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“Attention all passengers on Oceanus Airlines Flight 108. All pre-flight checks are complete, and in a few moments you will be escorted out onto the launching deck to begin the boarding process. Please make sure you have all your carry-on items with you, and your ticket ready to present to the agent at the gate. Thank you for your patience, and we hope you enjoy your flight. Bon voyage!”

I jerk awake as the announcement echoes through the terminal, the bubbly trill of the mare giving it still buzzing in my ears even after she stops talking, and within seconds my head is throbbing from the noise. Whoever first thought voice amplification spells were a good idea needs to have their head examined, and whoever feels the urge to use them so cheerfully after two hours of layover, doubly so. Especially when the best explanation we’ve been given for said layover is that the flight technicians can’t figure out which part of the zep the hydrogen is supposed to go into. And when my restless dream about building my own airship to take me to Haywaii alone was about to end happily ever after before Susie Smiles-A-Lot cranked the volume up and shattered it into a thousand beautiful pieces.

The rest of the passengers are already well on their way up to the gate by the time I force myself back up into a sitting position on the bench I conked out on, my eyes bleary and my back shrieking in complaint. For a moment, I almost get up and join them, but I blow off the idea almost as soon as it appears. It isn’t like it really matters who gets out the door first. We’ve all got at least another half-hour before we actually get on the zeppelin, because it’s going to take us all at least another half-hour to finish running the gauntlet of reporters, officials, and gawking pedestrians jockeying for position out on the launch pad. Because Celestia forbid that anypony miss the chance to watch eighty-three millionaires and one 22-year-old grease monkey from Rockton board the most momentous, incomparable, unequivocally extraordinary flight in the history of Equestria. Celestia forbid that Garnet just bring me out to Haywaii on a regular old sailing ship like the common, working earth pony he used to be. Celestia forbid that he hold his wedding back home with his family instead of dragging me out into the middle of Eternity’s Crossing to stand in for the whole clan.

I push a few stray mane hairs back behind my ear and straighten my glasses, and let out something between a groan and a sigh. All things considered, I don’t have any right to be complaining. I can’t even begin to imagine how much money went into getting me a spot on this flight, let alone into the five-star hotel I’ll be staying at once I hop back off it in about eight hours. “Nothing but the best for my family,” Garnet always says in situations like this, and it’s hard to imagine a different definition for “best” than

what I have in store for me over the next few days. Such are the perks of sharing blood with the CEO and public persona of Brightshine Industries, I suppose. And such are the pleasures of the name “Brightshine Family Mining Company” being only a distant memory in a long-abandoned past.

“This is the final boarding call for Oceanus Airlines Flight 108, direct to Haywaii. All passengers on Oceanus Airlines Flight 108, your flight will be departing from Gate 1 in approximately thirty minutes.”

I blink hard one last time, and grab my saddlebag in my teeth before sliding off the bench. “Thirty minutes, she says,” I mutter as I swing my bag over my back and join the crowd at the gate. “Approximately.”

The rest of the terminal around me is virtually empty, but the mass of ponies in front of me is thick and impenetrable, and already starting to bottleneck where two velvet red ropes form a narrow path up to the gate itself. I stop behind a powder-blue unicorn chattering away to her colt friend about how excited she is for the flight, and in seconds my ankles have tightened up and a tiny bonfire is burning in my chest. My dad always hated crowds, said that the only difference between a rockslide and an angry mob was that the rocks knew to stop at the bottom of the hill, and that’s one of the many things I inherited from him. Staring at the elaborately styled mane of the mare ahead of me doesn’t help, since all that does is remind me of how loose and ratty my own braid is, and staring at the floor isn’t much better, since that same mare’s gleaming white pumps just start the whole process over again. Then again, I’ll have to get used to that kind of thing sooner or later, won’t I? Garnet’s lovely young fiancée—you know, the one who’s about eight minutes older than me—will of course be expecting everypony sharing an island with her to be dressed in their most splendid finery for her upcoming nuptials, and will be simply gobsmacked if anypony were to attend...nay, to *arrive* in anything cheaper than a private yacht. Stars, she’ll probably even talk like that too. The last mare from Trottingham that Garnet tied the knot with sure did. Come to think of it, so did the last runway model.

It takes another ten minutes to get up to the gate, and by then I feel like I’ve had a woodpecker drilling into my skull for every single one of them. The mare in front of me has a voice like a squirrel—high, breathy, and prone to slip into a tittering half-giggle, half-whinny that seems specifically designed to make your ears bleed—and apparently her most favorite thing in the whole wide world is sharing that voice with everypony within earshot. Even after her companion gets their newly stamped tickets back from the pony who checked them and starts leading her down the walkway onto the launch pad, she still won’t shut up. Probably won’t be long before I’m not the only one wishing they’d packed some duct tape for the flight. *Celestia help him*, I think to myself as they disappear around the corner and I step up to the check-in desk. *And Celestia help me if I end up sitting behind her.*

“Ticket, pl-” the gate agent starts to say. Before she can finish, though, a loud cough from somewhere behind me cuts her off in mid-spiel, and I turn around just in time to watch myself get pushed gently to the side without so much as a “You’re in my way, numnutz.”

“Pardon us,” says a bubblegum-pink earth filly in a voice sweet as syrup, her dress gleaming with inlaid gems and her inflection making it sound like she’s scoffing with every syllable. “Very Important Ponies coming through.”

“Uh...Miss, I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a moment,” the gate agent stutters back. That makes two of us who can hardly believe what had just happened. “There’s a line-”

“I know there’s a line, *Miss*,” the filly snaps back with a dramatic roll of her sky-blue eyes. “That’s why we’re at the *front* of it.”

“Ma’am, these other ponies were here first...”

