She smiled as she pictured her face for a moment before Diamond Sky spoke.

“What if one of us had to go in there?” she asked.

“That won’t happen,” Aileron said.

Diamond Sky turned to Lauren. “What if Sunset Shimmer ended up in there?”

Lauren was uncertain how to respond to the question. Sunset Shimmer was many things but she would never be the type of pony to end up in Dark Moon. “I can’t imagine that happening, Diamond Sky.”

“What if it did?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Lauren said. It was the truth, she did not know what she would do or if she could handle it if her friend was taken away from her. She recalled their kiss. She had never been happier than that moment. Was she her special somepony? She had felt all these unusual sensations when she had touched her muzzle to Sunset’s. Lauren had kissed a mare and she had liked it. More than that, she felt her heart race at that moment in a way it never had before. “I’d rather not think about it.”

Red looked at Lauren. “What if you ended up in there?” he asked.

“I’d never raise a hoof against Princess Celestia.” Lauren turned away from the table, offended that he would even ask something like that. Her loyalty to the royals of Equestria was as strong as it had ever been. She had trusted Celestia since the day she had been her student. The gentle alicorn had taught her much. “You know that.”

“We’re talking about an idea only. If you had done something that warranted your going in there, would you go willingly?” he asked.

Lauren shook her head. “If I knew that what I had done was wrong, I would, though I don’t think stripes go with prison.” She paused and then looked at the others. “Can we please talk about something else?”

Red reached an arm around Lauren. “If you ended up in Dark Moon, I’d make sure you had lots of letters from me.”

“Thanks, I think,” Lauren said, giving the Earth pony an odd look. “Aileron, how long until we reach Cloudsdale? I’m anxious to meet back up with the others.”

Aileron trotted up the stairs to the steering wheel and studied the instrument panel. He rested his hooves on the railing and looked down towards the zebra. “I estimate arrival in one hour.”

“Not a second too soon. Can you shave a little time off of that?” she asked.

Aileron gestured behind her. “That depends on Red.”

Red gave a snort. “I can probably coax a little more out of the engines.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Red walked past her, then stopped. “Do you think something’s going on back there?”

“No, I just want to see the others again,” she said.

Diamond Sky smiled. “You just want to see Sunset Shimmer again,” she said.

“Not JUST her.” Lauren trotted up towards the steering wheel.

“Yes, but I bet you want to see her more than anypony else.” Diamond Sky followed her and smirked. “I know a crush when I see one. There used to be a pony in

the Wonderbolts Academy that gave me that look you get when her name comes up all the time.”

“Shouldn’t you be helping plot our course?” Lauren asked before she put Aileron between them much to his displeasure. He fidgeted while the two mares tried to make and avoid eye contact respectively until he finally spread his wings to block both of their views. Lauren slinked down towards the main table and wondered if a pony’s feelings were obvious to everyone but themselves sometimes. She blushed at the thought that the others could tell she had feelings for Sunset, but at the same time she could not deny them. She rested her head on the railing and let the wind blow her mane.

* * *

Life in Cloudsdale had mostly returned to normal after the attack but something kept bothering Sunset Shimmer. She examined the pattern of the attack via a map she had drawn of the approximate pattern. The unicorn mare had laid it out on the table as she considered the issue.

They had started on the end of Cloudsdale that at the time was the closest to the griffon homeland. That made sense. However, they had attacked mostly along the main road and not any of the critical structures. They had ignored potentially valuable targets in favor of the main street that other than the virtue of being the most traveled thoroughfare in the cloud city was relatively unremarkable. Sunset Shimmer was so focused on her analysis she did not notice when Vity approached from behind.

“Find anything interesting, hey?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Do you see anything unusual about this?” she asked.

Vity scratched his head. “Tell me what it is and I’ll tell you if I see something unusual.”

“It’s the pattern of the attack. I recall it rather vividly,” Doc Wagon said as he joined them. He had been resting on the couch in the next room. “That one is where I almost fell to my death,” he said. His hoof pointed to one of the central marks indicating a Cloud Bomb had hit.

“Yes, but do you notice that they didn’t go anywhere near the city hall, the power station, the weather factory, nothing that’s critical to Cloudsdale’s operation. All they did was make a few potholes in the clouds.” Sunset Shimmer trotted over to the window where Sidereal Equinox stood guard and motioned for him to take a look. “You’re a soldier. From a tactical perspective does this make sense to you?”

