

Our First Steps

Chapter XI – The Grand Pony Express

„...right, so now all we need is your signature here, here, and here.“

Grasping the pen in her mouth again, Zvezda rolled her eyes as she began working through the triplet of new forms on the Commissar's desk. Paperwork was incredibly annoying, but when working for a government-funded agency, it was unavoidable.

After she had signed all the appropriate papers, the Commissar turned back to sort through the shelves at the back of his office some more. Meanwhile, Zvezda passed the time away by reading through what she had just signed; mostly completely irrelevant details about her medical insurance, registered sector of permanent residence, bank account, and so forth. All of those were handled by public institutions anyway, so Zvezda had no idea why they couldn't just simply sort this stuff out amongst themselves without bothering her.

Unfortunately, whatever its reason, the bureaucracy was far too well entrenched for anypony to complain. Finally finishing up, the Commissar turned around, and put one more paper on the table:

„One last C-F eleven, please, and is finished.“

Sighing deeply, she filled out the stupid thing, quite convinced she had already signed that exact form half an hour ago; either she was going crazy from all this reading, or the stallion had simply managed to misplace it amidst all these tall towers of paperwork that formed his office. Both seemed equally likely.

Checking she had ticked all the right boxes, the Commissar nodded in satisfaction. After filing all of her paperwork into his saddlebags – ready to take it to the copying machine – he reached under his desk again.

„Thank you, worker. Here is two months' pay,“ he tossed a bag of coins over to Zvezda, which she caught with her mouth and promptly stashed away in her saddlebags, „Train leaves in one hour. And no talking to spies while away on leave, are we understood?“

„Yes, Co-“ she began, conditioned by reflex, but immediately fell into an extended coughing fit. The stallion gave her an evil eye – as if she was somehow purposefully upsetting his authority – then nodded and gestured towards the door, not even bothering to say goodbye.

Zvezda slowly left the office, not bothering either. As soon as she had closed the door, Sara and Cherry were all over her:

„So? So? How did it go?“

She nodded in reply.

„Lucky, lucky,“ Sara shook her head, „I've looked at our schedule for the next two weeks, you know. I *wish* I was away – nevermind with full pay.“

Softly smiling, Zvezda chose to keep the fact it was actually two months' pay a secret from the purple unicorn.

„Actually, it's not that great,“ Cherry shot back, „I mean, you almost *die*, and all they give you is a bit of paid holiday? I'd sue if I were you.“

Zvezda shrugged. Suing the state for every inconvenience was something the rich ponies did to pass the time away when bored. Besides, she was quite sure she signed some kind of waiver or something between all that paperwork...

„You sure? My dad has some great lawyers! Especially this one stalli-“

She definitively shook her head.

„Zvez, Zvez, sometimes I just don't get you,“ Sara smiled, patting her on the back, „Anyway, enjoy your time off. And bring back some more books! I've already read all of ours seven times over by now.“

Not wanting to speak in case her throat flared up again, Zvezda instead put on an exaggerated expression of sadness, gesturing towards the other end of the corridor. Sara shrugged:

„I'd love to see you to the train, but if stay any longer, Sunny's going to have my flank. She's dead serious about getting back on schedule.“

The two mares gave each other one last hug, then Sara quickly galloped off into the distance. Looking on until she disappeared, Zvezda then turned to Cherry:

„Aren't- aren't you busy too?“

„Eh,“ she smiled, „They can't exactly fire me, can they now?“

Laughing, they set down the corridor. Soon, they had reached the desert outside, and began lazily walking down the well-trodden path to the train station. All around them, the grounds of the Cosmodrome were awash with activity, busy ponies carrying heavy pieces of equipment and equally-heavy stacks of paperwork back and forth between bunkers. Even now, a thin grey layer of fine dust covered most surfaces, and Zvezda took care to only breathe in lightly; the chief physician had warned her that, until the Cape was fully decontaminated, she shouldn't really be walking outside a great lot, just to avoid any further complications.

After a while, Cherry broke the silence:

„Plus, I haven't really seen Redstone since the Princess left. I think he's locked himself in his room. Probably communing with his graphs or something, I dunno.“

„How-“ Zvezda began, then cleared her throat and tried again, „How're you doing, anyway? In

class, I mean.“

Cherry waved her hoof, „Could be worse. With Dash there, I'm no longer worst at maths. Close second, though...“

„Think you'll manage?“ Zvezda asked, genuinely caring for the orange pegasus. Cherry chatted to her a lot, but this would mark the first time she was actually actively listening. With interest, for that matter. The accident sure has changed things, and not just the obvious ones...

„I'm getting there,“ she smiled, „Geist helps me a lot with the theory. And in the simulators, I'm second best, right after Bliz, which counts for a lot I think. I could be third or fourth in line.“

That actually came as a surprise to Zvezda. „That... low? That doesn't make sense. I've seen you fly-“

Cherry scoffed, „You should see Bliz. Or Dash, actually. Those mares are just impossible.“

„Best,“ Zvezda coughed again, „Best in Equestria?“

„Pretty amazing, yeah.“

They fell into silence again, quietly walking side by side as they approached the train. Before them, a few last tech-ponies were still whittling away with their blowtorches at the carcass of a final carriage, but besides from that, the entire train had already been broken down into structural components for the rockets. Looking at the quickly-disappearing skeleton of that one remaining carriage, Zvezda noticed it was a lot sturdier than the original design one she had arrived in, all those months ago; knowing the Chief Designers, however, that was probably just a by-product of packing more rocket segments into one wagon, as opposed to an actual dedicated safety improvement.

The locomotive itself was still nowhere to be seen, probably taking on fuel in the depot on the far end of the tracks. Aside from the custom-built transport carriage, there was only one other wagon on the rails; a small, half-length coach awaiting its turn to be hooked up to the train. Though heavily blasted by sand and dust – like everything else around here – it was still quite possible to see the green finely-lacquered panels underneath, and the gold gilded text inscribed on the sides. With a smile on her face, Zvezda also noted it actually had such luxuries as glass windows. And doors.

Turning around, she hugged Cherry for one last time, causing the aspiring equenaut to erupt into tears.

„Just make sure to come back, alright?“ Cherry half-sobbed, half-whispered into her ear, „Things'll be a lot more boring without you around.“

„Don't worry,“ Zvezda smiled, „I wouldn't miss you for the kingdom.“

The two mares remained embraced for a while. Slowly, Zvezda began to realize she had no way of escaping from the pegasus' mighty clutches.

„So, heh, I guess I'll be seeing ya,“ she smiled nervously, glancing around. In response, Cherry's hold only tightened, and Zvezda could feel the air being pushed out of her.

