

“My Little Pony : Nightfall : Daring Do Your Worst”

By Lauren Rivers

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Oppressive heat forced Daring Do to wipe sweat from under her safari hat with a hoof. As she wicked the moisture from her forehead she looked ahead at the temple that she would have to enter to get to the artifact. She had been tracking it down for months in the heart of the jungle. Every lead had been a false direction. She had almost given up on it being real when she found a compelling potential possibility that she had previously overlooked. While she had not seen anything from the sky, older maps suggested there was a relatively low point in the jungle that used to be the site of an old temple.

The canopy of the jungle had hidden it from aerial view and only a pony traveling on hoof would have seen it. She took another swig from her canteen and continued closer. Once she had edged close enough to see the entrance it appeared relatively undisturbed by the passage of time. The Pegasus mare took a cautious step closer and ducked as a buzz saw passed inches above her head. Daring Do let out a deep breath upon confirming she had not lost any parts and tested the spot again. When the buzz saw did not appear, she picked up a rock and tossed it inside. The temple came alive with arrows that shot out of both sides of the wall, a floor that collapsed beneath where a pony would have stood, and several more buzz saws.

"They must not like visitors," she said to herself. She tossed another rock and nothing happened. After a third, fourth, and fifth attempt the traps activated again. She counted the time between the rounds and steeled herself to make the attempt. It would be tricky, but she could do it. She closed her eyes for a moment before she tossed the rock into the temple. The traps activated again and once they had ceased, she galloped at full speed through the gauntlet, trying to get as far as she could into the temple. She dared not fly for more of these traps seemed to exist above her head. Once she had made it to a relatively safe spot she wished she had brought additional rocks.

She reached into her pack and retrieved a rather hard muffin, a gift from Rainbow Dash. The rainbow haired Pegasus had thought it would be a sweet gesture, but really they were inedible. Daring Do stared momentarily at the picture of herself and Rainbow Dash before she put it back in her satchel and tossed the rock hard muffin ahead of herself. A slab from the ceiling smashed it about ten feet in front of her. Impressed by how flat the rock made the muffin she also considered what it would do to her if she failed to get past it in time. She counted out the same amount of time as the last one and sacrificed another terrible muffin to activate the trap.

Daring Do galloped ahead at full speed though once she had made it through another one activated right in front of her. She dropped to her butt and slid cutie mark first underneath the second crushing slab and pulled her hooves free seconds before impact. She checked once more to be certain she had not lost any parts and resumed her forward journey.

She disliked the fact that many of these old temples seemed ripe with traps to prevent an archaeologist from trotting away with her prize or saving the day depending on what she was doing at the time. At times she thought that maybe whoever designed these structures was toying with her. Perhaps behind the wall Ahuizotl was manipulating it all from a hidden control room. Deciding such notions were ridiculous she kept her forward progress.

Once she had gotten past the first couple of stretches of long hallway the temple seemed to cut down on the deathtraps somewhat. She kept her eyes open and moved slowly preparing at any moment to jump or fly to safety.

At least there didn't seem to be anything hostile to ponies in here. Mostly just old traps designed to take care of any intrepid explorers. She thanked Celestia for small favors.

She followed a number of twists and turns until she approached what seemed to be a large open chamber. The room was largely square with four slanted walls that led up to a flat stone ceiling. In the center was a round patch of Earth connected to where she stood by a bridge consisting of rope and several horizontal slats of wood. She tested the bridge with a hoof and it seemed solid. Even if the bridge collapsed the ceiling was tall enough that flying wouldn't be a problem. She glanced across to the circular area in the center.

At last she saw the thing that she had been searching for this entire time. It seemed to be a triangular device on a large pole that had a sharpened end. The artifact rested on a stand that displayed it at an angle. She mused that many of these temples liked to show off their prizes too as if they wanted to encourage adventurers to come closer. Just as she was about to start across, a pony from the opposite side of the room appeared. The mare was white with a matching mane that fell over her shoulders. She was not dressed for jungle travel. A Pegasus like herself, she was primped and looked more at home on the streets of Manehattan than a place like this one. Before Daring Do could ask, she flew across to the Earth patch and stepped in front of the artifact.

"Who are you?" Daring Do remained where she was as something told her this mare was dangerous.

"The name's Silver Snowflake. You must be the legendary Daring Do. I've heard about you. You wander through these jungles looking for all the little goodies older civilizations than ours left behind." She pranced around before the artifact as if taunting Daring Do to get closer. The Pegasus pony did not take the bait. "I was hoping I'd get the chance to meet you."

Daring Do raised a hoof as the white Pegasus mare moved to touch the artifact. "That's mine!"

"According to whom?" she asked. "This temple is older than Celestia and Luna's reign. Every member of the society that built it is long gone. The way I see it, you have no more claim on this than anyone else does. Not to mention the fact that I got here first." She smirked as Daring Do simply glared back at her. "I bet you don't even have a clue what this is."

Daring Do decided to bluff. "I know what it is. It's mine." She took one step onto the bridge.

Silver Snowflake flared her wings out in a classic Pegasus display of aggression. "So you don't then."

The olive colored pony looked down as her gamble failed to pay off. "I know that you're going to hand that artifact over to me."

"Oh, you see, I don't think so. I work with some rather influential ponies that gave me explicit instructions that I was to return with this in hoof. They were rather clear on that. I'm afraid you'll be leaving empty hooved." She placed one hoof on the artifact. "If I were you, I wouldn't stick around." Silver Snowflake removed the artifact and held it in her mouth as she threw an ice grenade at Daring Do.

Not knowing what it was, Daring Do backpedaled. It went off with enough force to blow her backwards and freeze the area where she had stood a moment earlier. Just as

she was about to breathe a sigh of relief, the entire temple shook. She fell to the ground and looked up just in time to see the white Pegasus fly out the way she had come. Daring Do shouted after her but her anger quickly turned to anxiety as the shaking intensified. Cracks started to appear in the walls, floor, and ceiling. She started to lift a forehoof off the ground as the island in the center sank into a pool of lava.

Daring Do put one hoof on her hat. "Oh, come on!" These old temples always seemed to have some sort of self destruct mechanism built in to them. While she angrily considered writing a letter to the people that built these sorts of places she turned around just in time to see a cave in block her original route. She turned to see that the only way out now was the way that white Pegasus had gone. Daring Do galloped around the perimeter of the room, jumping across a gap and landing on the other side. She dodged several falling stones, making her way to the opposite end.

No sooner had she started dashing away from the lava filled room than the ceiling above her collapsed. She coughed as dirt and debris rained down on her. Once it had settled enough that she could open her eyes again she saw her wing was rather substantially messed up. Wondering if this wasn't another of those cruel jokes that always seemed to happen to adventurers she galloped faster to try and escape the temple.

Ahead of her about twenty feet she noticed a large stone slab lowering towards the floor. If it closed then she would be trapped in here. Determined not to die in this temple she increased her speed. Her entire body ached as she hurried faster, finally dropping to her back and sliding flank first under the stone. When she patted her head and noticed her hat was missing, she reached under the slab to grab it, retrieving it a half second before it would have crushed her. "That was too close!" She picked herself up and hurried outside as more of the temple sank into the ever-growing lava lake behind her.

She trotted outside of the temple, exhausted and wondering how she was going to get to safety with a busted wing. Just as she was about to collapse, she saw an airship above her. Making out the shape of a white pony with black stripes and odd blue hair, she seemed to be shouting for Daring Do to head to the edge of a nearby cliff. As the airship moved into position, she hurried to comply.

Daring Do gathered all of her remaining strength and leapt off the cliff towards the airship. She felt Lauren and another pony grab her as her body slammed against the side of the airship, forcing the air out of her lungs. "Ouch!"

"Pull her in!" the unusual pony shouted. She heaved with all her might until she and a fellow brown Pegasus pulled her inside. Once Daring Do felt she was on something solid, she collapsed and tried to catch her breath. Adventuring was hazardous sometimes. "Get us higher!" the striped pony said.

Another Pegasi at the wheel nodded. He was a male with a propeller cutie mark and light blue hair. The female that had helped her aboard was dressed in what looked like a darker version of the Wonderbolts uniform, but they didn't use airships. She looked at the Earth ponies on the main deck and wondered what an unusual group this was and what they were doing here. Before she could ask, the striped pony approached with a brown Earth pony wearing glasses with a purple mane.

"My name is Lauren, and these are the Shadowbolts. My airship is the *Luna's Crescent*. We were flying over the jungle when we saw you and figured you could use a hoof." She gave her an acknowledging nod.