“Let me handle this, Diamond,” another voice cuts in suddenly, this one having half the bark and ten times the bite. After Diamond nods and steps aside with a smirk, an iron-gray earth filly with a braided silver mane, dainty blue glasses, and an intricately decorated spoon stamped on her flank floats up to the desk. “Pardon me if I’m mistaken,” she says, in a tone that makes it very clear who she thinks is in the wrong here, “but Oceanus Airlines policy states that first-class passengers are always allowed to board before the other sections. Has that policy changed?”

“Well, no, but...”

“Then what exactly is the problem?”

“But this flight is a special one,” the gate agent says. “All seats are considered to be in first-class.”

“What the hay is that supposed to mean?” asks the pink one impatiently.

“It means the line starts back there,” I can’t help but intone before the gate agent can get a word in edgewise.

In an instant, Diamond is on me like grease on a straight axle. “Was I talking to you?” she snarls, her furious eyes framed by a carefully fluffed mane with the color and consistency of grape-flavored toothpaste. There’s some part of the scenario that’s almost funny: this filly can’t be been more than seventeen or eighteen, and probably hasn’t seen a hard day’s work in her whole life. I could buck her snobby behind halfway to the moon and back if I had a mind to, and yet she’s the one standing there with that stupid fluffy mane trying to intimidate me.

And it’s working. I raise my eyebrows and do my best to send back a harrowing

glare of my own, but it's only a couple seconds before I'm the first to blink. I can't keep my gaze from turning towards the ground after that.

"That's what I thought," Diamond sneers, strutting back over to her friend without a second glance in my direction. She's a princess, all right, and the tiara stamped on her flank is the last thing anypony would need to confirm it. Stars above, she's even wearing a tiara right now that matches her cutie mark to a T. A battle of wills with her would be like bringing a monkey wrench to a sword fight. I set my jaw and tilt my chin up casually towards the ceiling. She wants to board first? Fine, then. She can board first all she wants, for all I care. She can have the whole dang flight to herself, for all I care. She just needs to hurry up and take the opportunity, before I lose my patience and show her exactly how much time we take to deal with hubris back home in Rockton.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but you're just going to have to wait," the gate agent continues, picking up where I left off with only an ounce of my passion.

The gray filly nods without looking at her, then clicks her tongue and gives the agent a stare that would probably give even her smugly grinning friend a run for her money. "Who's your supervisor?" she asks dismissively.

"I...beg your pardon?"

"Where is the pony who tells you what to do?"

That seems to be the final straw for the gate agent. "I report to the Lead Transportation Officer," she informs her with narrowed eyes, "who reports to the Director of Operations for the Canterlot Airport, who reports to the Chief Executive Officer for Oceanus Airlines."

"Who reports to the owner and primary stockholder of Oceanus Enterprises," the filly adds as she pulls out some kind of ID card with the airline's logo on the back. "Who just so happens to be my father."

The agent's jaw drops in the same instant her eyebrows shoot up, and I can see her eyes twitching back and forth as she reads whatever was written on the card. I almost speak up again, but my jaw is clenched too tightly to let any words slip out. "So if you don't mind, we'll be on our way now," the gray filly finishes. The gate agent goes beet-red and mutters something to herself, then sighs and gives a conciliatory shrug. The look in her eyes probably bears more than a passing resemblance to the one in mine.

"Pleasure chatting with you," Diamond says airily before glancing over at me one last time. After I don't give her anything but a filthy look and the gift of silence, she shakes her head and laughs. "Nice glasses," she whispers loud enough for everypony within twenty feet to hear it, and then she juts her chin out again and practically prances

down the hallway leading out to the launch pad.

“I-I’m very sorry, Ma’am,” the gate agent stammers, still red as a beet and pretty well tongue-tied. “I don’t really have the authority-”

“It’s okay,” I say, turning away from the hallway before the itchy feeling in my hooves makes me do something I’ll regret. “I know the feeling.”

That gets a friendly smile out of the agent, if a brief one. “Is this your first time flying with us, Miss...” She pauses and looks down at the name printed on the ticket I just gave her. “Ruby?”

“Fraid so,” I reply. “That your first time dealing with those two?”

“Fraid so,” she mutters through a heavy sigh. “Enjoy your flight.”

I give her a tight-lipped nod and don’t waste time making sure she sees it. The crush of ponies I spent a quarter-hour wading through—and my encounter with two of them in particular—has already put me in a bad mood, and the gauntlet I’m about to run isn’t likely to improve it. Best to just get through this as quickly as possible, keep the teeth-grinding to a minimum, and board the zep before anypony remembers I’m supposed to be on it. Nothing too complicated, nothing that’ll draw too much attention. Just walk in a straight line, and don’t stop for anything.

The noise hits my ears long before I reach the end of the hallway, but the left turn about fifty feet in blocks me from seeing its source. I know perfectly well what it’s coming from, though, and by the time the first rays of afternoon sunlight begin to splay out across my hooves at the bottom of the ramp, I can feel it vibrating in every bone in my body. For a few moments, a familiar chill sets the hair on my neck standing on end, but I shut my eyes and will it away before it spreads beyond my maneline. Two minutes. All I need is two minutes. All I need to do is walk straight, not stop, and stay calm.

I step off the ramp and onto the launch pad, and in the helpless second when my unadjusted eyes are blinded by the sun, the chaos outside the terminal hits me like an anvil. A carpet spun of even redder velvet than the ropes in the terminal stretches all the way down to where the zeppelin is being prepped for flight, and on either side of the narrow path it forms is a veritable parted sea of shouting journalists and clicking cameras and, somewhere off in the distance, a full brass band playing the national anthem. A minute ago, I got cagey around less than a hundred snobby socialites who had butlers to hurt flies for them, and now it looks like the whole population of Canterlot wants to see them leave. Wants to see *me* leave.