„Cherry-“ she wheezed, „Please-“

The mare suddenly squealed something, then was gone in a blur of orange. Recoiling as she took deep breaths, Zvezda wondered just what she was up to.

She was back as fast as she had gone; prompted by her survival instincts, Zvezda quickly jumped backwards, just in time to avoid a second hug.

It took a second to realize just what had changed; Cherry was now holding a large, loosely bound folder in her mouth. She tossed it over; Zvezda, though somewhat puzzled, caught it, then gave her friend a long questioning look:

„Just some stuff about the Commissar ponies,“ Cherry smiled back, „There was a lot of them running around during the fire, and Sara told me you were interested in them.“

Now very intrigued, Zvezda put the folder on the ground and, opening it, examined at the front page; it was entirely covered in a densely-packed, miniature font. Zvezda glanced through the first few lines:

„Feeling the ten thousand tonnes of steel that made up the mighty star cruiser Starmane under her hoofs, the Captain couldn't resist a smile. Soon, she'd become the first mare in Equestria to step on the surface of an alien world. Soon.

Suddenly, an alarm began to blare! The Captain's eyes narrowed. "Captain Skies!," yelled out a rating from somewhere in the depths of the great navigation deck. "We have a-“

„Wait!“ Cherry yelped, tearing the page away from underneath Zvezda's eyes, then clutched it tightly against her chest, „No idea how *that* got in there. Heh.“

Zvezda prepared a biting comment, but seeing the pegasus was quite evidently flustered enough anyway, settled for a mere subdued smirk. Continuing to smile with embarrassment, her friend awkwardly glanced between Zvezda and her great work, obviously wondering what to do next. Eventually giving up, she gave Zvezda one last wave, then immediately took to the skies.

A wide grin breaking across her face, Zvezda leafed through the remainder of the folder, and, finding no more embarrassing secrets, stuffed it in her saddlebags. The Commissar was interesting enough, sure, but he could wait. Right now was the time for a holiday.

„Miss?“ came a respectful voice from behind her. Turning around, Zvezda saw a surprisingly well-groomed earth stallion, of chestnut skin and green eyes and about the same age as her, wearing

a white engineer's cap and standing at attention. With a brief glance, she noted he was rather fetching, and giving off that nice dependable air of a responsible stallion. Then again, one didn't exactly have to try hard to immediately look better than ninety percent of the ponies working here; aside from the equenauts, most failed to adhere to even the most basic standards.

Of course, no matter how attractive the stallion might have otherwise been, Zvezda's eyes immediately slid off him. For, behind in the distance, slowly reversing out of the depot, stood the most breathtakingly beautiful thing she had ever seen; a giant monolithic cylinder of black steel that effortlessly slid along the tracks, almost resembling some ancient, awakening beast. Towering at two times the size of a traditional locomotive, it almost resembled a rocket in its design: Aerodynamically shaped, with no protrusions in its surface and the control cabin smoothly merging into the main pressure hull. Even the tender was fully integrated into the hull, almost impossible to distinguish from the rest. At first, Zvezda thought the thing was supposed to run on magic, as she could see no chimney, then finally noticed it; a streamlined, elongated droplet mounted at the top, three radial openings at either side, which in turn were filled by a delicate metal mesh.

Zvezda just stared at the incredible machine. As a little filly, she had always admired trains; all those moving pistons, revolving governor valves, shifting gears, spinning axles... had her younger self seen this, she probably would have spent the next three years in a state of untouchable bliss. Even today, her eyes lit up as they glazed over the arrays of delicate oscillator-cams that tantalizingly flashed from underneath the smooth metal skirt of the main hull...

„Amazing, isn't she?“ the engineer finally gathered what Zvezda was looking at – with just a hint of disappointment in his voice – then wondered up to her side to share the view. She absent-mindedly nodded, still entranced by the sight. The trains that usually ferried components to the Cosmodrome tended to be more impressive than common passenger trains, obviously, but this was a different league altogether.

Continuing to examine every detail of the giant engine, her brain finally snapped out of its brief fugue to realize something:

„Eight large-diameter m-wheels? *Eight?* They can't possibly all be powered.“

The engineer stifled a laugh, „This isn't one of your dinky Galloways, miss, oh no! Four separate power axles. Two cylinders each.“

„Eight cylinders?“ Zvezda scoffed at the obvious blustering, „Now that's just ridiculous. I worked on the Thousander-series Derbys, and those were bad enough to get working with just four!“

Although her throat still itched, the excitement was such to push that concern all the way to the

back of her head. She'd probably regret it later, true enough, but for now there were locomotives to discuss.

„Wait,“ the engineer pony turned his head, „*You* worked on the Thousander line?“

„How do you think I got this job?“ Zvezda grinned, „Know that strange little kink on the fourth reinforcer stay? That's me, alright. Gets rid of sulphur build-up in the superheater.“

The engineer whistled respectfully. After a brief while, he offered up his hoof:

„Call me Ray. *Brandenburger Stahl*, engineer first-class.“

„Zvezda,“ she smiled, lowering her eyes to the ground, „Star Walker assembly team.“

„I guess I shouldn't be *too* surprised to see ponies like you here,“ he smiled, shaking her hoof vigorously, „After all, that black beauty up there owes you her existence.“

„Oh, come on,“ Zvezda laughed, looking back to the giant locomotive, „Something like that couldn't even get drafted in a year. Nevermind built.“

„Who says it didn't get drafted earlier?“ Ray winked, „Point is, there just wasn't any need for it. It'd just sit on some boring desk, doing nothing. But then, suddenly, you lot appear out of nowhere, and now there's demand for eighteen-hundred ponypower engines! Took 'em a while, but they finally got the first one finished. And gave it to me for its test run.“

„Test run?“ Zvezda whispered, studying the deep dark hull again. Ray must have been right; a paintjob *this* good couldn't possibly have been more than a few days old. Turning to the engineer again, her eyes lit up:

„Do you think I could-“

„Somepony who worked on the Thousanders?“ Ray cut her off, „Miss, it'd be my pleasure!“

A wide grin appearing on her face, Zvezda quickly trotted up into the cab, eager to see just what kind of serious power this incredible engine could pony up. She didn't give the luxurious passenger carriage behind them another look; all it took was a brief glance at the dozens of massive dials and indicators, and the little filly inside her began dancing.



„Professor?“ Geist tapped again at the door of the old stallion's office, fearful to disturb him, yet still persistent in his approach, „I know you're in there!“

He was met with little more than silence. Pushing his ear up against the wooden planks, he could hear the fervent scratching of a pen against paper, coming from just behind the door. He briefly tried listening for pauses, but after thirty solid seconds of unbroken scratching, just gave up.