“Thank you.” Daring Do dusted herself off a bit. “I normally work alone.” She paused. “Though it is helpful to have a friend now and then.”

“Why don’t you let the doc take a look at you and we’ll figure out what to do together?” she asked.

Daring Do sat at the table while the Earth pony with the purple hair gave her a once over. He poked and prodded at her wing, which hurt whenever he made contact. “I was... OUCH! Looking for this artifact. I’d found that this temple was hidden in the... OUCH! I learned it was hidden underneath the jungle in a sense. I knew there was something important inside though I didn’t know what. Anyway... OW!” She gave Doc Wagon a withering look but he simply smiled widely and kept prodding at her. “I got inside and just as I was about to put my hooves on the thing inside, some white Pegasus came and stole it out from under me, and then left me to die. OUCH! Stop it!” She batted at Doc Wagon, who moved out of the way and started to bandage up her wing. “Am I going to be okay?”

“Despite your terrible temperament you’re going to be fine, Miss Do. You just need to let that wing heal for a day or so. It’s walking only for you for twenty-four hours. Doctor’s orders.” Doc Wagon gave her his best ‘for your own good’ expression and then sat beside her.

Lauren touched her hooves together on the table. “Did this white Pegasus happen to have a snowflake cutie mark?”

“How did you know?” she asked.

“Silver Snowflake,” Lauren said to the pilot.

The blue Pegasus, whose name she learned was Aileron, nodded. “I’m not surprised she popped up again.”

“Who is she?” Daring Do asked.

Lauren tilted her head. “We ran into her a week ago in Cloudsdale. She was coordinating some griffon attack on the city. We don’t know why.” The pony was a zebra, as Daring Do would also learn. She had never seen one of her kind before despite being a well-traveled adventurer, but most of her trips were within Equestria’s borders.

“Well, she took my artifact. I want it back.” Daring Do crossed her forelegs.

A meek girlish looking unicorn with pink hair trotted up. “Technically it wasn’t really yours since it was in this temple, right?”

“It’s the principle of the thing! I saw it first, plus I wouldn’t give it to my bosses like she said she was going to do,” Daring Do said.

“Did she say who those bosses were?” Doc Wagon asked.

“She wasn’t forthcoming with the details. I kind of got distracted with the almost dying thing.” Daring Do still couldn’t believe how close she had come to being roasted pony. She took a deep breath, recalling that these ponies saved her life. “I’m sorry. I don’t like to lose.”

Aileron nodded. “We’ve got more than a few questions we’d like to ask her ourselves.”

Lauren placed both hooves flat on the table. “How about you come with us? We bring her in, you can get your trinket back.”

“Do I have a choice?” she asked.

“It’s a long walk to the nearest town,” Lauren said.

Daring Do extended a hoof. “Then I guess I’m with you guys.”

* * *

Silver Snowflake cruised through the sky on her approach to a small airship that hovered behind some clouds so as not to be seen from the ground. She landed on the deck distributing the impact over all four hooves as she threw her head back and presented the artifact to the others on board. She set it down and gestured at it with a hoof.

“So is that it?” Crimson Fire asked.

“Of course it is, what were you expecting?” she asked in return.

Crimson Fire held up his hooves in a placating gesture. “I meant no offense, I just have a hard time believing that it’s real and that it’s right in front of me. They never talk about this in school.”

“I doubt they would, considering what it was meant to do.” She trotted around him in a wide circle.

“Did you have any problems retrieving it?” he asked.

Silver Snowflake gave a derisive laugh. “Not at all. I took it right from Daring Do’s hooves. Poor thing didn’t have a clue what it was.”

Crimson Fire nodded as he examined the device. “Should we be expecting company anytime soon?”

“I wouldn’t worry. Even if she made it out of that death trap I doubt she’ll be able to keep up with us. A Pegasus can only fly so fast, you know.” She gestured at the device. “Can you tell if it’s intact?”

The red Earth pony gave her an irritated look. “I could if you’d give me a moment. Just because I happened to develop the elemental grenades doesn’t mean I’m an instant expert on all things mystical and magical. You’ll just have to wait a few moments while I look it over.” He gently touched it with his hooves and held a magnifying glass as he examined the unusual device’s surface.

Silver Snowflake watched him as he conducted his survey of the unusual artifact. “I know that thing is old, but the boss says it should still work.”

“Well, I can tell you that the structure is intact. All of the parts seem to be in working order despite its great age, and I think it even has power.” Crimson Fire seemed a bit surprised at that last statement.

“Are you certain about that?” she asked. “Could we activate it?”

“I suppose it’s possible, though I can’t guarantee it’ll be in proper working order without more tests.” Crimson Fire propped it up against the side of the airship. “We just don’t have the ability to examine it any more carefully than we already have on board.”

Silver Snowflake walked up to the steering wheel and examined the map on the console. “According to this, there is a town less than an hours flight from the temple. If we set course now, we can give it a trial run there.”

Crimson Fire held up a hoof. “Now hold on a second. The only way to test this is for it to be activated and then dropped on target. Assuming everything works according to plan then retrieving it should be no problem. If it doesn’t work, we may have just thrown away one of the bosses new toys and I’m not sure he’d be crazy about that.”

“Yes, but if we don’t know if it works, it wouldn’t be proper for us to hand him a non functional weapon, would it?” she asked.

Crimson Fire hesitated. "I suppose that's true."

"After all, it shouldn't require much to make certain it works and we'll be able to retrieve it and be long gone before anyone gets word from a town this far removed from everything else. We're in the middle of the jungle, for Celestia's sake." Silver Snowflake waited a moment as her companion considered the idea. She watched him for any minute reaction until he finally gave a nod.

Silver Snowflake looked up at the pilot pony. "Set a course for the nearest town." She turned to him. "Can you determine its area of effect?"

"Not without some reference data. There aren't even any legends on how this thing is supposed to work. I could hazard a guess but without a frame of reference it would be gibberish. I simply don't know." The red Earth pony shrugged.

"Of course we must make certain we don't get caught in the artifact's reach when we activate it. For a margin of safety let's say one hundred feet in the air." She started up the stairs to join the pilot. "It can survive a fall of that distance, can it not?"

Crimson Fire gave an uncertain gesture. "You keep asking me questions you know I can't answer. My best guess would be that it would survive the fall, yes." He rapped on the surface of the device with his hoof. "It was meant to survive much worse, I suspect."

Silver Snowflake knew that the artifact was developed before the first alicorns had even walked the surface of the planet. Allegedly it predated the settling of Equestria though that was debatable. It appeared in only the most obscure of writings. Even Starswirl the Bearded did not have records of it. It was invented to cancel out all magic within its range. Not intended as one of a kind, the records that she had been shown indicated this device to be one of many. Operated one at a time it could affect a small area. When used in sync with others it could spread a much larger distance. Provided that they had enough time to study it, modern pony know how might be able to enhance its effects and allow them to shut magic on and off as they saw fit.

The journey went by quickly and before she knew it they were hovering above the town. She looked down below seeing more than a few ponies look up curiously at the unusual airship. Silver Snowflake gave them a bemused smirk as she motioned for Crimson Fire to prepare the device. "Move us over the center of town," she said. The pilot pony obliged and adjusted the ship's position to hover directly over the medium sized town.

She raised her eyebrow as a voice came over the radio. "This is Rufus of West Saddlebrook. Please identify yourself and state your reason for flying over our town."

"Shall I respond, ma'am?" the pilot pony asked.

"Ignore them," she said.

The voice came again. "I repeat, this is Rufus of West Saddlebrook. If you do not respond we will assume your presence to be hostile and act accordingly. I assure you that we are not defenseless and will take whatever actions are necessary to defend ourselves. This is your final warning." The voice then went silent.

Crimson Fire gave the artifact one more examination before he stood on all four hooves and nodded. "The device is in peak condition, as far as such things can be determined. It's powered on; all it needs is to be dropped in position. It'll activate once it contacts the ground." He awaited her order before he would drop the device onto the town.

Just as she was about to give the command, the airship rocked from an impact below. “What was that?” she asked.

“They appear to be firing upon us, ma’am.” The pilot pony held onto the wheel as another projectile struck the ship from below.

Silver Snowflake leaned over the side to get a look at whatever they were launching at them. From the tallest building in town they appeared to be firing metal spears into the hull of their airship. She ordered her own crew to return fire with ice arrows. “Drop the device when ready,” she said to Crimson Fire.

He nodded and balanced the device on the edge of the railing. As the ship was struck by another metal spear from below the device slipped off the side and down towards the ground. “Oh, Discord...”