Sidereal seemed to consider the question. He touched a hoof to his chin and then shook his head. “It depends on what you’re trying to accomplish.”

“I don’t understand,” Doc Wagon said.

“Think about it, everypony. If you’re intending to cause maximum casualties you might hit the residential area or the arena when there’s an event. You hit where you know ponies are going to be. If you wanted to cripple our government you’d go after the city hall. Though we don’t know why the attack occurs let us consider what we do know. From there the purpose of their attack may become evident.” Sidereal rested his hooves on the map. His eyes scanned the marks on the map. “I should think that they weren’t trying to do serious damage given their small numbers and lack of critical targets.”

Vity tilted his head. "So then why send in a small team of griffons with these things we've never seen before?"

"Think about what they did when they impacted the clouds," Sidereal said.

"They dissolved any cloud matter within its effective radius," Vity said.

"Exactly. Now why would you do that, if you were launching an attack?" he asked.

Sunset Shimmer stared at the map and did not see what the armored unicorn seemed to be able to detect. She knew that they had carried an ample supply of those mysterious weapons, one of which sat on this very table. Vity had been attempting to take one apart earlier but other than nearly accidentally setting it off he hadn't figured out how they functioned. Their purpose seemed obvious at least on the surface. They dissolved cloud matter into nothing, or at least nothing visible. She knew that Cloudsdale got its water from down below once every so often but that was about it. The attack hadn't caused any loss from the reservoir though, only minor cloud damage.

"I don't see how making holes in the clouds is going to make any difference to anyone." Doc Wagon examined the innocuous small device on the table with some minor displeasure. "It isn't inherently destructive, I was pretty close when it hit and I'm fine."

"Yes, but the point was not to harm ponies but to destroy cloud matter. You weren't the target, at least not initially." Sidereal corrected himself when he recalled that one of the griffons had targeted the doc, but Sunset Shimmer had to admit that they did not seem to attack any ponies directly save for the physician. Again, it seemed out of character for an attack.

Sunset Shimmer gestured at the map. "Yes, but clouds are just building materials. They can be replaced. What they were doing is effectively a nuisance and little else," she said.

Sidereal Equinox nodded at her. "That's true if you think that these devices are the only ones they have." He placed a hoof on the map and covered a large section of the main street. "What if you had a larger one?"

"You could destroy entire sections of the city." Doc Wagon frowned at that idea. He then adjusted his glasses a bit. "Though what is the point of that? Pegasi can fly and wouldn't be harmed if the city were to suffer an attack like that, even on a massive scale."

Sidereal Equinox removed his hoof from the table. "Then the target must not be the ponies that live here. What would happen if Cloudsdale ceased to exist tomorrow?" he asked.

Vity leaned against the table. "A lot of Pegasi would be without a home," he said.

"Besides that," Sidereal said.

Sunset Shimmer shrugged. "The city means a lot to the ponies of Equestria. Not just the ones that live here but all ponies. It's a symbol of Celestia's legacy. It was during her early days that this place was brought into existence. It was one of Luna's final acts before she became Nightmare Moon. I know that she had a special connection with one of the ponies that used to live in one of the small cloud towns that existed before this place brought all of the Pegasi into one place."

Vity shook his head. "Without the weather factory the rest of Equestria would be unable to grow crops."

At the mention of the weather factory, the group all locked eyes. “Do you think that this attack was a test run?”

Sidereal nodded. “It had to be. Those devices are too small to do any real damage. They wanted to find out if it would work so they sent a small team both to test our defenses and reaction time but to see if it would do it’s job.” The armored pony trotted around the table past each of them as he approached the window again. “Unfortunately for them they only got to use half of their payload before we intervened.”

Doc Wagon turned towards the armored unicorn. “Why would they attack while we were here?”

“Maybe they wanted to see what we would do. They could have been testing us as well. Maybe they were testing me.” Sunset Shimmer rolled up the map and set it aside.

“Testing you?” Vity asked.

“I’m new here, most ponies still don’t trust me after what I did before I joined you all, and I’ve never been in command before. I don’t know if I’m capable of handling command.” Sunset Shimmer looked at Doc Wagon. “I almost lost you today.”