They’re not looking for you, I tell myself. They’re not even looking at you. They’re just reporters. They want a few pictures of famous ponies and a cover story for tomorrow’s paper, and that’s it. Walk straight, don’t stop, and for the love of Celestia,

stay calm.

The sunlight streams across my face, and the change in temperature from the air-conditioned airport sends a shiver crawling down my back. I don't move.

You can do this, Ruby, a deep male voice murmurs inside my head. My dad always hated crowds, but he also sucked it up and dealt with them without a word of complaint, and he'd have sucked it up and dealt with this one if he were in my hooves today. He could do this. I can do this. I'm the daughter of Almandite Brightshine, and Brightshines don't bow to anypony or anything but their own free will.

I take one step forward, then two more. The squirrel-voiced mare is ten feet up the path, squealing with delight at all the festivities around her and ballooning with pride every time a hoof reaches out to touch her. Twenty feet beyond that, Diamond and her friend are preening for the cameras, the former's tiara pulsing and shimmering with every flash. All the way at the end of the walkway, I can just barely see the tuba player in the brass band, a lime-green earth pony whose cheeks puff out with every blast of his instrument. And to the left and right and all around me, shouted questions and bursts of conversation whip back and forth across the walkway and burrow their way into my skull, struggling to overpower the thoughts in my head.

"Are you concerned about running out of fuel?"

You can do this.

"Ooh, sweetheart, look at the band!"

Keep going.

"Any comment on the rumors that your flight will pass over the fabled lost city of Marelantis?"

Walk straight.

"Darling, isn't this grand?"

Don't stop.

"Are you afraid that something may go wrong?"

Stay calm.

"Are you afraid of heights?"

Stay calm...

"Is there anything you'd like to say to the millions of ponies cheering you on?"

Stay...

I chance a look up, and my heart nearly stops. The zeppelin is still hundreds of feet away and, now that I'm staring hopelessly up at it, almost seems to be shrinking. I blink, I shake my head, I suck in a breath so big I think my lungs are about to pop, but nothing changes: the zep just slips farther and farther away, and the blindingly noisy crowd just gets louder and louder. A pounding ache pops up behind my ears, then spreads out to the bridge of my nose before racing down to my hooves and all the way out to the base of my tail. I grit my teeth and take another step, and then the squirrel-voiced mare brays with laughter and my whole body ceases to function.

What are you doing?

"Just a moment of your time, sir..."

Walk straight!

"...n't this so exci..."

Don't stop!

"...nd one quick photo for the Daily, ple..."

"Stay calm..." I whisper with no air in my lungs. "Stay calm..."

"...at is she doing over there?"

I can't do this, Dad.

I want to swallow hard and get a grip on myself, except my tongue is stuck to my teeth and my throat won't open no matter how badly I need to scream. I want to sprint off the launch pad and gallop all the way back to Rockton, except Slate and Shale are too busy with work to spend a week in Haywahi and Mom wouldn't leave the house for all the bits in the world. I choke down a single shaky breath and tell myself that I am strong, that Dad was strong, that Dad never panicked and Dad never quit and Dad never let us know that anything was wrong, but the mares on the path are laughing and the newsponies in the wings are shouting and I can barely even stand under the weight of the perfume and the pressure and the sunlight and the *noise*.

Finally, I do the only thing I know how to do in situations like this: I close my eyes, let the voices around me fade from an uproar to a murmur to a hum, and in the blackness behind my eyelids summon an image of my basement. I see my workbench, see a small kerosene lamp and a clean white cloth and the baffling yet intimately familiar piles of gears, axles, and bolted joints on top of it, and I get to work. Unfettered by the boundaries of physics and reality, I draw three cogs together and set them all spinning in midair, and as more scraps of iron and aluminum float up to interlock with them in a

hypnotizing ballet of perpetual motion, the tension seeps out of my back and I breathe freely for the first time in days. Everypony has a happy place, and this one is mine: a cramped, dusty back room filled with machine bits, memories, and complete and total silence. In here, I am not the daughter of a miner, nor the sister of a CEO, nor the mindless plaything of ponies richer and more confident than me. In here, I have no name or face, just a table full of parts and an idea in my head of how to combine them into a whole greater than their sum. In here, friction and gravity are moot points, and everything runs smoothly and cleanly like it never could anywhere else. In here, there are no surprises.

I open my eyes before my impossible creation is finished, but by then it doesn't matter. The world could be ending two inches from my nose, but between my ears everything is calm, mechanical, and under control. In a few minutes, the serenity will wear off and I'll remember again how many ponies are looking at me right now, but in this fleeting moment, for once in the last of a whole string of miserable days, I am at peace. Inside my mind, I am happy. Inside my mind, I am home.

"Miss! Excuse me, Miss!"

It takes me a few seconds to realize this reporter is talking to me, and about double that time to actually turn my head and face him. "How does it feel to be a passenger on the first trans-oceanic dirigible flight in Equestrian history?" he said

I watch the brown-furred, blond-maned, bright-eyed pegasus colt placidly, waiting to see how long he'll keep thinking I'm considering his question. Just as the look on his face begins to sour and the determination starts to drain out of his gaze, I nod purposefully and answer him.

"Loud," I say. The pegasus blinks, a camera bulb flares somewhere behind him, and by the time the bulb cools down and its afterglow fades away, I'm already halfway to the ship he was so anxious to know how it felt to board.