Poor professor. The ponies of the Cosmodrome in general had been taking things rather easy since the accident, just using the time to recover, but not him; Geist still remembered that shell-shocked expression on his face as he wobbled off the launch pad those two days ago. It appeared almost comical at the time, but the old stallion had proceeded to lock himself in his office, and hasn't been seen outside since.

Shaking his head, he tried again:

„Professor? Listen, I know you're working, but you've got to eat!“

„Silence!“ came a sudden order from inside the office. Despite its insulting tone, Geist was relieved; if nothing else, at least the poor pony could still speak.

„The supply train's arrived today, too. Lots of newspapers,“ he disobediently carried on, glancing at the front pages of the several papers in his basket. Not surprisingly, they were full of pictures of the explosion. There were colourful paintings, artists' impressions, explanatory diagrams; but no photographs. All the available film was still confiscated by the Cosmodrome, undergoing analysis. Probably by Redstone himself right now, come to think of it.

„Is irrelevant. Even stupid foal could predict what they'll be saying!“ came the reply from behind the door, „Now, go away! These calculations require absolute concentration!“

Geist drew his breath again for another reply, but stopped midway through. Once he had started doing his sums, Redstone wouldn't stop even if his mane got set ablaze. Not before he was done, at least. He had been that way since always, and if anything, the accident would have pushed this attitude even further. There wasn't anything to be done.

Shrugging, Geist gently lowered the basket full of hand-picked produce – still fresh, a rarity here in the desert – before the door. With a deep sigh, he picked up yesterday's basket, then slowly backed out of the corridor, taking great care not to emit any disruptive noises.

Trying to push the depressive thoughts out of his mind, he retreated to his quarters, intending to take advantage of the Professor's brief absence to finally get some sleep. More sleep could never hurt, right?

Lying in silence on the upper floor of his bunk bed with his eyes closed, however, he reconsidered. Deprived of its visual input, his mind concentrated all the more on the one remaining sense it had, and the silence quickly became almost deafening.

It was a deeply unnatural sound, and Geist couldn't even remember the last time he had heard it. All the usual background sounds were absent; the frenzied screams of ponies as they galloped away from toxic chemical spills, the piercing impacts as expensive pieces of equipment slipped from cranes and shattered all across the floor, and even the occasional alarm siren or loudspeaker alert as

one of Lyuka's experimental engine designs exploded again. Not one lathe shrieked as it cut through metal, and not one obnoxious pump was running.

Perhaps most significantly, however, the corridor outside his door was quiet as well; and that *never* happened. No pony was playing loud music, swearing vigorously, or even just stomping around with incredibly loud steps.

On a normal day, all this would have been a relief, but today Geist realized just how familiar and comfortable that palisade had become. Without it, the Cosmodrome felt like a graveyard.

A single train whistle cut through the air, and his eyes lit up; only to dim again seconds later as he realized that the supply train was now leaving, not to be seen again for a week. Unpacking the train had been the one brief bout of commotion they have had since the accident, and now even that was gone.

Fidgeting around in his bed, trying to cover his ears with the pillow and the blanket just to block out the silence, he scrambled to push the thoughts back and get some sleep. Of course, that only made things worse.

Giving up in frustration, he jumped off, desperate for something to *do*, to focus his attention on and block out the rest of the world. His eyes glazed over the many newspapers scattered across the room – mostly stupid tabloids, all loudly mocking the Programme in garish colours – then stopped on the sketch of his Star Walker capsule simulator.

Just how much had he wasted on that stupid thing? Probably hundreds of nights, gallons of coffee, thousands of chewed-through pencils. *And it was all for nothing, just because of one single-*

A knock on the door derailed his train of thought. Puzzled, he was about to invite the unknown pony to come in, only to notice Cherry was already peeking her head inside:

„Hi!“ she chirped, looking around his quarters. Immediately, Geist began wishing he had had at least ten seconds to clean up, just to get rid of the most horrible mess. If he was remembering correctly, this was the first time Cherry would see his quarters, and giving such a poor first impression was just beyond embarrassing.

„Uh... hi!“ he spoke back, quickly running up to the doorway and trying to block her line of sight. Unfortunately, not very successfully:

„Is this really your room?“ she asked, still looking around, „I mean, it's kinda-“

Geist's mind began scrambling in desperate attempts to somehow rescue the situation.

Roommate's fault? No. Earthquake? No. Halfway through cleanup? Maybe... not. Redstone?

„-small,“ she instead finished, „I mean, bunk beds? Seriously?“

Geist looked around his room again, very much relieved, but slightly confused, „What? No! It's

just a normal room.“

Uninvited, Cherry nevertheless slipped past him and immediately began snooping around:

„Come on, you don't even have a fridge! Or a bathroom!“ she declared, steadily opening every cupboard and drawer, and carefully inspecting the contents of each single one, „Shouldn't you complain to the Director or something?“

Geist stood immobile for a while, simply confused by the orange pegasus' words. He looked around his room again; one certainly couldn't call it a palace, obviously, but it was in no way tiny. There were two tables, a bunk bed, plenty of shelves, cupboards integrated into the walls, several lights, and even a small, round window, equipped with blast-proof shutters. Well, that, and a lot of scattered mess everywhere, obviously; books, piles of paperwork, loose pens and protractors, covering almost every square inch of the floor. Cherry had to almost dance as she navigated the treacherous terrain, all the while checking out every nook and cranny of the apartment.

Suddenly noticing her sweep was coming closer and closer to a *particular* stash of magazines in the corner of the room – intended for, uh, personal use – he urgently surged forward, attempting to distract her:

„There's a bathroom just down the hall. And a kitchen next door.“

„Yeah, but, *shared*?“ Cherry rolled her eyes, still jutting between precarious piles of stacked documentation manuals, „Come on! How do you manage?“

„All the tech-ponies live like this. It's normal! Didn't you ever live in a college dorm?“

„Well, duh,“ she replied, not slowing down at all, drawing ever closer to *that* pile, „I admit, that was pretty bad. But even there we had a minibar and room service! This is like a janitor's closet!“

„You really should- wait, room service? You're joking, right?“ Geist asked, trying to manoeuvre himself between Cherry and his objective with absolutely zero success.