Silver Snowflake turned to the pilot pony. “Get us higher, now!” The airship bolted upwards and out of the range of the projectiles. As soon as it was at the proper altitude it started to slip away from the town as a dome of energy appeared to engulf the entire settlement. “I’d call that a successful test.” She looked back to see several Pegasi fall to the ground, unable to fly. A number of unicorns appeared to be perplexed as their magic failed them. Despite their best efforts their horns remained inattentive to their pleas. The Earth ponies appeared weakened with more than a few of them struggling to remain standing.

Crimson Fire trotted over to the railing with an instrument strapped to his hoof. He examined the readout and nodded. “My instruments confirm it. It’s a magic dead zone.”

“As expected,” Silver Snowflake touched her hooves together. “Can you determine how far the effect stretched?”

“Based on visual observation it encompassed the entire town plus a good distance in every direction. Before you ask I don’t know how long it’s going to last.” Crimson Fire removed the instrument and set it on the nearest table.

Silver Snowflake nodded. “All right, then let’s retrieve our artifact and resume course.”

Crimson Fire held up a hoof. “That might be a problem.”

“Why?” the white Pegasus asked.

Crimson Fire motioned for the airship that had just taken up station not far from West Saddlebrook. He and Silver Snowflake stood together as they recognized Luna’s flag from the front of the ship as well as the large crescent moon towards the rear on either side.

“The Shadowbolts.” She scraped a hoof on the deck in irritation. “Can we retrieve the artifact with them so close?”

“We might, but given the damage we’ve taken I wouldn’t suggest it. They’ll have their magic since they weren’t in the town when we activated the artifact. We go in now, they’ll be at full strength.” The red Earth pony glanced across the town at the other vessel.

Silver Snowflake spat as she turned away from him. “Summon reinforcements. I want them here as soon as we can get them. I’m not losing that artifact to them.” She trotted back up to the steering wheel and spread her wings in anger. “Keep position here until I say otherwise!”

* * *

The *Luna's Crescent* descended with a graceful arc to the ground where a number of ponies stood outside with some curiosity and others with looks of suspicion. Lauren was the first to leave the airship followed by Sunset Shimmer, Daring Do, and Doc Wagon. The quartet stopped at the base of the ramp where an angry Earth pony stepped up to them. "What do you want?"

"We're pursuing a rogue pony who may have come by here. I'm in pursuit on the authorization of Princess Luna," Lauren said.

Sunset Shimmer stepped forward. "She would have come by recently with a large airship."

"You mean one like yours?" the Earth pony asked.

Doc Wagon swallowed and adjusted his glasses. "Now hold on a moment, you don't think we did something improper, do you?"

"All I know is I haven't been able to cast a spell since a few minutes ago!" a unicorn shouted.

"I can't fly more than a bit into the sky and I can't go very fast either!" a Pegasus said.

Lauren turned to Sunset Shimmer. "Do you think we're too late?" she asked. "Could Silver Snowflake have caused this?"

Sunset Shimmer shrugged. "I don't know, but look out!" One of the ponies threw a rock right at Lauren, and Sunset Shimmer generated a force field. The rock bounced off of it and landed at their hooves. The ponies started to get more agitated when Daring Do stepped between them.

"Hold on just a pony minute. These folks didn't do anything to you. They came and gave me a hoof when I needed help and they don't strike me as the kind that would do something to hurt a pony. Now stand down. Don't make me pull out my whip." Daring Do stood back on two hooves and reached to her waist. A loud crack sounded as a pony appeared behind the crowd. The villagers started to part as a path opened to reveal a brown and cream pony with gray markings. Around his hoof was a device strapped to his foreleg that seemed to look like some sort of weapon. His cutie mark was a sledgehammer and a wrench with assorted gears.

"Settle down!" The pony walked to the center of the circle the other ponies had formed as he stood before the party. "Now we're going to get to the bottom of this and until we do I don't want any of you to start something we don't need to start. First things first. My name is Rufus. I'm the stallion you come to if you need something fixed. Now I know you didn't do this to us because your airship has that shiny logo from Princess Luna on the side." He paused. "You say you're here on her behalf?"

"Yes, we're the Shadowbolts. It's our mission to do what we can to protect Equestria from threats." Lauren gave a bow.

"Well, it's too bad you didn't arrive a little bit sooner." Rufus turned around and started walking as the other villagers began to disperse.

"What happened?" Sunset Shimmer asked.

"I'll tell you what I know, but it isn't much. We were going about our usual routines, minding our own business when this airship flies overhead and sort of hovers there for a few minutes. They don't talk to us but when enough ponies started getting

nervous I went and said hello and asked what they were doing above our town. They didn't seem too keen in answering so I fired a shot. After a few more they dropped something that hit the ground. Once it did a spell seemed to envelop the whole place. After that, we couldn't do any magic. Not one pony here could do anything magical and it's been that way since that ship went and took up a position on the other side of town. Now they're just sitting there, but they must have figured out they're out of the range of my weapons."

Daring Do looked at him. "That something, do you know where it landed?" she asked.

Rufus nodded. "I can show you four, if you want."

"Lead on," Lauren said. "At least we know it's not a continuous effect."

"Pardon me?" Rufus asked.

"I still have my magic," Sunset Shimmer said.

Doc Wagon trotted alongside the others. "If any of you start feeling weird, be sure to let me know."

Rufus led the group through the town to the near center where there was a water fountain with a pair of happy ponies on the top. To the right of the fountain was a long thin pole with a triangular object on top. "That's the artifact."

"That's the thing that Silver Snowflake took from me in the temple!" Daring Do said.

"You're certain?" Lauren asked.

"I remember it rather well," Daring Do said with a grumble. She walked up to it but Sunset Shimmer blocked her from touching it.

"I wouldn't do that. We don't know what caused it to activate." She stepped back a bit. "It feels a little weird the closer I stand to it."

Rufus nodded. "It's been like that for others too. I don't know if it's an effect of the spell."

Doc Wagon approached the pony. "Has there been any other side effects noted by the others here?"

"Not that I know of, though you're more than welcome to take a look at them." Rufus gestured towards the town around him. "Most of the folks here are pretty friendly and I think they'll warm up to you. They know you weren't responsible for this but you can't blame them for being a little skittish."

Doc Wagon nodded. "I certainly do understand that."

Lauren regarded the brown Earth pony with a nod. "Doc, I need you to find out anything you can about this effect. Sunset Shimmer, can you work with Daring Do to find out what this artifact is and what it's designed to do? More importantly, we need to figure out why they haven't come for it yet."

"They're waiting for reinforcements," Sunset Shimmer said. She gestured towards the other end of town. "That airship has taken some damage. I can tell from here."

"We got a few good shots in," Rufus said with a smile.

"She's not at full strength. Add to that the fact that we still seem to have our magic and there you have it. They're probably not willing to charge in right now because we have a superior tactical position. However, the fact that they haven't left also tells me

that they've got forces in the area and when they arrive, we're going to have a fight on our hooves."

Lauren frowned. "Rufus, do you have any sort of defenses? The *Luna's Crescent* has some ice arrows and other assorted weapons but she is intended for small scale defense not a heavy tactical engagement." She paced back and forth in front of the fountain. "I'm fairly certain that even if we were to call reinforcements they wouldn't arrive before theirs. I think in this case, we're on our own."

Rufus touched a hoof to his chin. "I've got the arrow launcher which you've already seen can do some damage. I have some other things in my workshop but I'm going to need help getting them completed and set up in time."

"We can probably delay them for a while though the sooner you can prepare something the better off we'll be. Right now we've got the power so the ball is in our court, but it's not going to stay that way," Lauren said. She turned to Sunset Shimmer. "You're the only one that's been face to face with Silver Snowflake. What do you think she's going to do?"

Sunset Shimmer looked down at her hooves for a moment and dug a hoof into the ground. "I didn't have more than a moment with her but I could tell her type. She's angry at something and it's twisted her away from friendship, as we know it. When we caught her she was willing to put Doc Wagon and myself in danger to escape. She didn't care if we were hurt in the process. Given the lengths she went to in order to establish her cover and escape I wouldn't put anything past her. If you push her into a corner she'll buck you in the chin before she'll let you take her down."

"I guess that rules out the possibility of negotiation," Doc Wagon said.

Sunset Shimmer shook her head. "There is no negotiating with her. She's in the state where nothing matters but her mission. She'll do anything to accomplish it. I wouldn't be surprised if she stole Twilight's crown and leapt through a mirror into a parallel dimension occupied by two legged furless weirdos."

"Who in Celestia's name would go with a plan like that?" Doc Wagon asked.

"It doesn't matter. The point is that Silver Snowflake isn't leaving until she either gets that artifact or is taken into custody. I intend to make sure that it's the latter."