Now that my vision is clearer and the pain in my head has died down to a dull ache, the zeppelin doesn't seem very far away at all. In fact, I can almost see the whole thing now. I push myself into a trot, pass right on by Diamond and completely resist the urge to check whether that sneer was pointed at me, dodge around a regal-looking unicorn with a flowing white mane and squeeze through a gap in his entourage, and then there she is: the airship *Elysium*, in all her glory. Maybe the rest of my trip might turn into the tropical vacation from Hades, but at least I get to ride out to it on this beauty of a vessel.

And she *is* a beauty: four hundred eighty-five feet from tip to tail, built on a skeleton of twelve state-of-the-art light-alloy rings interconnected by hundreds of hoof-welded girders, and covered by weather proofed, magically-treated canvas that tapers to a rounded stub at the bow of the ship and a sharp point flanked by four

matching horizontal and vertical fins at the stern. Even at a flight weight of over 235 tons, she'll be kept aloft with ease by just fourteen hydrogen-filled gas cells that take up the entire fore end of the craft, and powered by a trio of Maybuck VL-2 12-cylinder arcane combustion engines welded onto her stern, each of which is capable of maintaining a maximum thrust of 2650 wingpower for six hours straight, can produce an average flight speed of seventy miles per hour for twice that time, and has a max tested speed of eighty-two. She's fast, she's sleek, she's the biggest magically powered vehicle ever created by equinekind, and I'll bet a year and a half's pay that not a single one of the high society ponies behind me have any idea. On that note, they probably don't see anything wrong with the whole dang thing being painted a nauseating shade of salmon pink either.

But in this case, at least, their ignorance of their own luck doesn't have to affect me. About twenty-five minutes from now, the *Elysium* will set off on her maiden voyage, and one of the eighty-four seats inside its twenty-five hundred square foot gondola will be reserved just for me. The thought isn't enough to negate all the other unsavory bits of my impromptu journey to Haywain, but it's enough to make me forget about them for a few precious moments.

I was definitely one of the last ponies to exit the terminal, but as I step onto the *Elysium's* boarding ramp and flash my ticket again to the flight attendant standing at the top, I realize that I'm the first to actually get on the ship. Well, I can imagine much worse things than having a ship the size of a Manehattan skyscraper all to myself for a little while. In any case, I'll have a minute or two to chill out and mull over the events of the last few minutes, which isn't something I really want to do as much as something I know is more or less guaranteed to happen anyway. My brain's not the type that forgives and forgets easily, and its least favorite pony to go through that process with is the one whose noggin it resides inside. That's another trait I inherited from Dad. Unfortunately, I also got his lack of patience. I hardly even have a chance to settle back into my seat before I'm staring out the window and fighting off the urge to grind my forehooves into my eyes and cry. Isn't being emotionally imbalanced fun?

It isn't even like this sort of thing hasn't happened before. My whole life has been a string of one emotional breakdown after another: losing a balloon at the fair when I was three, scraping my knee at recess in third grade after somehow managing to strike out playing kickball, finding out Garnet was consolidating our family's business into a corporation and refusing to speak to him until...no, wait, I'm still not speaking to him. The list goes on and on. And now I can add that last encounter with the reporter to the mix.

A new knot twists into existence in my stomach, and I lay my head gently back against my seat before I give in to the compulsion to throw it forward into my hooves. Stars above, what was I even talking about a minute ago? Hay if I knew. Hay if I was even fully on this planet when I brought it up. "What's it like out here?" the newspony

asks, and what do I say back? “Loud.” Way to provide some scintillating commentary there, Ruby. Really cleared the whole thing up for him, I’m sure. And just to check if my memory serves me right...yep, that was a camera shutter’s click I heard just before I walked away. So he has pictures of me too. Stars, I can see the front page now: a full-color lead-in shot of a short, murky gray earth mare with a frumpy maroon mane and rusty red eyes hidden behind thick black-rimmed glasses, and a headline above that reads in big bold letters: ELYSIUM TAKES OFF ON FIRST TRANS-OCEANIC VOYAGE, PASSENGER DESCRIBES HISTORIC EVENT AS “LOUD”. Fan-flipping-tastic.

Well, there goes that good mood, I intone inside my head as I lose my internal battle to keep my forehoof off the bridge of my nose. After a heavy sigh and one more glance out the window, I end up looking down at the watch strapped onto the ankle of my left foreleg. The watch is another gift from my father, and one of the few physical ones. It’d been in his family for generations, going all the way back to when his great-grandfather moved to Equestria from Germaneigh, and he wore it every day of his life until I was about nine years old, when it suddenly stopped working after a long shift at the mine. I always liked tinkering with things even back then, though, and I was also at that tender young age when curiosity and self-restraint hadn’t begun to share a bed inside my mind yet. So while Dad cursed his luck in the kitchen and Mom made dinner while pretending to understand why he was so upset, I swiped the broken watch and took it down to my dad’s workshop in the basement, where I stayed up the whole night poring over an old watchmaker’s manual I’d found in the library down the street and piecing it back together cog by tiny cog.

My long-term memory’s not the best in the world, but I don’t have any trouble remembering exactly what happened that night. Dad found me at four in the morning just as I finished putting the last screw into the back of the casing, and I’ll never forget the look I saw come onto his face right then: at first he’d been angry that I was messing around with his tools, but when he saw what I’d done with his watch and heard the faint but steady ticking coming from its hands, the corners of his mouth softened and the wrinkles around his eyes flattened out, and then his whole face tightened up as if he’d pulled a cord to cinch it to his skull. At that moment, I knew he was more proud of me than he’d ever been of anypony in his whole life. It was several years before I knew it really meant he was trying not to cry.

Halfway blind from lack of sleep and all the way cross-eyed from how long I’d held my nose an inch above the workbench, I grabbed the watch’s strap in my teeth and wearily offered it up to my father. For a moment, he just lifted it up with the edge of his hoof and kept that same expression on his face, but then he nodded ever so slightly and sat down on the workshop floor, motioning for me to do the same. Once I did, he took my forehooves gently between his own and, while I watched with wide eyes and a pounding heart, somehow managed to smile without ever moving his lips.

