



The Color You Bleed

By Kegisak

Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	A Plot is Revealed	3
Chapter 2	Pride is Preserved	22
Chapter 3	Hope is Lost	43
Chapter 4	A Stallion Dies	64
Chapter 5	An Exchange is Made	91
Chapter 6	Home is Found	117
Chapter 7	Something is Kept	136
Chapter 8	A Crime is Remembered	159
Chapter 9	A Stallion is Good	187
Chapter 10	Care is Given	211
Chapter 11	An Expedition is Made	237
Chapter 12	A Garden Grows	263
Chapter 13	The Truth is Learned	287
Chapter 14	Roads Converge	314
Chapter 15	A Battle is Fought	350
Epilogue	The Sun Sets	385
Authors Notes		393

Chapter 1

In Which a Plot is Revealed

At the highest point of the tallest tower in Canterlot, Celestia stood proudly in the morning dim. She rose her horn, and as she did so the first light of dawn peaked over the mountains that surround Equestria on all sides. It spilled over her kingdom like a sea of gold, waking the citizens of the mountain villages first, then the farmers on the foothills and vast plains, finally falling upon the capital. The alabaster city gleamed, and Celestia smiled the sort of smile that only a pony who has worked her craft for millennia can manage. Far below her, in a lavish room of the palace a different pony smiled a very different kind of smile.

Blueblood stirred in his large bed, his grin presenting itself to the world even moments after he awoke. He rarely found cause not to smile, after all.

"Ire, are you out there?" Blueblood asked. The door to his chambers creaked open, revealing a tall, steel-gray earth stallion.

"Of course, your highness," the pony said. "What do you require?"

"Oh, just making sure," Blueblood said flippantly, rolling out of bed. "We can't have you gallivanting off to do... whatever it is you do while auntie and mother aren't watching you. What do you do, anyways?"

"Sleep," the pony said shortly, "among other things." Blueblood heard him mutter something under his breath, but ignored it. Instead, he trotted over to the picture window that let through his aunt's sunlight, and sighed happily.

"She's done well this morning, don't you think Ire?"

"What?" the gray pony asked, snapping out of his mumbled rant. "What was that, your highness?"

"The sunrise," Blueblood said. "It's lovely."

"I suppose so," Ire said, "I see the weather pegasi are keeping the clouds clear today." Blueblood shook his head.

"Oh Ire. All you ever think of is the weather, isn't it? The weather, or the taxes, or polishing your armour."

"It is my duty, sire. Speaking of my duty... I've requested that you don't call me... Ire."

"Oh, but your title really is such a mouthful," the unicorn whined, "I can't call you 'Captain Sir Iron Towers' every time I need you, now can I? Why, We'd take all day just to get ready in the morning. And besides, Ire fits you so well, don't you think? No, I think I'll just keep calling you Ire."

"Very well, sire," the captain said flatly. Blueblood looked out the window for a while longer, before spinning around.

"Well, what are we just standing here for, Ire?" he asked impatiently, "Why haven't you gotten the chamber maids to get me ready this morning? We have business today, you know."

"Of course, sire," Iron said, bowing and backing out the door, "My apologies. I'll fetch some maids for you right away."

"Very good, very good," Blueblood said, turning back to the window. Iron left the room, and sighed deeply. Standing right in front of him was a pair of earth pony mares.

"We, ah, though the prince might need us," one of them said slowly, leaning away from the scowling captain. The stallion sighed again, and rubbed his eyes.

"Yes," he said, "Yes, he wants to see you. But... let's not go in just yet, alright?"

"Oh dear," the other mare said, "Is his highness in a mood?"

"Of course he is," Iron growled, "He's always in a mood. The blasted brat *is* a mood." The mares giggled, and Iron shook his head. "I don't think I can take much more of that colt," he said, "It's just one more day, though."

"One more day until what?" the mare asked. Iron looked down at her, as if he only just realized that the mares were still there.

"One more day until... I'm off rotation," he said, "I'll be back on the watch duty, and guarding his highness will be somepony else's problem."

"That's a good plan," the older of the mares said, "I heard the last pony they had guarding him full time had to retire early... something about him being worse than anything the westerners had. Shifting ponies out could make him at least bearable."

"Is he really so bad?" the other mare asked, "I've never spoken with the prince... but he seems quite charming."

"Oh he is, from a distance," the older mare explained. "But once you actually talk to him, well... I suppose you'll see."

"Yes, we may as well," Iron growled, "If we wait any longer he's likely to be even worse when you speak with him." He pushed open the door to Blueblood's chambers, allowing the two mares to walk in. Blueblood had moved back to the bed, where he was lounging lazily.

"Ah, there you are!" the unicorn said, sitting up, "I was beginning to think you had run off..." he tilted his head as the two maids approached him, and asked, "You couldn't find any unicorns?"

"Ah, we were just in the area, sire," the older maid said, bowing to the prince, "And the captain asked us to help you ready yourself. We're more than capable - "

"But you'll take so long," Blueblood insisted, "A pair of unicorns would be much faster, and then they could get back to cleaning up the ballroom for this evening."

"There are more than enough ponies cleaning the ballroom, your highness," Iron insisted, "These two will do for this morning."

"Yes, we will," the older maid said again, "I've helped your mother get ready a time or two. And, well, Lilac here may be new, but she's a very quick worker."

"Oh, very well," Blueblood gave a long-suffering sigh. He stood in the middle of the room, and Lilac's partner directed her.

"Fetch the brush and scissors from the dresser, will you dear?" she asked. Lilac did as she was beckoned, while the older mare went to Blueblood's wardrobe and opened it. She selected a clean collar, and laid it out on the bed. Lilac had returned with the brush and scissors, and the pair went to work on the white unicorn. Lilac trimmed his fetlocks carefully, while the other maid brushed down his mane and coat. After a few minutes work the stallion looked presentable, albeit bare. Lilac fetched the collar, and with the older maids help it was soon around Blueblood's neck, completing the handsome stallion.

"Well, I am impressed," Blueblood said, inspecting himself in a mirror. Lilac smiled happily, but her partner just rolled her eyes. Iron tensed as well, to Lilac's confusion. Then, Blueblood turned to the trio, and spoke again.

"I never would have expected you poor earth ponies to pull it off," he said happily, taking Lilac's hoof.

"Um... your highness?" Lilac asked, taken aback.

"You've done almost a good a job as any pair of unicorns could have!" he said happily, "Especially you, dear. Trimming those fetlocks must be no easy task for your kind. What's your name?"

"I... ah... Lilac, your highness," Lilac sputtered. She didn't fully understand what was happening, but she felt vaguely insulted.

"Lilac... A lovely name," the prince told her, "It suits you."

"Um... thank you?"

"It's just a shame you're a peasant," Blueblood said, "And a simple earth pony, at that. You're a very pretty mare. " Lilac simply stared, until her partner took a gentle hold of her shoulders.

"Thank you very much, your highness," she said, "But we really must be going. We have more work to do, to be ready for this evening."

"Oh yes, of course!" Blueblood smiled. The two mares trotted out of his room, and when they were in the safety of the hallway Lilac asked,

"What... just happened?"

"Blueblood just happened, dear," her partner said. "I think Iron really must need that break, though. Blueblood was much better than usual today."

Hours later Blueblood was in the palace's garden, accompanied by the surly captain. The prince sauntered among the flower patches, occasionally stopping to inspect a rose or two.

"And here I thought you seemed so eager to get to your duties," Iron sighed. Blueblood flipped his mane, and inspected another flower.

"My duty is to look as good as I possibly can for all the mares tonight," the stallion told his bodyguard. Iron rolled his eyes behind the prince's back.

"I thought you were pleased with how the maids did?"

"Oh they did well enough, I suppose," the prince said, waving a hoof dismissively. "But I need a unicorn's touch to be complete. I must be as beautiful as auntie's sunrise for this evening - I'd hardly expect you to understand, Ire."

"Indeed not," the earth pony said coldly. Blueblood ignored him, and selected a rose from the bush. He bit off the stem, and tucked into his collar with his magic.

"There we are!" he said. "Perfect. What do you think, Ire?" the gray pony simply stared at him, blinking.

"I'm sure a... unicorn's taste, is better than anything I could muster, sire," he said. Blueblood sighed, and shook his head.

"You shouldn't be so serious all the time, Ire," he said. "It can't be good for you. Why, my last guard -"

"Had to retire," Ire interrupted, "I know."

"Yes," Blueblood said, his expression fouling, "Yes, he did. But he retired of his own choice. YOU might not get the same opportunity, Ire, if you do not keep your tone with me." The two ponies glowered at each other for a moment.

"Yes, sire." Iron said finally, "My apologies." Blueblood nodded, and walked past his guard.

"Good," he said, "Come along then. Let's see how the ballroom is coming along."

"Yes, your highness," Iron said, following after the prince. The two entered the palace and walked in silence, save for the clip-clopping of their hooves across the polished floors. Iron stared daggers into the back of his lord's head the whole way, but the unicorn seemed unaware of the seething anger emanating from behind him. Eventually the pair reach the ballroom, and Blueblood gestured to Iron to open the large doors. The earth pony did as he was beckoned, and Blueblood gasped in shock.

"Oh, no no no no no!" he cried. All of the servants decorating turned to stare at him. An old pegasus, apparently the pony in charge, walked respectfully up to the prince.

"What seems to be the matter, your highness?" he asked, bowing to the stallion. Blueblood ignored him, walking further into the ballroom.

"This is all wrong," he exclaimed, "this won't do at all!"

"What won't do, sire?" the old stallion asked again, following the prince.

"This, all of this!" Blueblood said, waving his hooves about. "Ambassadors are coming from all over Equestria, all over the world tonight to present their best mares to court me. The ballroom MUST display me favourably for them! The colours are all wrong, and there's no focus. Why, I'll just blend right into the background!"

"With... respect, sire," the old pony said carefully, "While it is true that mares may come to court you, the delegates are here for other diplomatic purposes -"

"Well, it won't hurt those purposes if I am given the proper amount of attention, now will it?" Blueblood said, looking down at the pony, "Now fix it."

"But, sire!" the old stallion objected, "It will take hours to change it now! We'd have to call in other servants, and, and..."

"Well, call in other ponies to work on it, then," Blueblood said. "Just have it fixed for this evening. We are the capital of the greatest nation on the planet. We must look the part for our guests."

"I... yes, sire," the old pony said, defeated. He clapped his hooves together, and called out to the workers. "You heard his highness, we're changing it. Misty, run down to the kitchens and see if there's anyone else who can lend a hoof." Blueblood nodded and turned back to his guard, whose expression could sour milk. The white unicorn seemed oblivious to this, however, and simply gestured for him to follow.

"Come along, Ire," he said. "We should go make certain that none of the other servants have managed to mess up their tasks for this evening."

The day wore on, as days are wont to do. Before too long, Celestia returned to her tall tower and aided the sun in its descent below the mountains. A soft clopping of hooves came from behind her, and Celestia turned to greet her little sister. The pair slapped hooves, the signal for their trade-off that Celestia had taught her sister when she returned, and Luna took to the air. She lifted her horn to the heavens as the milky face of the moon rose into view, silhouetting the little princess. She landed back on the tower, ruffling her wings proudly as her sister chuckled.

"Are we putting on a show now, Luna?" Celestia asked. Luna smirked, and replied,

"I'm an artist, Celly. I'm allowed to be proud of my work."

"You know, you could be even more proud of your work with a few ponies around to compliment you."

"Oh... I don't know," Luna said, the confidence fading from her voice. "I think it's best if I just keep my head down for a while. Let the whole..."

eternal night thing blow over first. Maybe a generation or two." Celestia sighed, and jostled her little sister playfully.

"You have to come out of your shell eventually, you know," she teased. "Come down to the party tonight, Luna. They'll be all compliments, you'll see. No pony is afraid of the night any more."

"Oh, please Celly." Luna snorted, leaning over the balcony, "Compliments from pumped-up aristocrats? If I wanted compliments on my stars, I'd go find a sailor."

"Some of those 'pumped-up aristocrats' are family, you know," Celestia goaded. "You don't even want to see your nephew find a nice mare?"

"Not my nephew," Luna scoffed, "I wasn't around while he was being raised. I'd have had a thing or two to say about it."

"Luna," Celestia started, but her sister simply rolled her eyes and flew over the balcony.

"I'm sorry Celestia, but it's just not for me. I can barely stand being around normal ponies after so long, but them... it's just so petty. It's not my world, Celestia."

"Alright," Celestia smiled. "Have a good night, sister. I'll see you again at dawn?"

"Of course," Luna said. She flew in close, and nuzzled her sister's neck before taking off again. Celestia chuckled, and shook her head. She turned back into the tower and made her way down to the castle proper. It would have been much faster to fly, but she couldn't be seen doing that in front of this crowd - heaven forbid nobility be seen doing something for itself. Some days she wondered if Luna didn't have the right idea, avoiding the aristocracy like she did. Still, someone had to keep everything together. She entered the ballroom as quietly as she could, but nevertheless all eyes in the room soon turned to her. She made her way through the throng of ponies, approaching the head of the room where she sat, flanked on one side by her great-niece, and on the other by her slightly greater-nephew Blueblood.

"Good evening, auntie," Blueblood greeted her. His mother did similarly. Celestia smiled at them both, and a voice piped up over the crowd.

"Attention! Your attention, please!" the voice said. The crowd managed to unstick its gaze from Celestia, turning to a unicorn in a finely crafted green suit - Equestria's foreign affairs minister, the stallion who had made most of the arrangements for the evening.

"Thank you very much," he said, "And thank you all for being with us here this evening. I know it must be difficult to travel so far for many of you. I'm sure you all understand the importance of this conference, of course - as you all know, we are gathered to deal with some issues of unrest among the countries along Equestria's borders..."

Blueblood smirked to himself. Celestia had decided that the best way to deal with the issue was to unite the countries through marriage - not that she'd ever admit it to anyone, of course. That was why so many princesses and princes were attending. They would try to match up countries, and in a few generations Equestria and its surrounding countries would be one single, large kingdom.

Of course, everyone knew that Blueblood was the prize of the evening. Whoever married him, their country would merge with Equestria. It would be a great honour to become a province of the largest and most influential country in the world. Blueblood's thoughts were interrupted as the delegates began to applaud, signaling the end of the minister's speech. The 'opening ceremony' would begin, to let the nobility mingle amongst themselves, and meet their prospective matches before they would be bartered off the next day.

Celestia and Blueblood's mother stood and walked into the crowd, but Blueblood remained seated at the front, his chest puffed out proudly. Iron stood behind him, looking around the room.

"Not going to mingle, your highness?" he asked, though not with any sort of enthusiasm. Blueblood flipped his hair.

"Of course not," he said. "They will come to me, of course. "

"Ah. Of course." Sure enough, a mare did break from the throng to approach the prince. She was a deep-purple unicorn, her mane the colour of wheat, and she was adorned with a beautiful green dress of wrappings.

"Good evening," she said. Blueblood smiled handsomely.

"It is in indeed, miss..."

"Princess Golden Dreams," she said, offering her hoof. Blueblood took it gently.

"Prince Blueblood. It's delightful to meet you, princess."

"Likewise, I'm sure. You are the prince of Equestria, I presume?" she looked him up and down, and gave a coy smile. "I hail from the kingdom to the west - Aloa."

"Aloa?" Blueblood asked, "I hadn't heard that the Aloans would be here." In truth, he hadn't heard who was going to be coming one way or another - he was only barely acquainted with the surrounding countries to begin with. Geography had not been his best subject. Still, the mare didn't need to know that - and it seemed that he had touched on a conversation piece inadvertently.

"Oh, well," she shrugged, "I didn't want to, but Father insisted. He said that it was important to the future of the country..." she glanced at Blueblood again, and said, "of course, I'm quite glad I came now."

"I don't doubt it," Blueblood said, puffing out his chest. A piano key sounded across the ballroom, and slowly the band that had assembled at the side of the room began to play their first piece of the evening. "Would you care to dance, Princess?" Blueblood asked, pumping every ounce of charm he had into his words. Golden Dreams fluttered her eyelashes at him, and smiled sweetly.

"I would love to, I'm sure," she said. The two unicorns trotted onto the dance floor, where pairs of ponies had already begun to twirl to the band's waltz. Iron didn't follow the prince, instead remaining behind the thrones. After a while he moved more into the crowd, still skirting the walls of the room. He eventually came to sit beside a short, squat unicorn.

"He's dancing with your princess," Iron muttered, "Should we be worried?"

"With Goldie?" the unicorn chuckled, "Hardly. She no doubt sees him as just another dalliance. She won't miss him at all."

"Then everything is still ready?"

"As soon as all this winds down."

"Good. I couldn't bear to dote on that wretched excuse for a stallion any longer."

"Now now, Mr. Towers," the unicorn said smugly, "We musn't speak that way about our superiors."

"Oh well," Iron grinned wryly, "I suppose I can wait a few more hours." He stood up, and crossed the room to a position where he could better watch the obnoxious prince.

Blueblood spent most of the night with the Aloan princess. They danced for a while, then ate and chatted, then danced a while longer. Eventually the moon was high in the nights sky, and the Equestrian Foreign Affairs Minister spoke again.

"Thank you all very much," he said to the crowd. Celestia stood by his side, adding the weight of royalty - not to mention divinity - to his words as he reminded all of the guests where they would meet the next day to discuss how to "quell the unrest", as it was so euphemistically put. Blueblood could not help but grin. No doubt he would walk away from the meeting with Golden Dreams as his bride-to-be. Figuratively speaking of course; with mother and auntie there, there was no reason for Blueblood himself to attend the meetings. She was an excellent prize - beautiful, a tad dim, and Aloa was the second largest country in the region next to Equestria. Adding it as one of their provinces would increase the kingdom's influence even further.

The guests began to file out of the ballroom, escorted to the chambers set aside for them by the palace guards. Blueblood bid farewell to his dance partner, and Iron came to stand beside him.

"An enjoyable evening, your highness?" he asked, a hint of humour creeping into his voice for the first time that day.

"I think so, yes," Blueblood said smugly. "And where did you get off to, hm? Sleeping?" He cocked an eyebrow at Iron, an expression the earth pony knew well. He had begun guarding Blueblood when he was an adolescent, but the unicorn still made that same I-Know-Something-That-Can-Get-You-In-Trouble expression. Iron had to fight the urge to smile. He fought it so well, in fact, that any trace of a good mood faded from his face.

"I was watching from the sidelines, sire," he explained. "I would not want to be in your way while you danced."

"Ah, of course," Blueblood said. "Well... I think this has been quite a day. I would like to retire for the evening, Ire."

"Very well, sire," Iron said, bowing. The two ponies left the ballroom, walking through the palace hallways. Pleased as he was about the evening, Blueblood couldn't help but notice that many of the guards he saw were not wearing Equestrian armour.

"Why are all the guards dressed oddly?" he asked, trying to feign disinterest.

"They aren't our guards," Iron told him, "They came with the guests. Her Majesty thought a show of trust would help things along, so she gave all the guards the night off - save for the royal family's."

"Ah," Blueblood said, "Very good. Well, as long as my chambers are well guarded, that's quite alright."

"Indeed," Iron smiled. The two were silent for the rest of the trip, until they arrived at Blueblood's chambers - which were not, as he had expected, guarded by Equestrians. Instead, the pair of unicorns that stood before them were dressed in plain steel armour, dressed with green and blue wrappings - Aloian armour. Blueblood took a short step back, but soon regained his composure.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked. The two guards bowed, and one spoke.

"You were called for, your highness," he said, "You are requested in a Aloan room for the night." Blueblood stared for a moment, before an impossibly smug grin came over him.

"My my," he said, "It seems I've made quite an impression on our guest the princess, don't you think Ire?"

"It would certainly seem that way, wouldn't it?" Iron agreed. The two Aloan ponies began to lead the prince, with Iron trailing behind. Blueblood stood proud and tall, too full of himself to notice where he was being led. After a while, the polished marble floors that the noble stallion was used to gave way to cobblestone. Still he seemed devoid of any thought other than his own greatness - until they stopped in front of a simple wooded door.

"This... is the princess's room?" Blueblood asked, shying away, "This is a servant's room!"

"Her highness is sleeping in the north quarter, actually," the Aloan guard told him. "You will have different accommodations this evening." The door opened, and the Aloans shoved Blueblood inside.

"What is the meaning of this!" Blueblood shouted, whipping his head around. Another shove came from the darkness, throwing him to the ground. The door slammed shut, and the room was illuminated by torchlight. The room was filled with a few Aloan guards, and the Aloan ambassador.

"Hello, Blueblood," the ambassador said, his words oozing with a fake charm that Blueblood recognized all too well.

"You will address me by my proper title!" Blueblood said, getting to his hooves. He was shoved to the ground again - this time, by Iron.

"He was, you pompous oaf," Iron sneered at him, "Or at least, by the end of tonight he will have. You're going on a trip, colt. I'll bet you can guess where."

"W-why are you doing this?" Blueblood asked, leaning away from Iron. The ambassador cleared his throat.

"It isn't personal - at least not for me," he said, "But we need you out of the way for a while. Equestria has more than enough power, you don't really need this conference. So you're going to stay away until the negotiations are done, alright?"

"For the record," Iron cut in, "It's personal for ME." The ambassador sighed.

"You won't get away with this!" Blueblood shouted, "Auntie will know I'm missing, and -" A hoof in the ribs silenced him mid-sentence."

"Shut up, colt," Iron sneered, "We can't have you yelling, now can we? You'd upset the other guests." Blueblood coughed violently, and Iron grinned. "You know," he said, "that was sort of fun. Can I do it again?"

"Be my guest," the ambassador shrugged. "He doesn't need to be in any sort of condition where we're going to be taking him."

"Goody," Iron said. He kicked Blueblood in the gut again, sending the stallion writhing across the floor. He snorted gleefully, and ground his hoof into Blueblood's ribs. The prince grunted in pain, and Iron pressed down harder.

"I take that back," the ambassador said, interrupting the guard's "fun", "Stop that. The carriage isn't here yet, and we can't afford to make much noise while we're in here. If one of your men finds us, we're all dead - including you. You aren't clever enough to talk your way out of this." Iron snorted, and took his hoof off the prince, who groaned miserably.

"Well, have your men shut him up, then. You unicorns all think you're so special, so prove it then."

"My men are trained in combat," the ambassador said coldly, "The best they could do is hold his mouth shut." Iron shook his head, and leaned against the wall beside Blueblood. The room fell into silence, save for Blueblood's occasional whimpers. The tension in the room was palpable as they waited. Even the room itself seemed to mirror the ambassadors sickly, worried expression. Iron simply scowled, picking something from the ball's buffet out of his teeth. Suddenly, he felt Blueblood's hoof on his leg.

"Iron..." Blueblood said weakly, "Iron, why are you doing this? Did... did they bribe you? Threaten you? Whatever it is, Auntie can help..." Iron smirked, and leaned in to the injured unicorn's face.

"They didn't pay me," he said, "They didn't threaten me, or blackmail me. The only thing that I get out of this is a way out... oh, and you." He flashed his teeth at the unicorn, and prodded him with his hoof. "Yes... 'prince Blueblood, you get to hurt him'. That's what they told me, colt. And you know what? I jumped at the chance. The chance to hurt you, you stupid, arrogant little princeling... you pathetic excuse for a stallion. They only asked me because I'm close to you, you know. Any one of the servants... anyone who ever has to deal with you, they'd all do the same. Every single pony in this castle would jump at the chance to watch you suffer." He was nearly nose-to-nose with Blueblood now, a wide, malicious grin spread across his face. Blueblood's eyes were wide with fear, and he tried to struggle backwards, but Iron stomped a hoof down on his mane to keep him in place. "You know why?" the earth pony asked, "You wanna guess? Go on, guess. I wanna know what you think ponies think about you. I wanna hear you say that they care about you, so It'll be that much sweeter when you learn the truth."

"T-they do care," Blueblood said, his voice shaking, "I'm the prince. They all care about my well being. That's their job..."

"Yeah, that's right," Iron chuckled, "It's their JOB. Not one of them would care for you if they had any choice in the matter. They like your auntie, and they like your momma just fine, but you? They all HATE you. You're just some worthless pile of flesh to them. Another nuisance to deal with in the day."

"That isn't true!" Blueblood insisted. Even he didn't seem convinced by his words.

"Say that all you want," Iron laughed. "But you know the truth every bit as much as I do. Hell, I bet that's why your so full of yourself. You know that you aren't worth anything. The truth is, I'm not just doing the Aloans a favour, I'm doing Equestria a favour too! Now your momma can just start over, have a foal who's worth something!"

"Iron!" the Ambassador said sharply, "The carriage is here. Let's go."

"Good," Iron said, straightening up, "As soon as we get away from here, we can start to make some noise. Load him in."