Rufus trotted up to Lauren as she examined the artifact. "Thank you for offering your help."

"It's our duty. Equestria needs all the protection it can get these days." Lauren gave him a smile and extended a hoof.

"You know, I don't think I've ever met a zebra before," Rufus said.

Lauren smiled. "I tend to be a lot of people's first zebra. Given that at last the zebra people have united under Zerdain, maybe now you'll start seeing more of us." She gave him a respectful nod as she regarded the mysterious artifact. He walked towards his workshop leaving them in the center of town.

Daring Do touched the object with a hoof. "At least we know one thing, it's out of batteries, at least for now."

Sunset Shimmer whirled around in surprise. "You're almost as bad as Rainbow Dash. At least she didn't Sonic Rainboom in front of it. Now that we know we can move it, we should take it somewhere more secure."

"Agreed. Tell Aileron to get the airship in the air. We need to make sure that Silver Snowflake doesn't make a move until we're ready for her."

* * *

No sooner had the *Luna's Crescent* raised into the clouds than she found herself approached by the enemy airship. It still kept its distance from both the town and the Shadowbolt vessel but it had moved close enough to let them know they were being observed.

Aileron held his hooves steady on the wheel as he watched the ship hold position. "What are they waiting for?" he asked.

"They're waiting for us to make a move," Diamond Sky said. "They know that we've got the town and the artifact, but they also know that they've got us locked into position. If we move, the town becomes vulnerable. All they have to do is wait us out."

Aileron nodded. "Well, we're not going anywhere as long as they want what's behind us." His goggles rested on the top of his head as they usually did when they were hovering or traveling at slow speed. On the main deck were Sidereal Equinox and Red, standing in the mid deck of the ship. "Stay sharp, everypony."

Aileron kept his attention on the enemy airship noticing that he could make out the white Pegasus on their foredeck. She spread her wings and stood in a challenge to the Shadowbolt vessel. Her eyes met with Aileron's, and she flew across the distance between their two ships.

Sidereal Equinox tensed. "Do you want me to blast her?" he asked.

"Not yet, let's see what she has to say." Aileron knew that not only would attacking her start a fight but that he needed to buy the group as much time as possible to build up their defenses before the enemy reinforcements arrived. He handed the wheel over to Muffins as he descended the stairs to the main deck. As the next most senior pony in their chain of command he was the one who would address Silver Snowflake. He looked at her with indifference as she landed on the deck.

Her posture was aggressive but without being easily angered. He could tell she radiated confidence and certainty. Aileron attempted to do the same, holding a hoof up so that neither Red nor Sidereal Equinox would attempt to harm her without his command.

"Silver Snowflake," he said.

"You have me at a disadvantage. I don't believe I know you, sir." She circled him for a moment with her eyes never leaving his own.

"My name is Aileron. I'm in command of the *Luna's Crescent*. Chief Pilot and Flyer of the Shadowbolts." He held up a hoof to keep Diamond Sky from moving past the base of the stairs. She looked at him and nodded her understanding. He wanted the others to keep their distance from her.

She chuckled. "That's a rather impressive title. No doubt it was a gift from Celestia or Luna." She walked past him and flicked her tail into his face.

He winced but quickly returned his façade to normal. "Actually, I already held the first part. The Shadowbolts, that's new, however. You may have heard of us. We took down Sombra and Chrysalis combined about a month or so back."

"That's quite a resume. I believe only Princess Twilight shares that particular point on her record." Silver Snowflake waltzed past Sidereal Equinox and touched a hoof to his chin. "Who might you be?"

“Sidereal Equinox. Head of security and magical defense.” He did not react when she turned away from him in a way that Aileron knew most mares only did when they were trying to tease a stallion. He snorted and ignored her.

“It won’t matter, you know. All of this, I mean.” She danced around Red and cantered back up to Aileron. “It’s not going to be worth anything when we’re finished with Equestria.” Silver Snowflake climbed up onto the table and lay down upon it. “By standing in our way you’re just ensuring that when the time comes you’ll be the first to fall.”

Aileron scoffed. “What do you want, Silver Snowflake?” The blue Pegasus trotted up to the table. “Surely you didn’t come over here just for a conversation.”

“I came over here to offer you a chance. All we want is that artifact and you and the village can go,” she said.

“That’s all?” Red asked.

“That’s all.”

“I don’t believe you,” the brown Earth pony said.

Silver Snowflake touched a hoof to her chest. “I’m wounded that you think I wouldn’t bargain fairly.”

Red stomped a hoof on the deck. “You haven’t given us a reason to trust you,” he said.

Silver Snowflake made a dismissive gesture and laughed. “Fair enough. I don’t expect you to trust me, though I’m warning you that we will tear through whomever and whatever we have to in order to get our hooves on that artifact. It belongs to us now.”

Aileron shook his head. “That’s funny, because Daring Do says you stole it from her.”

“Oh please, it’s not like she ever actually owned it, you know. I just got to it first so if you really want to play that game I had my hooves on it before she ever did.” Silver Snowflake brought her nose to within inches of Aileron’s. “You’ll give it back to us, or we will take it. This offer expires the moment our reinforcements arrive.” She stood on the table and climbed down onto the deck once more. “The only way you get out of this with all of your feathers intact is by turning it over to us.”

Diamond Sky approached with a determined expression. “I somehow don’t get the feeling that like would be doing anypony any good.”

“On the contrary, it would be for the greater good of Equestria. That is something that you and yours can’t understand at this point, but someday you will.” Silver Snowflake touched her cheek with her hoof. “Last chance, are you sure that you won’t consider withdrawing and letting us take the artifact?”

Aileron shook his head. “You’re not getting your hooves on that thing again.”

“Fine, have it your way,” Silver Snowflake crouched and then launched into the air.

Aileron did not take his eyes off of her until she had landed back on her own airship. He glanced at Diamond Sky. “What do you think?”

“I think she’s playing with us,” Diamond Sky said.

“That much is certain, but she knew before she came over here that we wouldn’t withdraw from the area. She probably came over to test our response. Right now the damage to her ship and her limited crew size is the only thing keeping her from taking this village and shooting us out of the sky. We can’t get reinforcements, but that doesn’t

mean we're just going to stand by and wait." He leaned over the railing to the main deck. "Red, Sidereal Equinox, would you join us up here?"

Sidereal Equinox was the first to join them on the upper deck. "If they do attack us we should expect to potentially be boarded."

"Can you two do anything to improve our tactical situation with what we've got on board?" Aileron asked.

Red gave a nod. "I can probably reinforce the hull slightly but in order to do any serious upgrades we'd have to put into drydock in Cloudsdale. I think I could shore up some potentially vulnerable spots though before we see any action but they'll be temporary jobs at best."

"Do it," Aileron said.

"I could probably install a few additional ice bows alongside either railing. It wouldn't be much but it could help if we get into a close engagement with some Pegasi." Sidereal Equinox said.

Aileron nodded his approval. "Once they're in place anypony can use them and it may mean the difference between victory and defeat. Do it." He turned to Muffins and Diamond Sky. "We're going to need to coordinate the defense of West Saddlebrook. I don't want them intercepting any radio transmissions so you two will need to be the chain of communication between us and Lauren and the others on the ground." Aileron walked to the rear mounted ice bow. "I'll provide you cover from here but be careful when flying up or down from the surface. I doubt they'll open fire on you but don't take any chances. Keep your heads up and your eyes open. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," both Pegasi said with a salute.

"Muffins, I want you to go down first. Find out what their status is and let Lauren know we've just had a visit from the enemy. Diamond Sky, in the meantime I want your eyes on the sky around us. If you see any sign that their reinforcements are on the way I want to know about it."

"Aye, sir." Diamond Sky flew over to the front of the ship and mounted the telescope in its bracket. She began scanning the sky carefully. With luck she would be able to warn them at least a short while ahead before the enemy received their backup. Aileron kept the airship between them and the village, but once Silver Snowflake's reinforcements arrived it would be harder to maintain a defensive position if it was even possible at all.

Given that he had no idea how many ships would arrive to assist the enemy he briefly considered sending one of the girls out to find help. He dismissed the idea quickly since they were in such a remote area that anypony would not return in time without an airship to aid their travel. They could not leave West Saddlebrook undefended so they were stuck here as her only line of defense. He knew that between the ponies on the ground and their crew up here they stood a good chance of buying the ponies below enough time to either drive them off or get to safety. If he had no choice, he would even fly the airship right into Silver Snowflake's craft and tear it in half.