„Of course not!“ she insisted, masterfully managing to side-step him without a single use of her wings, „And to think there's two of you, just stuffed in here!“

OK, she was getting way too close now. Desperate, Geist decided to do the only thing he could think of right now: *Pretend to trip, then fall on the pile and kick it over, under the bed. Like a boss.*

„Just what kind of university did you study at, anyway?“ he began, making sure to keep eye contact as he approached the pile, „Because if you think this is tiny, then you might in for a big surp-RIIIIIIUGH!“

He did trip and fall over; unfortunately, for real. His hoof slipping on a rogue protractor, he fell face-first into a tall tower of calculus books, which promptly proceeded to topple over, leaving him with additional injuries. Clutching his nose as he lay on the ground, he could see the black matte

cover of the magazine in question not two inches away from him, mocking him silently.

Great going, 'boss', his brain snapped sarcastically.

„Geist! Are you alright?“ Cherry gasped, quickly making her way over to him. She promptly began checking over his injuries, inspecting his head and nose for bleeding, then stopped; obviously having seen the magazine.

„What's this?“ she chirped, picking the booklet up. A quick glance through its pages was all that she needed.

Why did you have to leave that lying there? Why? Geist hit his forehead repeatedly as he watched Cherry slowly lower the booklet, shaking her head as she blinked:

„Honestly, Geist?“ she began, „I mean, really?“

His cheeks flushed red with embarrassment.

„Hoofington Post? I thought we agreed on this!“



Eyes closed, Zvezda let the wind obliterate her mane as she struck her head out of the locomotive window, feeling the air hit her in full force. She could hear her heart thumping in her ears, her skin itching as grains of sand bounced off; and even though the desert sun was bearing directly down at her, the rushing air kept it cool, even cold. The overall sensation was exhilarating, of bliss; an emotion she hadn't felt in a long while.

After a few more seconds, she rapidly withdrew into the cab again, completely overwhelmed. Clearing her eyes, she saw a tech-pony quickly shut the window after her, and suddenly burst out laughing.

„You feel it?“ Ray patted her on the back, shouting over the roar of the engine, and Zvezda couldn't help but nod, „Just taste that wind! Hundred twenty miles per hour!“

Her heartbeat slowly calming down, she closed her eyes again. The rapid, cyclic strokes of all eight cylinders pumping at full steam could be felt even here, in the isolated driver's cab, and the floor shook powerfully as the massive engine surged on ahead. The harsh, repeated thumping noise coming from the automatic boiler stoker just underneath added to the sensation, blending in to create an intoxicating dance of sense and sound. Probably what a rocket felt like when it was blasting off into orbit. *Almost,* Zvezda smiled to herself.

„Chief, we cannae keep this up forever,“ the second pony on Ray's team sounded from the back of the cab, speaking with a strong coal belt accent, „At this rate, we'll be runnin' empty long before

reaching tha' next depot!“

„Sure, sure,“ Ray quickly nodded, reaching over to pull at a massive lever. Zvezda heard the auto-stoker react almost immediately, winding itself down to near-nothing. The sound saddened her. For a few minutes there, her and Ray had been the fastest earth ponies in all of Equestria. Perhaps even in all of history.

Oh well, she sighed, No joyride lasts forever.

There was also something else to the feeling, though, much harder to determine. A sensation permeating her entire self, a soft glow she had never felt within in the confines of the Cape, subtly urging her to get as far away as possible, drawing her towards the east. It was almost impossible to describe, like having a sense she never knew she had before. The more she tried to isolate it, the more it slipped her grasp. She knew she has had 'hunches' before, but this was completely different; instead of an alarm bell in her head, it was almost like a pull in her hooves.

„You know, the Company sees me as a mature, responsible engineer who'd never waste valuable resources on something like this,“ Ray smiled at Zvezda, shaking his head and tearing her from her thoughts, „But this is the straightest, longest stretch of track in all of Equestria, you know? And they just gave me the most powerful locomotive on the planet under me, with not one annoying wagon dragging it down. I'd be a fool *not* to try!“

Bursting into yet another bout of laughter, Zvezda nodded knowledgeably.

„Closest us earthers get to heaven,“ he continued, adding a mischievous wink, „At least before your job is done, eh?“

That wiped the smile right off her face. She knew the friendly stallion hadn't meant it, but she couldn't help but think back to the terrible accident. That choking feeling as her lungs seized up and the world grew dark around her, the screaming and panicked galloping of terrified ponies... almost unconsciously, she felt her neck with her hoof, just to make sure it was still there.

The stallion appeared to have read off her expression, and suddenly also fell quiet, shifting his eyes towards the complex instrumentation. They spent the next few moments in complete silence, each just listening to the rumble of the mighty locomotive as it gradually settled itself down into a slightly more reasonable pace. Zvezda stared out the window, watching the featureless desert stream past them as they careened along the tracks.

„Right. Forgot you were on vacation,“ Ray broke the silence with a forced laugh, „Sorry. I'll stop reminding you of your job now.“

„No, no, it's alright,“ Zvezda tried to reassure him back, „I'll have to face my demons eventually, you know.“

„Oh no, I'd never forgive myself for spoiling another pony's holiday. Especially not another engine's!“ he wondered over to her, and, putting his hooves on her shoulders, swivelled her around to face the massive control panel, „Here. You take over for a while!“

Zvezda stared at him uncertainly, not certain whether this was a joke. „I- I just worked on the boilers. I didn't actually-“

„Ahh, you'll do fine,“ he smiled, putting his conductor's hat on her head, „Not like there are any passengers to complain!“

She looked at the dozens, if not hundreds, of little valves, pressure gauges, winding pipes, and water level indicators that littered the entire front wall of the giant drivers' cab. She remembered a few scattered memories of the Thousander controls layouts, yes, but this was leaps and bounds ahead.

Zvezda smiled to herself. 'Space-age', one could almost call it.

Over her shoulder, Ray pointed to the largest gauge on the panel:

„That's the main boiler pressure there. Pushing it over to the red is a no-no. Even yellow is cutting it a bit close. It puts too much strain on the feeder tubes, you see.“

The indicator needle was currently all the way at the far end, flickering deep inside the blood red zone, just skirting the edges of the white-marked emergency release level. Zvezda gave the stallion a stern look. He suggestively looked towards the ceiling:

„Ooh, somepony's been a bad engineer! Guess we'd better lower the pressure, eh?“

She didn't need any further prompts. A wide grin on her face, she stood tall on her hind legs, then pulled twice at a long, white cord hanging from the top of the cab.

The whistle boomed across the desert, probably heard for dozens of miles. Her smile growing even wider, she pulled at the cord again, drowning herself in the sound.

She had *always* wanted to do that.



„No, no, and no! Just who do they think they are?“

Standing at the corner of the equenaut canteen, still halfway into reaching for a cut of delicious chocolate cake, Cherry stared at the frenzied mare with fear, trying very hard not to be seen. Meanwhile, the pink pegasus was utterly enraged, smashing chairs and knocking over tables.