Blueblood felt magic take hold of his body, lifting him into the air. The Aloan soldiers took him out of the back door, out into the palace's back lawn. A large, plain carriage was waiting there, hitched to a pair of ponies wearing simple rags. Blueblood was tossed unceremoniously in the back, followed by Iron, the Ambassador and a half-dozen soldiers. The door shut, and a jerking let the passengers know that their transport had begun to move. Blueblood lay in the middle of the carriage, trying to chase Iron's words out of his head, but they wouldn't leave. He began to whimper again, only for Iron to kick him in the back.

"We're not in the castle any more," the guard sneered, "I can do that now. In fact, I think I'm gonna. Every time you whimper, you get a kick. And hey - I'll get a kick out of that too!" he laughed cruelly, and Blueblood shuddered, suppressing a squeak. The cart rolled for about an hour, and Iron kept true to his word - whenever so much as a squeak escaped Blueblood's lips, Iron would kick him violently in the back. Eventually the captain got bored - or Blueblood simply stopped making noise. Either way, Iron spoke up.

"Where are we?"

"Hm?" the ambassador asked, shaking away his tiredness, "We should be at the bottom of the mountains. We're in Aloan territory now."

"Close to the exchange point?"

"We'll reach it in a few minutes, yes. Why?"

"Tell your ponies to move faster. I want to get there early. I want some time with the whelp."

"Haven't you had enough of him yet?" the ambassador asked, disgust clear in his voice.

"Just do it," Iron scowled. The ambassador sighed, and commanded that they pick up the pace. They reached their destination within a couple of minutes, and Iron kicked Blueblood out of the back of the carriage. He looked around, and sighed happily.

"Shale!" he said, "Lot's of shale here. That's good."

"Dare I ask why?" the ambassador asked.

"Shale is flat," Iron said, as if that explained everything, "Get your ponies to take him over to that piece, there," he gestured to a large slab. The soldiers did as they were commanded, while Iron stepped back into the carriage to get something. Blueblood couldn't see what Iron was getting until he brought it around to the stone where the unicorn lay. The cruel earth pony carried an equally cruel-looking axe in his mouth, grinning fiendishly around the handle.

"Hold him down," Iron said.

"What do you mean?" one of the soldiers asked. Iron glowered at the soldier, who shrunk back.

"I mean, Hold. Him. Down." Iron said. The soldiers did so, pressing Blueblood against the rock with their magic. Iron dropped the axe of the slab in front of Blueblood's face.

"Wha... what are you going to do?" the prince asked, his voice trembling. Iron grinned evilly.

"Guess," he said. "Go on, guess." His grin was so wide that Blueblood thought he could see every tooth in his mouth, and his eyes bugged out of his skull like even they wanted to leap out and attack the prince. His hot breath blew across the unicorn's face as he chuckled. "I'll bet you'll do great. You're a unicorn, after all... you're so great. So superior to us 'humble earth ponies'," he quoted in a mocking imitation of Blueblood's voice, "But you know we do try. And there's a lot of things that we're pretty good at... some things we're even better at than you unicorns... but you'll find that out soon enough."

"Iron," the ambassador cut in, "Is this really necessary?"

"Of course it's necessary!" Iron roared, turning sharply on the fat unicorn, "You said yourself, we can't risk having him seen while he's in Aloa! It would tip everyone off, they'd know about your precious plan! Well, nopony's going to recognize him now! They'll all be looking for a unicorn,

and they aren't going to find one!" he whipped around, screaming at the soldiers, "HOLD HIM DOWN!"

They all flinched back, releasing the pressure on Blueblood just enough for him to struggle.

"Please, Iron!" Blueblood cried, "Please, don't do this!"

"Oh, you're begging now?" Iron gave a hissing laugh, "You think it'll make up for all the crap I had to deal with from you?"

"I'm sorry!" Blueblood cried again, "I'm sorry Iron! I didn't mean it!" He strained against the soldiers' magic, writhing as hard as he could on the rock. His heart was frozen in his chest as he struggled, and he trembled violently.

"I said, HOLD! HIM! DOWN!" Iron roared. Magic slammed against Blueblood, pressing down on him so hard he could barely breath.

"Please, please don't, Iron," Blueblood managed to wheeze, "Please don't do it..."

"Don't worry, colt," Iron chuckled, leaning in close to Blueblood and brushing his mane aside, "I won't hurt a hair on the pretty little mane of yours." He gave a barking laugh, and one of the soldiers looked away.

"Now, 'Blue blood'," Iron hissed, "let's find out what colour you really bleed!" he took the axe in his mouth, and lifted it up, laughing through the handle.

The prince's squeezed his eyes shut. "Please, please please please please please!" he begged.

The axe came down.

Pain erupted in Blueblood's skull. It felt like his forehead was on fire. It felt like his mind was on fire. He was vaguely aware of an explosion of colour, of Iron laughing hysterically, but he didn't care. The pain was his world. It was his everything. It spread through his entire body, growing far and wide like the roots of a great ash tree. It felt like it spread even out of his body, into the bodies of the guards that held him down, and into the ambassador. They broke their hold, but Blueblood didn't flail, or scream. He couldn't. His

entire body was on fire. His entire body was fire. Then it was ice, and then the air, and the earth. Then, for the briefest moment, his body was light. But the light faded, and there was only darkness. Blueblood's world went dark, and soon, it disappeared.

Chapter 2

In Which Pride is Preserved

The sun rose over Equestria with as little fanfare as ever, perhaps even less. Princess Celestia had other things on her mind – namely, the meeting between the delegates. The guests came in from all over the palace's more luxurious wings to a great antechamber near the center. It was used for various purposes throughout the year – to brief the guards for formal events mostly, but it occasionally was used to host plays and other such events. For charity of course, the princess would always tell the press. For today, however, it had been refurbished with desks and soft cushions, allowing the delegates to focus on center stage where the princess would host. She would refrain from debate, of course. The honour of representing Equestria would belong to her niece and nephew – if the young stallion would ever arrive.

Blueblood's mother paced near Celestia on the stage, fretting like only a mother can.

"Where is that colt?" She asked aloud, "I told him to be down here, didn't I?"

"You most certainly did, dear," Celestia assured her. "Many times, in fact. For all his other faults, Blueblood has never been a pony to shirk responsibility."

"Huh," Blueblood's mother scoffed, "You don't know him like I do. He'll do his best to dodge out of anything unpleasant, the lazy colt." Celestia shrugged.

"Not if you use the words 'honour' and 'grace' enough." She smiled knowingly. "And offering the odd treat doesn't hurt."

"Nobility shouldn't need to be offered biscuits to do its job!"

"You never seemed to mind," Celestia teased.

"Auntie!" Blueblood's mother cried, exasperated. "This is serious. How will it look if one of our delegates doesn't attend the meeting? How will it affect the debates?"

"About the same amount it will affect it to know that one of our delegates is a fretting mess of a mare," the princess said, taking her niece by the shoulders. More delegates had begun to file into the room. Celestia smoothed her niece's hair, and put on the voice of confidence. "You mustn't worry so much, Amethyst. I'm sure Blueblood is just sleeping in. I hear he had a late night last night." She smiled sweetly. "Now go and take your seat, dear. Try to look composed for our guests. You'll have to be enough for the both of you, for a while."

"Alright Auntie," Amethyst nodded. "Thank you." She left the stage and climbed the stairway, finding the seat that was marked with her cutie mark. Her son's cutie mark sat next to her, it's seat empty. Celestia turned her attention away from the arriving delegates for a moment, instead addressing the guard who had stood on the edge of her vision while she spoke with her niece.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Your majesty," the guard whispered, taking a step forward, "I went to wake the prince like you asked... he was missing."

"Missing?" the princess repeated. Neither her face nor her tone betrayed any sign of shock or surprise. The guard nodded.

"I'm afraid so. We checked with the Aloan princess as well – we'd heard from some of their ponies that he'd spent the night with her, but he wasn't there either. His bodyguard is missing as well. The guards who are still here are searching the palace as we speak."

"I see," Celestia said quietly. "Don't let anypony but our guards know about this."

"Of course, your majesty," the guard said, bowing again. "Would you like me to alert you when we find the prince?"

"No," Celestia said, "Send him in if you find him, but wait until the meeting is over to give me your report."

The guard bowed again, and backed off the stage. Most of the delegates had arrived now, and Celestia was beginning to regret insisting that they meet so early. Still, she couldn't afford to do anything about it now. All she could do for the next few hours was hope that the prince had simply wandered off somewhere.

Many miles away, Prince Blueblood awoke. Early morning sun filtered through his eyelids, and the smell of salt tingled in his nose. This confused him a bit, as did the fact that his bed jostled beneath him. He wondered crossly if Princess Golden dreams was dancing on the bed, and if she would kindly stop as it made his head swim – until he opened his eyes. He was not in his bedchambers. He was not in the visiting princess's bedchambers. He was not in anypony's bedchambers, unless that pony was very unfortunate indeed. He seemed to be in the back of a carriage. His head snapped up, and memories flooded back to him. The Aloan ambassador, his soldiers... and Iron. The guard was nowhere to be seen. No pony was in the carriage with him, in fact. Blueblood wasn't sure whether he should be pleased about that or not. He was about to call out to his captors, when he heard a voice.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to take him this far away from Equestria?" It was Iron. The ambassador answered him.

"I'm not about to start taking advice from you, Iron, not after what you did last night. At any rate, there isn't anywhere secure enough on the mainland. There's a trade city just inside the peninsula, we'll be able to hold him there until this all blows over."

"Hmph. Funny to hear you talk about security. He's bouncing around back there without any supervision at all."

"I doubt he'll need it. It's not as if he's going to be able to do much now, thanks to you. I doubt he'll even be awake for a few hours."

"I don't see why you're so sore about that," Iron said. His tone had changed – the urgency was gone, and there was an arrogant quality to it. The ambassador harrumphed.

"It was unnecessary. If his aunt ever finds out we were the ones responsible, we'll be skinned alive."

"I didn't hear you bring that up last night."

"Like I was going to argue with you when you were swinging that... thing, around! It's not important now. We'll keep him until the conference is over, and send him back. Blame it all on rebels, or something."

Blueblood crawled away from the wall, until he could no longer hear his kidnapper's voices. *This is insane*, he thought, *they're going to kill me!* A little voice in the back of his head told him that that was, silly, they'd never be stupid enough to kill him – his aunt would rain fire down on their heads. Still, that didn't change the fact that he needed to get out of there. He got shakily to his hooves, and inspected the door. He put his hoof against it and pushed experimentally. It was locked.

Well, that's no problem, Blueblood realized after a moment of panic, *I'll just open it with my magic!* He reared his head, trying to visualize the lock in his mind. Strangely, he couldn't picture it's inner workings. He furrowed his brow and tried again, trying to spread his magic over the lock, but nothing happened. No glow, no movement, not even the instinctive knowledge of an object that comes from handling it magically.

"What's going on?" Blueblood whispered to himself. His brow furrowed deeper. It must have been some sort of anti-magic. He tried again, straining himself, but to no avail. Eventually he sat on the floor, defeated.

What am I going to do? he moaned internally. He was going to be trapped in there until they took him into that city, and locked him up in some dirty old jail cell. He would probably have to share it with some smelly, decrepit old stallion, and they would only feed him slop and water twice a day. Or they would shackle him against the wall in rusty old chains, that would chafe and stain his fur. He would probably waste away to nothing before too long. He'd end up looking like some dirt-poor pony from some backwater farming village, his pristine white fur covered in dirt and slime. How awful!

Despite all that, he smiled to himself smugly. When this was all over, he would tell his auntie what they had done, and then they would get what was coming to them. They would see what happened when you wronged a prince, every single one of them! He leaned back, a bit happier than before, when he caught a snippet of Iron's conversation again.

"...Send a piece of him back."

Blueblood's eyes bulged. He clasped his hooves over his mouth to keep from crying out, and crept closer to the source of the voices.

"Well... it would certainly complete the illusion," The ambassador said.

"Exactly," Iron laughed, "They'll know 'we' mean business. We might even be able to pull some Bits out of the deal."

"We don't use Bits here, Iron. Anyways, I thought you didn't care about being paid?"

"Oh, I don't – being able to hurt that good-for-nothing brat is more than enough for me," Iron said. His voice was filled with a cruel sort of glee, like a schoolyard bully. "But if I can pull in some money, well, that's a bonus isn't it?"

Blueblood's heart froze in his chest. Send a piece of him back? Just for a more convincing lie? All traces of his smugness were gone, replaced by a gripping fear. Iron's sadistic grin filled his head, laughing hysterically. Blueblood needed to get out of there, and he needed to get out of there FAST.

He moved back to the door as quickly and quietly as he could, and pushed against it as hard as he could manage. The lock held fast, and the door didn't budge. He strained against it with all his might, even daring to throw himself against it, but for nothing. He kept trying. He began to sweat, and his mane stuck to his face. His breathing was heavy, but he struggled to keep it quiet. He couldn't risk letting Iron or the ambassador know he was awake. Finally, after what seemed like ages of struggling and pushing, he heard a small splintering noise. He stepped back to inspect the door and sure enough, it had begun to break. It was only a tiny crack – the wood near the lock had worn against the metal – but Blueblood's heart leapt. He returned to his work with a renewed vigor, dragging his hooves across the worn wood and straining against the lock. Little by little the worn patch got larger and larger. Soon he could dig his hooves into it, hacking away chips of wood from the door. Splinters dug into his hooves, but he ignored the pain. All he could think about was Iron, imagining the big gray pony bearing down on him, holding him down and grinning like a madpony. Blueblood shuddered, and pushed against the lock again. It wiggled a bit in its mount, and Blueblood grinned. He shoved against it, rocking back and forth and pausing every so often to dig more wood out of the door. The more he

pushed on it, the more it rocked. Eventually he started to hear a cracking noise as he pushed against it. He scraped his hoof against the door desperately, and dug a huge chunk of it out. As the piece of door fell, the morning light shone through. Blueblood gave the lock one final push, and with a weak crack it popped out of its mount. Ecstatic, Blueblood threw himself against the door. It swung open easily, and he tumbled out of the carriage – and right into a ditch.

The prince rolled down the steep wall of the ditch, grunting painfully as he landed in the bottom. He splashed into a puddle of stagnant water, but he didn't complain – he didn't make a sound. He lay there in the bottom of the ditch, hooves over his mouth and not daring to breathe as the sound of the carriage slowly moved away from him. Only when he could no longer hear the crunch of its wheels on the road did he allow himself to breathe a heavy sigh of relief. He lay in the ditch until his pounding heart finally settled, and in spite of himself he began to laugh. He had escaped!

I'm free! He thought to himself as he clambered up the side of the ditch. *Now I just need to get back to the palace, and tell auntie about what Iron did to me, and...*

Blueblood looked up and down the road. The only times he had ever left the palace before were for official appearances, holidays and the like, and he had certainly never left Equestria before. The environment was completely alien to him. The land seemed flat in all directions, except for the steep slope to the west. In the distance, Blueblood could see a shining line that bulged and sank along the horizon – the ocean. To the east, Blueblood could just make out the tips of a mountain range.

"Where in the world am I?" the prince cried out. He sat down on the side of the road, looking left and right. He knew he was in Aloa, at least. It may not have been much, but at least it was a start. He closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to remember any of his lessons from his geography tutor. Unfortunately, all that came to mind were the rude drawings he had made of his tutor. He did remember, however, that Aloa was west of Equestria – which meant home was east. Blueblood looked around once more, and sighed. There was no pony around.

"Well," he said, getting to his hooves, "Mother and Auntie have probably sent out guards to look for me by now... but they aren't going to find me

sitting on some dirt road in the middle of nowhere." He set off east, in search of a town.

The sun reached its zenith, shining down on the world below. Without any trees growing in its sandy soil, the country of Aloa was at the sun's mercy, as was Blueblood. The white stallion limped along the road, whimpering whenever he stepped with his bad hoof. Once the rush of adrenaline had left his system, the splinters in his hoof had begun the sting and ache unbearably. His hoof was burning, and the heat of the midday sun wasn't helping his temperament at all. Finally, he collapsed beside the road, whimpering miserably.

"This is it," he moaned, "I'm going to die. I'm going to die out here, in the middle of nowhere in some stupid little country. No pony will ever be able to tell my story. Ponies in the future will learn about Equestria's princes, but will they ever learn about Prince Blueblood? No. Because Prince Blueblood disappeared one day, and got eaten by buzzards along some Celestia-forsaken road. He sighed, and flopped his head to the side. In the ditch beside the road there was a small bush, and for just a moment Blueblood thought he saw it twitch. His eyes narrowed, and he watched it carefully. Slowly, a tiny head appeared from behind it, staring at him. It was a foal.

"Hello?" Blueblood asked, pushing himself up. The foal ducked behind the bush again, and Blueblood stood up. "Hello?" he asked again, trotting towards the bush. He skidded down the side of the road, coming to a stop a few feet away from the bush. The foal squeaked and ran off.

"Wait!" Blueblood called after the foal. "Come back!" He tried to follow after it, but his hoof made him unable to keep up, so he just watched. The foal scrambled up the other side of the ditch, and darted over a hill on the other side. Blueblood followed slowly, pulling himself out of the ditch and limping up the hill. When he reached the top, he could see that the other side fell away, quickly turning to sand. A river cut through the landscape not far away, and the foal was running to what appeared to be a small house floating near the bank.

Ponies! Blueblood thought happily. He grinned wildly and dashed down the hill – or tried. He lost his footing in the loose sand and fell flat on his face, sliding down in an avalanche of soil and winding up lying on his back at the bottom.

"That seems to be happening a lot today," He muttered as he righted himself. He shook the sand out of his mane, and looked up. He could see the foal, peeking from behind a round, older-looking unicorn mare. There were a few other foals nearby, as well as a pair of older colts, all staring at the prince. He stared back for a moment, before standing up straight and puffing out his chest.

"Good day," He said in his most regal tone. The mare approached him, her foal still skirting her legs, and smiled broadly to Blueblood.

"Well, good day to you too, young colt," She said happily, "You'll have to excuse my family, we don't tend to see many earth ponies around these parts. What's your name?"

"My name is prince Blueblood," he declared, "And I am no simple earth pony! I am a pure-blooded unicorn!"

"Great," a young stallion remarked, "He's crazy." Blueblood scowled at the stallion and swelled his chest, preparing to verbally lash him, but the old mare cut him off.

"Mind your manners, colt!" she snapped. "That's no way to talk about our guest." She turned back to Blueblood and gently took his head in her hooves. "Anyways, he ain't crazy... poor thing probably knocked his head, and he's confused. Look at all this blood. Come along colt, let's get you cleaned up. You look like you dug your way out of your own grave."

"What?" Blueblood asked as the mare pulled him along. The foal now trotted alongside the prince, staring intently at him. Blueblood was pulled waist-deep into the river, where he finally saw himself in the water

The mare hadn't been exaggerating when she said he looked like he crawled out of the grave. He was caked in dirt and sand, turning his coat from a pristine white into a pale, smokey gray. Clumps of mud clung to him, and his mane was matted against his forehead. Any other day, any of that would have been enough to send him into fits, but he didn't even notice. All he could do was stare at his face.

His horn was missing.

No wonder the mare had thought he was an earth pony. There was no trace of it, just his straw-blond mane plastered over his face where his horn used to be. A dark line of dried blood ran down the center of his face, dipping down to the left past his eyes. The only hint that there had ever been a horn there. As far as anypony was concerned, he was just another earth pony.

"How... what happened to it?" he said to himself, "Where did my horn go?" More memories from the previous night came back to him. Right before he blacked out, he remembered the most bizarre feeling, and the most incredible light he had ever seen. He remembered the soldiers holding him down against the stone as Iron brandished his axe, laughing like a maniac. Blueblood shut his eyes, and began to shake violently. "Oh..." He whimpered.

A torrent of water falling over his head broke him out of his stupor. He coughed and spluttered, pulling his mane out of his eyes to see the mare magically pulling a large ball of water out of the river.

"Sorry about that," She said cheerfully, dumping the water over his head again. "But if the water's too cold for you the best thing to do is just dive right in."

"I'm... what?" Blueblood asked. The mare shook her head, and tutted.

"You must have knocked your head mighty hard," She said, "But we can still get you cleaned up." She levitated a cloth from the shore and dunked it in the water, saturating it. She began to scrub Blueblood firmly with it who, long used to having servants help him wash, allowed her to wash him without a fuss. Before too long she had managed to scrub him mostly clean. He looked at his reflection in the water once again. His fur was back to it's proper white colour and his mane no longer stuck to his clean face, but there was still no evidence that he had ever been a unicorn. He walked to the shore and sat down, sighing.

"There now, isn't that much better?" the mare asked him. "My name's Seagrass, by the way."

"Hm?" Blueblood said offhandedly, "Yes, thank you miss."

"So where d'you come from, Blueblood?" She pressed. She clearly noticed his depression. Blueblood sighed, and answered.

"Canterlot," he said, "in Equestria."

"Canterlot, eh? Can't say I know where that is, I'm afraid," Seagrass admitted. "I know most everywhere there is to go along the Crate river, but beyond that I don't know much. Still, Equestria. That's a fair ways away from here. What brings a young stallion like yourself this far west?"

"I..." Blueblood began. He wasn't sure whether or not he should tell this old mare the truth. For all he knew, they could try to deliver him back to the ambassador, or try to squeeze anything they could out of Blueblood. There was no telling with these ponies. Finally, he settled on a lie.

"I was visiting someone," he said, "but my ride home abandoned me, and now I'm completely lost."

"Lost?" Seagrass said, shaking her head sadly, "Well, that's no good. I'll tell you what. My family and I are making our way upriver now. There's a town called Riverbank about a half a days trip east of here where we'll make port. We can take you about as far as that, and I'm sure you'll be able to find yourself a ride home from there. How's that sound?"

Blueblood thought about it for a moment. He didn't know if he could trust these ponies, but they were traveling away from Iron, which was good. It would certainly beat trying to walk all the way to the next town with no idea where he was going and a bad hoof. All in all, it was the best option. Blueblood nodded.

"That would be good," he said. He had regained some of his composure, and he managed to at least stand straight and proud – if he couldn't look like a true prince, he could at least act the part, he resolved.

"Well, we'll be ready to head off again in just a few minutes. My husband's just off getting water."

Blueblood looked back at the river. "There's plenty of water right there," he pointed out. Seagrass shook her head, and laughed.

"We're too close to the ocean here," she told him. "This water is brackish. Not good to drink. There's a wellspring nearby here though, so we stop by and fill top up whenever we pass."

"I see," Blueblood nodded, "So, you and your family live in this... boat?" He gestured vaguely towards the floating house. Now that he had gotten closer to it it looked less like a true house and more like a raft that just happened to have walls and a roof. Blueblood doubted it even had any rooms.

"That's right," the old mare nodded. "We travel up and down the river. We're traders, mostly, but we ship as well. The river moves better than most mailponies can on their own, after all."

"I don't see how that's possible," Blueblood scoffed. "The pegasi can fly faster than any river can move."

"Yeah, if there were any pegasi around," the young stallion from earlier snarked again. His mother glared at him, and explained,

"We don't have many pegasi in Aloa, or earth ponies like yourself... it's mostly unicorns here, really."

"Really," Blueblood said. Now that he thought of it, all of the guards that had captured him had been unicorns, as opposed to the mix of races in Equestria's service. Seagrass looked like she was about to say something else, when she suddenly looked over the prince's shoulder. Blueblood turned around to see a large, silvery-blue unicorn stallion coming over the hill with two large barrels floating around his head. The colts both ran to the stallion, who Blueblood presumed to be their father, and helped him bring the barrels down the sandy hill.

"Hey, sweetie," The stallion said gruffly, setting down the barrels and embracing his wife.

"Hello Seastone," Seagrass said, "How are you feeling?"

"Tired," the unicorn laughed, "Water never gets any lighter. Good thing I've got these stout colts around to help their old stallion out, eh?" He ruffled the mane of the colt nearest to him, and turned to Blueblood. "Speaking of," he said, "looks like we've managed to pick up a new one, eh?"

"This is Blueblood," Seagrass said, introducing the prince to her husband, "We're taking him up to Riverbank."

"Oh are we now?" Seastone asked, smirking at Blueblood. "Well, it's nice to meet you, Blueblood – bit of a funny name, that."

"It's a very old, and very respected name," Blueblood said sharply. Seastone raised his hooves apologetically.

"Alright, well, I don't know many earth ponies – I wouldn't know." He held out his hoof to Blueblood, who took it carefully. Seastone shook firmly, causing Blueblood to wince in pain as the splinters in his hoof shifted around.

"Oh, dear!" Seagrass cried, taking Blueblood's hoof immediately, "What happened to your hoof?"

"Splinters," the prince told her. The mare tutted, and began pulling him towards her home.

"Colts, help your father bring in the water," she called back to her children, "I'm going to see what we can do about this."

Blueblood wrenched his hoof away from Seagrass, and stood up tall. "I can walk to your home myself, thank you," He said. His pride had taken enough hits today – he didn't need some old mare treating him like a foal on top of everything. Seagrass frowned at him, but didn't say anything. She simply led the prince inside, letting him limp off the bank and onto the shaky foundations of the raft.