“A long time ago, when I was just about your age, your grandpa took me out to

our mine and told me that whatever I could dig up inside, I could keep,” he said in his rough, rumbling voice, brushing his hooves over the watch as he spoke but never looking away from me. “It was the first time I’d ever been allowed inside. I thought I’d walk out that night with more gems and crystals than I fit in ten saddlebags. Well, I chipped away at those rocks the whole day long, and I didn’t find nothing but slate rock and worn-out coal streaks. By nightfall, I was tired, thirsty, grubby, and just about ready to never set hoof in that dusty ol’ hole again. But just as I was turning to leave, I saw something glinting in the corner of my eye. It was a gemstone, a dull little red thing no bigger than a peanut, the smallest one I’d ever seen. Any other miner worth his salt would’ve left it alone, but I chipped it out and took it with me. Something about it seemed special, even then. Like something about that rock and I was meant to be.

“When your grandpa saw that little gem sitting there in my hoof, his eyes lit up like the Summer Solstice, and he took it away and cleaned it and shined it until suddenly, it wasn’t dull anymore. It was a *gem*, like one you’d see hanging from a gold chain in a store window down in Manehattan or Canterlot. I’d found a gem, all by myself, without anypony helping me or telling me what I should or shouldn’t have done.”

He looked down at the watch again, then maneuvered it between his hooves until it was resting on top of my left forehoof. “That was my day your grandpa gave me this watch, the day he said I’d done all the growing up he could help me with. And that was the day he told me about where I got my name, how he found his first gemstone when he was my age too, and decided right then and there that he was gonna grow up and get married and have foals, and his little colt would have a name just like that gem: Almandite. And so I knew too, right then and there, that I was gonna do the same thing. Except I knew that I wasn’t gonna have a colt, but a filly. A beautiful little filly just as tiny as can be, with a tiny red mane that glinted in the sunlight and a tiny flame in her heart that’d never go out, that’d keep shining and shining just like my little gem.”

He pulled my hoof up to his chest, and with a gentleness that had baffled me even then, fastened the watch around my ankle. When he spoke again, there was more emotion in his words than I think he ever showed in the rest of his life combined. “You’re a very special pony, Ruby,” he murmured as he pulled me close to his chest, “and you’re gonna do great things. Someday, Ruby, you’re gonna change the world. And I hope you never forget that. I hope you never forget how special you are.” The last thing I remember after that is falling asleep in his lap as he ran his forehoof over my mane, and a warming sensation of movement as he carried me up to my bed.

I don’t know about the rest of it, but my own world certainly changed that night. I noticed the mark stamped on my flank while I was brushing my teeth the next morning, and from then on I spent every single day counting the seconds until I could get back into the basement to take apart a wagon or a toaster or a table lamp, every experiment driven by a small silver cog wheel on my backside with a brilliant red ruby set into its center. Maybe that talent makes me special, and maybe some of the things I used that

talent for later on could be looked at as great, but as for changing the world...well, even my dad couldn't be right about anything. I have his workshop and I have my machines, and I'm perfectly happy with things being just the way they are. That's all there is to it. That's why I'm moody today. That's why I was moody yesterday too. And the day before that. And the day before that.

And now I'm depressed again. I let another sigh escape my chest, and refocus on my watch. I've been on the zep for three minutes, which means it's been about eight since I left the terminal. So that means I have about another twenty-two minutes before our seven-hour flight to Haywaaï gets officially underway. Be still, my obnoxiously indecisive heart.

I spend another minute or two pony-watching out the window, but you can only see so many kisses blown to so many starstruck fans before your gag reflex becomes too much to handle. I tossed a few snacks and a couple books into my bag this morning to stave off the boredom pangs once the flight gets underway, but I was really hoping to save those until at least the two-hour mark. Breaking into the Apollo Bars before we even leave the ground seems awfully weak-willed, and I'm too fast a reader to dive into either book below ten thousand feet. Especially when I already got halfway through the first one during the carriage ride into Canterlot.

Then again, my third best friend behind my welding torch and whoever invented the magnetic screwdriver is chocolate, and intestinal fortitude has never really one of my strong suits. For that matter, neither has patience. I bite my lip once just to make sure my subconscious knows what it's doing is wrong, and then I snatch a candy bar and my first book up out of the saddlebag beneath my seat, picking up right where I left off last night as the sweet taste of caramel spreads across my tongue.

Over the next ten minutes, the faltering trickle of ponies boarding the zeppelin grows into a steady stream, but I hardly see anything of them but the tips of their hooves as they walk past my row. Every so often, something unique enough to catch my attention worms its way through my senses: a whiff of generously applied perfume, an unexpected burst of laughter, a sudden increase in temperature when Diamond and her friend come aboard. Beyond that, though, I keep my nose in my book and my mind tuned off the outside world, and on to the much more fascinating one spilling out of the pages I have balanced on my legs. The various scents and sounds that pass over and around me are only fleeting distractions, including the flickering shadows that wash over my book as more and more passengers trot by. Even when one of the shadows stops right next to me and tints my whole seat dark, I still don't feel the need to pay it any mind. It's only once that shadow starts talking that I can't keep up the act any longer.

"The evil of the world is made possible by nothin' but the sanction you give it."

The dramatic pulse of the scene playing out in my imagination stutters and flatlines, and I look up to find a yellow-furred, green-tailed, and impressively fat earth

stallion staring down at me. He shoots me a smile that shows a few too many teeth to avoid falling over the “creepy” line, and then motions down at my lap with a pudgy forehoof as he wedges himself into the aisle seat next to mine.