„Scud!“ Ala suddenly rocketed into the room, obviously summoned by the sound, „Just what the hay's going on here?“

„Oh, nothing!“ she paused midway through destroying a plate, scoffing as she threw her head back, „What did you *think* I'd be doing?“

„What?“ Ala stared back, rapidly alternating between the enraged pegasus and the shattered tableware, „Are you drunk?“

„Drunk?“ Scud laughed, turning her head to glare at the chestnut mare, „Sure. Go on. Just keep up with your pointless accusations. See if I'm surprised anymore.“

„Scud, this isn't funny!“ Ala insisted, „Now, stop trashing everything before Redstone reprimands us all!“

„Redstone? That chalky ol' stallion?“ the pink pony snorted in response, „I bet he's already fossilized in his office by now!“

Cherry took advantage of the rising volume by slowly starting to back away from the argument. Tempers had been rather short-cut amongst the Seven after the accident, but this mess was just Scud being herself, and Cherry absolutely refused to get caught up in it. Of course, right as she was in the doorway, she knocked over a particularly large metal pot. And just as there was a brief break in the argument, too. Both sets of eyes turned to her:

„You!“ Scud turned her rage around, „I should have known it'd be you! Listenin' for more dirty secrets now, are we?“

Cherry shook her head briefly, utterly lost as to what the stupid mare was on about. Ala was right; she must have had one too much to drink.

„I don't-“

„Oh, really?“ Scud approached her, „Then, how do you explain *this*?“

She stuffed one of her glossy tabloids right into her face; so close, in fact, it took Cherry a few seconds to fully focus on the cover picture.

It was Scud, of course: Wearing long, silky socks over her hind legs as she stared at the camera with a look of surprise on her face, lying on a large feather bed with both wings spread, and posing herself suggestively. The long-heeled, cast-iron horseshoes just underscored the point. And, topping even that, she was twirling an equenaut's helmet on her hoof. Cherry scoffed to herself. Did that mare really have no self-respect?

„Look, they asked me too, you know,“ she began haughtily, „Even promised really good money. If you didn't want pictures like that getting out, then you shouldn't have-“

„What-“ Scud cut her off, glancing between the magazine and Cherry in confusion before realizing what she was on about, „Not that, you doof! That's old stuff! Just read the stupid headline!“

Cherry glanced at the page again, forcing herself to stop wondering just how Scud had managed to make her wings look like that – *Must be airbrush. Or extensions. There's just no way those are natural* – then read over the inane, bold font:

„TROUBLE ON CLOUD 7?

Scud Firewish admits flaming-hot affair with lowly janitor!

Husband says he had 'no idea'“

She re-read it once again, just to make sure her brain hadn't restarted itself halfway through. And, after that, once more, still equally lost. Finally giving up, she glanced at the fuming pegasus:

„What's all this got to do with me?“

„What's it- What-“ the mare began screaming, then stopped as her face reddened with pure, unbridled rage. Taking long, deep breaths, she stared at Cherry resentfully. After her blood pressure had fallen again, she finally resumed:

„Wow. Just wow,“ she got out through her gritted teeth, still exhaling through her nose, „I know you were cold, Skies, but never this much. Not only do you sneak into my room and steal my diary, now you just stand there without batting an eyelash!“

Cherry blinked. Just what the *hay* was going on here?

„Wait. Are you telling me-“

Screaming in a sudden fit of rage, she cut Cherry off, first smashing the magazine into her face, then slamming her down onto the floor. Flying up into the air, she announced:

„I keep working day and night here, busting my flank just for the mere *chance* of sometime eventually getting into space, and what do I get? You ponies, showing all my secrets to the press! You're trying to sabotage me, aren't you? Get me out of the picture, to make it easier for yourselves?“

„Scud, just calm down and-“

„You know what? I think, I think that I've just about *had it* with this stupid joke of an organization! How many months, how much cheap publicity, and not a single success? And to think I turned down the Wonderbolts for this. I am *out* of here!“

Flying out through the doorway, she stopped in the corridor and turned around to yell some more, „And don't you think I don't have dirt on all of you! Just you wait!“

Nursing her bruised cheek, Cherry slowly got up and exchanged disdainful glances with Ala. The other mare silently mouthed a few obscenities, then shot off into the air, probably to chase after Scud and appeal her to reconsider.

Cherry bothered with no such effort. Turning around to the door, she calmly left the room, then

marched down the corridor to her quarters. On her way, she passed a few of the other equenauts, all standing in the doors of their own rooms. Judging by the puzzled, thoughtful looks on their faces, they must have heard Scud's entire speech too. Not saying a word, she kept walking, eventually reaching a side exit. Once outside the sterile bunker, she immediately took to the skies, soaring high above the ground and letting the soothing cool breeze rush past her, washing away the silent rage.

It was nice and peaceful up here. As she let her mind relax and cool itself down from the stupid argument, Cherry wondered about many things. Equestria's idiotic tabloids. The accident. What would become of her future. Perhaps she could just settle down again and take over the business, as her father had always wanted?

She snorted. *Yeah, right.*

The trouble was, there really weren't that many other options available to her. Aside from flying, spending vast amounts of money, and misprogramming complex computeronics, she had little applicable skills in anything else. Even weather control – the lowliest of occupations, something her pride would never let herself lower down to anyway – was a lost art to her. Born with a silver spoon in her mouth to the president of a grand manufacturing concern, it was never expected she'd ever do such menial labour. A bit of it came instinctively, sure, and she could probably learn the rest, but still... *weather control?* Come on!

Opening her eyes again, she stared at the sand dunes flashing past in the depths below. The Cosmodrome was somewhere far behind her now, and so were the rail tracks. There wasn't even a cloud in the sky.

Weather control's the stupidest thing a pegasus can do, she repeated to herself.

Only simpletons would ever find it fun.

It wasn't very convincing.

Buck.

Well, this was as good a time as any. Slowing down to a hover, Cherry looked around once more to check absolutely no pony was watching.

Confident she wouldn't fail publicly, she concentrated on a small patch of sky in front of her. Just as an experiment.

As soon as she had started, she was immediately stumped.

Wait... how do you do this thing, anyway?

Closing her eyes again, she pressed her forehooves against her head and began intently thinking of clouds. Water, rain, snow, anything to do with weather.

She lifted one of her eyelids. Not a notch. Groaning, she began desperately rifling through her

memory for anything related. *Come on!* When she was a little filly, she could do this! She still remembered playing rain-tag with the other foals!

No such luck, however. The more she tried to bring back that moment, the more it seemed to slip from her grasp. She kept at it for a few more minutes, attempting anything she could possibly think of; kicking the air, screaming at it, waving her hooves around.