Blueblood had been right about the home – it was made of a single room. There was a large round table in the middle, several hammocks slung up along the corners and a wood-burning stove, but aside from that it was decidedly spartan. The pair of young stallions came in with the water barrels, followed by their father and all the other children. When they were all packed into the same room Blueblood was able to count them easier. Aside from Seagrass and Seastone, there were three colts and two fillies. The two colts who carried in the water were the eldest, and the foal who Blueblood had seen in the bush the youngest. The two fillies were in the middle, both looking about the age to get their cutie marks soon. After he saw that the water was placed properly, Seastone left through a small door

in the front of the home, and Blueblood felt the craft lurch into motion moments later.

"What's he doing?" Blueblood asked.

"Who, Seastone?" Seagrass asked. "He's moving us with his magic. It's the easiest way to go upriver. We're fighting the current the whole way up. Downriver is much easier, we can just drift along." She lifted Blueblood's hoof carefully, and inspected it. "Hmm..." She said, squinting, "You sure got a lot of them in there, didn't you?" She asked. "What were you doing?"

"I'd rather not say," Blueblood said. Seagrass shrugged.

"Ah, well. Everypony's entitled to their privacy." Her horn lit up, and one of the splinters loosed itself from Blueblood's hoof.

"YEOUCH!" the prince cried, jerking his hoof back. The older colt stared at him, and Seagrass rolled her eyes.

"What, haven't you ever had a splinter before?" she asked. "They hurt. Don't be such a foal, otherwise I'll never get them out."

"I was not being a foal." Blueblood look away from her, embarrassed. "You just... caught me off guard, that's all."

"Well then," she smiled, "I'm going to pull out your splinters. There – on guard now?" Blueblood nodded. Seagrass's horn lit up again, and she began to pull out the many, many splinters. Blueblood winced each time, but he did manage to keep himself from yelling. After a while, the white stallion became aware of the fact that he was being watched. The older colts and fillies had retired to the corners of the house to play a game, but the youngest colt was sitting across the table from Blueblood, staring at him.

"That's just our Sandy," Seagrass said, plucking out another splinter, "Don't you mind him. He's never seen an earth pony before."

"I... don't mind," Blueblood said. Sandy was an appropriate name for the beige colt. He dipped his head below the table a bit when Blueblood looked at him, so the stallion pretended to look away, watching the foal out of the corner of his eye.

"Does he talk?"

"When he wants to. Not that that comes around much. Mostly, he just likes to watch. He's a clever colt, don't let the quiet fool you. There's a lot going on in that little head of his."

"Hard to imagine," Blueblood said. "He's barely moving."

"He ain't moving," Seagrass said, tapping her forehead, "But his head is. Just you watch. I bet he'll be nothing but questions later tonight. You know how foals are."

"No," Blueblood said, "I never really met any foals."

Seagrass plucked a splinter, and paused. "How can you have never met a foal before?" she asked. Blueblood shrugged.

"I don't have any siblings. I've seen foals around, but none of them ever talk to me."

"Well, that don't seem right to me," she laughed, patting his shoulder. "You seem like a nice enough lad. Maybe a little funny still, but nice enough." Blueblood raised an eyebrow at this, but Seagrass continued, "You'll probably get your first time tonight, just you wait. You're all done."

"What?"

"Your hoof. All the splinters are gone."

"Oh," Blueblood said, inspecting his hoof, "So they are." He tried to put his hoof down to test it out, but magic took hold of it before it reached the ground.

"Ah ah ah," Seagrass said, wagging her hoof at him, "Sorry, you aren't quite done yet."

"What?" Blueblood asked. "But all the splinters are gone. You said it was done."

"Well the splinters are gone, yes," Seagrass said, "But the hoof could get infected. We need to put something on it."

"Oh, fine," Blueblood sighed, sitting back down. Seagrass went to a cupboard and returned with a small jar. She scooped out some of the contents and began to massage it into Blueblood's hoof. It felt cold, and it stung a bit, but Blueblood didn't complain. Finally, Seagrass wrapped some bandages around his hoof and put her hooves together.

"There you go," She said, "All better."

Blueblood inspected his hoof. "It feels much better," he said.

"I'm glad," Seagrass said, smiling at him. She stood up from the table and trotted over to where her children were playing, joining them. Blueblood stayed seated at the table. He stared at the bandaged hoof, turning it over and looking at it from every different angle. He wasn't quite sure why. He knew he should be angry that this had happened to him, but he wasn't. The only thing he felt was tired. He rested his head on the table and looked around the room. Suddenly, he realized that Sandy wasn't sitting across from him anymore. He wasn't playing with his siblings, either. He didn't seem to be anywhere in the room. Narrowing his eyes, Blueblood leaned down, and peeked beneath the table. Sure enough, there was Sandy.

"Hi," the little colt said quietly.

"What are you doing down there?" Blueblood asked.

"You said you were a prince. Mama and Papa said that you gotta be lower than a prince to talk to them. So I'm under that table, so I'll be lower than you."

"Well," Blueblood said, tilting his head, "You don't have to be under the table to be lower than me. You can be lower than me anywhere in the room." He hadn't expecting such a young colt to understand royalty – though calling it understanding would be a bit of a stretch.

Sandy shuffled out from under the table, and sat beside Blueblood, staring up at him. The prince was beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable.

"Are you really a prince?" The colt asked suddenly.

"Of course I am," Blueblood answered.

"Seaweed doesn't believe you," he said, "I don't think momma does either."

"Well, they wouldn't know, would they," Blueblood said, rolling his eyes, "They don't care about anything outside their lives. I'm the prince of Equestria."

"Where's that?"

"It's... east of here," Blueblood said vaguely.

"Where east of here?"

"I don't know. East. It's in the mountains."

"How come you don't know where it is?" Sandy asked, tilting his head quizzically. "Shouldn't a prince know where his country is?"

"Well I've never been here before." Blueblood looked away from the colt. "And I didn't see where I came from. So I just know Equestria is in the mountains east of here. Why are you so curious?"

"I've never seen a prince before. Or an earth pony. What's it like, being an earth pony prince?"

"Well, I can tell you what it's like to be a prince," Blueblood said, puffing out his chest like a songbird. "You have everypony's utmost respect. They'll do anything for you, and never complain about it to you. There are a few responsibilities, but most of the time you get to do whatever you want. No pony is allowed to question you, either." He paused, and his brow furrowed for a moment, but he shook his head and continued.

"I don't know what it's like to be an earth pony, however. I, am a unicorn."

"Really?" Sandy asked. "Then how come you don't have a horn?" Blueblood's head sank.

"Well... It's a very long story," Blueblood said, "I don't think that a foal would understand."

"I'm not a foal!" Sandy objected, "And momma and poppa say I'm smart! I'll understand!"

"It's not about being smart," Blueblood scoffed, "It's about... jealousy. Somepony was jealous of me. Anyways, I'm not going to talk about it any more than that."

"Well... okay," Sandy said. "I'm gonna go play now. Do you wanna play with me?"

"No, thank you," Blueblood said, "princes do not 'play'."

"Okay," Sandy said. He got down from his chair and ran over to his siblings and mother, joining in their game. Blueblood watched him for a little while, then continued to stare at his injured hoof.

"Dinner time, dear," Seagrass called out the front door. A grunt of recognition came from outside, and Seagrass let the door swing shut. She turned her attention to the foals, who were already seated around the table.

"Did you all wash your hooves?" She asked sternly.

"I did!" Sandy piped up. The two fillies nodded as well, but the older colts begrudgingly stood up and washed their front hooves in a bowl of water taken from the barrels.

"And you, Blueblood?" Seagrass asked, "Did you wash your hooves?"

"Of course," The prince said, turning up his nose, "I do have my manners, miss."

"I'm sure you do, dear," Seagrass said. As her husband entered the room and washed up himself, the mare placed a package in the center of the table and unwrapped it. It contained several sticks of a hard, green substance. Seagrass passed them around to her children, who began to suck and chew on them. She gave one to Blueblood, who simply stared at it.

"What... is it?" Blueblood asked.

"It's seaweed," Seastone answered. His son looked up for a moment, before shaking his head and returning to his meal. Blueblood sniffed it, and gave it an experimental nibble. There was a salty taste, but it was

overpowered by a pungent, pickle-like flavour. Blueblood pulled a face, and stuck his tongue out.

"Bleagh!" He said, "That's awful!" Seastone and Seagrass both laughed.

"I take it you've never had seaweed before," Seastone said, "It's sort of an acquired taste."

"How in the world would you acquire it?" the prince asked, "I'd think starvation would be preferable.

"If you don't want to eat it, I'll take yours," Seaweed piped up. Blueblood seriously considered giving it to him for a moment, but his stomach growled fiercely.

"No," the white stallion said. He took another bite out of the tough plant. It was almost as difficult to actually take a bite out of it as it was to stomach the taste. The plant was dry and extremely stringy, and Blueblood could hardly grip it with just his hooves. He set it on the table, deciding he would just pick it up with his magic. He focused on it, mentally reaching out to it, but nothing happened. He stared at it furiously for a moment, before it dawned on him. He no longer had his horn – and no horn meant no magic.

"Something wrong, Blueblood?" Seagrass asked him. He shook his head.

"Nothing's wrong," he said firmly. He picked up the piece of seaweed again, chewing on it furiously.

It doesn't matter, he thought to himself weakly, *It doesn't matter. You are still the prince of Equestria. You can still be proud of that, at least. It doesn't matter.*

The family chattered happily as they ate, though Blueblood stayed quiet. He stood tall and straight, chewing his food silently. Sandy managed to stare at him even more intently than he had before, Somehow. When the meal was finished the family washed their hooves gain, and settled in around the table to chat more.

"We'll pull into Riverbank in about an hour or so," Seastone said. "A breeze cropped up, I set up the sail so we'll drift right in. How'd you like that seaweed, colt?"

"I've certainly had better meals," Blueblood said flippantly, "But it was alright, I suppose."

"Well..." Seastone replied, raising an eyebrow, "I'd imagine most ponies have. But we've been low on food lately. It's been a couple of weeks since we made port. Seaweed'll keep forever – good thing too, since most ponies will go for as long as they can before eating it. So... I don't think I ever heard where you're from, Blueblood?"

"Canterlot," he replied, "The capital of Equestria."

"Ah," Seastone said, nodding, "I hear a bit about it from other traders, but I've never been myself. I hear it's a nice city."

"It's nice enough," Blueblood said, "But I spend most of my time in the Palace. Much nicer than any city."

"Really? So, you're a servant? A guard?"

"Hardly," Blueblood scoffed, "I am nobility."

"He's a prince!" Sandy piped up, "That's what he said when he came, that he was prince of Equestria!"

"Pff, he was loony when he showed up," Seaweed snorted. His father cuffed him on the ear.

"Seaweed, none of that. We should be good hosts to our guest."

"Right, right," The young stallion scowled, "Sorry, 'your highness'."

"That's quite alright," Blueblood said gracefully, "It would hardly be fair of me to hold commoners to the same standards of class as nobility, after all."

"Well..." Seastone said quietly. He exchanged a look with his wife, then stood up. "I'm going to go and make sure we don't drift past the town. It was... interesting chatting with you, Blueblood." He trotted out the door, shutting it tight behind him. The room fell into silence, and Seagrass coughed.

"So, um, Blueblood," she said carefully, "When we met you mentioned you were here visiting someone. Was it a matter of state?"

"Sort of," Blueblood said, his head dipping slightly. "It's rather complicated. I'd rather not talk about it."

"I understand," the mare said. Once again, the room became silent. One by one the colts and fillies drifted away from the table to their corners to play, until it was just Seagrass and Blueblood sitting. Seagrass looked around awkwardly, and asked, "I hope you don't mind if I leave you here?"

"Not at all," Blueblood said. Seagrass nodded, and left the table gratefully.

Blueblood sat alone by himself for the short remainder of the trip. He tried his best to look proud and important, despite the fact that he was doing little more than staring into space. He had felt better for a while, but once again he was beginning to feel tired.

I'll have to find an inn when we arrive, he thought, It's been a... taxing day, after all. Slowly, he felt the raft begin to slow down, and eventually stop. The door opened up, and Seastone poked his head in.

"We're in Riverbank now," he said. The family piled out onto the front deck of the raft, Blueblood included. Night had fallen, and most of the town seemed to be asleep. The river cut right through the center, with cobblestone banks on either side.

"There's no dock?" Blueblood asked.

"There are some deeper in the city," Seastone said, "but I figured you'd want to get off as soon as you could.

"Well, that's very thoughtful of you," Blueblood said. He smiled at the family earnestly, and he felt the tiredness slip away a little. "You should consider ferrying passengers more often. You certainly aren't the worst company I've had lately."

"I... don't think that's going to happen," Seastone said.

"Well, there's probably good money in it," Blueblood offered, "You could probably afford to upgrade your home a little bit too, make it more comfortable."

"Thank you for the advice," Seastone said, patience clearly waning from his voice, "Now please, if you're ready to go?"

"Well, I suppose so," Blueblood said. "But, how am I supposed to get to shore? Do you have a plank, or something?" He looked around for something that would get him to the shore, until he felt magic grip his body.

"I'll give you a lift to the bank," Seastone said shortly, "unless you'd prefer to swim."

"I think I'd prefer the lift," Blueblood answered. "You ponies really do know how to be hospitable, don't you?"

"Well, we do try dear," Seagrass said sweetly.

"If only we had better guests," Seaweed snorted. Blueblood glowered at him.

"And goodbye to you too, you rude little colt," he said. "I hope your parents manage to teach you some manners one day."

"You're one to talk." The colt stuck his tongue out. Blueblood huffed impudently, and looked to the colt's father.

"No, I'm with the colt on this one," Seastone said flatly. "If somepony invites you into their home, you should at least be courteous enough not to insult them. I'd think 'nobility' would know that. Now, kindly get off my boat."

Blueblood drifted over the edge of the boat, and the magic let go, plunging him into the river. He broke the surface, spluttering and flicking his mane out of his eyes. He swam to the shore and scrambled out of the freezing water, coughing and spluttering.

"How dare you!" He shouted at the retreating raft, "How DARE you! What did I ever do to you, huh!" He scowled at the ship, and shivered angrily. "Rotten peasants," he harrumphed, turning around. Out of the blackness, a piece of seaweed came whizzing and struck him in the back of the head.

Chapter 3

In Which Hope is Lost

The trade city of Newport came alive early in the morning. Unicorns bustled around the city, setting up shops in the bazaar, making deliveries and preparing for the day ahead. For some ponies, this business was more urgent than others.

The ambassador paced restlessly in the safe house. His black mane was disheveled, curling aimlessly across his face without its usual tie, his eyes sunken and half closed. He hadn't slept, and it showed. Iron sat at the table in the lavish main room, watching him. Unlike his partner, Iron didn't seem to be upset in the slightest. The only indication that he was even awake was his eyes, narrow and peering, watching the ambassador move back and forth across the room. Back and forth, back and forth...

"What are you just sitting around for?" the ambassador snapped, whirling on the guard. Iron shrugged, and folded his hooves in front of his mouth.

"What do you expect me to do? Help you wear a hole in the carpet?"

"You could offer an idea! Prisoners are your area of expertise, not mine!"

Iron glared daggers at the plump crimson pony. "Are you trying to blame this on me?" he asked dangerously. "I already gave you an idea. That idea was 'tie him up'. But you don't take my advice, remember?" The ambassador took a step back, and retorted.

"There's no point in blaming anypony right now. Right now, we need ideas." The ambassador sat down, and put his head in his hooves. "You know the prince better than anypony. What would he do after he escaped? Run? Hide?"

"Go looking for the closest person who can deal with his problems for him," Iron said.

"So you think he'd go for the nearest town?"

"Eventually," Iron shrugged, "but not at first. I don't think he'd go anywhere for a while. He'd probably just sit and bawl until somepony came to help him."

"So what does that mean for us?" The ambassador sighed. A maid came into the room and set a tea tray in front of him.

"Your tea, ambassador Letter," she said respectfully. The ambassador nodded gratefully, and dismissed her. He poured himself a cup of tea and sipped at it, musing aloud.

"That road might not be busy, but somepony would have passed him," he said. "He would have made it to some sort of town yesterday."

"Well, that's great," Iron said, scowling. "At least we've narrowed it down to what – three, four towns? How long is that going to take us to search?"

"The farthest likely town is a days trip west," Letter said, "Anything between that and Equestria is pretty much barren. There's another small city between here and there. It'll take all my guards maybe two or three days to search it, before they can move on."

"All your guards?" Iron asked, slamming his hoof on the table. Letter's tea set rattled on its platter. "Three days, for all the guards? Do you know what will happen if Celestia finds out about this?"

"I know exactly what will happen!" Letter snapped. "Celestia blames Aloa, and we get boiled alive for causing all this!"

"Well, then maybe you could spare more than ten bloody guards!" Iron roared, slamming his hoof on the table again. "You should have dozens on this! Hundreds! We need that brat found NOW!"

"We can't get hundreds of guards on this," Letter seethed, "We can't get ANY more guards." He took a sip of tea to calm himself, while Iron stared.

"What do you mean, we can't get more guards?" he asked. Letter remained silent, sipping his tea. Iron's face slowly creased more and more into a scowl, becoming the picture of rage as it dawned on him. "This wasn't your king's idea, was it?"

Letter set his tea down carefully, and looked away. Impossibly, Iron's expression grew even more furious, until it seemed to glow red. Heat seemed to radiate off of him, like his namesake metal had been put in a fire. He roared, and struck Letter's tea set off the table.

"You IDIOT!" he berated the ambassador, throwing him to the ground. "We'll both be boiled alive if that colt makes it back home! And for what! Some petty ambition? What, you thought this would put you in your King's good books?"

"So what was your reason?" Letter shouted back, getting to his hooves, "You just wanted a chance to hurt the prince? Which one of us is worse, then?"

Iron roared wordlessly, like a mad beast, and reared up. His hooves struck Letter hard, throwing him across the room.

"Don't you DARE try to turn this on me!" he snarled, "This was your idea, not mine!" His head was held low to the ground, like he was ready to charge at any moment. Letter swallowed, and slowly got to his hooves.

"Look, this isn't helping us," he said cautiously. "We can't go to the king now. We need to get started searching for him if we want any chance of finding him."

Iron's chest heaved heavily, but it began to slow, and before long he regained his apathetic exterior.

"You're right," he said, "Gather the guards. We'll set out as soon as they're all ready. As far as we know, the brat could be asleep on a carriage back to Equestria by now."

Blueblood woke slow, and hard. For just a moment, he seemed to be aware of everything at once. The texture of the stones beneath him, the bristling of his fur as it played in the wind, and the coolness of a small puddle of water near his hooves. Even the soft hooffalls of nearby ponies seemed like drumbeats. He could feel where his horn had been, burning like a hot coal had been pressed against his head. Slowly though, the world returned to a manageable level, and Blueblood groaned.

He hadn't managed to find any sort of inn last night, and he had not been willing to lower himself enough to ask another family for help. He wasn't even sure if that would work at this point. In the end he had nearly collapsed from exhaustion, falling asleep in a gutter. Somepony had at least been kind enough to drape a newspaper over him while he slept. The prince picked it up, and looked at it. It had been opened to the classifieds. He scowled and pitched it away, sitting up on the street corner. The cold wind coming in from the river nearby pierced through him, chilling him to the bone and causing him to shiver violently. He got to his hooves and made his way away from it as fast as he could.

So far Riverbank had not been kind to him, but he was confident all that would change. All he needed to do was find somepony who could get him out of this Celestia-forsaken country, he thought, and then this nightmare would all be over. He would be back home, back where he rightfully belonged. The only question was, where could he find somepony to bring him home.

He was wandering the town aimlessly. He needed a plan. He needed directions, and he knew it. But he wasn't about to just stop and shame himself in front of some commoner, so he continued to walk tall and proud through the city, until he came to a dead end alleyway. He scowled, turning to leave, but he heard a voice come from deeper in the alleyway. It was laughing at him.

"You lost, son?" the wheezing voice asked. Blueblood turned casually, looking for the source of the voice. It seemed to be coming from a pile of garbage – but as Blueblood came closer, he saw that it was simply a very grimy stallion.

"Hardly," Blueblood said, looking down his nose at the pony, who laughed again.

"So what, then, you just came in here to take a look at the scenery?" he asked, grinning at the prince with a mouth almost completely bereft of teeth.

"Maybe I just felt like going for a walk, and seeing where it took me," Blueblood replied curtly. "What difference does it make to you? I'll be gone soon enough."

"Same difference it would make if someone wandered into your house, son. This here's my home, and I ain't sharing it."

"Well, I have no intention of staying in some dirty old alleyway," Blueblood said. This homeless pony was patronizing him, and it was infuriating. "I won't even be in this silly little town, as soon as I can find a way back to Equestria."

"You're looking to get to Equestria?" the old pony asked. Blueblood sighed.

"Yes, I am," he said. "Not that it's any of your business."

"Well, if you're looking to get out of here you won't find it in any old alley," the stallion said, shakily getting to his hooves. Blueblood resisted the urge to gag as pieces of refuse fell off the old pony. "You can probably work out a deal with some shippers, though."

"Shippers?" Blueblood asked, peering carefully at the old pony. If there were any shippers taking their goods into Equestria, it certainly wouldn't be out of the question for them to take him along. They'd certainly oblige once they realized who he was – they would no doubt be rewarded handsomely. If this old pony knew about any of them, he was at least worth putting up with for a few minutes.

"I doubt you know where any shippers even are," The prince said. The old stallion snorted.

"Course I do," he said. "They'll all be down by the docks in the middle of the town, getting stocked up for today's trip. If you hurry, you might be able to catch one of 'em before they leave."

"What direction are the docks?" Blueblood asked urgently. He had no intention of spending a minute more in this country than he absolutely had to.

"Middle of town, just like I said. You earth-pony types don't listen too good, do you?"

"WHERE is the middle of town?" Blueblood asked impatiently. "And I am not an earth pony – I am a unicorn."

"Huh, right," The stallion wheezed, "And I got a boat to sell you. You just follow the roads, even a dope like you isn't going to miss it. The docks are a hub, and the streets are just spokes and wheels. Now can you get out of my alley?"

"With pleasure," Blueblood sneered as he turned away from the dirty pony. "Enjoy your squalor." He stormed out of the alleyway, glad to be away from the filthy pony. The way that he looked down on Blueblood – him! Some lowly homeless pony, looking down on a prince – infuriated the white stallion. He tried to shake it off, just another unpleasantness he had to deal with in this whole ordeal. He escaped from the area around the alley quickly, ensuring that the pony wouldn't follow him, and found a bench to sit on. His hoof was beginning to ache, and he felt exhausted, despite having woken up mere hours before.

Clearly, he thought to himself, *cobblestone does not make a good bed*. He slumped forward, too tired to hold himself upright on the bench, and looked around.

The entire town seemed to be shining. It didn't compare to Canterlot's alabaster buildings, of course, but the rough sandstone of the town at least made it feel very clean. If it hadn't been for the situation surrounding it, Blueblood might actually have been impressed. As it was though, it was just another reminder of how far away from the comforts of home he was. He straightened up, steeling himself for the coming conversation with the shippers and dock workers, and set off.

Blueblood hated to admit it, but the old pony in the ally had been right. The streets were very easy to navigate. He walked along a gently curving road for about a quarter of an hour before he came to a long, straight street. Further down the street he could see ponies packed together, bustling along. This, he assumed, must be the path to the docks. If it wasn't, he would at least be able to find somepony competent enough to give him proper directions among the crowd. He walked down the street proudly, despite the lack of onlookers, slowly making his way towards the docks. When he finally did arrive, he found his way blocked by a tightly packed crowd of unicorns. He cleared his throat, trying to draw one's attention, but no pony turned around. He tried again, louder. This time, a young stallion in the back turned around.

"What do you want?" he asked sourly. Blueblood turned his nose up, and spoke.

"Move aside. I need to find a shipper."

"Yeah, you and everypony else here buddy," the stallion said. "The shippers just got in, and they're unloading. You'll have to wait your turn like everypony else."

"Oh no, I'm not here to buy. I need to find a shipper who will give me a ride to Equestria."

The young unicorn turned around again, looking more carefully at Blueblood this time. "An earth pony, huh?" he said. "I guess that explains why you want to go to Equestria. Alright, try and listen a bit more carefully this time." He began to speak louder and more slowly, saying, "The docks are packed. No pony's getting anywhere near the shippers until the ponies in front move out. It doesn't matter what you're looking for. You got that, rocky?"

"Yes," Blueblood said patiently, "I got that." The unicorn turned around, and Blueblood made a rude face at him. It was hardly becoming of a prince, but Blueblood was in anything but a princely mood. He wanted to tell the unicorn who he was, who he had just finished insulting, but he knew it wouldn't make a difference. No pony would believe that he was prince Blueblood, not without his horn. He sighed sadly, and sat down. The exhaustion was seeping through his bones. He wanted to just lie down, curl up and go to sleep. He forced himself to stay up, though. He forced himself to keep shuffling forward with the crowd, little by little making his way towards the shippers.