“Always hated that book,” he remarks once he gets settled in, leaning over a bit in the process so he can pretend to read over my shoulder. “Had to read it for school once, back in ancient times. My teacher wouldn’t shut up about it, kept quotin’ that line like a dang mantra. Me, I was too busy sellin’ Party Pops outta my desk to give two hoots about ‘Ponies’ States’ and whatnot. ‘Who is John Colt?’ Who the hay cares?”

The stallion pauses to take in a breath, and I lean back against the window as he lets it back out. If his paunch couldn’t stop a speeding bullet, his breath would do the trick in a heartbeat. “Where you’d say you go to school again, honey?”

“I didn’t,” I answer stiffly as I look back down at my lap. “And I’m not reading this for school.”

The stallion’s surprise comes out as a little harrumph and a small shake of his head. “How ‘bout that,” he says. “Already graduated, and readin’ for kicks on top’a that. Well, to each his own, I suppose. Or *her* own, as the case may be.” I nod without looking up, so the hoof that suddenly materializes right ovetop of Chapter Twelve shocks me enough to get my attention again.

“Golden Garter,” he announces cheerfully, sweeping the short spikes in his mane back against his scalp with the same hoof he soon realizes I’m not going to shake. “I’m in the advertisin’ business, mostly, but I do a few other things on the side. Consultin’, negotiatin’, fraternizin’, things’a that nature. I’m supposed to meet some bigwig architect out on Mau’u, draw up a contract or three for his new clothing line or something. Can you imagine? An architect wantin’ to design clothes! What’s he gonna do, stitch building codes into a dress hem?”

Golden wheezes and shudders with laughter at his joke, and I briefly wonder whether banging my head against a reinforced gondola window will be enough to knock me out. “Ah, but for hay’s sake, I’m prattlin’ on about m’self again,” he coughs once he’s finished patting himself on the back. “What’s your angle for bein’ here? What d’you do?”

It takes a few seconds to realize I don’t have a credible lie to feed this guy. “I build things,” I eventually tell him.

“No kiddin’? What kinda things?”

“The patented kind.”

I see his next question coming from a mile away. “*You* got a patent?”

“No, the seat cushion does,” I reply in a deadpan. “I just handle the paperwork.”

Golden grins and chucks me in the shoulder, and I try to act like that doesn't make me want to go crawling up the walls. “Shoot, I knew you were pulling my tail!” he guffaws. “C'mon, don't be shy now. Pretty filly like you must be showing off for somepony. You an actress or somethin'?”

Now I'm the one who can't help but laugh, although in my case it's mostly just to keep myself from socking him in the jaw. “Don't I wish...,” I mutter, turning a page with more force than necessary and hoping the message I mean by it is clear.

“Coulda fooled me,” Golden goes on without missing a beat. “You got the look'a one down pat. Like, you could be one'a those little sidekick ponies that's always crackin' jokes and gettin' kidnapped an' stuff.” He pauses, and eventually it begins to dawn on him what he just said. “One'a the nice-lookin' ones, I mean,” he clarifies. “Not the ugly ones.”

I snap my book shut and turn to face him, and for about three seconds I manage to hold off the urge to inform Mr. Garter exactly where he can stick his next insightful comment. Mercifully, though, at the end of those three seconds, I'm saved. Not by Celestia coming down from on high or Mr. Garter suddenly growing a brain in his head bigger than the one beneath his stomach, but by a small, almost imperceptible cough behind him that sounds for all the world like a chorus of angels to me. I flash Golden the shortest forced smile in the history of Equestria and lean way forward in my seat to look around him, and what I see standing in the aisle behind him is just about the most beautiful thing I've seen all day.

Okay, not really. I'm a little prone to exaggeration when I get desperate enough. To be fair, though, the colt who just cleared his throat and caught both my and Golden's eye isn't that bad-looking anyway. He's a unicorn about my age, with silvery-blue fur and a navy mane highlighted by a little loose strand of hair that hangs under his horn. His nose is a bit on the small side and his lips are too tightly pressed together to get an idea of what they might look like curved into a smile, but his eyes are a deep, elusive shade of green that seems to catch the ambient light in the gondola just like an emerald would. I can't quite see his hind legs behind the plain brown saddlebags slung across his back, but the rest of him looks pretty well-built, and the little tuft of slightly darker fur sticking out of his chest is a surprisingly nice final touch to the whole image. All things considered, he's actually kind of cute. And he's standing right in front of me, waiting for an opportunity to speak. On second thought, maybe exaggeration is warranted sometimes.

“Scuse me,” the colt says. He has a nice voice too: strong and lively with a bit of a smoky quality to it, but also carrying the unmistakable trappings of a Fillydelphia accent. Make that *really* cute, actually. “Sorry if I'm interrupting, but you're in my seat.”

My heart leaps into my throat, and the prospect of not having to spend seven hours within hooves' reach of Golden is only one of the reasons. "Beg pardon?" Golden says testily.

"Uh..."

"I'm pretty sure I know where my seat is, buddy," Golden continues.

"Well, actually I-"

"What, you think I can't read a ticket right?"

"No, I mean-"

"Do you?"

"Listen-"

"Well, I'll tell you one thing..."

One thing quickly turns into seven, and so for about thirty seconds both the colt and I are subjected to the laundry list of reasons why Mr. Garter thinks the first of us is an idiot. Part of me is just about ready to shove the big lug out of his seat myself, but another part of me is terrified of what that might lead to. On the one hoof, I'd get to spend the whole flight sitting next to this new colt, whose sudden tendency to chew on his lip when he was nervous is putting him a pair of coveralls short of being a certified dream. On the other, this flight will last seven hours, and the total length of all my interesting stories and anecdotes adds up to about twenty minutes. What am I supposed to talk to this colt about? Do I even want to talk to him? Has he even realized I'm here yet?