„Tough day, huh?“ Rainbow's voice suddenly sounded from behind her, and Cherry almost fell out of the air in embarrassment.

Regaining her stability, she uncertainly turned around to the new arrival. The blue mare was grinning to herself, but hopefully just because of Cherry's near-fall. And not that other thing she definitely wasn't just trying to do and just failed miserably at. No.

„Wanna join me for a flight?“ Rainbow continued, still grinning, „Trust me, it helps more than just kicking clouds.“

Cherry quickly nodded, if only to bury her embarrassment. The two pegasi set out over the empty desert, rocketing through the sky, letting the cold breeze swish past them. Letting Dash pick the route, Cherry switched herself to autopilot, letting her mind clear out again.

For a while, each remained lost in their own thoughts. Eventually, however, Cherry couldn't help but speak up:

„You heard Scud's little speech, right?“

Rainbow laughed, „I'd be deaf if I hadn't.“

Cherry let her continue, but the blue mare didn't. With annoyance, she pushed on:

„That's like it, then? No opinion?“

„Nope!“

„But, like, you must wonder what's going to become of us.“

„Why?“

„Come on, you must think *something* about it!“

„Not a thing!“ the blue pegasus grinned, then accelerated and began banking into a steep roll. Taking the manoeuvre as a challenge, Cherry responded with an aerobatical feat of her own, tracing out a high-speed double-eight figure.

A few seconds later, the two mares joined up again. Cherry, catching her breath from the sudden exercise, noticed Dash was still grinning. She prodded her further:

„So, you just don't care about whatever might happen?“

„Why would I?“ Rainbow grinned, then spread her wings again, „Now, I'll bet anything you can't match *this!*“

And she rocketed off into the distance again, leaving Cherry far behind. Slowing down to a hover, she watched as the blue pegasus first climbed up into the sky, then folded her wings and began falling like a rock. She plummeted and plummeted, all the way to the point where Cherry thought recovery would be impossible, then kept plummeting. Involuntarily flinching, she watched Dash almost hit the ground, then do what could only be described as bouncing off the air and completely reversing her fall in milliseconds. The manoeuvre kicked up a tall shockwave of sand that kept going for several seconds before merging back into the dunes.

As soon as it had began, the show was over, and the excited Dash was hovering in front of Cherry again:

„Huh? How 'bout that?“

Cherry tried to fight it, but her enthusiasm seemed infectious.

„Well?“ her friend grinned.

Though unwanted, the edge of a smile nevertheless crept onto her lips.

„There you go!“ Rainbow raised her hooves in approval, „Whatever happened to 'Just don't mind if you don't make it'?“

Remembering their conversation the night before the launch, Cherry barely held back an irritated snort. Ponies bringing up her own words against her was incredibly annoying.

Not that it makes them less true, though, she had to admit.

A part of her mind still protested. What if they got cancelled? Where will she get a job? What if the tabloids keep mocking her for the rest of her life? Spreading fictitious rumours?

Well, buck 'em.

So what if they won't quite make it? They still got a chance to participate in something truly amazing. For a few months there, they had carried the torch of history. Cherry wished she could come up with a better and more poetic way of phrasing the idea, then it struck her: A greater wheel. Something far bigger than any of their individual lives. One way or another, their work here will have counted. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually.

And not many ponies could say that.

„Pretty cool, pretty cool,“ Cherry declared, nodding to Rainbow, „Just try *this one*, though!“

She shot off into the sky, fully determined to beat that infernal pegasus at her own game. At least this once.



Lying in the shade of the massive locomotive, Zvezda looked with much interest at the 'town' around; that is, if the tiny settlement could even be called such. It was little more than a motley assortment of dusty wooden shacks and houses, one rickety clocktower, and not a whole lot more. Even the 'train station' – something which ought to be the pride of any town – was merely a single wooden cabin, lying on the side of the tracks, along with a couple of coal bunkers and water towers.

The townsfolk seemed to resemble their city, clad in similarly downtrodden headscarves and cowpony hats. Off in the distance, standing over at a table on his porch, a gentlecolt wearing a rather dusted, yet modern, suit, complete with top hat – most likely the richest pony in town – was watching the scene below with a bemused look on his face. A few dirty foals were also running about, playing hide-and-seek around and under the massive undercarriage of the dormant locomotive, dashing past the giant wheels and crawling under the thick hydraulic pipes.

It was this contrast that utterly fascinated Zvezda. On the one hoof, there was this absolutely amazing, eight-cylinder space-age super-engine that could reach hundred twenty miles per hour, chewed through coal like there was no tomorrow, and whose flowing lines radiated power even when utterly stationary.

On the other, it was parked in the middle of this completely unremarkable frontier town, which most likely didn't even have electricity, and whose combined income of all its inhabitants couldn't possibly exceed one month's wages for a single engineer back at the Cape. What little infrastructure the town *did* appear to have – namely, the half-buried coal bunkers, and the array of four distinct water towers, two of which were currently servicing Ray's locomotive – seemed similarly out of place, and Zvezda guessed that they had been installed purely for the countless armies of supply trains that regularly serviced the Cosmodrome.

She decided to study the locals with a bit more detail. Even though she couldn't read emotions anywhere near as well as machines, the way they looked at the massive engine (and her) seemed obvious enough; a mixture of resentment and disapproval. *What else would they think, after all? We're just spoiled brats to them.*

Despite their apparent hostility, Zvezda was at peace. Whatever that strange feeling she had previously felt during the train ride – and ever since leaving the Cosmodrome, come to think of it – had been, was even stronger here. It seemed to be radiating from the desert itself; digging her hoof through the sand, she wondered what strange processes – unconscious and otherwise – might have been at play in her mind here.

She adored the Cosmodrome; it was a lovely place, completely isolated from the rest of Equestria, and the tedious concerns of daily life. The food was free, the housing likewise, there

were a lot of interesting ponies around, and the work was the most challenging she'd ever see. Time didn't seem to really exist there, either; were it not for the slowly growing rockets and launch pads, she would have sworn no longer than a week had passed since her initial arrival.

Why, then, did she seem to get happier the further away she withdrew?

„We done yet, partner?“ yelled an orange earth pony from the side of the water pump, using the wide brim of his hat to shield his eyes from the desert sun. Behind him, five of the locals were steadfastly walking around in a circle, powering the great pumping machinery with their movements, „This water isn't gonna last forever!“

„Halfway there!“ came the reply from the locomotive.