Just a little bit further, he kept telling himself, Just a little bit further. Just need to talk to the shippers. They'll understand. They'll take you home, and you'll be back where you belong. It won't matter to the servants if you've got your horn or not, you'll still be the same old Blueblood. He sighed again.

"Hey, keep it moving, stone-head!" a wheezing voice shouted from behind him.

"Sorry," Blueblood muttered, shuffling forward. He looked back, and saw the old pony from the alleyway standing behind him.

"Oh, it's you," the old stallion laughed. "So you managed to find your way here after all, huh?"

An intense heat flared in Blueblood's gut, filling him up and threatening to leap out his eyes at the filthy pony. He glared and stood straight and tall once more, turning his nose up.

"Of course," he said haughtily. "And just what are you of all ponies doing here? I thought this was supposed to be a market – you know, for ponies who have the money to buy things?"

"Go stick a vegetable in it, colt," the old pony said, "A stallion's gotta eat."

"Really?" Blueblood asked, sneering, "I would have thought you somehow didn't need to eat. You certainly don't seem to feel the need to bathe."

The old unicorn snorted, and tapped his hoof impatiently. "The day I take criticism from some empty-headed earth pony -"

"You aren't in the situation to be arguing criticism from ANYPONY," Blueblood cut him off, "let alone me. But by all means, don't take my criticism. Just go back and eat some of that garbage in your alleyway – or did you need all that to sleep on?"

The dirt stallion snarled at Blueblood, but didn't make a move to fight. He turned around, flicking his tail impatiently.

"I don't feel like listening to some rock-head try to be clever," he muttered, "I'll go find somewhere else to wait." He trotted off with his head slung low, leaving Blueblood grinning smugly at the back of the queue. Or at least, he tried. The victory over the old stallion felt hollow. He was the prince of Equestria, after all. He shouldn't have felt the need to prove himself to anypony, let alone some old bum, and ordinarily he wouldn't have. But he had anyways. The thought of some dirty, grizzled old unicorn, living in a back alley of some two-pony town, thinking that he was better than Blueblood absolutely infuriated the prince. He turned his back on the homeless pony, as well as the empty feeling, and rejoined the queue silently.

Amethyst stirred gently in her bed. She stretched, groaning happily, and looked out her window. It looked like it was already mid-morning, to judge from the sun. She sighed.

The day before had been tiring, to say the least. The debates had gone on the whole day, and without Blueblood there she had needed to fight twice as hard to see Equestria represented fairly, Celestia never once lifting a hoof in her favour. Amethyst loved and respected her aunt immensely, but she would admit there were times the ancient goddess's devotion to her morals was just a bit irritating. The purple princess had fallen asleep almost as soon as the meeting had ended. She vaguely remembered her personal guard helping her back to her chambers, but nothing more.

"Oak?" she called out, sitting up in her bed. The door to her chambers creaked open, revealing a heavily built, red-brown pegasus. He smiled gently at her, and entered the room.

"Yes, m'lady?" he asked.

"What time is it?"

"It's about... ten o'clock, your highness," the guard said. "I'm sorry it's so late. I hadn't wanted to wake you – you had a busy day yesterday, after all."

"That's alright, Oak," Amethyst assured him. "Auntie's giving us all some time to recover after yesterday. The meeting went on much longer than any of us were expecting, of course."

"Of course," Oak nodded. "How did the discussions go?"

"Well..." Amethyst sighed, "they could have been much worse. We've made an alliance with Errebia to the northwest, but they're very small country. I'm worried that our influence might be waning, Oak."

"But, we're still the largest country in the region, aren't we, highness?" Oak asked, tilting his head. Amethyst smiled weakly at him. She loved it when he tilted his head like that. He looked so honest when he did it, so eager to listen.

"For now," she told him, "But Aloa is growing dangerously. Their princess is betrothed to the prince of Mihaan, now. Those are two big countries, Oak. Neither of them like us very much."

"You're worried about them gaining allies against us?"

"I'm worried about them trying to," Amethyst said, shaking her head. "These conferences are supposed to unite our countries, but they're beginning to feel like an arms race. If this keeps up, we could be looking at war. That's the last thing we want."

Oak put his head down, and took a few cautious steps toward his lady. "I'm sure it will work out fine," he said encouragingly. "You'll find a way. I have faith in you, Amethyst – ah!" He blushed. "I-I mean, your highness." Amethyst giggled.

"Oh, Oak. I've told you not to worry about that. Thank you for the vote of confidence." She got out of her bed, stretching slowly and making a happy noise. Oak looked away as she trotted to the window, pulling the curtains more open.

"I don't want to think about politics today, Oak," she said, "I just want to relax. You must be famished, why don't we go and get some breakfast?"

"As you wish, m'lady," Oak said, bowing to her. Amethyst laughed, and shook her head at the humble pegasus.

"Well, I wish you would escort me down to the kitchens for a nice biscuit and a cup of tea," she said. Oak lifted his head, and smiled at her. The pair trotted out into the halls, making for the kitchen. They were mostly silent, Amethyst trying her best to forget about the conference and take in the beautiful morning, but they occasionally broke into conversation. When they did reach the kitchen they didn't stop for long. Instead, Amethyst suggested that they take their breakfast out into the courtyard to enjoy. They spread a blanket, and lounged happily beneath Celestia's bright sun.

"Aaah," Amethyst said, laying on the blanket, "this is exactly what I needed after yesterday. Isn't this nice, Oak? You never seem to relax, this must be wonderful for you."

"It's... nice," the guard said shyly. Amethyst had managed to convince him to take off his heavier armour while he sat with her, and he felt rather bare. Amethyst smiled slyly to herself.

"Hopefully tomorrow will be better at least," she said, resting her chin on her hooves. "Blueblood will be in there with me for sure this time..." she sat up suddenly, looking at her guard. "That reminds me actually," she said, "I meant to ask about him when I called you. Where on earth did that colt get off to yesterday? I know Auntie sent off some of your stallions to look for him, didn't she?"

Oak coughed awkwardly, and looked away from the purple princess. "Well... yes," he said, "yes, she did." Amethyst raised an eyebrow at this. Oak was always shy with her, but this was different. He had never been so deliberately coy with her before.

"Well?" she asked. "You must have found him. What was he up to?" She smiled suddenly, thinking that she might have an idea why Oak was being so shy. "I know for a fact he wasn't with princess Golden Dreams..."

"No," Oak said slowly, "no, he wasn't. He, ah... I'm very sorry, your highness."

"Sorry?" Amethyst repeated. She leaned in to Oak, suddenly very concerned. "Sorry for what?"

The guard closed his eyes in shame, looking away from his princess. "We searched the entire palace and surrounding area for him," he said quietly. "We couldn't find him at all. Prince Blueblood is missing."

Finally, the crowd around the docks had begun to disperse, allowing Blueblood in. The smell of salt and sweat hung over the air. Chatter buzzed through the whole region like flies, humming wherever the prince could wander. Ships bobbed alongside wooden docs stretching out of the shore, heavy-set workers loading and unloading crates and barrels. Ropes and pulleys hung everywhere, even away from the ships. The whole thing was an alien sight to the prince, fascinating and strangely inviting in it's novelty.

Blueblood trotted through the minimal crowd that remained, looking for a suitable pony to take him home. His search took him all across the sizable neighborhood until finally, nearly directly across the river from where he

had begun, he saw a unicorn unloading crates marked with the royal seal of Equestria. He had clearly been there once, Blueblood thought, and he could go back. The prince could make it well worth his while.

"You there!" the white stallion called out. The boatpony looked up from his work, and trotted down the gangplank. As he got closer Blueblood could see that he was wearing the distinctive Aloa wrappings, marking him as a native.

"Well, blow me down," the unicorn stallion laughed, "An earth pony in Aloa. What can I do for you, son?"

Blueblood ignored the comment about his race – he had long grown tired of correcting ponies who had no intention of listening to him. Instead he smiled, trying his best to be friendly – or at least, what he imagined to be friendly.

"Hello, ah... old stallion. I notice you've come from Equestria," he said, gesturing to the crates still aboard the unicorn's boat, "I need you to go back."

"Back?" the boatpony asked. He scratched his neck awkwardly, saying, "I don't know I can do that. I just got back from Equestria, see, and I was shipping deeper into Aloa. Gotta make it to the capital soon, before my cargo goes off. Carrying grain, see?"

"Oh believe me, that won't be an issue," Blueblood told him, smiling smugly. "You'll be shipping something far more valuable than mere grains, and you'll be rewarded for it."

"Oh?" the unicorn asked, suddenly quite interested. "So what do you need shipped that's so important then, huh?"

"The most important cargo you've ever shipped by far," the prince said. He felt his pride returning, and his chest swelled as he told the shipper his cargo. "Me." The shipper simply stared at him for a minute. He looked back and forth between Blueblood and his boat once or twice.

"You?" he asked finally. He seemed unconvinced. Blueblood frowned.

"Yes, me." the prince said curtly.

"So what, you expecting me to believe you're rich, or something?"

"Rich' does not do my position justice," Blueblood told him. "I have access to more money than a pony like you will see in your entire life."

"That so?" the boatpony asked. "You sure don't look it." Blueblood sighed.

"Yes, I'm afraid I've been looking decidedly common as of late, but I assure you it's through no fault of my own. It's been a... tiring time, and I'd really just like to go home."

"And home is Equestria, huh?" the boatpony nodded, "Well, that makes sense. Don't really see anything but unicorns 'round these parts."

"So I've heard," Blueblood said, "and seen." The unicorn chuckled.

"So what brings you out west anyhow?"

"I don't think you'd understand," Blueblood said. The prince still wasn't entirely sure that he understood. All he knew was that Aloa wanted him out of the way of the negotiations – for all he knew that could just be an excuse that Iron concocted to mess with his head. The guard had seemed to revel in hurting Blueblood, both physically and mentally. Even now Blueblood could almost feel the earth pony's cruel grin on him, still hear the lies echoing in his mind. *They all hate you... any one of them would have done the same as me...* the prince closed his eyes, and shuddered.

"You alright, son?" the sailor asked. Blueblood's eyes snapped open, and he immediately regained his composure.

"Yes, I'm fine," he said quickly. "But it's... well, it's politics. You wouldn't be interested at all."

"Politics affects me more than you'd think," the unicorn said, "Try me."

"I'd rather not," Blueblood said. The unicorn gave him an unimpressed look.

"You know, son," he said, "you're doing an awful fine job of dodging around all this. I'm having a hard time believing you've got any kind of money at all."

"What?" Blueblood asked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, a little bit of proof would be nice. I'm not just going to risk my entire shipment rotting if there's nothing in it for me, now am I?"

"And you don't trust me?" the prince asked, offended.

"You don't seem to trust me," The boatpony replied, "You won't tell me why you're here, all you'll tell me is you've got more money than you know what to do with, and I haven't seen a single silver of that."

Blueblood frowned. Once again, he had no idea if he could trust this pony or not. He was clearly only concerned with filling his own purse. Still, Blueblood had no other choice. He looked around suspiciously, and leaned in.

"Very well," he said, "I'll tell you who I am, so you know that I can repay you." The sailor nodded, and leaned in as well. "I am Prince Blueblood," the prince said conspiratorially. The sailor peered at him, and burst out laughing.

"Hah!" he laughed, wiping his eye. "That's a good one. Look colt, I can respect you not wanting me to know who you are, but I still need real proof – just a sack of bits, or anything."

Blueblood scowled. He hadn't even thought that he might need to give an advance. He didn't have a single bit on him – Someone had taken all his money when he was unconscious. This was going to be much more difficult than he had first thought. He decided to try again.

"It wasn't a joke," he said, putting on his best royal airs. "I am Prince Blueblood of Equestria, nephew of the sun goddess Celestia. Our coffers run deeper than the deepest ocean, and -"

"Look, colt," the sailor said, his humour fading, "I may not be an Equestrian, but I've been to Equestria. I know about the royal family – they're unicorns. Have YOU even been to Equestria?"

"Of course I have!" Blueblood said, beginning to become frustrated. "I was born and raised there! I am who I say I am!"

"Well, you say your a unicorn. And I don't see no horn on that thick head of yours." The boatpony seemed to be losing his temper as well, but Blueblood didn't notice. All he could think of was his own indignation, how much trouble he had been caused because nopony believed him. He WAS prince of Equestria. He WAS nobility.

"I AM a unicorn, you oaf," he hissed.

"Unicorn my hoof!" the boatpony shouted back. "Where's your horn, huh unicorn? You ain't got one, because you ain't a unicorn!"

"Yes, I am!" Blueblood yelled again. The boatpony growled, and shook his head.

"Do you honestly think I'm buying any of this? I'd heard you earth ponies were supposed to be thick, but you're just crazy. Look, colt, I've got work to do. I'm not going to take you to Equestria – you can go find somepony else who might fall for your game, but I wouldn't count on it."

"Oh, Shut up!" Blueblood shouted, his temper finally snapping, "Shut up, you giant, stupid... PEASANT! How would you know if I am who I say I am? You're just some filthy, salty sailor! Ponies like you wouldn't know class if it ran up and bit you! I shouldn't have to take your petty, stupid insults! I AM Prince Blueblood! I AM a unicorn! And I demand the respect I deserve!"

"The respect you deserve?" the unicorn asked, smirking. "Alright colt, fine. But remember, you asked for it!"

Blueblood felt an invisible hand take hold of his body, lifting him off the ground. He struggled in it's grip, shouting at the boatpony to let him go, but the sailor didn't comply. Some of his crew members had gathered around now, coming out from below decks to join the growing crowd that Blueblood's shouting match with the unicorn had attracted. Some of them leered and laughed at the struggling prince, some simply watched with a quiet smugness. It infuriated Blueblood. He struggled harder as the sailor bobbed him up and down in mid-air. He was turned upside down, spun around, and finally pitched over the water. He sailed through the air, plunging into the river for the second time in as many days.

He landed head down, the hard surface of the water knocking the sense from him. For a minute, the only thing he knew was the cold darkness of the water. He didn't understand which way was up. To him, there was no

up, only an airless void. He thrashed madly, trying to find some way out of the endless water, until his hoof finally broke the surface. He managed to spin around, breaking the surface and gasping for breath.

The crowd was still laughing. Some younger ponies had already begun to mimic the show, repeating his words in taunting voices and throwing rocks into the river. Blueblood flung insult back, in between gasps for breath. He thrashed his hooves, trying to pull himself back to where he believed the shore was. His mane stuck in his eyes, plastered against his forehead by the water, and his coat was sopping wet, dragging him down. Eventually, he managed to reach a dock. A pair of unicorns helped him out of the river, but he shook them off, storming away from the docks. He fumed, stomping down the town's cobbled streets until he could no longer hear the laughter and jeers of the sailors, and sat down.

He was completely sopping wet. His mane clung to his face like glue, and the river water chilled him straight to the bone. He shivered, his teeth chattering, and muttered oaths at the town under his breath.

He cursed the ambassador for dragging him away from his home. He cursed the family on the river for bringing him to this stupid town. He cursed the sailor for humiliating him in front of everypony, and for putting him in his current state. He didn't know who else to curse, but he tried anyways. He lashed out mentally, cursing everypony he knew. He cursed all his servants, for not being good enough at their jobs. He cursed Princess Golden Dreams, for being the princess of this stupid country. He cursed his auntie for not rushing out to save him. He cursed whoever had built the carriage that brought him out here. He cursed the lockmaker who made him dig the lock out of the door and get splinters in his hoof. He cursed whoever made seaweed first. He cursed every sailor all over the world, and anypony who had even thought of shipping things. He cursed himself for even thinking that somepony might help him. He was alone in this country, and he was a fool for ever thinking otherwise. He put his head in his hoofs, closing his eyes and trying to imagine what it would be like when he finally made it back home.

He imagined all of the servants in the castle lined up in the foyer, all ecstatic to see him again. They had all been so worried about him. The castle just wasn't the same without the prince around.

He imagined his auntie wrapping her wings around him, telling him that he was going to be okay, and she could fix his horn, give him back his magic. Even Luna was there, and she spoke him too.

He imagined his mother holding him tight. She must be so worried about him. He missed her dearly. It broke his heart to think of how afraid for him she must be. He sniffed, blinking back tears. He told himself that it was just because of the cold. He couldn't afford to be weak now. He was all alone here – he would have to get back on his own. His mind started to work, concocting a plan. He could see the mountains of Equestria in the distance. They couldn't be too far away – a few days walk, maybe? He would need to take supplies with him. That would mean he'd need food, and saddlebags. If there was a shipping dock in this town, surely there must be a marketplace. Maybe he could barter for food. His planning was interrupted, however, by a voice."

"...Hey there."

Blueblood looked up, to see a young green stallion staring back at him. He was looking gently at the prince, concern clear in his eyes.

"Are you alright?" the stallion asked Blueblood. The prince wasn't sure how to respond. After what had happened at the docks, he was set never to trust another Aloan in his life. He wanted to tell the pony to buzz off, to leave him alone, but he didn't have the energy left. He just hung his head.

"I guess that's a no?" The pony said. Blueblood was silent. The green unicorn looked around awkwardly for a moment, then sat beside him. They were silent for a while.

"What do you want?" Blueblood asked suddenly.

"What?"

"What do you want? Do you want to laugh at me too?"

"No," the unicorn said, "No, I-"

"Then what do you want? Maybe you've just never seen an earth pony before, and you wanted to see one up close, huh? Is that it?"

"I just wanted to see if you were okay!" the young stallion protested, "Really! Look, I... it wasn't right what those sailors did to you. I mean, even if you did insult them, they shouldn't have thrown you around like that. It's not like you could fight back."

Blueblood grunted. He still wasn't sure what to think of this pony, but a little light of hope shone inside him. Maybe there was somepony here who would help him. If this stallion could help him out at all, Blueblood would love him forever. He would bring him and his whole family to the court, and have them knighted and rewarded. The unicorn smiled at him.

"Look," he said, "You shouldn't be sitting out here, soaking wet. I'll take you back to my house, and you can dry off. You can even spend the night, if you don't have anywhere else to stay."

"Really?" Blueblood asked carefully. The young stallion nodded.

"Really," he said. He stood up, motioning Blueblood to follow. The prince did so, trailing gratefully after the green unicorn. They walked through the streets of Riverbank, weaving in and out of side roads and shortcuts through alleyways. Blueblood looked around at the scenery as they walked. He wasn't familiar with the town, of course. Nor was he familiar with slums – to him, this entire town was a slum, and degrees meant nothing. But still, he was beginning to grow concerned. The cobbled streets gave way, replaced by the same sandy dirt that carpeted the rest of Aloa. The stone of the houses became less clean, less ornate, becoming mere slabs of stone mortared together to form shelters.

"Is this... where you live?" Blueblood asked.

"Nearby," the unicorn told him. He didn't seem to be nervous at all, so Blueblood decided to trust him. He knew he could hardly judge common towns, after all.

He had been wrong, of course.

The young stallion turned a corner, Blueblood following close behind. They had turned into a tight alleyway, blocked at one end. It was similar to the alley in which Blueblood had found the old bum, but this one was clear of garbage. It was far from clean, however. Flecks of black painted the walls,

dried pools along the ground. The whole alley smelt fowl, and the high walls on all sides blocked out the light.

"Uh... I think we've taken a wrong turn," Blueblood said. The young stallion shook his head.

"I didn't," he said, "You did though. I'm sorry about this."

"What?" Blueblood asked. His question was answered by a large unicorn who stepped into the alley, silhouetted against the light from the street. The green unicorn trotted up to him.

"Thirty percent," he demanded.

"Fifteen," the dark figure replied, not missing a beat. The green pony made an unhappy noise.

"Twenty-five?"

"You gonna help us get it from him?"

"...Twenty?"

"Yeah, fine. Just keep watch."

The green unicorn nodded, and stepped out of the alley. Three more ponies took his place, blocking the entrance completely.

"Who are you?" Blueblood asked, taking a step backwards. "What do you want?"

"Doesn't matter who we are," one of the ponies said. The group began to approach Blueblood slowly, spreading out as best as the tight alley would allow.

"We want your silvers," another pony said.

"My... what?" Blueblood asked, "I haven't got any money. Somepony already robbed me!"

"Heh," the leader said, "We don't hear that one often. But we hear it enough. We'll see if you've got any money or not, pretty colt." The group

moved further into the alley, pushing Blueblood back. The closer they came, the more the shadows shrunk away. As the leader came into view, Blueblood's heart froze solid.

There, standing at the front of the group, was an enormous steel-gray unicorn. His face was plastered with a wicked, cruel grin, and there was a manic sort of look in his eye. The look of a pony who's been in too many fights, and enjoyed them all too much. The other unicorns didn't matter. His horn was invisible to Blueblood. All he saw was...

"Iron," he whimpered. The unicorn ignored him. The prince scrambled back through the alley, moving almost as fast backwards as he could forward, driven only by a pure, primal fear. His back thumped against the far wall, holding him still. The gray pony was coming for him faster now. He spun around, scrambling against the wall for some sort of hoofhold, something that would get him out of the alley and away from his horror. He found nothing. He heard a crunch behind him, and he turned – there was the pony, grinning wildly mere inches away from Blueblood's face. The prince flinched away, sinking into a corner.

"Please!" he shouted, squeezing his eyes shut, "Please, please don't hurt me Iron!"

"Give us your money," the pony said. Blueblood's heart had begun to pound in his ears. He could hardly hear what the pony was saying. Laughter echoed in his mind.

"I haven't got any!" he wailed. " But I can get you some! Lots! Auntie... I'll tell auntie! She'll give you all the bits you want Iron, if you just don't hurt me!"

He felt a hoof in his ribs. He sunk to the ground, clutching his gut. The next hoof hit him in the face.

"I'm sorry!" he cried, "Oh, Celestia, oh Luna, I'm so sorry Iron!"

The blows rained down, again and again. Blueblood screamed out for help, calling for his aunts, calling for his mother, calling for anypony who would listen. But help never came, only more strikes. The specter of Iron in his mind lay into him, laughing madly, screaming lies and insults. Blueblood lay on the ground, sobbing and screaming, consumed by his nightmare. He

didn't even notice when the unicorns stopped beating him, and checked him for money. They said something about a ripoff, then walked away like nothing had ever happened, leaving the sobbing Blueblood in the alleyway.

Chapter 4

In Which a Stallion Dies

The day was beginning to wind to a close, the sun dipping low along the western horizon. In the east the moon had already begun to rise, its faded form cast in hues of pinks and oranges by the twilight. To most ponies this was merely an oddity; a quirk of the sun and moon's orbit, or a mistake on the part of the little goddess of Equestria. The servants of Canterlot palace, however, knew that this was no mistake. The early coming of the moon meant that Luna wanted to spend time with her sister. Most of them had retired to their quarters, or returned to their homes in the city. No pony wanted to disturb the sisters.

The halls of the palace were silent, save for the heavy hooffalls of the one pony who did want to disturb the princesses, echoing through the halls. This pony had had a very busy, and very stressful day. It was a day that she was supposed to have spent relaxing, but instead she had spent it running around the palace, trying to wring information out of any guard who would speak to her. Those had been few, and she had become more and more bedraggled as the day went on. Now, her mane was disheveled. It had been tied hastily to keep it out of her eyes, but the tie was beginning to fail. Her eyes were completely still as she walked, dead-set on the large, ornate door at the end of the hall. They did not betray the panic and chaos that raged behind them.

"Auntie!" Amethyst cried, throwing open the door to Celestia's bedchamber. She stormed inside, marching up to the two surprised princesses.

"Amethyst," Celestia said after a moment, "Good evening."

"Ah, yes," Luna said as well, shying away from her niece, "Good evening."

"Yes," Amethyst said, trying to calm herself, "Yes, I'm sorry. Good evening, Auntie Celestia... Auntie Luna."

"I assume there is some reason you've decided to join us tonight?" Celestia asked. Luna peered over Amethyst's shoulder, commenting,

"No doubt it has something to do with why a trained guard can't seem to keep up with you."

Amethyst glanced over her shoulder quickly, seeing an exhausted looking Oak standing just inside the door. She shook her head, and turned back to her aunts.

"Yes," She said, "I... Auntie, where's Blueblood!"

"Blueblood?" Luna asked, looking between her sister and niece, "What's happened to him?"

"That's what I want to know!" Amethyst cried again, "I try to have a relaxing day, and what's the first thing I hear? That my son has gone missing!"

Celestia peered curiously at Oak, who looked at the ground.

"I'm sorry, your majesty. I know you asked me not to tell, but I... I couldn't keep it from her. She deserved to know, your majesty."