Doc Wagon wrapped an arm around her. “Rest assured, other than almost falling to my terrible death I’m fine. I could sing a song if it’d make you feel better,” he said.

“No, no, that won’t be necessary,” she said. “The griffons that attacked, they were well organized.”

“Yeah, so?” Doc Wagon asked.

“Griffons aren’t known for working as part of a team,” she said.

Sidereal Equinox looked at her. “Do you think that they’re working for somepony else?”

“Someone had to send them, maybe it’s someone that has enough clout to hire a group of griffons for a job.” She thought back to the attack and recalled that she had felt like she was being watched. While she had walked to see Doc Wagon she recalled seeing a white Pegasus that had watched her with more interest than most of the other citizens had since she had arrived. At the time she had disregarded it as them being interested in something new and different, but maybe this was something else. “I don’t think they were working alone.”

“What?” Vity asked.

“They had someone directing their efforts. This wasn’t random. I think we all agree on that. They were here to test us and they had a plan. It wasn’t put together on the spot; they had someone actively giving them instructions. I think I know whom.” She walked out of the room and all three stallions followed her. She walked back to the main street of Cloudsdale where she saw the same white Pegasus with the snowflake cutie mark talking to another.

Sunset Shimmer trotted up with her eyes firmly locked on her. The other Pegasus excused herself and left leaving only the white Pegasus behind. “Do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions?”

The white Pegasus met her glance. “I haven’t done anything,” she said.

“Then you won’t mind having a short conversation with us.” Sunset Shimmer walked to the other side of her. “I saw you earlier after the attack. You were staring at me, why?”

“I haven’t seen a unicorn here before, I thought it was a little interesting. Surely you aren’t going to blame me for being interested. We don’t often get other types of ponies up here.” The white Pegasus appeared offended, but Sunset Shimmer did not lessen her questioning.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Silver Snowflake,” the Pegasus said in response.

“Where were you during the attack this morning?” she asked.

“I was here, on the main street going to work,” she said.

“Where do you work?” Sunset Shimmer asked.

Silver Snowflake turned away from her but Sunset was right in her face again. “I work at the weather factory. I make lightning bolts!”

Vity shook his head. “I spoke with the supervisor pony that runs the weather factory, a fellow named Moonstorm, and he didn’t mention you. I asked for a complete list of his employees.”

“I’m new,” she said.

Sunset Shimmer knew she was dirty, but she had to prove it. She levitated open the pony’s saddlebags and started dumping out the contents.

“Hey!” Silver Snowflake said in protest.

Just as she was about to give up a Cloud Bomb dropped out of the bag and onto the soft fluffy clouds beneath them. Sunset Shimmer raised her head to look at her.

“Where did you get this?”

“I…” Silver Snowflake assumed a wicked grin. It was obvious she had been caught. “You know, I was hoping this cover would last another few months at the least. Do you know what a pain in the tail it is to arrange this complicated of a cover? I even started dating a gentlecolt to sell the pretense,” she said.

“Whom are you working for?” she asked.

“I could tell you, but that would be a spoiler. Let’s just say that today, the revolution begins.” She pressed the button on the Cloud Bomb with her hoof and flew upwards into the sky.

Sidereal Equinox pushed Sunset Shimmer out of the way while Vity scrambled backwards. Doc Wagon stumbled to move but the bomb went off, dissolving all of the clouds in a ten-foot radius. He screamed as he started to slip into the hole. His hooves barely held on to the clouds as his rear legs kicked for purchase.

“Help!” he shouted.

Silver Snowflake stopped in midair as she gave Sunset Shimmer a salute. “Better luck next time.” She flew away faster than any pony short of Rainbow Dash. Sunset Shimmer and Vity both grabbed on to one of Doc Wagon’s hooves as they pulled him up to safety.

“Next time I’m going with Lauren. Earth ponies and clouds do not mix.” Doc Wagon looked at them both gratefully for his rescue.

Sunset Shimmer sighed and found she wished she were an alicorn or at least a Pegasi at that moment. By the time they alerted the authorities Silver Snowflake would be long gone. For now, they had to let her go. Next time, they wouldn’t be caught by surprise.