Judging by how he's still trying to get a word in edgewise with Golden, probably not. "Look, can you just..."

"Just what?" Golden interrupts again.

Oh Celestia, just get him out of here.

"I wasn't..."

"You weren't what?"

Oh Celestia, don't let him leave.

"I..."

"Well?"

The colt glares, and pauses to take in a deep breath. *Oh Celestia, please just-*

"I wasn't even talking to you," he says, just before looking back at me and raising a forehoof to point in my direction. "Her. You, I mean. You're in my seat."

"What?" Golden says after a long silence.

What?, my mental image of Princess Celestia sputters.

"What?" I half-shout before I can stop myself.

"Yes. You. Are in my seat. 12C," the colt goes on, with the tone of somepony who's running on borrowed patience as it is. "Please move."

I don't know what it is exactly that sets me off. Maybe it's because this guy was more civil with the jerk next to me than he's being with me now. Maybe I was about finished deciding I *did* want to spend seven hours sitting next to this colt. Maybe this last turn of events just fried what little portion of my brain wasn't golden-brown with stress already.

"Please?" the colt asks. No, wait, it isn't any of that. It's the fact that I'm old enough to read a ticket and know where my freaking seat is on an eighty-four passenger zep, and that I have officially had it with ponies treating me otherwise while I just stand by and take it like a coward.

"You're not in the wrong seat either, are you?" the colt says in an undertone.

"No, as a matter of fact, I'm not," I reply with the same level of civility, snapping my book shut as I do. Golden's eyebrows shoot up, so I take that as meaning I'm making a strong impression so far. "I'm pretty sure I can read a ticket right too."

The colt's hoof drops heavily to the floor, and between the tightness in his jaw and the long, deep breath he takes in, he looks for all the world like he's about to go postal. A small part of my conscience is already berating the rest of me for acting even worse than Golden did, but at this point every word it gets in is like a single bucket of water thrown on a forest fire. "Okay, can somepony explain to me what the hell I'm doing wrong?" he growls with his eyes closed and his head quivering with frustration. "I get on the plane, I get to my seat and find someone sitting in it, and they act like I'm the idiot when I ask them to move. Where is the disconnect here, exactly?"

"Probably right around the part where you thought this was your seat, genius," I growl right back.

"Oh, good. Now *I'm* the one who can't read my ticket. How original."

"Hey, here's an *original* thought for you: why don't you go find another fricking

seat? We're underbooked as it is."

"Are we now? Well, by all means, take your pick, then."

"Ladies first."

The colt's eyes widen for a split second before crumpling into a look black enough to stain linen, and I'm pretty sure Golden actually swears under his breath. Of course, that may be because I'm halfway in his lap by this point, for how far I've leaned towards the colt standing next to him. We're nearly nose-to-nose by the time a fourth voice finally forces us apart.

"Excuse me, sir," a perky young mare in an ocean-blue flight attendant vest says, hesitating a bit once she notices me off to the side. "Is there a problem?"

The colt leans back into the aisle without retreating from our silent staring war, then glances at the flight attendant just long enough to acknowledge her butting in. "She's in my seat," he says icily, his eyes still locked coldly with mine. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the attendant look curiously from him to me and then back to him again, before clearing her throat and extending her hoof.

"May I see your ticket, please, sir?" she asks. Finally, the colt turns his head completely away from me, but his eyes start darting back in my direction the instant he's done fishing his ticket out of the front pocket of his saddlebag.

"Game over," he mutters too quietly for anyone but to hear it but me. Before I can respond, the attendant's lips twitch and narrow into a frown.

"Um...sir?"

"Mm-hmm?" he hums airily to the attendant, who is holding his ticket with a quizzical expression on her face.

"Sir, this mare is sitting in seat 12C."

The colt glances back at me, and I can tell he was holding back a smirk. "Yes, she is, isn't she?"

"Well, quite frankly, I don't see what the problem is, sir."

A little bit of bluster drains out of the colt's eyes. "What d'you mean, you don't..."

"Sir, your ticket has you in seat 21C."

And now the rest of it is gone in half the time. "Are you kidding m..." he begins to sputter, but once he snatches his ticket back from the attendant and reads the line she's pointing at, his mouth slams shut right in the middle of his complaint, and his face goes

pale beneath his fur. Once he hears several mares and a couple stallions snickering in the seats behind him, that white hue darkens into a brilliant scarlet red. And after that...

I couldn't help it. He had it coming. I wasn't in my right mind at the time, or that day, or that month, or that year. I can spit out all number of excuses after the fact, but nothing I tell myself later on changes the reality that it's my mouth that opens and my lips that purse, and my decision that this colt won't leave without me having the last word. Without me further humiliating a pony who's probably having just as bad a day as I am. Without me flashing a grin and letting out a long, low sympathetic groan that would've sent me diving for this guy's throat if he did the same to me.

The colt flinches as if I've smacked him across the face, and when he opens his eyes again the look of pure, boiling hatred in his eyes cuts straight through me and shakes me all the way down to my core. Just moments ago, I thought those eyes looked like flawless emeralds sparkling in the sun, but now all I can see are dark pupils and glassy irises and a blackness that wants nothing more than to swallow me whole and leave nothing behind but a messy pile of bones and fur. Now all I can see is my own reflection, staring back at me with all the pain and hurt and disgust I've lived with longer than anypony could ever deserve.

The colt only stands there for a couple seconds before hiking his bags up around his shoulders and stalking off down the aisle, but I feel his gaze boring into me even after I fall back against my seat and stare blindly out towards the window in front of mine. Even after my shock crystallizes into shame and then snowballs into piercing, searing hatred for myself. Even after the gondola starts to spin and my head begins to throb, and the window in front of me blurred into a dim, shapeless grey blob.