"Oh, and my own Auntie was trying to keep this from me now!" Amethyst demanded. She tried to glare at her aunt, but she couldn't muster it. She looked like she was about to burst into tears. "Oh, Auntie, what's going on? Why won't anypony tell me anything? What's happened to my son, Auntie?" She threw herself onto the grand pillow on which the princesses sat, pressing her face into Celestia's neck. The goddess cooed to her niece, and wrapped a comforting wing around her.

"My sister and I were just reading a report from my student – you remember Twilight Sparkle, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Auntie," Amethyst said quietly. She had met the unicorn once when she was a filly – but even if she had not, there's was no way she could have forgotten about her aunt's prized pupil, savior of Equestria twice-over. She didn't see what that had to do with anything, though. She knew that Celestia was old and wise – far older and wiser than she could even imagine, let alone hope to be – and she knew that she always had a reason for everything she did, but she still couldn't how obtuse her aunt could be. Especially in a situation like this.

"Why don't you sit, and listen to it with us?" Celestia asked softly. "It might help you to relax."

"Oh, auntie," Amethyst said, before her aunt shushed her.

"I insist," Celestia said. She levitated a scroll and opened it, beginning to read aloud.

Dear Princess Celestia,

I'm not very proud of what I have to tell you today.

Everything seemed to be going wrong this week. Applejack's special batch of cider went bad in the tank, Rarity's fabrics had been torn up, and ponies all over town were running into problems – apparently, problems with some fillies. Of course, we turned to the most obvious suspects – Applebloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo. They told us that they were innocent, but we refused to believe them – until we caught another pair of fillies red-hooved.

I learned an important lesson today. I learned that no matter how obvious something may seem, and no matter how clear the course of action appears, there is always more than one side to a story. I learned that you shouldn't jump to conclusions – especially when it comes to something important. You need to be patient, and find out what really happened. It may be very different from what you think, and jumping to conclusions can hurt a pony's feelings very badly.

Your Faithful (and repentant) Student,

Twilight Sparkle.

Celestia set the letter down, and smiled.

"There, you see?" she asked. "Don't you feel much calmer now? Twilight really has a way with words – I always love reading her letters at the end of a long day. They help me wind down. I always tell her she should try her hoof at fiction, but the dear prefers to read – I suppose it's just as well, she's already found her cutie mark."

"Yes, she's very good," Amethyst said impatiently, "But auntie, what does this have to do with Blueblood? What's happened to my son?" Celestia sighed.

"Oh Amethyst, I'm very sorry," she said, nuzzling her niece gently. "We don't know what happened to him."

"You don't know?" Amethyst choked out. Her eyes had begun to water, but she blinked back the tears, refusing to allow herself to cry.

"No," Celestia shook her head. "We know that Blueblood went missing two nights ago. He was seen leaving the opening ceremonies in the evening with Captain Iron, but he wasn't in the palace the next morning. Beyond that, we don't know what's happened to him."

"Oh, my Blueblood," Amethyst whispered. Her mind was moving a thousand miles a minute, trying to think of something – anything – that would point them to her son.

"The Princess!" she cried suddenly. The princesses peered at her oddly, and she explained, "Princess Golden Dreams. I heard one of the guards mention that she invited him to her chambers after the opening ceremonies. The Aloans must have done something to him!"

"Yes, we're looking into it," Celestia told her, "But we don't know for sure yet -"

"Don't know for sure?" Amethyst cried, jumping up, "Auntie, what else could it have been! You were there at the conference – Aloa is gathering allies against us! Auntie, they're preparing for war, and they've kidnapped Blueblood to use as a bargaining chip!"

"We don't know that for sure," Celestia said, trying to calm her niece, "We're looking into it."

"You don't need to look into it," Amethyst shouted, tears springing to her eyes once more, "you need to go to Aloa and make them give my foal back!"

"Amethyst!" Celestia said sharply. The purple princess shrank like a filly who had been caught with her hoof in the cookie jar. Celestia's expression

softened, and she wrapped her wing around her niece once more. "Oh Amethyst, weren't you listening to the letter? We mustn't jump to conclusions – if we're wrong, the Aloans will take it as a deep insult, and the divide between us will grow even deeper. We need to investigate it further, so we know we aren't wrong."

"I'm sorry," Amethyst sighed, "You're right. But... oh Auntie, I'm just so worried. My little colt is somewhere out there... he's probably alone, and afraid... he's never been on his own before."

"I know, sweetie," Celestia said, "I know. We'll find him, don't you worry. We'll bring him back. You'll see." She nuzzled her niece, pulling her close. Amethyst didn't resist, letting herself be pressed tightly against her auntie's warm body. She was warmer than any other pony could ever be, and she rocked Amethyst gently, humming a lullaby in her ear. Soon the purple princess's eyes drifted shut, and she fell asleep, wrapped in the goddess's wings.

Luna had been silent all the while her sister and niece had talked, looking on softly. It was hard for her to be around other ponies after 1000 years of solitude. Everything about them – all their feelings, all their little quirks and traits – they all seemed so surreal to her now, and so magnified. Emotions made her uncomfortable, because she couldn't remember how to react to them, or express them.

She and Blueblood rarely spoke – almost never, in fact. Something about the stallion got on her nerves. There was just that quality about him... she couldn't put her hoof on it. It was like, whenever he walked into a room he expected every head to turn. It was hard enough for her to navigate a conversation with a normal pony, to weave around all the little twists and spins that they put in a conversation to make it go their way without getting flustered. But he was a master of it – any time the conversation was going a way he didn't like he could just give it a little tweak, and it was right back where he wanted. If she could have put a word to the feeling, she might have said it frightened her. Now, however, she felt something very different. This was a feeling she remembered, a feeling that had kept her company for very, very long time. She put her head down, closing her eyes and looking away from her sister. She felt guilty.

Blueblood moved slowly through the streets of Riverbank. He wasn't sure just how long he had been laying in that alleyway, but it was late in the day now. The sky was beginning to show tinges of twilight, and the air was growing cool. The stallion shivered – and wondered just how much of that was the cold.

He was feeling better now. At least, he was feeling stable. He could think again. In the alleyway, fear had gripped his mind and refused to let go. It had steered his thoughts, tricking his eyes. He hadn't understood what had been happening, all he could see was Iron. Now he understood. He knew that it hadn't been Iron in the alley – it was just some unicorn. If it had been Iron, there's was no way he would have still been walking free. Part of him wanted to be mad – at the stallions for mugging him, at the pony for leading him into the trap, at himself for being foolish enough to fall for it – but he couldn't muster the energy. All he could feel was a deeply rooted shame. He had been an idiot to think that that pony really wanted to help him. Especially here – here, where everpony had magic except for him. If there was anypony here who didn't look down on him, it was because they considered him a novelty.

Huh, Blueblood thought wryly. *Common ponies, looking down on a prince... because they think he's too common.* He tried to find a sort of bitter humour in that – he knew it was there. But the feeling burnt out quickly, leaving only more shame.

That was what bothered him more than anything, was the shame. He felt ashamed because he had no magic. He felt ashamed because commoners were looking down on him. He felt shame because, time and again, he had looked like a fool in front of those same ponies. He had given them all reason to look down on him.

Even just now, laying on the ground in an alleyway, crying and screaming like a foal in front of those unicorns, all because of some specter. Some imaginary pony. He may as well have been screaming about the gluemaker, for all it mattered. He sighed, and sat in the middle of the road.

An all-consuming sort of exhaustion wore at his bones. He felt almost as if he had been hollowed out, like all that was left of him was a thin layer of skin and fur. If it hadn't been for his hoof, he might have believed that. It ached miserably. After two trips into the river the bandages had long since

come off, and whatever Seagrass had rubbed into it had washed away. Still, he was almost glad of it. At least it was something real. Something palpable. Everything else about this experience was beginning to feel surreal, like it really was a nightmare after all. He just needed sleep, he told himself, that was all. Real sleep, in a real bed. Not in a gutter, or on the floor of a carriage. He peered into a small puddle on the ground before him – he certainly looked like he needed sleep. His eyes were red from tears, his face sunken. His coat had begun to turn gray again, bruises starting to show through, and his mane hung limply over his forehead. He turned his head back and forth out of habit; he wasn't inspecting himself at all. He knew he looked terrible, but he felt far, far worse. As he twisted his head once again, his mane fell away, revealing the place where his horn had once been.

He stared at it strangely. All that was left of it was a red wound. He wondered vaguely why it didn't hurt at all. It certainly looked like it should have – but he was hardly a doctor. He sighed again and brushed the mane back into place, covering the red spot. Then, he set out in search of a warm bed.

As the sun slipped below the horizon, he still hadn't found any sort of inn. He was beginning to think that this town didn't have one at all. Perhaps all the travelers in this country were like the ones he had met, they made their homes on their boats and didn't need an inn. Still, he pushed on, forcing himself to keep walking. Just down the street, just around this corner, maybe something would come his way. Surprisingly, given the nature of his journey, he was right.

He hadn't found an inn, but he had found something just as good. It was a marketplace. Most of the shops were closed up, of course, but many of them still had their awnings open. If nothing else, Blueblood at least wouldn't be rained on tonight. He would be able to get supplies tomorrow as well, to prepare for the trip back home. He would still be sleeping on the hard ground, but he was too exhausted to care at this point. Choosing cart with a large awning, he lay down beside it, groaning miserably. To his weary body, even the cobblestones felt like a fine mattress. He fidgeted once or twice, trying to get comfortable, and bumped the cart next to him. An apple that had been left out shifted from its place, dropping off and rolling in front of his nose. Blueblood stared at it like it would bite him.

Serendipity was being unusually kind to him this evening. Everything had gone wrong for him since he came to Aloa. He had been wounded, dumped in a river, humiliated, and generally dragged through the mud. But now he had found a near abandoned street, an uncovered cart full of apples, and one had just fallen in front of his face. He couldn't leave it there – it would spoil on the ground overnight. Surely whoever owned this shop wouldn't be happy to see food had been wasted. Surely he wouldn't miss one single apple. Blueblood reached out and took it awkwardly, fumbling with it in his hooves. He could smell it – it smelled sweet, and juicy. He hadn't had anything to eat all day, not since the seaweed. He was starving – his stomach begged for food. But even so, he wasn't sure he could eat the apple. It wasn't his – he had everything taken away from him, but did that make it right to take something away from another pony? Even if he was starving to death? He could always pay for it in the morning – he would throw in a bit extra for the shopkeeper when he bartered for supplies, to make up for it. He probably wouldn't even know the difference. He sat up, still staring at the apple. There wasn't a mark on its surface. It was perfect.

Well... Blueblood thought, *I do need to get home... I'm royalty after all, my country needs me. That's worth a simple apple, isn't it?* He gulped, and looked to the left and right. There was nopony around. A faint smile crept into his lips as he raised the apple to his mouth, taking a bite.

It was magnificent. Even the sound of it, that hearty crunch, filled him with glee. A part of him in the back of his mind scoffed at the idea of relishing such common food, but he ignored it. He had been right about the apple – it was so juicy that it leaked, dribbling down his chin and across his hooves. It was sweeter than any candy he had ever tasted. It was perfect. This apple was the best apple in the world – and the worst.

"Hey, you!" a voice shouted. Blueblood swiveled his head left and right, looking for the voice, until an apple core struck him in the back of the head. He turned to see an extremely angry unicorn standing in the doorway of a building behind the cart.

"Just what do you think you're doing, huh?" the unicorn demanded, marching up to Blueblood. The white stallion looked at the half-eaten apple in his hand, and the cart, and the furious pony bearing down on him. His mouth hung open.

"Is that my apple?" the unicorn demanded.

"I... I... um," Blueblood stuttered. The unicorn pulled the apple away from him, inspecting it.

"It is my apple!" he said. "You thought you could just help yourself because I wasn't around, huh? You dirty thief!"

"No, that's not it!" Blueblood exclaimed. "I'm not a thief, honest! I just-"

"Then what was it?" the unicorn asked sternly. Blueblood withered under his glare, trying to come up with an excuse. He couldn't. He felt the unicorn's magic take hold of him, and he sighed. He knew what was coming. Another swim in the river, no doubt.

Strangely, though, the pony brought him inside his house. He was placed on a stool, and the unicorn called for someone to help him. A mare came into the room, and the pair inspected him critically.

"I found this pony trying to steal our apples outside," the unicorn stallion said. The mare looked him up and down, nodding.

"He sure does look the part," she said. "Grubby, shaggy, looks like he hasn't eaten in a while. You eaten in a while, colt?"

"N-not much," Blueblood said. He leaned away from their gazes, but the mare circled him.

"Hm. So you figured you could just help yourself, then?" she asked. Blueblood didn't answer. There was no point. She huffed at him, and walked towards the door. "Well, we know what to do with thieves here," she said.

Being a guard in Riverbank was normally quite easy. The only issues that ever cropped up were at the docks or in the slums, and the ponies there always preferred to do things on their own anyways. Most of the time, work as a guard was restricted to filing paperwork, or detaining the occasional drunkard. There was never any work after dark, either.

Well. Almost never.

A severely less-than-please guard stood glowering at the white earth pony before him. It was a bit of a stretch to imagine that this pony had ever been white, though. He looked like he had been dragged through the mud, in more ways than one. It was clear that he was at least trying to stand up straight, but all he managed was a miserable slouch.

"So," the guard said impatiently, "You've caught this pony stealing from your cart, have you?"

"Yes officer," the merchant nodded, glaring at Blueblood again, "he was halfway through one of my apples when I caught him. Probably would have stolen more if I hadn't caught him."

"I wouldn't have," Blueblood insisted. "That one just fell in front of me. I didn't think you would miss it, and I was hungry, so-"

"So you stole it!" the merchant said sharply. The guard sighed. It was just one stupid apple – but the law was the law, after all.

"So you want to press charges?" he asked, "Over one apple?"

"...No," the merchant admitted, "but I want him to pay for that bloody apple!"

"Well, colt?" the guard asked. "You heard him. Pay for the apple, and we can all go home happy."

"I can't," Blueblood sighed miserably. "I haven't got any money. I haven't even got a place to stay tonight! I was just trying to sleep under his awning so I wouldn't be rained on, and the apple fell in front of me! It was just one apple!"

"Oh, easy for you to say!" the merchant piped up again, "It wasn't your apple! How'd you like it if I stole something from you, huh?"

"Look, there has to be some way I can pay you back!" Blueblood insisted. The angry unicorn was beginning to get on his nerves. He wanted this unpleasant business to be over as much as anypony, so he could go and get some rest, but there was nothing he could do.

"You can pay me back by paying for the apple!" the merchant shouted. Blueblood was about to shout back when the guard stepped between the two.

"Enough!" he shouted. "The colt obviously isn't going to pay you. I'll take him back to the guard house, and we'll have him searched and interrogated. If he's got the money we'll send it back to you."

"And if not?" the unicorn demanded. The guard sighed, and said,

"Then he'll be put in prison." The merchant stared for a moment, and nodded, apparently satisfied with the outcome. Blueblood groaned internally as the guard's magic picked him up. He was carted out the door, where the guard set him down. For a moment Blueblood thought that the guard might be planning on letting him go, but he felt a tug around his neck.

"Come on colt, let's go," the guard said, "Don't make this any harder than it has to be."

"It's already harder than it has to be," Blueblood moaned. "Please, can't you just let me go? It was just one apple, and I was starving. I haven't hardly had anything to eat for two days, and I woke up in a gutter this morning -"

"No, I can't just let you go," the guard sighed. "The law's the law, colt. You stole, we gotta take you in for it. That's how it works."

"But I haven't got the money to pay for it," Blueblood told him, "that's why I had to steal it in the first place. I can't go to prison – I need to get home!"

"I thought you said you didn't have anywhere to sleep?" the guard asked. He was clearly only talking for the sake of having something to do, disinterest clear in his voice.

"I'm not from here," Blueblood said, "I need to travel back home – it's important!"

"The law is more important than you, colt," the guard sighed. Blueblood groaned again, in place of an objection.

"Look, it isn't so bad," the guard sighed. "At least you won't have to sleep out on the street tonight."

"What?"

"You won't have to sleep out in the street tonight. You'll be in a cell, but at least it's a bed, right? Better than a gutter."

"You're going to give me a bed to sleep in?" Blueblood asked incredulously. The guard looked back at him strangely, like he had just asked how many hooves a pony has.

"Yeah," the guard told him, "if you need one." In spite of his exhaustion, Blueblood began to grin. It wasn't much to look forward to, but at least it was something. A real bed. He spent the rest of the trip in silence, keeping up as best he could with the guard, in spite of his sore hoof. They reached the guard house within a few minutes, whereupon he was led inside and sat down again, this time on a small seat in front of a desk. The guard sat behind the desk and took out several pieces of paper.

"What's this?" Blueblood asked, "Where's the bed?"

"Soon, colt, soon," the guard told him, shuffling through the papers. "I need to ask you a few questions, first. Clear up this whole thing with the merchant."

"Oh..." Blueblood said, his head sinking. He wasn't sure that he even had the energy to do that, but he tried to straighten back up. It didn't work.

"Now," the guard began, "The merchant's report says he found you stealing one apple... is that right?"

"Yes, it is," the white stallion answered.

"And he claims that you refused to pay for the product?"

"I didn't refuse," Blueblood objected, "I can't. I was robbed earlier today – and once before that!" The guard slumped, and gave him a you-aren't-making-this-easier-for-either-of-us sort of look.

"You refused to pay for the apple?"

"Yes," Blueblood sighed, giving up.

"So. Are you going to pay for the apple now?"

"I can't pay for the apple," Blueblood repeated. The guard nodded, and scribbled something onto his papers.

"Would you mind if we searched you?"

"What?" Blueblood asked, leaning back. His hooves instinctively went up, covering himself. Even if he had been raised to be used to servants helping him clean, there were just some things a gentlecolt did NOT let others do. Searching sounded like it was one of those things.

"We'll just give a pat-down, see if you're hiding any silver. It's nothing invasive." The guard looked at him gently. Blueblood nodded slowly, and got to his hooves. The guard circled around the desk and gently prodded the stallion, searching through his mane for any hidden purses. He paused when he saw the great red mark on his forehead.

"Eesh," the guard commented, "What happened to you?"

"I..." Blueblood said weakly. Part of him wanted to tell this guard what had happened to him, who he was, and why he needed to get back home so badly. The guard seemed nice – maybe he would believe Blueblood. But, the white stallion knew it was a bad idea. If the ambassador wanted him gone, he likely wasn't too popular in Aloa. Even if the guard actually believed him, he could kiss his chances of ever seeing home again goodbye.

"I got in a fight," Blueblood lied, "I don't really want to talk about it."

"If you insist," the guard shrugged. "So, you haven't got any silver on you. That means you can't pay."

"That's right," Blueblood said, "But I can still pay it off. I could trade something for it, or work it off..." he looked entreatingly at the guard, who shook his head.

"It doesn't work that way, colt. Silvers or nothing."

"Then..."

"Prison."

Blueblood moaned, laying his head on the desk. "For how long?" he asked.

"A few months, maybe?" The guard said. "It's not a severe crime. But really, it depends on what sort of a mood the Duke is in when he sentences you. It's not like we can just get you off on a fine." Blueblood groaned again.

"Fine... can I just go to sleep now?" he asked. Maybe in the morning he would be able to come up with something approaching a plan. The guard just shook his head.

"We're almost done here, don't worry. I just need to see your citizenship, so I can get everything mailed off tomorrow."

"My what?" Blueblood asked weakly, looking up at the guard, who frowned at him.

"Your citizenship. You know – name, cutie mark, this thing?" his horn lit up, and the medallion that bound his wrappings floated off in front of the prince. On the back of it was inscribed the guard's name, a date that Blueblood assumed to be his birth date, and a small copy of his cutie mark.

"I... don't have one of those," Blueblood told him. The guard sighed.

"Well, just give me your name, date of birth and cutie mark. We'll get you from the records.

"No, you don't understand," Blueblood said. "I told you, I'm not from here. I'm not Aloan." The guard raised an eyebrow at this.

"You aren't a citizen?"

"No... I'm Equestrian."

The guard rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well," he said, "If you aren't a citizen there's nothing we can do."

"Nothing you can do?" Blueblood asked eagerly. The guard stared at him again. It was clear he did not have high opinions of Blueblood's intelligence.

"No, nothing we can do. Foreigners aren't treated with the same laws. We can't send you to prison, we just eject you from the populace."

"Really?" Blueblood asked, suddenly as ecstatic as his exhaustion would allow, "You mean you're going to kick me out of the country!"

"Close enough," the guard said, shrugging.

"That's fantastic!" Blueblood exclaimed. If he had an ounce of energy left, he would have jumped up and clapped his hooves together. As it was though, he simply gave the guard a very tired, but very earnest smile. "Do you need anything else?" the prince asked. The guard shook his head.

"Naw," he told Blueblood, "there's no point now. You just get some sleep, colt. You'll need it. The next few days aren't going to be very kind to you."

"Trust me," Blueblood chuckled, "Compared to what I've been through, anything will be an improvement."

The guard shrugged, and got up from his desk. He lead the prince to a wing in the back of the guardhouse that was comprised of several cells packed tightly together. Each cell contained a small sink and toilet on one side, and a cot big enough for a single pony on the other. The guard ushered Blueblood into a cell across the room from the door, closing and locking the cell door behind him. Blueblood wished the guard a goodnight and flopped happily onto the cot as he doused the lights. He sighed, snuggling into the hard, lumpy mattress. For a moment, his mind was consumed in a war between exhaustion and excitement. He was finally going home! It was amazing how just a few short days had seemed to stretch out into an eternity for him, but the nightmare was finally over. He began thinking of all the things that he would do when he got home – hug his mother and aunt, greet his servants, and then have them help him to relax. A nice hot bath, perhaps, and a proper pedicure to fix his hooves. A trim for his mane, as well. He would also ask a pegasus to try and find that merchant again, so Blueblood could repay him for the apple. That could wait, though. The bits weren't going anywhere.

It seemed as though his excitement had the upper hand in the battle, but exhaustion had been there longer, and it was a crafty foe. It overcame the excitement quickly, and Blueblood drifted to sleep. It was the best sleep he had had in a long while, completely devoid of dreams or stirring. It was the sleep of the dead; more than that, it was the sleep of an inanimate object. He was so still that when he re-awoke, he was stiff for lack of movement. Among other things.

Despite his peaceful slumber, his awakening was anything but. He was completely unable to move – his body felt like it was made of stone and steel. In his half-awake state he imagined that he could feel every tiny piece of air brushing across his skin. The place where his horn had been felt tight, and tingled strangely. It was almost pleasant, in stark contrast to the rest of the experience. Every fiber of the mattress gouged into him, every sound was a drum in his ears. Light pierced through his eyelids, blinding him and filling his mind with white. He was, for a brief instant, acutely aware of everything in the cell room. Soon though, the feeling subsided, to be replaced with a pleasant tiredness. The sort of tiredness that comes from sleeping too long, rather than from not sleeping enough. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. Waking to that... feeling, was strange, but he was getting used to it at least. So, despite the harsh wake-up, he was in a good mood.

Now that the world was once again tolerable, he could make out sounds coming from the main room of the guard house. He tried to open the barred door to his cell to go and see who was talking, but it was locked tight. Frowning, he decided to call out to the guard.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Guard! Can you hear me out there?" The sounds from outside paused, and the door across from him opened up. The guard from the previous night entered, standing aside for two stallions.

The two stallions stood in the doorway for a moment, the light of the main room haloing around them. The first pony was a small, lithe beige unicorn. His mane was a dark shade of blue, sweeping handsomely across his face and down his neck. About his neck and shoulders he wore heavy wrappings of a deep, rich blue, similar to his mane. He moved constantly, bobbing to the left and right, showing Blueblood his cutie mark – a silver coin on a tongue. As he moved closer Blueblood could see that he was not actually that small – he was perhaps only a few inches shorter than

Blueblood – but he was dwarfed by the pony who was with him: an enormous, deep purple unicorn with jet black hair. He too wore wrappings, but his were creme-coloured and much more extensive, covering his flanks as well.

"This is the one you told us about?" the first pony asked. His voice was almost surprisingly smooth, and had a rich quality to it. The guard nodded.

"Aye," he said. "Took him in for robbery last night." The blue-maned unicorn nodded, moving back and forth in front of the cage.

"Get him out of there," he said finally, "I'll need to have a better look at him." The guard nodded, and unlocked Blueblood's cell, opening the door. The purple unicorn moved into the doorway to the main room silently, completely blocking it off. Blueblood stepped out of the cell, eyeing the beige unicorn carefully. For his part the beige unicorn ignored this, instead circling around him. His head bobbed up and down, and he occasionally made small grunting noises. He reached out and prodded Blueblood's side.

"Excuse me?" the prince said indignantly, jerking away. The unicorn smiled at him gently, and explained himself.

"I'm just doing a basic inspection," he said, "You know, see how strong you are, getting a decent look. I'm not going to bite, you know. You don't need to worry about little old me."