The four ponies looked up in relief as the airship cruised overhead in a gentle glide. A salute from Aileron greeted them and the ship set down on the clouds. The ramp extended to the soft surface where Doc Wagon was the first to step hoof upon it. Lauren noticed he seemed to relax a bit as soon as he was back on board. She gave him a nod as Sidereal Equinox, Vity, and lastly Sunset Shimmer followed him. Her cheeks reddened as the unicorn approached and touched her face against her own.

Lauren caught a glimpse of Diamond Sky giving her a knowing smirk as she trotted towards the other side of the airship. She looked at Sunset Shimmer and fell into step beside her. "How was your first command?"

"All things considered I'd rather have you in charge, thanks." She led the way towards the captain's cabin underneath the steering wheel and pushed open the door. "Cloudsdale was attacked by a group of four griffons. We don't know why or who any of them were. They all escaped after the assault."

"Was anypony hurt?" she asked.

Sunset Shimmer shook her head. "No, other than a few minor injuries. They were getting instructions from a white Pegasus named Silver Snowflake. She was surreptitiously directing their efforts from amidst the chaos. We didn't know she was involved until afterwards. I regret to say I was not able to take her into custody."

"We'll get her. Do you know what she was trying to do?" she asked. Lauren took a piece of chalk and drew a crude picture of a white Pegasus on the board. For the moment, those two ponies that had stolen a book from Twilight's Castle and this mysterious white Pegasus were her two main assignments. She did not know what either incident was intended to accomplish.

Sunset Shimmer levitated another one of the spherical devices with the glowing blue band onto the table in the center of the room. "They carried these."

"What is that?" Lauren asked.

"We've nicknamed them 'cloud bombs'. When they impacted they dissolved all cloud matter within a three-meter radius. We think that these were prototypes designed to test how effective they would be on the cloud city." She pointed to the small button on the top. "Push that once, it's armed. Push it a second time, it disarms."

Lauren inspected it carefully before setting it back down on the table. "Perhaps they're connected to our other assignment."

"Excuse me?" Sunset Shimmer asked, confused.

"Think about it. The ponies that broke into Twilight Sparkle's new castle only took a book on Cloudsdale history. What if it was so that they could perfect these?" she asked.

"The others and I were theorizing that if you had a large enough version you could disable the entire city." Sunset Shimmer knew that without the cloud city to generate weather it would send the entire pony ecosystem into chaos.

"Perhaps Omega Directive isn't so wrong after all." Lauren turned away from Sunset and leaned against the window railing. From their present position she could see a clear view of Cloudsdale as a whole. The construct as a whole was rather beautiful and a remarkable feat of pony engineering. She could not imagine looking up into the sky and not seeing it there every morning.

Sunset Shimmer trotted up next to her. "What do you mean?"

“Omega Directive thinks we need a place to keep the worst of the worst. The dangerous ones like Queen Chrysalis and Obsidian. It would be for ponies that won’t or can’t find a way to live in peace with the rest of us. I didn’t want to think that we’d need such a place but if there are those that would threaten to destroy Cloudsdale then maybe we need Dark Moon prison.” She looked into the yellow unicorn’s eyes. “When we went in there I thought the place felt wrong. The only thing that held me together was that I knew I wouldn’t have to stay there. I also knew I’d be coming back to you. I don’t like the idea of separating ponies from the rest of the world but there are some that are just too dangerous.”

Sunset Shimmer placed her hoof on Lauren’s. “I wasn’t there, so I can’t tell you whether it’s a good thing or not, but it may be a necessary thing. I know that Celestia must have thought the same when she banished Nightmare Moon to the lunar surface.”

“Sweet Celestia, that must have been hard for her. I don’t think I could ever do that to someone I loved. I wouldn’t have the strength.” Lauren turned away from Sunset Shimmer.

“She did what she had to do. I understand why she told me what she did the day I left. I wasn’t ready to hear it then but I see what she meant now. She’s wiser than most of us.” The flame haired unicorn kissed Lauren on the cheek. “Sometimes it’s not that friendship can’t reach you. Sometimes it’s just that you have to be open to hear its message.” She looked at the map of Equestria that was stretched out along one wall. “After all, just because your ears are open doesn’t mean you can hear what another pony is saying. Your mind has to be open too.”

Lauren gave her a mild smile. “When did you get to be so introspective?” she asked.