Zvezda had to fight back laughter as she saw the orange pony's hat nearly jump straight off his head:

„Halfway?“ he yelled, apparently in shock, „Whaddaya mean, halfway?“

Peeking out of the side window, Ray looked down at the stallion:

„I mean that we need twice as much water to actually reach the next stop. And even that's running it a bit on the low side. Understand?“

„Oh, I understand a'right!“ the orange pony yelled back, „Y'all are just trying to drain us o' every last drop this town has!“

„No, I don't think you understand,“ Ray chuckled, looking over his great engine again, „This locomotive is the single, most advanced piece of earthbound machinery in all of Equestria's history. It can produce up to eight hundred ponypowers of pure, sustained motive power. It can cross the entire Great Eastern in four days flat. And to do all that, it needs water, plenty of it. Now please, we're on company time here.“

The orange pony – probably the town's sheriff, Zvezda realized, noticing the six-sided star on his hat – replied with a stern wave to his crews, who immediately stopped pumping.

„Lookie here, mister,“ he began, suddenly very serious as he approached the locomotive, „I don't care how much yer fancy trains need. My one, singular concern is-“

„Now hang on there, just a minute!“ Ray interrupted, reaching out of the window to bang on the company logo painted on the cab's side, „We're a royally-chartered company, operating by the authority of the Princess of the Sun herself! As her subjects, you cannot simply-“

„In case you haven't noticed, we're in the middle of tha' desert 'round here!“ the sheriff yelled back, „You can't just run giant massive rocket-trains through every three days and expect us to service every last one without dyin' of thirst!“

„Well, that's your job, isn't it?“ Ray was equally furious as the sheriff now, „It's *your*

responsibility to ensure the town has enough wells! Meanwhile, by direct authority of the Canterlot Act hundred twenty seven, transport of strategic supplies is to be guaranteed-“

„Well, we were here first! And we're not gonna just let you steal all our water!“ the sheriff stood his ground, glancing all around, „Aren't we, folks?“

Suddenly, Zvezda became very, very aware of the other inhabitants of the town. Up to this point, they had just been standing still, idly listening to the ongoing argument. Now, they were all slowly beginning to approach, forming a large semicircle around the massive locomotive. Considering her vulnerable position – still lying in the shade, right next to the giant wheels – she suddenly wished she had just stayed inside the cab, exactly as Ray had originally suggested upon their initial arrival.

„Now, now,“ she rapidly spoke up, getting up and glancing around nervously, „Let's not do anything too hasty here, shall we?“

„Hasty?“ the sheriff suddenly turned to her, fire in his eyes, „You're calling us hasty? And just how long do'ya think this all here has been goin' on for?“

Well, buck. *They're probably in the right here*, Zvezda realized, looking around for a means of escape, *Now, how the hay I'm gonna get out?*

„Listen, now,“ she uncertainly began, watching as the semicircle of ponies rapidly closed around her, „I understand why you're angry. I really do. But do you really think that you'll improve your situation if you try resisting orders from Canterlot? Just how do you *think* the regional office's gonna react?“

„I might not be that good at them all fancy-schmancy politics, miss, but I do know one thing!“ the sheriff was quick to respond, „Ponies without water don't go walkin' about for long!“

„But, come on, do you really think this will fix anything? I mean, you refuse water to us now, today, sure, but then what? This is a top-of-the-line prototype locomotive; don't you think *somepony* will notice it's gone missing?“

„Well, let them!“ a random pony from the crowd blustered, „What can they's do to us?“

„I'll let you know, *Brandenburger Stahl* is one of the biggest industrial firms in all of Equestria!“ Ray bellowed, peering out from his cab, „We'll take your entire town to court, and you'll wish you-“

„Them's mighty fine words coming from up there in your giant train, mister!“ the sheriff turned back to Ray, „At least your lady friend here has the courage to say 'em to my face!“

This appeared to enrage the engineer. Immediately opening the cab's door, he jumped down to the ground and galloped straight up to the sheriff:

„Now, as I was saying,“ he began, pushing his own head against the sheriff's, „This train is under royal charter. Not supplying us consists of a breach of conduct, for which our lawyers will haul your entire, damn dusty town to the Royal Court itself!“

„And whoddaya think Celestia's gonna trust?“ the sheriff boomed back, „A couple rich folks in them shiney trains, or a whole town of thirsty ponies?“

No longer in the middle of the argument, Zvezda had at least a little time to think; and the worst thing was, the more she did so, the more she couldn't help but agree with the townsfolk. They appeared to be genuinely in the right here, actively suffering, yet no pony was willing to listen to them. Taking a prototype locomotive and its crew hostage might have been their only chance.

Still, the conflict here seemed to be escalating exponentially, and for all the legitimate concerns of other ponies, she still preferred keeping her own skin more. Stepping back into the fray, she began:

„Everypony, please! I agree with your complaints! But tell me, what can *we* actually do about it? You can stop our train, but then more are going to come. What will you do with them?“

„Miss, this town's survived a whole invasion of mighty wild buffalo before,“ the sheriff turned back to her, „We ain't afraid of a few ruffled top hats!“

„Oh, you really think so?“ Ray still remained furious, „Well, let me tell you, by the time our company's finished with your little dinky town, you'll be wishing-“

„Ray!“ Zvezda cut the stallion off mid-sentence. He immediately gathered breath and was about to shout her down, but then stopped, as if reconsidering at the last moment. Though still chafed, he was willing to listen. For now.

„OK, everypony just calm down for a second,“ she quickly began, turning to address the crowd, „You hear him? That engineer pony loyal to his company? He's not one of us.“

She almost flinched as she said these words, but managed to suppress the gesture; Ray, on the other hoof, got out an audible gasp.

„Huh?“ the sheriff meanwhile exclaimed, „Then what is he? A zebra?“

This drew a laugh from the assembled crowds. Kicking herself for not picking her words more carefully, Zvezda tried again:

„I mean the Cosmodrome. He's not from the Cosmodrome,“ she corrected herself, „But I am.“

„And just what darn difference does that make?“

„Sorry,“ Zvezda smiled nervously, desperately scrambling to re-arrange the words in her head. Seeing all these eyes peering at her was making her thoughts fast and agitated, quite unlike her usual self. Panicked, even. The gradually lengthening silence, and the incredibly scratchy feeling in

her throat – she'd ask for some water, but that would be highly inappropriate here – didn't exactly help either.