"Well..." Blueblood said, glancing suspiciously at the unicorn. The beige pony simply smiled back at him. Somehow, in spite of all that had happened because of trusting the ponies of this country, Blueblood relaxed. "Alright," he said, "inspect away." He straightened up, lifting his head proudly for the unicorn.

"Now, that's what I like to see!" the unicorn commented, "Nice and confident." He moved closer to Blueblood, prodding him gently in the sides and legs. Blueblood flexed for him as he prodded, and the unicorn smiled. He inspected Blueblood's face and mouth, before moving onto his hooves. He tapped each one gently without incident until he came to the injured hoof – Blueblood flinched away before he could even touch it."

"Well, that's no good," the unicorn tutted. "What's the matter with it?"

"I... hurt it," Blueblood said, "a couple of days ago. It's still sore."

"We'll have to get the doc to take a look at it," the large unicorn commented from the doorway.

"My thoughts exactly," the little one nodded, "We can't have him going lame."

"Thank you," Blueblood said happily. Finally, ponies were starting to treat him properly. Perhaps the guard had looked him up while he slept, and realized who he was. He decided to ask. "This seems like a lot of trouble to go to for escorting somepony out of the country, though."

"Out of the country?" the beige unicorn asked. He looked to his partner, who scratched his chin.

"Well," he said, "Mihaan has good sales lately, but they're a long ways away. Erebbia has decent trade, but the country isn't exactly rich... We'd turn a better profit on him on the peninsula. He looks like he'd be good for a noble."

"What?" Blueblood asked, confused. "I thought you were escorting me back to Equestria?"

"Equestria?" the beige pony laughed. "No way, they've got no trade! No, colt, you are now in the service of the happy hooves trading company!"

"The happy... hooves... trading company." Blueblood said slowly. He recalled vague stories of ponies being press-ganged, but he had always assumed they were myths. Is that what was happening to him here?

"That's right," the beige pony said cheerfully, "We'll take you upriver and on to the peninsula, find a nice big city full of rich ponies, and set you up on auction!"

"Wait..." Blueblood said again. Slowly, the pieces fell into place in his mind, and he realized what was happening. "What!" he cried, leaping away from the unicorn. "You're going to SELL me? To who? Why?" His head whipped around frantically, and snapped to the guard. "You!" he cried. "You told me you were just going to kick me out of Aloa!"

"I told you you were getting ejected from the populace," the guard said ambivalently, "You just assumed."

"Why... you... I... how can you do this?" the prince asked, backing away from the ponies before him, "I'm a pony, just like you! You can't just sell me like, like I was some apple!" His heart was pounding in his chest, but none of the unicorns appeared to care much. The beige unicorn approached him again, still smiling happily.

"Oh, now don't be that way son. That's just the way things work. It's the law -"

"But you said I was immune to your laws! I'm not a citizen!"

"Most of our laws don't apply to you," the guard corrected, "but we have special laws. If a foreigner commits a crime, they work off their debt to the country. Trust me colt, private service is a lot better than public. At least you won't be working down in a mine somewhere."

Blueblood's eyes darted madly. He had been so close! He had almost made it home, and now this? He needed to escape. He wouldn't be locked away again, tossed in the back of another carriage to be carted off to who knows where for who knows how long. He needed to get out of there and get home, but how? There were no windows in the room, and the giant unicorn blocked the only exit. Blueblood thought that he might be able to surprise him, get the drop on all of them. He allowed himself to be backed into a corner by the beige unicorn. The unicorn came closer still, offering him a friendly hoof, and Blueblood lashed out. His head struck the unicorn under his jaw, stunning him. Blueblood's ears rang from the impact, but he ignored it, dashing for the door instead. The guard started, leaping out of Blueblood's path, but the giant pony held firm. His horn lit up and Blueblood felt his hooves give out from underneath him. He crumpled in mid-stride, a tangled mass of legs and pony, and skidded to a stop still feet away from the door. The giant just shook his head.

"Now, there's no need for that," the beige unicorn said as he picked himself up. His smile had dimmed a little, but it was still present. "Running isn't going to do anything for you now – we've got the cart parked out front anyhow. You'd just have been running into more of us, and not all of our ponies are as gentle as big ol' crown here." He patted his partner's shoulder gently, and leaned down in front of Blueblood. "There's nothing

you can do now, son. You broke the law, this's the punishment. Just think of it like prison – 'cept if you do a good job, nopony's gonna try to beat you, right? So it's better than prison!"

"But I shouldn't have to go to prison in the first place!" Blueblood objected. "I was just a stupid apple! Look, please, there has to be some way we can work this out!" He lay his head down on the ground, and shut his eyes. "I just wanted to go home," he said sadly. The unicorn shook his head, and sighed.

"Then you shouldn't have nicked the apple. I hope you know, colt, it isn't personal."

Blueblood looked up at the unicorn. He was still smiling, like that was supposed to make him feel better that he was about to be treated like a commodity. It wasn't personal – was that supposed to make it easier? He scowled at the beige pony, who seemed to ignore him.

"Help him into the cart, Crown," the beige pony said. The giant called Crown nodded and picked Blueblood up, placing him on his wide back. Whatever he had done to Blueblood, it has stopped his legs from working. They all moved into the main room, and the beige pony took a sackful of silver out of his wrappings, giving it to the guard.

"All of it?" the guard asked, surprised.

"Yup," the unicorn nodded. "He's a good one. Young, strong, good-looking – and an earth pony! That'll look exotic, good for a price spike."

Blueblood seethed on Crown's back. He had gotten sick of that – calling him an earth pony. Treating it like it was some sort of novelty. "I'm not an earth pony," he growled at the unicorns. The beige one looked at him in surprise. He trotted over, and took hold of Blueblood's head.

"Hmm..." he said, turning it left and right. He brushed away the mane and rubbed Blueblood's forehead, raising his eyebrows in shock. "Well, blow me down," he said, "You're right!"

"What?" Blueblood asked. He hadn't expected anypony to believe him.

"Yeah – crown, have a look at this! There's a hard patch on his head, right where a horn should be!"

Crown set him down and did the same as his partner, rubbing Blueblood's forehead. "Well I'll be," he said, "Look at that. You can't hardly see it at all. If he hadn't told us, we never would have known."

"What?" Blueblood asked again, "But... the wound! There was one there just yesterday!"

"That doesn't surprise me," Crown said, "I've seen a few de-horned unicorns before. The wound always heals unnaturally fast. Probably something about the leftover magic, who can say? They always heal right up in a day or two."

"Boy, somepony must have really not liked you," the beige unicorn commented. Blueblood scowled at him, but he was speaking with his partner.

"So what do we do with him?" he asked. "Can we still sell him as an earth pony?"

"Well, he won't be as strong," Crown replied, "but they probably won't know the difference."

"Aye, but what if they find us out? We could get it for false advertisement..."

"No pony will know – what, they're gonna believe him? Anyways, even if they do we can always just give them a refund. No big deal, he'll sell for enough for being big."

The beige pony contemplated this for a while, then nodded. "You're right," he said, "earth pony it is!"

"Fantastic," Blueblood growled, "So it'll be official now, then? Everypony's been calling me that since I got here, may as well be."

"Looks like it, son," the beige pony said as Crown picked Blueblood up once again, "I'd get used to it if I were you. Or, hey, get it out of your system. Either way, owners don't tend to like their slaves correcting them,

so I wouldn't go around advertising your, ah, condition." Blueblood just growled in response.

The two unicorns carried him outside, where a large wagon was waiting for them. He was dumped unceremoniously in the back, and the door was shut. He lay there on the straw-matted ground for what seemed like ages, consumed in thoughts of his indignation. Anger flared up within him, accompanied by that same hollow exhaustion he had felt yesterday. Eventually feeling returned to his legs, and he could stand and move again. When he did, he noticed for the first time that there were other ponies in there with him. Many of them ignored him, staring sadly at the floor. A few looked at him sympathetically. Most of them just looked... gray. Like sadness had literally washed over them, dulling their coats and sagging their heads. For a moment, Blueblood felt afraid. Would he end up like these ponies? Just some sad shell being carted off from sale to sale? Would it even go that far? Maybe he would just get sold to one owner, and be stuck there for his entire life, serving under some rich unicorn. How would they treat him? Surely they wouldn't respect him – they would treat him like a servant, or worse. He began to pace nervously, moving to the windows at the sides of the wagon. He peered out, and noticed that they were passing through a crowd.

Dozens of ponies flowed around the wagon like water, paying it no heed. Did they even know what it was for? What was happening to the ponies inside it? They were simply commoners, Blueblood thought. Surely they couldn't know what went on. Then Blueblood had an idea. If they didn't know what had happened to him, then he would tell them. It would never stand – he was a pony, flesh and blood just like them. They would never let another pony be bought and sold like this.

"HEEEY!" he shouted out the window, "HEEEEEEEEEY! HELP ME! These ponies kidnapped me, and they're trying to sell me as a slave! Help! Go get somepony!" he paused for breath, but nopony seemed to be paying attention. He tried again, harder. "Please!" he cried, "I need your help! They're going to sell me to somepony! Please, You have to help me! I'm a pony just like you, you can't let them do this to me! Please, please help..."

Out in the crowd, a mare looked at the wagon. Blueblood's heart leaped – somepony had heard him!

"Yes!" he cried out, "Yes, yes, please help! Go and find somepony who can help me! There are other ponies in here to!" But the mare simply frowned at him, and looked away. Blueblood's mouth fell open. "Hey..." he said, "Hey, hey! Wait, come back! Please, don't just leave me in here!"

"Oh, sit down you stupid colt, nopony's going to help us." The voice was familiar. Blueblood turned to see the old pony from the alleyway. For a moment, Blueblood wanted to ask what he was doing there, but he didn't want to give him anymore ammunition. He knew what was coming.

"So, they got you too, huh?" the pony laughed. "Shoulda' figured. What'd you do, piss off the wrong pony? Or maybe you harassed those sailors at the docks, huh? Or were you just so stupid they picked you up so you wouldn't hurt yourself?" He gave a wheezing laugh, and Blueblood slid down the wall, taking a seat.

"Why do I keep running into you," he asked nopony in particular. "What do you want?"

"Well, I don't know. Misery loves company, doesn't it? Maybe it's just nice to see you brought down to your proper place."

Blueblood snorted. "My proper place. What, beside you? This isn't my proper place, you old goat. My proper place is in the palace in Canterlot, beside my mother and aunt. Not here in some... dank old wagon with a smell old pony."

"Well, if that's your proper place why ain't you there, huh?" the old pony asked pointedly, "How come you're in here with a dirty old pony like me?"

"Haven't we done this before?" Blueblood asked disdainfully, "I don't feel like doing this again. You obviously don't care to listen."

"Huh, listen to some rock-headed earth pony? What would you even have to say, huh?" the old pony laughed again. "No wait, let me guess, let me guess. You'd say, 'I'm not an earth pony, I'm a unicorn!'"

"Well, at least you can learn," Blueblood said. He tried his best to stay angry at the pony, but the exhaustion was creeping over him again. He fought it down, trying to become indignant, if only for the sake of having something to do. Not that the old pony made it very hard.

"Looks like you don't, though," the old pony wheezed. "Still trying to feed everypony that same stupid story. You really believe it, don't you? It'd be sad, if it weren't so damn funny."

"Like you know what's funny," Blueblood said, "Have you looked in a mirror lately – now there's something funny, the look of you. I don't suppose you would have though, not many ponies throw away mirrors."

"If you're so high and mighty, how come you don't have any better jokes, smart colt?" the ancient stallion taunted. Blueblood fumed, and barked at him.

"I shouldn't have to – you aren't worth the effort! You don't just sleep in trash, you ARE trash! You deserve to be in here, at least!"

"Maybe I do," the pony shouted back, "At least I've got a reason! What's mr. high-and-mighty's reason, huh? I bet it ain't so fancy, I bet you done got caught stealing something!" Blueblood glowered at the old pony, who burst out laughing, knowing he had hit his mark.

"Haw, you did! You got caught stealing, cause you ain't got no money! How can you be classy if you ain't got no money, huh? If there's one thing I know, it's you ain't worth nothing on your own, colt! You gotta have money to be fancy. You ain't got that, and you're just some old bum like me. So where's your money? Where's your fancy fortunes? You're just some common trash like me! You deserve to be in here just as much as I do, what do you think about that?"

"YOU SHUT UP!" Blueblood screamed, leaping to his hooves, "You shut up, you stupid old bum! I'm not like you! I'm NOTHING like you! I don't sleep on piles of garbage, I don't beg for scraps, and I don't taunt my betters! I've never done anything so degrading in my entire LIFE until I came to this pit of a country! I AM ROYALTY!"

Tears rimmed his eyes. Some part of him wanted to stop shouting, to stop fighting. Some part of him didn't believe in what he was saying any more than the old pony did. Perhaps some part of him really believed that he was some common pony who had gone mad, and his whole life was just his imaginings. Or maybe some part of him thought that he did belong in here. But he couldn't stop fighting. He couldn't stop fighting that little part of him, and he couldn't stop fighting the pony before him. He needed to fight, he

knew that. If he ever dreamed of seeing his home again, he needed to fight. He shook his head, and yelled again.

"I am Prince Blueblood of Equestria! Go ahead and laugh, I know none of you believe me! I don't care! I know who I am, why should I care about your damned opinions? The opinions of slaves, of beggars and commoners? What do they mean to me? I'm better than any of you will ever be! Before I got dragged out here... before I got dragged out here, I was everything that any of you ever aspired to be! I was better! I was a prince! The nephew of a goddess! And now here I am, off to be sold... all because stupid, selfish ponies like YOU can't handle the fact that I was better than you! Well, I was wrong. Some ponies deserve to be slaves – all of you! I've done NOTHING to deserve ANY of this!"

"Don't you dare say that," Another voice piped up. Blueblood looked to the source of the voice. It was young mare – scrawny, all knees and elbows. She looked like she had barely gotten her cutie mark a few years ago, but more than anything her most vivid feature was her eyes. They were filled to the brim with raw, seething hatred.

"Don't you dare tell me I deserve this," she yelled at him. For a moment he was speechless, taken aback by this little pony. "Don't you dare tell me you've done nothing to deserve this. You know what? I believe you! I believe that you're prince Blueblood, and you know what? I DON'T GIVE A DAMN! How many of you do you think I've ever served under? I was BORN a slave! Do you think I deserved that? You think I deserved to be raised on rags and scraps, under pissheads like you? You think I deserved anything I got? I've known nobelponies before, and you know what? I believe you're one of them. Because you're just like them. You're a spoiled, selfish brat!"

"That's... that's not true!" Blueblood objected, but the little pony kept on screaming.

"You shut the fuck up! Do you know how long I've wanted the chance to tell one of you this? You aren't as great as you think you are! You aren't some gift from the goddesses to ponykind, you're all just foals with power! Every single one of you! You're all completely self centered! Here you are, whining about how your going to get sold off, well you know what? You'll be fine! You'll get sold to some pony who's just as evil as you are, and you'll get along famously!"

"N-no," Blueblood said quietly. The ferocity of the little pony stunned him. It completely quelled the anger he had worked so hard to build, leaving only that hollowness. Only now it found a strange, cold companion. "No," he said again, "I'm not... I was never that bad. I never had any slaves -"

"Oh sure, not in name maybe. But you had servants, didn't you? Well, we had servants too, and you know what? They were treated just the same as I was! You treated your servants like damned slaves, and they just bent over backwards and took it! I'll bet you didn't even notice half the shit they had to put up with from you, did you? All the crap you demanded on a daily basis! Do you have any idea how much they hated you? Well! Do you!"

"No," Blueblood said, shaking his head, "No, that isn't true!" his mind returned to Iron's words – they echoed in his mind even as the filly lay into him.

"Yes it is, don't you lie! You know it, don't you? You know how miserable you were to them. Well guess what, Blueblood? You're one of them now! So don't you dare stand there, yelling at us like you're some kind of saint. Don't you dare talk to me like you're better than me. You aren't any better than anypony in this wagon, not any more. As far as they're concerned, we're all the same – just another slave to buy and sell. But you know what? I know the truth, and so do you. You aren't better than me, or any other slave. You never were. You're WORSE. You're an arrogant, self-centered, spoiled, selfish, stupid pony. You're a waste – a waste of a perfectly good pony. Somepony else could have been born instead of you, somepony worthwhile, but they weren't. You were instead. Congratulations."

"No," Blueblood said, "no, no, no, no, no, no!" He lay on the ground, covering his ears and scrambling away from the screaming filly. He curled into a tiny ball, covering his head and crying out, "No, no, no, no, no! That isn't true! None of it is true! They didn't hate me... Iron was just insane! It wasn't my fault! I said I was sorry, but he didn't listen! He wasn't mad at me, he was just insane! He was psychopath, that's why he did it! He just wanted to hurt somepony! The ambassador didn't hate me, he just had plans! Auntie didn't hate me, that isn't why she never talked to me, she was just shy! They didn't hate me! No pony hated me!" Tears ran down his face, and he sobbed. The filly had stopped screaming at him, but he didn't care. He hadn't been listening anyways. He had sunk into his own mind, flashes of memories dancing around him, taunting him. He remembered Iron's irate

tone, the tone he always used when Blueblood was around. He remembered the chambermaid's stunned expression when he had tried to compliment her. He remembered all his servants exasperated expressions when he had asked things of them. But surely they hadn't hated him? He had never given them cause to... had he? Had he truly been so horrible? He never wanted to be... but did that mean it was natural? He was a terrible pony without even realizing it?

"No," he cried again, sobbing, "No, that can't be it! I'm not a bad pony... I'm not, I swear... I swear... oh..." He broke into unintelligible sobs, unable to form words around his screaming. But in his mind, he could still lash out. He cursed the ambassador, for taking him away from his comfortable illusion. He cursed the family on the boat for giving him a chance to be miserable to them. He cursed the old pony for not getting through to him sooner. He cursed the sailor and the muggers for beating him, and he cursed them for not beating him hard enough to kill him, and spare him from this. He cursed everypony. He cursed his servants for listening to him. He cursed his aunt for fooling him into believing that he was important enough to get away with what he had done. He cursed everypony who had ever talked to him, and not told him what he was doing. He cursed himself, for being miserable. For being selfish, and stupid, and cruel. He cursed himself for ever denying what he was, for ever fighting it. Still sobbing, he leaned against the wall. The filly was right. He was never going to make it home. This was his home now, and he deserved it. He cursed himself, and he cried.

Then, he gave up.

Chapter 5

In Which an Exchange is Made

"...Anything?"

"Nothing. No pony's seen any pony but unicorns. You?"

The brown-furred guard shook his head. His partner grimaced. The two had spent half the day talking to ponies in the market, asking about a white "earth pony", but to no avail. Now it was the middle of the night, and they couldn't put it off any longer. They were going to have to tell Iron.

Of course, they only HAD to tell Ambassador Letter. It was he that they answered to, after all. It was rare to see the ambassador without the surly gray pony nearby these days, though, and he seemed almost to control the crimson unicorn. There was no way they would be able to speak to Ambassador Letter alone unless they were very, very lucky – and right now, neither of them felt very lucky.

They moved slowly through the streets of Dune. It was one of the few inland cities this close to the coast, and it lived up to its name. The cobblestone streets were coated with a fine layer of white sand, piling up against buildings and sliding across the streets. The guards hated coming out this far east. The east was for ponies as arid as the climate. Most of the ponies that Ambassador Letter had dragged out here agreed, they much preferred the peninsula. Amongst themselves, at least. None of them dared complain in front of Iron.

The earth pony was growing more unstable every day. He screamed, he shouted, he broke things – often with only the slightest provocation. One guard swore that he'd seen Iron start howling with absolutely no provocation at all. If he was trying to frighten the guards into obedience, it was certainly working - every last one of them was petrified of the pony. Of course, the most frightening prospect was that Iron wasn't trying to frighten them at all, but was simply insane. The guards considered this possibility as they stood in front of the ambassador's door. One of the guards, a wiry yellow stallion, gulped.

"Maybe," he said slowly, "maybe we can do another pass? Somepony might have found something out while we were searching elsewhere?"

"That's a good point," his partner commented, nodding. "It's a fair-sized town... he could have easily slipped past us before." The two exchanged a hopeful glance. Their hope was short-lived, however, as moments later the door swung open from the inside. Iron stood before them, staring down ambivalently.

"You're back," he said, standing aside for them. "Come in and give your report." The unicorns nodded nervously, and stepped inside.

Ambassador Letter had booked several rooms in a local inn for their stay in Dune, and he had chosen to stay in the largest. The room was luxurious, swathed in red curtains and featuring a large table set up in the center, where Letter currently sat, pouring over maps and papers. He looked up from his work, and nodded to the two soldiers.

"Good evening, stallions," he said quietly. The soldiers saluted to him, and Iron cleared his throat loudly. Letter nodded, and asked, "Now... your report? Did you find the prince?"

"Well..." the yellow stallion said, his head sinking, "no. We saw no sign of Prince Blueblood while we were searching the city."

Iron growled, and began to pace in front of the pair, who shrunk back visibly. "Did you ask the citizens?" he asked sharply. "Did anypony see a white earth pony?"

"N-no sir," the yellow stallion said again. "None of the ponies we asked reported seeing any earth ponies."

Iron growled again, much louder. The soldiers backed away from him, but he remained relatively calm. "How many teams are there left?" he asked the ambassador. Letter looked down at his papers.

"This is the sixth team," he said, "We have two more teams coming in."

"The we'll have covered the whole city?"

"As best as we're able." The ambassador sighed.

"What do you mean, 'as best as we're able'?" Iron asked, stomping over to the table. "The best we're able to do is search the whole blasted city! Every sand-infested inch of it, until we find that sniveling whelp!"

"That's exactly what we're doing, Iron," the ambassador said. If he was as afraid of Iron as the soldiers, he hid it admirably. There was not a hint of tension in his voice. Even Iron seemed relaxed by it.

"There's really only so much we can do, sir," the yellow stallion piped up, "We don't have enough ponies to search the city effectively – we could be missing the prince by inches for all we know."

Letter buried his face in his hooves, and gave a retracted sigh. The two soldiers froze up as Iron turned slowly, staring at them.

"What," he said flatly. The yellow stallion took a step backwards, trying in vain to placate the earth pony.

"I-I only meant, sir, t-that we're doing the best that we can. I m-mean, we need to be thorough, to make sure he doesn't slip past us, and, and, we don't have a lot of ponies, s-so it's going to take a while..." He cringed, closing his eyes. His partner hooked a hoof around his neck, flattening him just in time to keep the candlestick from hitting his head.

"MISSING HIM BY INCHES!" Iron roared, his eyes burning brightly with rage, "MISSING HIM BY INCHES! You idiots mean to tell me that he could be right under your blasted noses, and YOU STILL WOULDN'T SEE HIM!"

"N-no sir!" the other soldier shouted, barely dodging a flung chair, "That's not what we mean! We're doing the best we can, we just need time to make sure he isn't here!"

"IDIOTS! MORONS! INCOMPETENTS!" Iron screamed, bucking another chair which exploded into splinters, "For all we know the prince could be back in Equestria already! We haven't got bloody TIME for this, we need to catch him NOW!"

"We're trying, sir!" the yellow stallion parroted, getting to his hooves. Iron snorted, lowering his head and charging the pony. The poor unicorn hardly had time to react before Iron rocketed across the room, taking him full in the chest. He was thrown backwards, striking the door and blowing it off its hinges. Broken door and pony both fell out into the street, skidding across

the sandy cobblestone. His partner dashed out the portal, just barely avoiding a kick. He grabbed the moaning yellow stallion and ran, as Iron yelled out after them.

"BRING ME BACK THE PRINCE, YOU IDIOTS! EXCUSES AREN'T GOING TO SAVE US FROM CELESTIA, AND THEY AREN'T GOING TO SAVE YOU FROM ME!"

The unicorn ran like mad, his friend sprawled across his back, flopping weakly. Eventually he stopped, gently rolling the yellow unicorn onto the ground. His breath was shallow, but at least consistent.

"Are you alright?" he asked the yellow unicorn.

"I'll be fine," the stallion said, "It just hurts to breathe, a bit."

"That doesn't sound alright to me. I'm going to find you a doctor. I remember seeing one when I was searching."

"That would be nice." The yellow unicorn laughed weakly. His friend picked him up again, slinging him over his chocolate-coloured back. The brown pony carried his partner through the streets, trying to find the doctor's office again.

"Hey..." the yellow soldier said, "Sorry."

"Sorry?" the brown pony asked, turning to give him an odd glance. "What are you sorry for?"

"For setting Iron off," he explained. "We almost made it out of there unscathed."

"You're the one who got hurt, not me," the brown pony said, laughing faintly. "Anyways, you didn't set Iron off... not by much, anyways. One of us could have standing too close to him and he would have done backflips."

The yellow pony laughed, wincing as pain shot through his chest. "Where's that doctor, again?" he asked.

"Don't worry," his partner told him, "We're almost there."