No pony was going to attack innocents while Aileron was in the air. He only hoped that down below they had some sort of plan. He considered it ironic that they were so close but he could not signal Lauren without the enemy knowing, at least not until Muffins returned with a message. For now, he waited and watched the white Pegasus as she did the same.

* * *

Silence fell over the town as Sunset Shimmer generated a force field large enough to cover the entire town. She grunted and braced all four hooves against the ground as the magical energy poured out of her body. Her horn glowed with the strain of the spell until finally it had formed a dome of transparent magic. The airship was floating just underneath its maximum height. For now, the *Luna's Crescent* would hover in place until the battle began.

“Are you all right?” Lauren asked the yellow and red haired unicorn.

“I’ll be fine. I just need to catch my breath. The field will hold for a short while but once they start bombarding it with anything it won’t be long before it collapses completely. I’m not Cadence, I can’t keep it up for long under fire.” The alicorn had once protected the entire capitol of the Crystal Empire with her powerful magic. Sunset Shimmer had used a similar spell to protect the airship, but a small airship was a lot different than a small town. It would do for the time being. The main purpose of such a field was to give them a little time to react once the battle began. Lauren would order the citizens into protected areas of the town that hopefully would reduce if not outright prevent the possibility of injuries among the townsfolk.

Lauren touched a hoof to her special somepony’s face. “Hey, not many unicorns can do a spell like that. All it has to do is buy us some time. If it starts to collapse, let it. I don’t want you trying to maintain that field once the fighting begins.”

Sunset Shimmer followed after her. “Where DO you want me?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

The unicorn walked alongside the zebra as they headed towards Rufus’ workshop. “I mean, what’s the plan? They attack not long after their reinforcements arrive, which could be anytime.”

Lauren gestured for her to follow behind her into the workshop. “That’s why I had the others working on this stuff.”

“What is it?” Sunset Shimmer asked.

Rufus held up a contraption. “Our plan.” The tricolor pony gestured to a table with all sorts of inventions lining them from one end to the other. “A lot of them aren’t fully finished but they’ll do the job.”

“Which is what exactly?” the unicorn asked.

The Earth pony smiled. “I’m glad you asked. The spear launcher will hopefully be able to take out at least one of their airships but let’s be honest; help won’t arrive before their reinforcements do. Since it’s pretty clear that your airship by itself can’t protect us, we know at least three of those airships are going to land and come after that artifact of theirs.”

Daring Do hugged the artifact. “No way. This is mine, no matter what that white Pegasus says.”

“Possession aside, they plan to come for it. We can use it to know where they’re going to be headed. That said, these we can place around the town and out of sight to delay them. Once they move into the town these will slow their advance. This first device is a net launcher. We put it somewhere and place a tripwire along the pathway. When one of them sets it off a net will trap them against the nearest building neat as you

please.” Rufus then showed another device operated by a pressure plate. “This releases some pretty powerful knockout gas when you step on the plate. We bury a few of these and it’ll slow them down. It doesn’t go far so we shouldn’t have to worry about it affecting us, but be careful while setting them up.” Rufus indicated his last device. “This releases a bolas, anyone that sets this thing off will be hog tied faster than a pig at a rodeo.”

“I bet Applejack would love one of those,” a voice said from the workshop doorway. Muffins set down with a salute before she pushed up her goggles revealing her unique misaligned eyes. A feature Lauren had always found endearing, she gave the gray Pegasus a hug. “Aileron sent me to find out what you’ve got planned.”

“For now, we’ve got a few traps we’re going to set around West Saddlebrook. They’re going to head here when the attack begins, but we need to make sure they don’t land near the center of town. Force them towards the edges but don’t sacrifice the ship. If the *Crescent* starts to take too much damage I want Aileron to get the crew to safety. We can handle the rest of it down here,” Lauren said.

Muffins gave a nod. “Will do. Is there anything else we can do to help you guys?”

Rufus trotted up to the three mares. “You folks have already done plenty for us even without us asking.”

“It’s our job,” Lauren said.

“I understand that, ma’am, but thanks all the same. You don’t have to stand beside us, but here you are on the ground with all the townsfolk.” Rufus gave her a smile. “I just wanted you to know I appreciate it.”

Lauren nodded. “We’re happy to do it. All kind words aside until the rest of you get your magic back we’re your only line of defense.”

Rufus held up one of his net launchers. “Maybe not the only line.”

Bowing in deference to the inventor she gave him a nod. “If you’ve got this handled, I’m going to check on the last preparations and make sure everything is in order.”

Rufus nodded. “I’ve got it, thanks,” he said.

Sunset Shimmer gave her a gentle touch of the muzzle against her own. “I’ll stay here and give him a hoof with these things.”

Lauren returned the gesture before turning to Muffins. “Come with me to get a status report from Doc Wagon. Once we’re done there, you can report back to Aileron and prepare for battle. Once you get back up there I don’t want you coming back down. You’re too vulnerable in between here and there and we don’t want them trying to shoot apart our force field too early.”

“Okey dokey,” Muffins said.

The two cantered towards the large open building that Doc Wagon had converted to serve as a makeshift pony hospital. Beds were already prepared as well as numerous first aid stations. Doc Wagon adjusted his glasses as the two mares approached. “Doc, what’s your status?”

“As well as can be expected given our limited time and resources,” he said. “It isn’t perfect but it will more than serve for the sort of injuries we expect. I’ve been working with the town mayor to set up a brigade to ferry the wounded in here as quickly as possible.” He trotted down the length of the building while Lauren observed the setup.

“We chose this building because it’s the largest and the sturdiest in town. If anything hits it, the ceiling should hold for a good long while. In addition it’s towards the edge of town so it’s not likely we’ll see anypony that isn’t on our side heading our way.” Doc Wagon held up a thick stick that looked like a broken branch he’d picked up from somewhere. “If any hostile ponies do show up I’m ready for them,” he said.

Lauren chuckled. “Let’s hope they don’t test that theory all the same. Your focus is going to be treating the injured, don’t go looking for a fight. If they don’t come after you, let them go, we’ll handle the assault force.”

Doc Wagon nodded. “Trust me, I’m not a fighter. I’m ready for whatever comes, though.”

“I know you are.” Lauren gave the doctor a reassuring rub on the shoulder. Though he was a little quirky at times the Earth pony was a rather fine physician that had served her well since he had formally joined their team. Though she hadn’t quite figured him out he had a good heart and that was more than enough for her. “Stay safe, doc, understand?”

“That’s the plan,” he said.

“Good to hear it,” she said in response. She turned to trot away when Doc Wagon moved to stop her.

“Before you go, do you think we can fight them off?” he asked.

Lauren hesitated for a moment. In truth she did not know how many ponies would be coming or what kind of weapons they would bring. All they had was one airship and an assortment of Equestrian denizens that had come together to form a unit. She looked at Muffins with the ever-present optimistic smile and her answer came to her. “You bet we can or my name is Discord.”

Doc Wagon gave a chuckle. “Well, that settles it. We’ll be fine.” He accompanied them to the doorway. “How long do we have until their reinforcements arrive?”

“I’d say...” Lauren did not get time to finish her sentence as a set of five airships appeared above them, momentarily blocking out the sun. They cruised over the town and above the *Luna’s Crescent*. Now they were outnumbered six to one. She had to admit she hesitated for a moment as she watched the shadows cross the sun and join the lead ship in its position over the town.

Ponies from all over West Saddlebrook came out to look at the spectacle of the large airship fleet. Likely none of them had ever seen anything so ominous as most threats to Equestria preferred to target the large cities. Odds were that the most exciting thing to happen in this town for a long time was Rufus firing the spears at the airship. The ships organized into a V formation, their silhouettes forming a menacing impression.

Lauren found herself wishing she had an Equestrian princess or two right about now. She cast the thought aside as she looked at Muffins and with one glance told her she wanted her to hurry back to their own airship. It would not be long before the enemy attacked. She said a silent wish to Celestia that all of the ponies in this town would be safe.

Once Muffins was gone she galloped as fast as she could back towards Rufus and his workshop. She hoped they had enough time to set up the traps. They were out of time.

* * *

Less than ten minutes after Lauren had seen the enemy airships get into formation they opened fire with a hail of magical weapons. As Sunset Shimmer had estimated the field only held for a few second of bombardment before the energy dome collapsed. The *Luna's Crescent* moved into position to block the six airships though this too was likely to only buy them a short while.

Lauren hurried into the workshop where she found Rufus and Sunset Shimmer preparing the last of the defenses. "Is everything ready?"

"Barely, we didn't have time to test anything so we'll have to hope my inventions do their job." Rufus looked over his shoulder at the stairs to the lower level. "Daring Do is down there with the doohickey. She's got a whip and she's ready to use it."