“I’ve had a little bit of time to think about things since I joined you. Most ponies still aren’t open to seeing me in a new light yet. They still see me as the one that left Princess Celestia and joined King Sombra. I can’t blame them entirely. I was bitter when I left and the more I heard about Twilight Sparkle it just made me more isolated. I was in a dark place when Trixie approached me about bringing him back. At times I can’t believe that I was like that. It feels like I was watching another pony in my hooves. I now realize that I had to go through that before I could see what I needed. As dark as it may have been, it brought me to you.”

Lauren’s eyes widened at the admission. She realized that it was true. If Sunset Shimmer had not joined King Sombra she would not have been in a place to ultimately redeem herself and Lauren would not have met her. It seemed almost surreal to have Trixie and Sombra to thank for their present situation but it was a crucial ingredient as much as it was Lauren’s desire to bring her people together with the ponies. They had chosen her because she had visited Ponyville once a year earlier. They had considered asking Zecora, but Lauren worked and lived among the zebras so it was determined she would be better suited to understand their issues. Zecora had been somewhat out of contact for some time, and they were not even sure of her disposition towards Zerdain, the present zebra leader.

“I see what you’re saying. If Princess Celestia had not sent Nightmare Moon to her prison she would have had no choice but to kill her. She couldn’t bring herself to do that so she did the next best thing. She sent her away until the day that she would be ready to hear her sister’s words again.” Lauren thought about the gentle pony that was

Luna and the day she had met the Princess in her role as zebra ambassador. Celestia had never spoken of her during her tutelage but she obviously never left her thoughts. Images of Luna were all over the castle, never removed from the days that Canterlot was built. There were no images of Nightmare Moon of course other than the unusual shadow on the moon's surface but Lauren knew that Celestia had never given up on her sister.

For a thousand years she had waited and hoped that she would return to her as the pony she had known when she was younger. That pony was the only one Lauren had ever known. Princess Luna was kind and loving and just as important to Equestria's well being. She had taken command when Celestia disappeared without hesitation and guided the land through its most unique crisis yet. The enemy had hoped that by taking Twilight the Elements of Harmony would be useless and their victory would be assured. Lauren and her group had ensured otherwise, with aid from numerous other ponies across Equestria.

Even if Dark Moon prison were just a temporary place to hold ponies until they were ready to consider another way, what would they do with another Sombra? He had been evil in life and ruled with an iron hoof. After his first return he intended to pick up right where he left off. When given a third chance at life he chose the same path yet again and Lauren had no choice but to kill him. It was true that there were few whose hearts were as dark as the unicorn king's but they did exist.

Lauren considered that either way it already existed and was operating with its first prisoner. Perhaps the ponies there could reach Obsidian and change his mind. For now, he would remain there to serve out his punishment for the attacks he had already conducted against nearby pony settlements loyal to Celestia. Perhaps at some point he could return to society. She did not know the ebony unicorn well enough yet to tell.

Sunset Shimmer nodded. "In any event, I don't think that white Pegasus was the one calling the shots."

"I tend to agree. The griffons were probably hired paws, working for bits for someone. She may have had more intangible motivations but I wouldn't be surprised if the incident at Twilight's palace and this attack here were related. The pieces are all on the board, the question is, who is making the moves?" Lauren asked.

Sunset Shimmer touched their hooves together and looked at her. "Can we talk about something else for a minute?"

"Sure," Lauren said.

"I know we kissed and everything, but I was wondering. When we kissed, what were you thinking?" she asked.

"I don't know. I guess I was thinking about you, and how depending on which part of Equestria we're in neither of us is welcome in some cases. I remember thinking about how pretty you looked in that dress at that years Grand Galloping Gala..." She turned away, a little embarrassed.

"I mean, I know we haven't discussed it, but we share a bed, we're kissing all of the time, and you and I can't seem to keep our hooves off of each other." Sunset Shimmer looked down at her fore hooves. "So what are we?"

Lauren looked into her eyes. "I guess you and I are something." She paused. "You're my special somepony." Lauren looked at Sunset Shimmer awaiting a response. "Well? Aren't you going to say something?"

“Enough talk.” She kissed her and wrapped her forelegs around her. At that moment, Lauren wanted it to last forever.