"That's good... I'll be honest with you, mate. I think I'm gonna need to be in as good shape as possible, if this keeps up." The brown pony nodded in agreement.

"Aye... I don't like this, not one bit. I didn't sign on to get thrown around by some psychotic Equestrian."

"Heh," the yellow pony chuckled, "Don't think I signed on for any of this, come to think of it. You remember them telling you we were gonna cause a war in briefing?"

"Think it might'a come after after they served biscuits." The brown pony laughed.

"Aw, man, they served biscuits in yours?" The two laughed as best as they were able, in between the yellow pony's grunts of pain. He shook his head, and sighed.

"Seriously though... I don't remember hearing about any of this. I thought this was gonna be a vacation – escort the ambassador to Equestria, relax for a few days in the palace, then come back for regular duties. No pony ever told me about kidnapping the prince."

"Me either," the brown pony agreed. "And they won't give us any backup... we should have a hundred ponies out looking for the prince, not just the ten of us."

"I don' like it," the yellow pony said again.

"Well, don't you worry. We'll be done with it soon enough. Here, there's that doctor."

"Fantastic," the yellow pony said, looking up. He frowned. "Looks like we've got a bit of a wait first," he added.

An enormous wagon was parked outside of the office. It looked like it could easily fit a dozen ponies in the back, with room to spare. The back doors of it were bolted tight, and the pair of soldiers could hear muffled talking coming from inside it.

"...would be much easier if we were doing this at my work station," said a pony, likely the doctor.

"No can do, Doc. We can't hold on to them while you're working, and we can't have them running away. 'Specially not this one – he'll be worth a pretty penny on the auction.

"Slaves?" the brown pony asked. His friend nodded.

"Sounds like it... I don't know about you, but I think my gut is a bit more important than some slave. Can you put me up under that window there? I'll see if I can't get their attention."

The brown pony complied, standing tight against the wall. His partner stood up, balancing himself on his back hooves on the brown pony's back. He was just tall enough to peek over the windowsill, and he peered inside.

It was dark in the wagon, but he could make out the shapes of several ponies. In the center three sat close together – two slim figures around a heavily slouching third. The first two were likely a slaver and the doctor – as he stared longer, the yellow pony confirmed this. In the darkness of the wagon, the doctor's white jacket stood out. Her patient stood out as well, with his pure white fur and light blond mane, sitting with his back turned to the window. The doctor was fussing over his hoof, inspecting it carefully. She reached up and forced the pony to look at her, revealing his face to the yellow unicorn as well. His jaw dropped.

He slid down the wall of the wagon, grinning excitedly to his brown partner. "We're going to get out of this a lot sooner than we thought, mate!" he whispered. His friend gave him an odd look, and he exclaimed as quietly as he could, "The prince's in there!"

~ ~ ~

"This would be much easier if I didn't have to force you to do everything, colt," the doctor said irritably. Blueblood didn't seem to react. The doctor sighed.

"Look, colt, just work with me here," she said, pulling Blueblood to look at her.

"...Sorry," Blueblood said weakly.

"Give me your hoof, colt," the doctor ordered. Blueblood complied, lifting up his injured hoof for her. It felt like it was made of lead, weighing hard upon

his shoulder. It threatened to pull him down onto the floor, and he desperately wanted to follow it. He didn't care that his hoof hurt, he just wanted to sleep forever.

The doctor inspected his hoof carefully, twisting it left and right. "Hmm..." she said, "It doesn't look so bad. The wounds are closing well, but there's a bit of swelling. How does it feel? Does it hurt?"

"A bit," Blueblood said. "It aches."

"Is it a sharp pain? Like pin-pricks, where the splinters were? Or is it dull, and spread out?"

"Dull pain," Blueblood said simply. The doctor sighed again.

"I need more details, boy. Describe it for me."

"I... don't know," Blueblood said, "It's a small pain. It stops just above the hoof... it just aches, all the time."

"Does it throb?"

"No."

The doctor nodded. "It's probably alright then," she said. "It doesn't seem like it's infected... it'll probably clear up by the time you make it to market." She turned to the blue-maned slaver beside the pair, and told him, "I'm going to give him a salve anyways. I'll rub it into the hoof and bandage it up, to make sure it doesn't get infected."

The slaver nodded, and led the doctor to the wagon's door, knocking on it. There was a metallic noise from outside, and the door opened up, revealing Crown. He helped the two into the street, and bolted the door tight again afterwards. The three unicorns circled around the wagon, and saw a pair of stallions - one brown, and carrying another yellow stallion on his back.

"Pardon me, miss," the brown unicorn carrying his friend said, "but I think my partner needs some help." His partner, a yellow unicorn, smiled awkwardly from his friend's back.

"Yes," the doctor said, "yes, of course. Come into my office, I'll have a look at him. I just need to take care of another patient first." She led them into

her shop, leaving the two soldiers in the lobby and taking Bit and Crown into her office.

"There's a much more pressing problem than the hoof, you know," the doctor said. The blue-maned pony nodded.

"I know... the behavior, yes?"

"Yes. There's something wrong with that pony."

"He's just been sold, you know," Crown pointed out. "I'd be more surprised if he was taking it well."

"Well is one thing," the doctor said, "but he should at least be something. I've never seen a pony look so empty before. It's like he's dead."

"He was strong when we bought him," the blue-maned unicorn noted. "Stood nice and tall. Proud pony, that one was. Even tried to make a break for it. Got me good on the jaw, too." He rubbed his jaw where Blueblood had struck him, smiling. The doctor ignored this.

"All the more reason to be concerned," she said, "You just picked him up this morning – and he's already like this?"

"You think it's a sickness?" Crown asked. She shook her head.

"Not any that I've seen. I've got no idea what's happened to him."

"Then why bring it up?" the purple giant asked. "Why the concern?"

"She's right to be concerned, Crown," the slaver pointed out, "A weak slave will never sell. Tell me, oh wise doctor, is there anything we can do?" The doctor raised an eyebrow at this.

"Why do you always flatter me, Bit? I would tell you anything I know anyways."

"It's what I do, my dear," the pony called Bit said proudly, bowing his head. "But, do you know of anything we can do to keep him strong?"

"Just make sure he keeps eating. It's none of my business what you do with your slaves, but... just watch him, Bit."

"I shall do my best, doctor dearest," Bit replied. She sighed, and nuzzled him.

"I'm serious. It doesn't look like he's holding on very hard. Make sure he gets a good master, in a good city."

"We pass through Port Ponzance in a week's time," Bit said, "We'll put him up there."

"Good," the doctor nodded. She rummaged through one of her cupboards, retrieving a small jar and a roll of bandages. The three unicorns went back outside, and Crown let the two into the wagon again. Blueblood was sitting exactly where they had left him, slouched over in the middle of the wagon. The doctor applied her salve and wrapped the bandages around his hoof silently. Blueblood never fought her – he hardly moved, just passively observing her as she worked. When she was done, she patted his shoulder.

"Get some sleep, colt," she told him. "It'll help the hoof. Alright?"

"Alright," Blueblood said, nodding weakly. He curled up on the floor where he sat, despite it lacking the straw bedding that lined the walls of the wagon, where all the other slaves slept. The doctor sighed, and left the wagon.

"Take care of him, Bit." The slaver nodded solemnly.

"I'll do my best, " he said. The two exchanged a heavy glance, while Crown stood in the background impatiently. Soon enough the slaver broke their gaze, and bid the doctor farewell. The two stallions returned to the front of the wagon, and before too long it lurched into life, setting off to its new destination - Port Ponzance. The doctor stood out in the street, watching the wagon leave. She shook her head, and returned inside.

"Right," she said to the soldiers waiting for her, "let's take a look at you."

~ ~ ~

The wagon trundled slowly across Aloa. The trips seemed to take years, centuries. Then again, perhaps it was just Blueblood. He spent the entire trip slumped in the corner of the wagon, staring idly out the window. He hardly felt anything – not the bumps and jostles of the wagon across the old

roads, not the poking of the old straw against his flank, nor the rough texture of the wood. He didn't feel sad, or angry, or anything. All he felt was this incredible, all-consuming emptiness. Sometimes he felt hunger, or thirst, and at those times he could convince himself to eat a little. At the very least he kept himself from wasting away in the wagon. The other slaves paid him no heed, instead talking amongst themselves. In his more lucid moments, Blueblood imagined that they resented him, if they believed that he was who he had claimed to be. He hardly blamed them; in those times he resented himself, as well.

A few days into the trip the wagon came upon a delta, as the massive Aloa river opened to the ocean. Blueblood could see it, looking out of the wagon's window. He had never seen anything like it. Equestria existed in a valley, mountain peaks creeping along the horizon in all directions. He had grown up always seeing those mountains, and for many years he couldn't even understand that there was anything beyond them. The ocean had no mountains along its horizon. There was nothing there, just water as far as the eye could see, and further still. Something about it pierced through Blueblood, stirring something in him. It wasn't much, but it was there. Just a hint of a feeling. He turned his face away from the window, shutting the feeling out. He didn't need to feel, he told himself. Not anymore. It would be easier if he didn't feel.

The wagon made its way into a town on the edge of the delta, and rolled up to the docks. The slaves were herded out of the back of the wagon, and out into the light. After spending days in the dark wagon the light hurt Blueblood's eyes, and it took him a while to realize what was happening. There was an enormous boat waiting for them there. Bit and Crown spoke with the captain, and then the slaves were shepherded on board, and into the ship's hold. After a while of mulling around the slave ponies eventually took on a similar arrangement to the wagon, as least as far as Blueblood was concerned. He once again found himself with a corner to slouch into, and a porthole to look out of. It was through this porthole that he could see the dock drift away from them, and watch the ocean stretch out.

They were on the ocean for days. The slaves' diet changed from one of boiled gruel into one of pickles and seaweed. Soon the hold came to smell permanently of the briny foods, as well as of vomit from the weak-stomached ponies. Blueblood rarely felt ill on the trip, not ever filling himself too much. The longer the trip went on, the thinner the white stallion became. He ate less and less, and stopped even reacting to the slavers

when they brought him his food. All the other slaves would scramble at their food when it was put in front of them, but Blueblood just stayed slouching in his corner. Sometimes the other slaves would fight over who got the meal he left untouched. Blueblood never said a word.

Eventually, after days of staring out the window and seeing nothing, Blueblood was aware of land in the distance. As he watched it creep closer he could see pillars rising above the city, like the towers of Canterlot. For the first time in many days he stirred from his funk, enough to really, truly see the city for which they were headed.

It was different from the other towns Blueblood had seen in Aloo. Where they had been constructed from rough sandstone brick, hastily mortared together and supported with petrified wood, this city was made of sandstone alone, the dusty rock somehow polished into a yellow gleam. The buildings were no longer made as simple shelters, but were designed with purpose. Pillars sprouted out of the water around the harbor, meeting in arches high above the ship's masts. Stone docks stretched out into the water like mighty arms, scooping up the ships that came in. Much like the docks in Riverbank, these were populated by gruff, heavy looking unicorns, and adorned with ropes, pulleys, and other such instruments. Piles of boxes swung through the air on cranes, and great nets full of seaweed were piled onshore. Peering down out of the porthole, Blueblood could see ponies in the water, half-submerged as they bickered with the sailors on the docks. Blueblood almost wondered what they were doing in the water, for a moment.

Their ship pulled into port, and sound of the bosun barking orders at his sailors could be heard from above decks. Blueblood saw a rope drop in front of his porthole, no doubt to be tied and secure the boat. There was the sound of heavy hooves clattering around, as had been the soundtrack for the entirety of their trip at sea, and then there was silence.

The other slaves stirred uncomfortably on their hay beds. Silence meant that somepony would come for them soon, come to ferry them onto their next location, or their next means of transportation. Blueblood just sighed quietly to himself, slumping back into his corner.

Before too long the hold's hatch was pulled open, and Bit descended. He was accompanied by a slightly ill-looking Crown, who looked around the hold irritably.

"Welcome to Port Ponzance!" Bit declared happily, clapping his hooves together. One or two of the slaves looked at him oddly, and he continued.

"For many of you this is just another leg of your journey," he said, "But for some of you this will be your new home, probably for a long time. Port Ponzance is a rich city, full of rich unicorns – I don't doubt that some lucky few of you will find yourselves a nice master here, and I also don't doubt you'll make them all very happy – we wouldn't want to get any complaints from our valued customers, eh?" He smiled around the room, but the slaves didn't react. He kept smiling anyways, clapping his hooves together once more. Several sailors came into the brig, carrying a line of chains. The slaves were all buckled into it, with Blueblood at the front of the line, and then they were marched off the boat and onto the docks. Bit led them up to a tired-looking pony levitating several clipboards, and spoke to him.

"Good afternoon, my good pony!" The unicorn looked up from his clipboards, peering down the line of slaves.

"Looking for the auction house?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, we are," Bit told him. "would you be so good as to direct us?"

"Head north until you reach the market lane. Then head east. The house is the building with the giant wooden stand out front, you can't miss it."

"Thank you very much," Bit said, nodding to him. He nodded distractedly, and the slave line set off.

Blueblood was feeling strangely lucid in this city. Perhaps it was that it reminded him of home, with plenty of ponies bustling through the streets, trying to look important and powerful. Blueblood shied away from them instinctively. In every one of them he could see himself, leering back at their inferiors. He looked down, trying not to pay attention to them.

It was much easier when they reached the market lane, absolutely packed with ponies. He could hardly see the slaves behind him, nor Bit and Crown in front of him. His only direction was the tugging about his neck, the unicorn's magic keeping him moving along. It was here that Blueblood began to notice things about the ponies of this city.

Amongst all the ponies that packed the street, every single one of them was a unicorn. Some horns laid bare, but some had been adorned with golden rings and jewels. Every single one of the ponies was swathed in richly coloured wrappings, thrown about their neck and chests, tied with medallions. Some ponies wore their wrappings simply about their necks, but others covered their flanks, and wrapped about their middles. Some shopkeepers even let them hang loose in front of their legs. Blueblood looked around with something between interest and confusion, catching snippets of ponies haggling, chattering, or just walking and sitting about. He had little time to observe, however, as he nearly dragged through the crowd by the slavers. They soon reached their destination – an enormous building, all domes and arches and pillars. A great set of steps lead up to a set of double doors, the entrance to the beautiful building. They did not use this entrance. Instead, the slavers lead them around the side, and to the back. There was a much smaller entrance there, probably a servant entrance of some kind. Rather than the grand, yellow-tinged building that Blueblood had been expecting, the door opened into a tight, dark corridor. Crown turned back to the slaves, warning them sternly not to speak or make too much noise, and then they were lead inside.

Blueblood did his best not to rattle his chains as he followed after the two slavers. He could hear a soft echo through the halls, the sound of a pony's voice. He couldn't make out what it was saying, but it didn't matter. It soon faded from hearing as the slaves were taken deeper into the building. Soon even the rough hallways that they had entered into seemed good compared to where they were. Dank, hardly used hallways, supported by mildewed wood. They were led down a set of stairs, and found themselves in their final destination. Before the line stretched a long hallway, doors on either side. They were told to march down the middle, and then stopped. Blueblood could hear Bit and Crown speaking from the stairs.

"I'll go talk to them, get everything set up," Bit told his partner. "You make sure they all get into their cells proper."

"Alright," Crown said. Blueblood could hear the sounds of Bit ascending the stairway, and of Crown approaching. The giant passed Blueblood, turning to stare at the line. His gaze was withering and contemptuous; the gaze one might use on a dirty, naughty pet. He glared at them silently, as if he were trying to lash them with his eyes alone. Behind him Blueblood heard the chain rattling, and supposed that it must have worked. He simply stared

back, though, his expression as empty as ever. Crown snorted, and spat at his hooves.

"Listen up," he said harshly, "I know some of you are new here," he gave Blueblood a heavy glance, and continued, "so I'm going to tell you the way things actually work here. Bit is a good master to you. Somehow, he's managed to convince me to be the same. But in my household I saw how slaves are really treated." He leaned into Blueblood's face, and asked him, "What's your name, colt?"

"What?" Blueblood asked quietly. It was the first time he had spoken all week – it felt strange to speak. His voice was soft, and he sounded dazed. Crown stomped, and asked again.

"What's your NAME, colt?"

Blueblood was silent for a moment, as if it was hard for him to say the name. In a way, it was. "B-Blueblood," he said. Crown smirked, and swiped his hooves out from under him. Blueblood came crashing down, driving his face into the ground. The ponies behind him on the chain were dragged down as well. They all got to their hooves, and the mare behind Blueblood tried to help him up, but Crown stopped her.

"Let him get up on his own," he said. "If he can't, then he's no good to anypony. May as well just leave him to die."

Blueblood got to his hooves slowly, not saying a word. Crown spoke again.

"What's your name, colt?"

"Blueblood..." the prince said again. Crown reared up, bucking him in the face. A small trickle of blood came down his forehead, but Blueblood stayed up this time.

"Wrong answer!" Crown shouted. "You're a slave, colt! I don't give a damn who you were before – whether you were some bum we picked up in an alleyway, or whether you were a bloody prince! You're a slave now. And slaves. Aren't. Ponies. That means no pony names. Forget who you were before – this is who you are now, and who you will be for the rest of your miserable little lives. This is your lot. I suggest you learn to deal with it. Now..." he smirked at Blueblood again. "What's your name, colt?"

"I..." Blueblood said, looking down, "I don't have one..."

"That's right," Crown said. "That goes for the rest of you, too!" he shouted at the slave line, "You aren't ponies anymore. You're slaves. An object, something real ponies buy and sell. I suggest you all get used to it – and bowing to your new masters, while you're at it. You all got that?" There was a subdued mumbling from the slaved line, and Crown scowled. "I said do you understand, slaves!" he shouted.

"Yes, Master," the slaves said. Crown nodded, and drew a key out of his wrappings.

"Good," he said. "Bit is talking to the auctioneer now. We're setting up a time for you all to get sold. We'll cart you up on stage there, one by one, you show off a bit for the buyers, and we find someone nice to buy you. Got that?"

"Yes Master," the slaves echoed again.

"That's right. We'll see you all on your best behavior up there – we'll get someone to clean you up first too, so you at least look a little bit less filthy. Now, get in your cells." He unlocked Blueblood's collar, shoving him into the cell on his right and locking the door behind him.

The prince slowly picked himself up off the floor, looking around. He barely even understood why – he should have just slunk into the corner as usual, but he didn't.

There was a window high along the wall; too thin for even a foal to squeeze through, but barred nevertheless. A thin strip of light streamed through, illuminating the cell. It was constructed out of the same dusty sandstone as the rest of the building, and held up by old wooden pillars. The floor beneath his hooves was dirt, specked with bits of straw from a pile in one corner. Blueblood walked slowly over, and sat down.

He kept looking around the cell, despite there being nothing else to see. For the first time in days, he felt something. Just a small kernel of something, buried deep inside him. It slowly grew and grew, and with it came a thought. Those felt strange too, after so long without them. Lucidity. Awareness. Blueblood had been avoiding it, but now... now it came with relief.

I'm not a pony anymore, he thought. I'm not Blueblood anymore. He blinked. Just like that, the thought was gone. The damage was done, though; more came in its place. Thoughts about the cell, thoughts about Crown and Bit, thoughts about the other slaves on the line. He wondered if they would be alright. He wondered about the little filly who had shouted at him. He sort of wanted to find her – to thank her. It felt so strange. So surreal. The thoughts in his head grew more and more numerous, and louder. Soon it was hard to focus on anything through the thoughts. He just kept looking around the cell, every notion and idea flooding into his head. He thought about the beam of sunlight playing through the dust. He thought about the colour of the walls, and of the dirt. He thought about the feeling of the hay beneath him. He just... thought. Soon, though, the thoughts subsided. In the end, only one was left.

I'm not Blueblood anymore.

It was a strange thought, that much was sure. He wasn't sure what to do about it; he simply kept thinking.

My entire life... none of it means anything anymore. Everything I've ever known, everything I've ever been... He narrowed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Good, he thought. Blueblood never did anything worthwhile... Blueblood was a bad pony. Stupid. Selfish. Greedy. I... I don't have to be him anymore. I can be a good pony... He looked down.

"No..." he said, "I can be a good slave. That's... good enough, right?" He sighed weakly, and slouched again.

~ ~ ~

The sun passed through the sky as the day wore on. Blueblood watched the little beam of light through his window, observing it silently as it crept across the dirt. As he watched its hue turn pink, he heard hoofsteps coming down the stairs.

"Cleaning time!" he heard Crown's voice call out. There was the metallic sound of the doors unlocking, and all the doors were flung open. "Get out here!" Crown called again.

Blueblood poked his head out of the doorway slowly. He saw the other slaves creeping out into the hallway as well, all staring at Crown standing at

the base of the stairs. He was flanked by servants, each levitating a tub of water above their head.

"Get in line!" Crown barked. The slaves did as they were told, and Crown nodded to the servants. The tubs floated out over the slaves and upended themselves, pouring the water over the grimy ponies. Blueblood was drenched, nearly buckling under the torrent. The water was freezing – it hit him like a brick, setting his teeth chattering instantly. He spluttered and pulled his mane out of his eyes, only to see a servant standing before him, brandishing a washcloth. The servant took hold of the white stallion and began to scrub him down furiously. Though this servant was much rougher, it reminded Blueblood of being home again -

No! He thought, squeezing his eyes shut, I'm not Blueblood anymore! He kept his eyes shut, allowing the servant to scrub him down entirely. In the end his fur was matted and his mane tangled, but at least he was clean. The servant dragged a comb across him roughly, doing his best to straighten Blueblood up. Crown walked up and down the line of slaves, inspecting every one. He paused in front of Blueblood, seeing him still slouching weakly. He shook his head, but didn't say anything.

"Alright," he declared when he was finished inspecting all the slaves, "Back in your cells! Get some sleep, and try not to get yourselves too dirty. The auctions start first thing in the morning."

Blueblood shuffled back into his cell, ignoring it shutting roughly behind him. He returned to his bed of straw and sat down

Tomorrow it was, then. Tomorrow he would meet his new master, and begin his new life. Tomorrow he would be allowed to completely forget who he ever was, and start over. He wasn't certain how to feel. He wasn't sure whether he should be relieved, excited, or frightened. In the end, he fell back on what he had come to know – nothing. He let the feelings slip away from him, returning to the comfortable numbness. It had treated him well so far, and it would continue to do so. He lay down, closing his eyes, and eventually he drifted into oblivion.

~ ~ ~

The morning brought feeling back to Blueblood with a vengeance. Once again he felt that same holistic sort of feeling – an almost divine awareness of his cell and its inhabitants – what few of those there were. When the

painful alertness subsided he realized that it was mid-morning. He had slept longer than normal, exhausted by the effort of thinking and feeling again. He also realized what had woken him – two ponies were talking outside his cell. He slowly shuffled close to the heavy wooden door, and he found he recognized the voices – Bit and Crown, arguing under their breath.

"...So what are we supposed to do with this one, then?" Crown asked.

"What do you mean, what do we do with him? We sell him, of course." Bit sounded on edge.

"Don't be stupid. You know as well as I do he'll never sell in his state."

"And why not? Look, he hasn't even lost much weight. He's still plenty strong – and those ponies out there will think he's stronger still because he's an earth pony."

"Aren't you the one who was worried they would be mad when he wasn't strong enough?"

"IF he wasn't strong enough. But he is. Look at him! He's built like a farmer!"

"But he carries himself like a washcloth. Who's going to buy a pony who can barely hold himself up?"

"Well, what do you propose we do with him, then?" Bit was clearly on edge now. Blueblood almost imagined he sounded nervous.

"We call in the doctor."

"The doc... the doctor. You want to call in the doctor. The specialist."

"That's right."

"Are you insane!" Bit shouted. Blueblood could almost hear him composing himself, and returning his voice to a whisper. Blueblood had to lean against the door to hear them speak, now.

"Look at him! He's massive. He'll sell like-"

"I have looked at him. Have you? Look, the mane, the coat, the features – the colt is made for it. Just imagine what he'll look like when the changes are done – think of it. He'll go for SACKS of silver.

"And what are we supposed to do in the meantime, huh? And what if it goes wrong? We've got a perfectly good laborer right here – and you want to give it up for a chance at a personal slave?"

"Chance nothing – he's practically a guarantee. He'll slim out, we'll grow the mane, give him a chance to put some fat on -"

"So he'll look like a mare. So why don't we just sell a mare – we've got plenty. And some of them look pretty good."

"But a mare is what they're expecting – he'll be exotic."

"Exotic? He's an earth pony – exotic ponies have new things, not missing things. If we want exotic, we go for a pegasus."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. We could take him all the way to Ys – you know how the nobleponies get up there."

"Yeah, I know – and I want nothing to do with any of them."

"Look, we need to be willing to set aside our personal feelings for the business."

"I know that just as well as you – I sell ponies to rich idiots, for goodness sake. But this is too far – I refuse to mutilate that poor pony and sell him to some KINK!"