"She'll need it, we've got six airships in the sky." Lauren did not have time to say any more before they heard sounds of aerial combat. Several ice arrows struck the first airship and froze its engines, causing it to seize up and explode. The airship drifted helplessly in the sky until it struck another of its compatriots, damaging the hulls of both ships. Two of the airships cruised right past the *Luna's Crescent* to land at the largest open areas in the village. One of them was Silver Snowflake's flagship.

The trio rushed out to meet the ponies that poured out of the enemy airships. Lauren bucked an Earth pony in the cheek, sending him flying backwards with the force of her kick. She'd have to thank Applejack later for giving her a few lessons. The zebra looked up at an approaching Pegasi when a net suddenly pinned him against the nearest structure. She turned to see a smiling Rufus. "Thanks!"

"No problem," Rufus said. The tri colored Earth pony fired several more nets at his aerial attackers. He missed as often as he hit his target, but the contraption did narrow the field at least somewhat.

Sunset Shimmer dug in her hooves as she blocked magical attacks from a pair of unicorns. Both of them seemed to have significant skill. The yellow unicorn slid back a few inches under the brunt of a powerful magical blast from the pair. Lauren rushed at the first of the two, sending her galloping away from the furious zebra. She kicked the other in the side hard enough to send her sliding a few feet into the dirt.

"You all right?" she asked Sunset Shimmer.

"That was reckless," the unicorn pointed out.

"No pony messes with my mare." She gave her a kiss on the cheek as the trio stood back to back. Rufus fired a bolas at an approaching Earth pony. The attacker crashed to the ground on his chin as his hooves became helplessly tangled in the rope.

Rufus pointed at the spear launcher. "We have to get to it!" He did not wait for a reply before he galloped off at full speed towards the weapon. Lauren and Sunset Shimmer followed at their top speed, though both mares slid to a stop as they came face to face with Crimson Fire.

The red Earth pony snorted into the air and scraped the Earth with his hoof. He wore a set of armor that would render him largely resistant to any of her physical attacks. She bolted in the opposite direction, hoping she would be able to lose him among the buildings. He chased after the two mares, tossing the red crystals that she recognized as fire grenades. Each one burst behind her in a blast of fire, almost as if flames were lapping at her hooves as she ran.

Sunset Shimmer motioned to her left. "Follow me, I have an idea!" She bolted around a corner using her rear hooves to kick off a sharp turn. Lauren duplicated the maneuver kicking dirt into the air as the two galloped wherever the yellow and red haired unicorn was taking them.

Crimson Fire skidded and slid across the dirt, both due to his lack of agility in the armor and his added weight as a stallion. Lauren was grateful for the few extra seconds this bought them.

Sunset Shimmer jumped over an opening between two bales of hay prompting Lauren to follow her example. She turned around when the unicorn stopped running.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Right here," Sunset Shimmer said. She stared down Crimson Fire as he approached.

Crimson Fire laughed at the two ponies. "You know that you're only delaying the inevitable, don't you?"

"I don't know, we seem to be doing a decent job of it so far," she said. Lauren resisted the urge to run. Though it almost seemed overwhelming, especially when Crimson Fire pulled a small red crystal out of his saddlebag, the look from Sunset Shimmer told her she needed to stay right where she was. She fought the instincts that told her to gallop away from the danger and stayed right by her special somepony's side. If anything was going to happen to one of them, it would happen to them both. She reached out for Sunset Shimmer's hoof and felt calmer the moment she took it.

Crimson Fire approached closer with the crystal in his hoof. "You really should be running right about now."

Sunset Shimmer lowered her horn and blasted him in the face with a bolt of magical energy. "Now!" She turned and ran as he took a step forward and a net launched from a hidden spot nearby to trap him against the ground. He struggled, growling from inside the net.

"How dare you?" he asked with a furious expression on his face.

Lauren took the fire crystal from his hoof. "You really shouldn't play with these, they're dangerous." She threw it away from any structures, allowing it to explode into flames on impact.

A loud thump above them told the mares that Rufus had made it to the spear launcher. One of the projectiles struck one of the enemy airships in the middle. The two mares rushed closer to the tall hill where it was mounted. They arrived just in time to see Rufus roll down the hill as a blast of magical energy destroyed the device. Splinters of debris rained down on the surrounding area as the tricolor Earth pony came to a stop.

Lauren looked upwards at the two airships that circled the Luna's Crescent and hoped that the others were faring as well as they were down here. She looked up as she saw Silver Snowflake point her forehoof at the Shadowbolt vessel. Pegasi hurried to board their airship along with unicorns that leapt across the distance with a little magical help. She could do nothing to help them now. Lauren wished them luck as she bolted in the direction of the workshop.

* * *

Aileron spun the wheel hard in an attempt to reduce their profile to the enemy, but it was a losing battle between the other two targets. He was one of the finest pilots in Equestria but he could not keep his side protected from one airship without exposing it to the other. He saw a spear strike one of the airships that was still in the sky. The other four were all on the ground now, at least one of which due to their initial barrage of ice arrows disabling its engines. They had only gotten a few shots off before the enemy vessels closed in on them.

The two enemy airships moved into position to attempt to box the *Luna's Crescent* in once again. He pushed the engines to their maximum and the airship glided between them forcing both to narrowly avoid each other. He let out a satisfied laugh as he kept his ship one step ahead of the others.

Diamond Sky hurried up to his side. "We're not going to be able to keep this up for long."

"The more heat we can divert from the others down below, the better," he said. "Return fire!"

Diamond Sky flew towards the front of the airship. She took up the other forward facing ice bow and pulled a frozen arrow back with her teeth. She launched the weapon at the enemy, freezing a surprised looking Earth pony into a perfect ice cube. "Yes!"

Sidereal Equinox drew his own bow back and fired, though Silver Snowflake leapt out of the way before the arrow struck. It embedded into the deck of her ship causing a pool of ice to form on the deck. She commanded the airship to move behind them and opened fire again with several fire attacks.

Ice arrows met the flaming spheres in the air canceling each other out in a hiss of steam. Diamond Sky drew back again to fire as the two attempted to keep the ship in one piece. If they had not been in the middle of a battle it might almost be beautiful. Aileron pushed the switch by the steering wheel to indicate he needed more power. He was certain Red was probably starting to wonder what was going on up on the main deck. All he could do was try to keep the ship intact.

Silver Snowflake's ship moved forward and closed to within a couple dozen feet of their side. Grappling hooks fired onto the deck. The ropes pulled taught as the ponies on the other end retracted the cables and drew their vessels closer together. Aileron hurried over to the railing and pulled, lifting one off with no small effort. He wiped the sweat off his brow as another latched on to the ship on the other side.

"They're trying to snare us," he said with urgency.

Diamond Sky rushed to pull another one off but he could tell from her size that she was not strong enough to pull it free. He added his strength to her own and together they pulled another grappling hook free from the ship's railings.

"We have to get higher," she said.

Aileron hurried back up to the steering wheel and pulled the ship away from the two enemy airships. Two more hooks latched on in an effort to hold the Shadowbolt vessel in position. The cords strained and with the full might of the engines pulling the *Luna's Crescent* away from them the cords snapped and the ship was temporarily free. It would not last long.

As the ship climbed they only managed to ascend a short distance before the engines were struck by a fire attack. He frowned as smoke billowed out from the rear of the ship. They could go up and down but their ability to maneuver was all but disabled.

A few seconds later the enemy airships rose to match their altitude. Aileron watched in stunned silence as enemy Pegasi led by Silver Snowflake boarded their ship. She landed hard on the center table with her head lowered. She raised her muzzle slowly towards him and jumped down to the main deck.

“I told you, you should have cooperated,” she said.

“Not as long as I draw breath,” he said in response. The Pegasus leapt off the flight deck to tackle her with his full weight. The two rolled together across the main deck while the others moved to attack Diamond Sky and Sidereal Equinox.

The armored pony bucked one of them as he approached and blasted the other off of Diamond Sky with his horn. The magic glowed as he picked one of the enemy Pegasi off the deck and flung him across to the other side.

Aileron felt Silver Snowflake’s hooves in his chest as she kicked free of him. The mare was definitely a worthy opponent. As a pilot he was not as used to hoof-to-hoof combat like Sidereal was, but he would not let her take his ship. He snorted and scraped his hoof on the deck as he charged at her. She sidestepped him with extraordinary grace and kicked him firmly in the butt, sending him into a roll. He came to a stop when he struck the stairs and rubbed his head for a moment.

He looked up to see Red standing there, extending a hoof to help him up. “I see we have uninvited guests.”