„What I mean is,“ she eventually got out, „Your situation here, it's not like we're ignoring you on purpose. Look, I'm on the chief design council, working on capsule design, and I never even *heard* of this. And I can guarantee, neither has the Director. But now I have, and I'm willing to listen. Can't we just work something out?“

It was a gamble. And a lie. A pretty big one, too. In fact, she regretted it as soon as she had said it. *I'm obviously not a designer. I don't even look like one! My mane looks way too terrible. You just ruined it for yourself, Zvez.*

As these thoughts ran through her head, however, the sheriff deliberated in silence. After a while, he gestured over to the engine, still lying dormant on the tracks:

„What we do 'bout that thing, then?“

„Nopony touches it!“ Ray flared up from the side. The sheriff froze for a second, but then shook his head:

„Not y'all, and not us,“ he nodded, „Deal.“

„Fine! Great. Now all I need is some pen and paper,“ Zvezda smiled cautiously, not quite believing the entire gambit had worked. Maybe she didn't look that bad after all? „Celestia will hear of this herself, you have my word.“

The sheriff slowly nodded, and the tension dropped like a rock. Breathing out in relief, Zvezda smiled as she watched the ponies slowly retreat. Of course, that smile immediately disappeared as she glanced at Ray, standing at the side of his locomotive and silently brooding.

She felt a pang of regret for herself too. He had been so friendly all this time; why did she have to go and treat him in this way? And all just for a stupid locomotive? *There must have been another way, you silly filly. Now look what you've done. Lies upon lies.*



Slowly, Wilhelmina continued marching through the cold, deserted corridors of Stable II. Ever since the accident, not one pony had ventured here; too ashamed, probably, and she could see why. At each step, framed paintings hanging from the walls taunted her. They seemed to stretch out for infinity, a gallery of empty wishes and broken dreams.

Stopping in her stride, she studied one; at its centre stood a single pony, clad in a massive bronze suit and standing on the summit of some alien peak. With the faint blue marble of their home

planet reassuringly reflecting in her visor, she sifted through the soft soil of the lunar regolith. Behind her loomed the spider-like landing assembly of her space cruiser, a giant array of actuators and piping.

Will smiled as she studied the delicately-painted machinery of the rocketship and the space suit, then contrasted it with the comparatively simple lines that defined the face of the moon-walking pony. Sunny might have been a great artist, but she did sometimes get too carried away by the technical side of things.

On either side, more of such pictures hung; Will walked quietly past the rows of rocket engine sketches, photographs of their early practicals, and fiery paintings of re-entering space capsules, eventually arriving at a small diorama set into the wall.

It was one of their earlier attempts, and still a bit crude, yet – especially considering all five of them were engineers, with not a shred of actual artistic education – still quite good. It was a cutaway of a massive moon laboratory, half-buried into the lunar rock. Tiny plastic ponies, all wearing futuristic silvery fabrics, scurried through its many corridors, managing experiments or repairing equipment. Several were having moon-pies in the kitchen. A ring of giant mercury boilers at the top of the facility converted the sun's rays into usable energy, providing them with power, for heat and light; meanwhile, every room was awash with greenery, clay pots hanging off the ceiling and occupying every otherwise-wasted space, together providing enough oxygen for all twelve of the brave pioneers.

Leaning closer in, she examined one of them; a chocolate-coloured earth stallion with a confident smile on his face as he stepped over the threshold of the command deck. Nopony had ever picked up on it, but the little plastic figurine was suspiciously similar to this one stallion that used attend the campus gym every Thursday... not that Wilhelmina had ever even asked his name, of course. Idly, she wondered what had become of him. What did he study, anyway?

Off to the facility's side, a giant metallic bird loomed, ready to take its crew back at a moment's notice, should things ever go wrong. Not that they would, of course; but it always paid to be well-prepared. The Equestrian Space Agency would tolerate no safety hazards.

Sighing deeply, she looked around the long corridor again. All in all, about twenty years of hopeful dreams were stashed here. Their entire adult lives, from the early days of their secret meetings, until today. Or three days ago, to be precise.

So close. And yet so far.

The sight of Redstone standing at the far end of the corridor tore her from her thoughts.

„Will?“ he quietly spoke up, „Sorry to interrupt, but... it is time.“

Nodding, she trotted up to him, then emerged through the Stable's blastdoor. The rest of the Chief Designers were already gathered there, bearing saddlebags loaded down with technical diagrams and sheets of calculations.

The carriage was there too, forebodingly standing empty in the moonlit desert. A group of four royal guards towered besides it, ready to haul the designers back to Canterlot and before the investigative committee, for their final showdown. This was it.

She turned to the Professor:

„Have you finished the analysis, then?“

Redstone looked to the ground, smiling sadly, „Premature ignition of third engine, coupled with structural failure of bind-points. You were right, after all; we shouldn't have gone with steel.“

Lyuka was next in line. „What about that special assignment I gave you? Is it-“

The pegasus saluted, a wide grin on her face: „Six sealed envelopes, all slid under the equenauts' doorsteps. They'll find them in the morning.“

„Final bids for pressure chamber production also dispatched to our prime contractors, direct dragon-fire,“ Sunny didn't even await being prompted by Will.

And at last, but not least, there was Sequine, confirming her task with a simple nod. Wilhelmina smiled. Like the others, she had also sent many letters of her own today, many of which would also be arriving soon.

Determined, she took the lead of the group, walking up to the waiting carriage and jumping aboard. The future of the Space Programme looked grim; the lawsuits were steadily beginning to stream in, every tabloid in the land was having a field day, and their opposition in the Assembly was undoubtedly mounting even now.

But, if her father's political career had taught her anything, it was to make backup strategies, plans for all contingencies, and never show all of her cards. Ever since the initial establishment of the Cosmodrome, key alliances were continuously being forged, vital points seized, networks of communication established. Always in the background, never quite obvious. But still there.

And this night, the wheels had finally been set in motion. All over Equestria, Wilhelmina's immense defensive machine would slowly begin to awaken, ready to fight back at whatever their opposition would have in store.

„Madam director! Wait up!“

With a quick gesture, Will ordered the royal guards to wait a few seconds longer, then looked over the side of the carriage; one of Redstone's aides was galloping out of Stable I, carrying a letter in his mouth.

„Urgent flare from the *Brandenburger* head office,“ he reported, tossing the message over, „Seems like there's a situation developing.“

Wilhelmina looked the letter over – it was still warm, having just arrived over dragon-fire – then sighed. A 'situation'. Judging by the lack of further details, it must have been more bad news; the last thing they needed.

„Thank you, worker,“ she nevertheless smiled back, „I'll read it on the way.“

And just like that, they were off. The quartet of royal guards sped up, and in a few seconds the carriage was afloat and turning towards Canterlot. She glanced at the bunkers of the Cosmodrome disappear into the distance – quite possibly for the one last time – then turned to face the sky.

It would be a tough fight ahead; their enemies were many, and they were prominent, with far more power than her allies could ever hope to manage. But her entire life had been leading up to this moment.

And she wasn't just going to waste it.