"Buck me to the moon, you don't screw around, do ya?" Golden laughs in between relieved whistles. "Boy, your colt friend must have one hell of a...uh, hey, you all ri-

"I'm fine," I tell him through my teeth, my throat raw and my hoof propped up on my temple so he can't see the warm wet beads sliding down my leg and dripping into my lap. I close my eyes tight and lean hard against my window, and don't look up again until nearly an hour later, after our seatbeats are fastened and the launch pad is cleared and my stomach dives into my feet as a cacophony of cheers and complimentary champagne fill the whole zeppelin. I don't see the spires of Canterlot painted black with the shadow of its greatest achievement, nor do I see the flight attendants come by with the drink carts, nor do I see Mr. Garter chug down however many eight-ounce bottles of malt liquor it takes to down a three-hundred-pound stallion in the advertisin' business. I don't see anything except the backs of my eyelids, and a dark, filthy workshop with broken and bent parts strewn all over the place and the scent of decay tainting everything inside it.

I open my eyes once Golden's snores smooth out into a constant rhythm, and

close them quickly once I see how far the twilight expanse of violet-gold water spreads in all directions outside, and how many miles it seems to be below me. In the middle of the first of what will surely be many vertigo trips, I hear a spell crackle into life at the front of the cabin, and my hunch about what it's going to be used for turns out to be exactly right.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, Oceanus Airlines would like to thank you once again for flying with us this evening," the perky flight attendant says, her voice amplified enough to reach the back row of seats but thankfully not in a deafening way this time. "It's currently 6:45 P.M., we're approximately one hour into our flight, and if you look out your windows now, you may catch a glimpse of the Eternity Coastline directly below us. This moment marks the first time in history that anypony has traveled beyond this easternmost point of the Equestrian landmass in a passenger-class dirigible. For the rest of our flight to the Hawaiian islands of Mau'u, Ka'ui, and Kilio, we will be traveling over approximately three hundred and seventy-five miles of open ocean, with an estimated time of arrival of 9:42 P.M. local time. The entire *Elysium* crew offers its gratitude and its congratulations, and we hope you choose Oceanus Airlines for all your future travel needs. Enjoy your flight."

I hear everything the attendant said, but every single word passes right on through me like there's nothing between my ears to stop it, like I'm just a hollow shell of a pony being blown wherever the wind chooses to take her. That's certainly what I feel like at the moment: not angry or even really upset anymore, just empty. I feel like someone stuck a straw in me and sucked out all the energy I could've used to dry my face or rub my eyes, or even lift my forelegs off the arms of my seat. I feel tired. No, on second thought, I feel exhausted.

Always this. I always do this exact same thing. I get stressed out, things start to pile up on my shoulders and I bottle up my emotions for days and weeks on end, and then one day some little insignificant thing is the final piece of straw that snaps me clean in two, and I just zero in on whoever's unlucky enough to be close by and rage at them until there's nothing left inside of me to throw in their face. Sometimes, it's just an innocent bystander, who more often than not gets indignant herself. Usually, it's my mother, who never fights back and somehow makes it all worse because of it. Two and a half years ago, it was my older brother and second-best friend Garnet, and now he's paying my way out to Haywahi when I've spent all my time since doing everything in my power to make sure I never saw him again. And here I am, sitting in a zeppelin, just going with the flow and trying to act like nothing ever happened. Just a hollow shell, filling and emptying and floating through life like a shadow, like the ghost of whatever it was I used to be.

I rest my head back against the window, and the numbness building in my brain spreads through my chest and into my legs and hooves. As my breathing slows and fatigue begins to overtake me, I find myself sluggishly thinking back to that night in the basement so long ago, when my father placed his hooves over mine and gave me the

watch that's still ticking on my ankle even now. Is this what you were thinking about, Dad? Is this what you always knew I'd be, what you knew I always was? I snort under my breath and force the memory away again. He hadn't known whether I'd grow up to be an inventor or a businessmare, whether I'd turn into a strong, dependable worker or a miserable, spiteful lump of selfishness and fear. He hadn't known what my cutie mark meant when he was the first one to ever see it. He'd never known anything his whole life but working hard and having jack-all to show for it. All that time I spent idolizing him, all those nights I wished I could be just like him, when he was nothing more than a backwater, third-generation two-bit miner: soft-spoken, mild-mannered, simpleminded, and mortal. Just like me. Just like Garnet. Just like everypony on this whole moonforsaken zep.

Well, good for you, Ruby, I think as the farthest corners of my mind began to shut themselves off. *You finally figured it out. You feel better now?* No, actually, I feel like I want to crawl in a hole and sleep for a week, thanks, and I'm about to get started on that now. *Well, isn't that proactive,* I tell myself just before I lose consciousness. *Isn't that special...*

Special. That's what it always comes down to, isn't it? Everypony wants to be special. Everypony wants to believe the ponies they love are special, when really all we are is an improbable combination of electrochemical impulses and faulty parts, with our expiration dates already stamped on our casings before we're even born. We can do little things to buy some time, skimp and swindle our way into a few extra days here and there, but in the end there's only one way out of this world, and that's when the gears in your head stop turning and the pumps in your chest can't kick hard enough to spin them around again. It's not a matter of fairness or mercy, just cold, unrelenting inevitability. No pony is above it. No pony is invincible. No pony is special.

My dad told me I was special. My dad told me I was gonna do great things. My dad told me someday I would change the world.

And you know what the worst part is?

He was right.

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“My friends and I all learned an important lesson this week:
never judge a book by its cover.”

- Twilight Sparkle