“Care to show them the door?” Aileron asked.

“Gladly,” Red said, rearing and pushing two of the Pegasi against the railing. He pushed hard enough to send them falling over the railing. A moment later, Aileron saw them flying back up towards the airship.

“You know that Lauren will never let you have the artifact, don’t you?” Aileron asked Silver Snowflake.

The white Pegasus laughed. “You speak as if we require her permission. We have no gods, no masters.” She took a step closer. “All you are doing is delaying the inevitable.” Silver Snowflake leapt off the side of the ship and dove towards the ground.

Aileron looked down after her. “She’s headed for the artifact.”

“Go after her, you two, we’ll handle things up here,” Red said.

Aileron motioned for Diamond Sky to join him as the two leapt off the airship after her. The last thing he saw before he leapt was Red and Sidereal Equinox standing back to back as they fought off the remaining boarders.

He slipped his goggles over his eyes on the way down. The wind blew through his mane with a powerful force. He held his wings close to his body to keep the speed up until he approached the ground and spread them at the last few moments to pull up. He glanced around the area to search for Silver Snowflake but she had already slipped away.

“She’s got to be headed for the workshop,” Diamond Sky said.

“Then that’s where we’re going,” he said. He cast one more look up at the airship and noticed it was still flying. The enemy airships seemed to ignore it as they moved to descend, bringing the full brunt of their available forces against West Saddlebrook. Aileron hurried towards Rufus’s workshop, where the others were likely to make their stand. Diamond Sky at his right side, they flew as fast as their wings would carry them.

* * *

Injured ponies had poured in from all over the town. The enemy didn't seem too partial to who got in the way as they searched for the artifact. Doc Wagon struggled to comprehend why anyone would want to hurt other ponies to get some ancient trinket. He did not have much time to ponder the matter as he wrapped another bandage around a pony's forehoof. He reached into his medical bag and gave a lollipop to a filly on his way towards his next patient.

The brown Earth pony shook his head as he touched a pony's side, noticing the mare was bruised on the side of her torso. He searched the building that was his makeshift infirmary until he found a fridge and poured the ice cubes into a towel. He hurried back to her and placed it against her side. "Here you go, this will help you feel better."

He had asked for no defenses to be set up around his makeshift hospital since he did not want the wounded being injured further in the event they accidentally tripped something on their way here. As a trade off he knew that there was nothing protecting him from the enemy forces.

Doc Wagon smiled at two new arrivals until he noticed their armor. "I don't suppose you gentlecolts are here to experience the magic of friendship?" He backed up slowly searching the room for something he could use as a weapon. He laughed though it was obvious from his expression it was out of nervousness. "I should warn you that I'm dangerous if you push me into a corner! I've been known to make a huge scene!" He grabbed something and swung at one of the two approaching stallions. It was an umbrella, which promptly cracked against his head and became bent. He held it up at the other stallion, though the top drooped downwards, useless.

"That was a mistake, doc," he said.

"I've been known to make a few. Pony error, you see," he said. He looked around and saw an older pony seated on one of the beds. His eyes settled on the cane. "May I borrow this?" he asked. At a nod, he held it like a sword. "I'm not going to let you harm my patients."

"Tell us where Daring Do is, doc." One of them moved forward, touching his chest to the end of the cane.

Doc Wagon glanced around. His patients were counting on him. He had to do something. "I have a better idea. Why don't you two take a nap?" He swung the cane as hard as he could. He struck both of them on the helmets with a satisfying metal clang. They crossed their eyes and passed out. "Phew, thank you for the loan, sir," he handed the cane back to the old stallion.

"You should've used the blade in the cane, sonny," the old stallion said, pulling the handle apart from the cylindrical end exposing a sharp blade.

"Oh," Doc Wagon said, wondering what sort of life this old pony had led that he needed something like that. Perhaps if they made it through this, he would have the opportunity to ask. "Here, have an extra pillow, as a thank you," he said, handing the old stallion another soft fluffy pillow. He did not know how much longer this could go on before they ran out of beds, but he would do what he could as more wounded made their way into his temporary facility. A doctor's work was never done.

"At least there were only two of them," he said.

Daring Do stared at the artifact in the center of the room. It had started to glow with renewed energy since the battle had begun. She hoped that it would not activate in the center of the town as the only edge they had were the inventions from Rufus and their own magic. She could not presently fly but if they lost their abilities they could not stand against so many enemy ponies.

She stood in the center of the workshop with had two large garage doors on one side and one on the other. On top of that, there was a skylight and a door for a single pony that led to Rufus's office and couch. She pulled her whip from her belt and held it in her hooves, standing on her hind legs to provide the most reach for the weapon.

"You know how to use that thing?" Rufus asked.

Daring Do answered his question by cracking the whip with a firm flick of her hoof. "I've had a little practice."

Rufus held a net launcher in his hooves. "If they get this far then we're in trouble."

"They're not getting to that artifact. The others will do all that they can, I'm sure." Daring Do raised her head at the sound of hoofbeats. She prepared her whip when Lauren and Sunset Shimmer hurried into the workshop.

"They're almost here!" Lauren said.

"I don't suppose you can cook us up a force field?" Rufus asked Sunset Shimmer.

She shook her head. "That one that I established over the town took most of my energy, it'll be a while before I can do that again. Best I can do is some blasts of magic." She took up position on the other side of the artifact. Lauren moved to join her, trotting to her side.

Daring Do whirled around at the sound of two Pegasi flying in from the roof. Aileron and Diamond Sky hovered above the artifact as they gathered together. "If anyone wants to get off this ride, now is probably your last chance." Daring Do looked around at the eclectic group of ponies that now stood at her side.

"We're not going anywhere," Lauren said. The six ponies around the artifact all turned in unison as Silver Snowflake landed hard just outside of the workshop. She was surrounded by an assortment of various ponies under her command. They waited for her to give the command to attack, scraping their hooves on the dirt as Silver Snowflake stepped closer.

Silver Snowflake gave Daring Do a smirk. "Seems not too long ago we were in this same situation. I was where you are, and you were at a distinct disadvantage. The second part hasn't changed."

"I'm not alone this time," Daring Do said.

"It won't make a difference, I'm leaving with that artifact, one way or the other." She took another step at which Daring Do cracked her whip.

"I don't think so." The adventurer pony tipped her hat to a slight angle. "Take another step and you'll meet the business end of my whip."

Silver Snowflake raised her hoof into the air, and then pointed at the artifact. "Attack!" Her soldiers surged forward towards the six. Daring Do knocked the first pair aside with her first whip crack. She was able to get in a second crack before the ponies closed in on her forcing the mare to attempt to fly to get above them. Her wings

managed a little height, but she knew she could not maintain it long or do any complex maneuvers.

Sunset Shimmer blasted at Silver Snowflake with her horn, but the white Pegasus seemed to have the ability to dodge and weave way from attacks like few other ponies. She was slippery; Daring Do knew that from experience.

Lauren bucked one of the Earth pony soldiers in the face. He reeled from the force of her hooves. A second later the zebra was running away from a pair of them that had started to gang up on her. She was about to be trapped in a corner when a timely blast from Sunset Shimmer's magic left her unharmed by her attackers. "Thanks," she said.

"Nopony messes with my mare," Sunset Shimmer said, echoing her statement from earlier.

Aileron and Diamond Sky had their hooves full with the dozen Pegasi attacking them in the air above the artifact. Aileron put on his goggles and flew as fast as he could around a couple of them disorienting them with the speed of his flight. Diamond Sky followed his lead, staying on his wing the entire time.

Silver Snowflake leapt towards Daring Do and kicked her in the chest with her back hooves, sending her flying against the wall. "Enough games."

"I could stand to play a little more," Daring Do said, rolling to her hooves. She whinnied and reared before charging the white Pegasus. She tackled her with all of her weight sending the two of them rolling through a pair of her soldiers. Daring Do kicked her in the stomach as she struggled to get up. She wrapped her forehooves around Silver Snowflake's legs in an effort to keep her from rising, but she felt a hoof strike her forehead knocking her hat off her head. She fell backwards, and by the time she shook her head clear of the fog that seemed to wrap around it, she looked up to see Silver Snowflake with the artifact in her mouth.

The white Pegasus rushed towards the door and pushed the door close button with the hoof as she hurried towards the airship. "Fall back, now!" Her order was immediately obeyed with the soldier ponies rushing away as quickly as they had come. Daring Do hurried towards the garage door and slid under it the moment before it closed. She galloped after Silver Snowflake in hot pursuit.

Daring Do leapt over a hedge to keep up with the white Pegasus mare. She struggled to keep her in her sight. Despite her best efforts, she halted when she saw her board her airship. As it rose into the sky with a laughing Silver Snowflake aboard the main deck, she knew that she could not fly fast enough to catch up with her. Nor would the Luna's Crescent be able to get underway in time. She screamed after the white Pegasus as her airship departed, the majority of her forces loading into the functional airships and pulling away.

Lauren and Sunset Shimmer rushed up to her with expectant looks on their faces. "What happened?"

"She got it," Daring Do said ruefully. "She's gone."

The two mares said nothing as they returned to Rufus's workshop with a defeated Daring Do.

* * *

With the airship in dire need of some repairs, Lauren and the others had slept in Doc Wagon's makeshift clinic for the night. There were more than enough empty cots since most of the injured ponies were allowed to go home after the fighting stopped. Though it had taken some time to get comfortable the zebra had managed to get some rest until the sunlight woke her up. She raised her head with her eyes still heavy from sleep.

"Time to wake up, sleepy." Sunset Shimmer's voice filled her ears and stimulated her to try opening her eyes. She blinked as they adjusted to the light to meet her special somepony's face. "Hey, I thought you might sleep all day."

"How long was I out?" Lauren asked.

"Long enough, but it's not like we could go anywhere until the others fixed the airship." Sunset Shimmer waited until Lauren jumped to the floor and fell into a walk beside her.

Doc Wagon greeted the two mares with a bright and cheery smile. "Good morning, ladies! As you can see we're almost clear of patients. Fortunately for us most of the injuries were relatively minor, and everyone has gotten their magic back as of this morning."

"Are you certain?" Lauren asked.

"Quite so. I went around and visited quite a few homes making sure everything was ship shape. It would appear that whatever the effect of the artifact was, it was temporary. Unicorns are once again capable of casting spells and Pegasi can fly. Earth ponies all appear to have their strength back, so I'd say that West Saddlebrook is slowly returning back to normal." Doc Wagon started to pack some of the medical supplies back into his bag.

The zebra let out a sigh of relief. "No aftereffects?"

"None that I could detect. I think everypony is fine." Doc Wagon collected the rest of his equipment and slung his medical bag's strap over his neck.

"Thank Celestia for small favors, I suppose," Lauren said.

Sunset Shimmer nodded. "It could have been a lot worse." The red and yellow haired unicorn led the way out of the makeshift clinic. "Given that Silver Snowflake got away with the artifact we're going to need to keep an eye out for that effect in the future. I'm certain it wasn't any coincidence that she took it in the first place. Clearly she knew what it did."

"Yes, but why take away everypony's magic?" the zebra asked. "What purpose would that serve?"

"Maybe they're trying to level the playing field." Sunset Shimmer gave a mild shrug. "Or perhaps they want to disable magic for when they make their next move. Ponies are so used to having it that if they suddenly weren't able to use it they could use that window to do a lot of damage."

Lauren looked at Doc Wagon. "Assuming that the effect kicked in before we arrived and based on the time we saw it disappear, how long did it last?"

"A full day, by my guess," Doc Wagon said.

"That's a long time to go without magic," Sunset Shimmer said.

Lauren would have to take her word for it as zebra magic didn't work the same way. She herself really didn't have any, but those of Zecora's tribe had the ability to mix potions and things like that. They walked some distance until they came across the

Luna's Crescent, parked on the edge of town with the balloon above the airship holding it level.

The trio climbed the ramp up to the main deck where Aileron tested the rudder. He rolled the steering wheel back and forth a few times before he nodded with approval at Rufus's work. The tricolor pony stood with a proud expression. "How does she feel?" he asked.

"She feels wonderful," Aileron said. The blue Pegasus gave a nod to the two women as they joined them up on the flight deck. "The *Luna's Crescent* is fully operational and back in working order ma'am."

"That quickly?" Lauren asked, knowing the ship had taken some damage during the conflict.

"Well, when you've got a pilot, an engineer, and a local fix it pony you can get a lot done in six hours." Rufus tossed his wrench back into his tool kit. "I figured it was the least I could do for all you've done for us."

"It was our pleasure," Sunset Shimmer said.

Aileron gestured towards the wheel. "We can shove off whenever you're ready. Red is conducting a few more checks of the engines down below but it won't take long." He leaned against the railing. "He even helped us improve the integrity of the hull, as well as a few other systems aboard."

"You've got a talent for machines," Lauren said.

"They speak to me," Rufus responded. "So why do you think that white Pegasus dropped that artifact on our town?"

Lauren gave Sunset Shimmer an uncertain glance. "We really don't know. I suspect that either they just picked you because your town was the closest to the temple or they wanted to see what it did, possibly both."

"Maybe I shouldn't have shot at them, then. They didn't drop it until after I fired." Rufus looked around at the townsfolk. "They might've just kept on going."

Sunset Shimmer shook her head. "I doubt it. They hovered over your town before they dropped it, didn't they? They weren't just sightseeing."

"I suppose you're right," he said. "Well, lucky for us the loss of our magic didn't last that long. Do you think they'll be back?"

"I wouldn't think so. They've already gotten what they wanted from you. I think they're done here." Though she was not certain it seemed unlikely that they would return to this remote jungle. "If they do come back, call us. We'll come as quickly as we can."

Rufus gestured towards his spear launcher. "No offense to your fine work, but I think we might see about protecting ourselves. We can't always wait for help to arrive." Rufus gave each mare a hug before he started to walk down the stairs to the main deck. "Safe travels, and if you come back this way you're always welcome here."

"Thank you," Lauren said as she gave him a wave in thanks.

Aileron looked up at the two. "Red reports ready for departure."

Lauren nodded. "All right, then."

"WAIT!" a female voice said. All three turned to their left to see Daring Do land on the main deck of the airship. "You guys weren't going to leave without saying good bye, were you?"

"Wouldn't dream of it." Lauren extended a hoof and shook hers. "Look, I'm sorry that Silver Snowflake got away with the artifact."

“It’s probably something I should’ve left alone in the first place. I’d go after her but it sounds to me like it’s more your job than mine. There’ll always be another adventure. There’s a lot of ruins out here in these jungles, you know.” Daring Do adjusted her hat as the beige colored pony posed like she was on a poster.

Lauren nodded. “Yes, and they’re all death traps. Sometimes I think we’re in a safer line of work.”

“How would you know?” Aileron asked.

“I may have read a Daring Do book or two.” Lauren gave a nervous chuckle. “Don’t judge me for liking ponies.”

Sunset Shimmer laughed. “I think you more than like ponies, sweetie.” She rubbed her nose against Lauren’s and watched the zebra blush.

“Stay safe, okay? I’m sure I’m not the only one that would regret it if your books ended,” Lauren said.

Daring Do nodded. “I’ll do my best. Maybe I should have partners more often. This going it alone stuff always gets rotten when my wing gets hurt. It was nice having a lift out of there for a change.”

Lauren knelt in respect towards her. “It was nice having you along. I’m certain Rainbow Dash would have loved to come along if she’d known we were going to run into you.”

“Oh, if you see Dash, don’t tell her that her muffins are terrible. She can fly faster than any pony I know, but her cooking skills leave a lot to be desired.” Daring Do picked one out of her back and threw it over her shoulder. The muffin sunk into the ground making a muffin shaped impression in the dirt.

“Our lips are sealed.” Lauren motioned towards the muffin. “Maybe something else for Rufus’s gadgets to chuck.”

Daring Do adjusted her hat as she turned to leave. “Hey, I did some looking into that temple I found, and it was built pre-Celestia. I don’t know if there was anything connected to it, but all I can say is that it’s older than most of what we know. There could be more things like that out there.”

“Understood,” Lauren said.

Daring Do gave a final farewell before she too started down the ramp to the ground. “Are you sure you don’t want to catch a ride with us back to civilization?”

“I don’t know, I kind of like this place. I might stay for a few days before I decide where I want to go next. There are rumors of another temple in the next valley.”

The zebra rolled her eyes and turned back towards Aileron. “Get us up in the air, we’ve got a lot of places to be, and a lot of things to do. See that Omega Directive is informed of the situation and Princess Luna as well.”

Sunset Shimmer shook her head. “Omega Directive isn’t going to be happy we lost the artifact.”

“He may have had interest in what Silver Snowflake was doing, but our mission is to protect Equestria. The immediate threat is over. We can deal with the consequences later.”

Aileron waited until the ramp was aboard. “Take off in five.” He waited for the count to run down and pushed a lever that lifted the airship towards the sky. As Lauren looked down at West Saddlebrook, Daring Do, Rufus, and most of the town waved back as they departed into the sky.