Blueblood tore his ear away from the door as he realized what the two had been talking about. He scrambled backwards, retreating against the far wall. He knew that these ponies were far from kind – they sold others for their own gain. He refused to believe that there was anything good in a pony like that. This, though... this was insane! It was one thing to sell a pony as he was, but gelding? He swallowed hard. He couldn't believe it. They would geld him, and sell him to some old pervert. He had believed that whatever life stretched out in front of him, it was what Blueblood had deserved. Even still, this? No, not this. Not even Blueblood had deserved this. He squeezed his eyes shut, and curled up. For a little while, he had been allowed to think that there was some sort of fairness in the world –

that he was getting exactly what he had deserved. He didn't deserve this, though. No pony did.

The door to his cell swung open, revealing Bit and Crown. Blueblood looked up at them, fear clear and bright in his eyes.

"Your turn, son," Bit said. "Auction started while you were sleeping... has any pony ever told you you snore?" Blueblood didn't answer, looking away from the unicorn's smile.

"Please don't..." he whispered. He didn't know why he even bothered. It hadn't worked before, and it wasn't going to work now that he was a slave. He shuddered as he felt Crown pick him up, slipping an iron collar around his neck. He could hardly walk as they dragged him along; his legs felt like jelly. Still he walked with the slavers, as if he had any choice. They led him up the stairs and through the halls, finally into a large, nearly empty room. There was a set of double-doors along a wall, and Blueblood could hear a deep, clear voice through it. He ignored it, however, shying away from Crown and Bit as much he could. The giant purple pony didn't react, but Bit shook his head sadly. Blueblood lay down, quivering.

So this was it, then? This was his ultimate fate. A toy in the hands of some sick stallion, a pony so impossibly worse than he had been. Perhaps he had deserved this – after all, he could no longer deny he had earned everything up until this point. Every wrongdoing he had ever committed, heaped back upon his head the instant he left the comfort of his palace. Not a single pony had ever done anything to him he hadn't earned in full, and this was just the rest of it. Maybe it really was what he had earned.

"You're up, colt," Bit said quietly. Blueblood whimpered softly, and tightened up. Bit shook his head, and tutted.

"It won't be so bad, colt. I promise. Keep your chin up out there, and everything will work out for you in the end." Blueblood scoffed in his mind. All that would work out was he would be punished for what he had done. Bit coaxed him to his hooves, and led him to the door.

"Look, son," he said, "I just want you to know... none of this is personal. It isn't some sort of divine retribution, it's just... it's just bad luck." The doors swung open, and Blueblood was blinded by a brightly shining light. "Stand proud out there, colt," Bit said. Blueblood was led into the light, and he felt his chain being affixed to the floor. Eventually his eyes adjusted to the light,

and he could see a crowd standing before him. He was on a stage, and they were all lined up row by row, staring at him.

There's a crowd? Blueblood thought miserably, Well that's just perfect, isn't it... They're all here to watch. One final humiliation... he sighed. The final humiliation of Prince Blueblood. Maybe they'll screw up, or let me just bleed out up here. Get it all over with.

He heard the sound of a heavy strike beside him, and looked over. There was a unicorn dressed in elegant wrapping, hovering a gavel over a podium.

"The next item is a stallion; approximately 20 years of age. Subject has never been previously owned, and was a foreigner before purchase. As you can see, he is well built, and strong. He is also quite handsome – his coat and mane mesh very well, as well as complimenting most colours, both in decoration and dress. Subject is very presentable for company. He is well suited for both personal attendance and heavy labour. Also note: Subject is an earth pony. As many of you know, earth ponies are extremely strong and resilient, much more so than unicorns. In addition, this makes an excellent talking point for guests. A full known history can be disclosed upon purchase if requested. Bidding will begin at 150 Silver."

What? Blueblood thought, peering oddly at the pony, What is he talking about?

"Get him to face forward," a pony called out, "I want a better look at him!"

"Subject, face forward," the pony commanded. Blueblood did as he was told, still trying to puzzle out what was happening. He had been so certain they were sending him to a surgeon... had they really decided just to sell him as he was?

"Again, bidding begins at 150 Silver. Do I hear 150 Silver?"

"150 Silver!"

"I hear 150 Silver. Do I hear 175 Silver?"

"175"

Blueblood stared incredulously at the crowd. They were. The slavers had decided to sell him as it was. Relief spread over him, but he didn't allow

himself to relax. He looked over these ponies in the audience, staring up at him. He wasn't sure how to feel. Seeing so many ponies all focusing on him again made him remember the palace, and formal events in the ballroom. He would walk in, and all heads would turn to him. True, this was a much different context, but the thought still scared him. He felt a hint of pride in his chest, and it terrified him. Pride was something that Blueblood had – he wasn't Blueblood. He didn't want to be Blueblood... he couldn't be Blueblood anymore.

"300 Silver!"

"325!"

"I hear 325 Silver, do I hear 350? 350 Silver?"

"375."

"375 Silver, very impressive. This stallion has the right idea fillies and gentlecolts, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Earth Ponies just don't come along every day now – do I hear 400 Silver?"

"400 Silver!"

But how could Blueblood be proud of this? The ponies may have been looking up at him, but they were still looking down on him. They were still treating him as a novelty – and worse, as an object. They only wanted him because he was interesting. Because he would be something to talk about amongst the other aristocrats – Blueblood knew how it was. The palace had once hired a crippled pegasus, and Blueblood had used him as a talking point for another noblemare. He shook his head, banishing the memory. It was what Blueblood had done. He wouldn't be Blueblood any more.

"500 Silver!"

"550."

"600!"

"700."

"800 SILVER! DON'T you touch me again..."

But Blueblood... Blueblood would never have been proud of this. He would have been furious – livid. They only cared about him because they thought he looked strong, or novel. Not because he was important. A noble couldn't be proud of that... but a slave could.

A slave could be proud of being stared at. He could be proud that ponies thought he was unnaturally strong. He could be proud that they thought he was interesting enough to show off to other ponies. He could be proud that he had sold for the most, and had the richest master. He shifted his stance, bringing his front hooves together beneath him and spreading his back legs out. His chest swelled, and he lifted his head high. His mane fell across his face, his right eye just poking out from between his bangs. He gave it a subtle flick, draping it over his left shoulder. He flexed his muscles – just a bit. Just enough to be seen. He knew that the ponies in the crowd could see it. A pony who was strong. A pony who would do what they said, no matter what the task. Powerful, obedient. Noble and proud, as befitting one of their households. They looked at the stage, and not one of them saw the spoiled Prince Blueblood. They saw a white earth stallion with the straw-blond mane. They saw a pony with no name – They saw a good slave.

"1,500 Silver."

"I hear 1,500 Silver – do I hear 2,000? 1,750 Silver? 1,600 Silver, do I hear 1,600 Silver? Going once... going twice... SOLD! To the elderly gentlestallion in the back." The gavel swung down, echoing through the auction house. The white stallion had been sold. The guards returned onto the stage, unchaining him and pulling him back into the preparation room. He passed another pony on the way back in, a bundle of nerves. The two ignored each other, both intent on their own destinations. A grinning Bit approached the white stallion.

"Well done, son, well done!" he said happily, "I told Crown we could sell you... and at 1,500 Silver, too! You've made us wealthy, colt... you'll do well, I promise. Who knows, you may even make it to management like me some day! That was some display you put on there, let me tell you."

"Thank you, master," the pony said, bowing his head to Bit. Bit smiled, and patted his shoulder.

"I'm not your master anymore, son. C'mon – let's go meet him now. Wouldn't want to keep him waiting, would we?"

"No..." The stallion said slowly.

~ ~ ~

Iron glared furiously at the ambassador.

"Why did you make me stop!" he hissed, struggling to keep his voice down among the crowd of rich ponies.

"Because you bid over what we had," Letter told him patiently. "We're on limited funds right now. Even if we had won, we wouldn't have been able to keep him. And then he would know that we've found him again."

"How can we not have enough money?" Iron interrogated the ambassador. "You take your funds right from the king!" The red pony sighed.

"Yes... right from the king. If I were to suddenly withdraw 1,500 Silver, don't you think somepony would be a little bit suspicious?"

"We could have stolen him, then! Killed the guards, and run off with the little sod in tow! A clean getaway, and then we drag him back, wipe his memory and drop him off!"

"Do you really think it would have been that simple?" Letter asked disdainfully. Iron seethed violently at him, but managed to restrain himself from true violence – barely.

"At least it would have been something, aside from sitting around here on our flanks! At least getting killed by guards is better than what Celestia will do with us!"

"Well, there's no point in arguing about it now," Letter said, "It's not as if he's going anywhere."

"No..." Iron growled, shaking his head, "No, you're right. He's stuck, just like us, the little rat. But I don't trust him... he shouldn't even have made it this far."

"You have a proposition?"

"Watch him," Iron said, "For now, until he tries to get away. Then we can snatch him up." He smiled, an almost perverse degree of joy in his wicked grin. "We watch him."

~ ~ ~

The stallion and Bit were alone in a room, Bit looking around randomly. Apparently, he had expected the stallion's new master to be waiting for them. His unspoken question was answered by a rhythmic series of shuffling thuds, growing steadily nearer to the door. Soon the heavy door was pushed open, and the white stallion caught the first glimpse of his new master.

The auctioneer had referred to him as an elderly gentlestallion, and while this description had been somewhat accurate, it most certainly did not do him justice. His coat was a deep shade of forest green, and he held himself straight and tall. Despite the aqua wrappings draping limply around his shoulders and flanks there was a military air about him, but more than that it was the straightness of pride, and of a bizarre sort of peace. The unicorn had a near-blank expression on his face, the only trace of emotion a faint furrowing of the brow. It was impossible to tell if it was a scowl, or merely concentration.

While he was old, elderly was perhaps a bit too far. Some wrinkles creased along his face, and his mane had gone white, but he looked like a father more than a grandfather. Strong, calm, and confident.

"Good morning, sir," Bit greeted. The stallion bowed to him as well, but his master seemed intent on ignoring them both. He approached the stallion slowly, and the source of the shuffling became evident. The unicorn before them walked with a heavy limp – he barely even used his right-front hoof, jerking forward and landing heavily on his front-left whenever the time came to use it. His hoof was still strong enough to shoo Bit away, however, and he did so. Bit bowed respectfully, and said his final farewell to the white stallion.

"Good luck, son," he said, and left the room.

"He your father?" the old unicorn asked. The white stallion blinked, and answered him.

"No, master. He was my previous owner. My slaver."

The unicorn nodded, grunting. "The auctioneer said you've never been owned before. You seem to be well enough into it – I haven't been conned, have I?"

"No master."

The unicorn stared at him again. He sighed, and shook his head. He began to slowly circle the white stallion, limping his way along. The stallion took his pose from the pedestal again, but the old unicorn simply scoffed.

"Don't bother, colt. I've already bought you, you can cut the act."

The stallion looked at him with an odd expression, but he managed to relax. A feeling of heaviness returned to him somewhat, but he ignored it. The old stallion nodded thoughtfully, and made his way back to the stallion's front.

"Hm," he said curtly. "You have a name, colt?"

"No, master," the stallion answered. The old unicorn paused, and peered oddly at the stallion.

"What do you mean, 'No, master'?"

"I... I'm a slave, master. Slaves don't have names..."

"What am I supposed to call you, then?"

"You can call me whatever you like, master," the stallion said, looking at the ground. His master regarded him impassively, the only hint of an expression a slightly raised eyebrow. After a moment of silence, he spoke again.

"What's the name your parents gave you, colt?"

"I..." The stallion said. He almost answered Blueblood. Part of him wanted to answer Blueblood, certainly. It was the name he was comfortable with, but... was it really his name?

Blueblood had been a horrible pony. He had been arrogant and selfish. How long had it taken him to even think of other ponies when he was kidnapped? It took days! Blueblood wasn't a pony he should want to be again... and he didn't. He didn't want to be Blueblood. He wouldn't be Blueblood, never again. That name wasn't right, it wasn't his. His blood wasn't blue. He wasn't special. He was just like everypony else.

"Red," he said. "My name is Red."

Chapter 6

In Which Home is Found

From her tower in Canterlot palace, Princess Celestia could see everything in her kingdom. She could see the ponies taking their lunch breaks in the capital, eating at restaurants and cafes, or just sitting outside and enjoying the spring air. She could see the little villages in the valley, with all their little ponies going about their days. She could see the vast swaths of farmland, ready to be tilled and sowed with seeds for the year's crop. From the other side of the tower she could even see over the tip of the mountains, and look out at the ocean, far in the distance. Despite all that she could see from her tower, one thing that she could not see was her younger sister, Princess Luna.

Celestia sighed, and shook her head. She had had to lower the moon herself, this morning. Luna had not arrived in the tower to bring it down. She wasn't worried by this, of course. She trusted her younger sister completely; she knew that the little princess would never dream of trying to bring about eternal night again. Not when there were so many ponies who reveled beneath her beautiful stars.

This was not the first time Luna had gone missing since she had returned, either. Every so often she would fly away to visit some little village, or see a new country. Sometimes she would even tell Celestia before she left. She had been alone for so long, though, and she had troubles remembering that sometimes, the ponies you care about like to keep tabs on you. Celestia could forgive her for all that, of course, but it could still frustrate her. Particularly now, with all that had happened recently.

The palace's spies had been investigating the Aloan delegates all week. So far, none of them had found any clues as to what had happened to the prince. If anything, the Aloans seemed more confused as to the prince's whereabouts than she was. The only thing that the spies had managed to glean was that the Aloan delegates were insulted Blueblood had not attended the meetings. As far as Celestia could tell, they were either being admirably tight-lipped, or they had had nothing to do with Blueblood's disappearance at all.

Perhaps that was the most distressing prospect, the idea that nopony knew what had happened to Blueblood. It had weighed on Celestia's mind all week, but she hadn't wanted to share it with anypony. One way or another, she knew it would wind up getting back to her niece. Poor Amethyst had been inconsolable all week long. She had put on a brave face for the delegates and the meetings, though; Celestia was so proud of her. The princess sighed sadly, and stepped back inside the small room in her tower. It was a second home to her; a place she could come when she didn't want to be disturbed by anypony. Usually. This week had been a little different than most weeks. There was a knock on the door.

"Come in, Oak," she said. The door creaked open, and a tired auburn pegasus stepped inside. He wasn't wearing his armour, and his mane was loose. He looked like he hadn't slept in days. He probably hadn't.

"Good afternoon, your majesty," Oak said, bowing slowly. Celestia tutted, and levitated a pot of tea from nearby the fireplace.

"Have a seat, Oak," she said. "And have some tea. You look like you could use it."

Oak took a seat on a plush cushion across for Celestia. For a moment he looked like he was about to decline her offer of tea, but in the end he took the cup she offered happily. He sipped at it gingerly, while Celestia watched.

"How is she, Oak?" Celestia asked suddenly. Oak looked down.

"She's asleep right now," he said. "Today's meeting really wore her out. She's putting on a strong face for all the other ambassadors and nobles, but... she spends most of her free time fretting, these days. I'm..." Oak shook his head, and said, "I'm worried about her, your majesty."

"I know you are, Oak," Celestia agreed. "That's why I trust you to look after her."

"Thank you, your majesty," Oak said, bowing slightly. "But... is there anything I can tell her? Do we know anything new about her so – about the prince?" Celestia shook her head.

"The Aloans don't know anything. Or if they do, they aren't letting on."

"Not to be rude, majesty," Oak said, "but can't we just... ask them? Interrogate a guard?" Celestia shook her head.

"They all have diplomatic immunity while they're here, so we can't arrest them. Even if we just asked outright, Aloa would take it as an insult. They'd be up in arms over it... and we can't just say the prince has gone missing, otherwise if Aloa did kidnap him they'd run before we had the chance to do anything."

Oak shook his head weakly. "This politics thing makes my head spin, Majesty." Celestia smiled.

"You aren't the only one, Oak. But we do what we must." Oak nodded solemnly.

"Has there been any word on Captain Iron Towers, either?" he asked suddenly. Celestia shook her head, peering at him.

"No," she said. "We've heard nothing from him. We believe he's been kidnapped along with Blueblood."

"Has anypony been chosen to take his place yet?"

"No," Celestia said, "It's hardly the most opportune time. Why do you ask, Oak?"

The pegasus pony straightened up as best he could, and said, "I'd like to request to be promoted to acting captain of the guards, your majesty."

Celestia peered at him oddly. This sort of behavior was very unlike him – Lieutenant Rowan Oak had never been a pony to take advantage of a situation for his ambition. In fact, he had never been a terribly ambitious pony to begin with. He had even turned down several promotions – he had been appointed as Amethyst's personal guard because of his loyalty and skill more than his position in the guards. He had always seemed perfectly content in his role, until now.

Celestia shook her head. "I can't do that, Oak. If anypony were to be elected acting Captain, it would be the second-in-command. You know that."

"I know your majesty," Oak said, "but... please, I ask you just this once. I would step down immediately once this ordeal is over with, go back to being Princess Amethyst's guard."

"Then why do you want this promotion so badly?" Celestia asked. Oak looked down ashamedly, and fidgeted.

"I..." he said, "I just... I want to do more." He looked up, gazing earnestly into the princess's eyes. She saw nothing but an overwhelming passion in those eyes, slick with tears. "I want to do more to help. If I were acting captain, I could organize the spies. I could come up with something... some plan to help us find out what's happened to the prince. I just... I feel so useless right now. Ameth-" he shook his head and blinked, saying, "I'm sorry – the princess, this is hurting her so much. She hardly sleeps any more, and when she does... she has nightmares, your majesty. Horrible nightmares. I hear her, sometimes, screaming in her sleep. And I just wish that I could do more for her." He looked down, shame and pain clear on his face. "I'm worried, Your majesty. I want to stop her hurting."

Celestia smiled faintly. Out of all the guards, Oak was the one she felt that she could trust the most. That was why she had asked him to be assigned to Amethyst. It seemed sometimes like it was impossible for him to lie – he wore his heart on his sleeve more than anypony she had ever met. She could understand why her niece found him so endearing. She reached out, and put a gentle hoof on his shoulder.

"You can do something for her, Oak. You can be there for her." Oak looked up, and Celestia smiled at him. "We'll take care of this," she told him. "You just be there for her. That's all we can do, right now."

Oak nodded. "Thank you, your majesty," he said. He finished his tea and stood, moving for the door.

"Thank you, your majesty," he said again. Celestia nodded, and he left. He trotted carefully down the long, winding staircase that made up most of the tower – despite the tea his head was beginning to nod. Soon enough he made it to the main floor of the palace, and returned to Princess Amethyst's bedchambers. He opened the door just a crack, peering inside – the princess was still fast asleep. He stepped inside, closing the door behind him, and went to take a closer look.

In spite of her slumber, the princess's face was still creased with worry. She stirred occasionally, mumbling something incoherent beneath her breath. Oak sighed, and sat beside the bed.

"It's going to be alright, Amethyst," he whispered. "You'll see..."

In her sleep, Amethyst sighed. The worry slowly faded away, and a gentle smile blessed her face. Oak smiled as well.

I hope... he thought. He blinked, his head dipping a bit. His head was getting a bit fuzzy. He leaned against the bed, resting beside the princess. The bed was amazingly soft, and the silk sheets felt wonderfully cool. He hadn't slept in ages, worrying over the princess. She was asleep now, though, and he could relax. He shifted, nestling his head deeper into the bed. His eyes fell shut and he slowly drifted off to sleep, leaning against the bed there.

Blueblood's master lead him outside the auction house. The white stallion had to walk slowly to keep pace with the old unicorn, limping as he did, but the two made it outside soon enough. It was a bright day outside, the sky clear of in spite of the lack of pegasi here. The market lane was much more sparse today; hardly any ponies were about, in fact.

There was an old cart at the foot of the stairs, a heavy chain anchoring it to a pillar. Blueblood's master limped down the steps, approaching it. Blueblood followed him, staring at the ground and being careful to stay a step behind his master. The old pony dug a key from the folds of his wrappings, and unlocked the chains. He took the chains in his mouth, dragging them into the back of the cart. When he was done, he turned to look at Blueblood.

"Help me in," he said, beckoning for the white stallion to approach. Blueblood did as he was told, coming closer. The old unicorn put a hoof on his back, and one on the edge of the wagon, pushing himself up carefully. Blueblood stepped in closer, pushing his master up further, who grunted and swung over the edge of the wagon. He settled in, laying down, and peered over to his slave.

"Stand in front of the wagon," he ordered. Blueblood nodded, and complied.

"Yes master," he said quietly. He stood between the two wooden bars protruding from the front of the wagon, and set his chest against a third flat bar that connected the two.

"I'm done here for today," his master said. "Take me home – head north. I'll tell you where and when to turn."

Blueblood nodded, and started to walk. He strained at first, pushing forward to move the old wagon. Once it had started to move, though, it wasn't so bad. In fact, it wasn't too hard at all after a while. He set off up the street, wagon in tow, until his master called up to him.

"North is the other direction," he said. Blueblood winced.

"Sorry," he said, turning the wagon around slowly. Facing the right direction now, he headed off again.

The trip through the city was an easy one. Whichever day this was – Blueblood found he couldn't remember how much time had passed now – it was clearly not one where ponies liked to venture out of their homes. There were hardly any of the wrapped unicorns he had seen the previous day out and about, and those that were out didn't seem too keen on mingling. They kept a wide berth of the wagon, not looking at either of the ponies in it. Blueblood gave them no heed either – they were not his master, he told himself, so he didn't need to worry about what they thought of him. He told himself that every time one of them passed, staring directly forward. He had to fight not to look down, or shy away from them as they passed.

"Turn left here," the old unicorn in the wagon said. Blueblood looked down the road to the left of him. It was a long, wide and straight road. Blueblood could see an enormous wall at the end of it, broken by a wooden gate almost as tall as the wall itself. The gate was swung wide open, revealing the open country beyond it. Blueblood slowly looked back at his master, who raised an eyebrow at him.

"I don't live in the city," his master said. "I live by the river. It's a fair walk, so you'd best get started."

"Of course," Blueblood said, turning down the long road, "I'm sorry, master. I didn't mean to question you." His master grunted softly, and Blueblood could hear him shift in the back of the wagon. Blueblood risked another

peek backwards, and saw that his master had turned away from him, looking down the other side of the street. It led to the harbor, and Blueblood could see the ocean framed between two of the enormous pillars that surrounded the port city. He turned back, trying to concentrate on the road before him.

It doesn't matter, he told himself, there's nothing down there for me. It doesn't matter one of the ships down there could take me home... He shook his head, and set it firmly ahead.

No! He told himself, they can't take me home! THIS is my home. I'm Red now – not Blueblood. My home is with my master.

He let his neck fall, sighing to himself. His legs were beginning to ache a bit from pulling the cart, but he ignored it. They were almost out of the city now, and Blueblood could see a guard standing by the gate. The guard nodded to them as they passed.

"Have a nice day," he said. Blueblood didn't answer. He heard his master mumble something to guard, but couldn't make it out – he doubted the guard had understood it either.

He looked around idly as they moved away from the city. Port Ponzance appeared to be surrounded by farmland, giant swaths of fertile fields on either side of the road. The path was rolling and hilly, slowly moving upwards as it made its way away from the coast. Fortunately for Blueblood it never got too steep, or difficult to pull the wagon. Soon they had passed the many farms, and moved into more open countryside. The landscape around the road turned into enormous dips and bulges, dotted with patches of thick, lush trees. The road passed by one such patch of trees, and Blueblood got a better look at them – they were unlike anything he had ever seen. Their bark was segmented, like scales, and their leaves were enormous and flat. Blueblood stared up at them as he passed. The leaves didn't cast true shade, not the way he knew it – they just filtered out the light, turning it green as it fell upon him. He looked back, watching the patch of green as it move across his coat, and he found himself meeting the eyes of his master.

The old pony had shifted positions again, leaning on the front rim of the cart and resting his chin on his good hoof. He watched Blueblood with an impassive expression, the green light of the leaves darkening his already

green coat even more. Blueblood turned his head back to the road sharply, lowering it. He couldn't tell what the old unicorn was thinking when he watched him. He couldn't tell if his expression was irritated, or just blank. It made the white stallion uncomfortable, when he saw it. So he stared forward, trying to make himself as small as possible. He heard a quiet sigh from his master, but ignored it.

They continued along the road for hours. The landscape had flattened out for a while, but it had started to slope downwards again. The patches of trees had become more dense, forming into thick woods, the road beginning to wind down as well. They had long since left any pretense of paving, the smooth stones falling away to dirt at a crossroads an hour or so back, but now it had begun to dwindle even further. Blueblood tugged the cart up one of the hills that made up their gradual descent, and as he came over it he saw a gap in the trees. In the distance he could see a thin line of blue cutting through the landscape – another river, down the middle of the peninsula.

"The River Aloe," his master commented, seeing it as well. "We'll reach home in a few hours. Turn right up here."

Blueblood saw the turnoff coming, and nodded. "Yes master," he said, turning onto the road. The path thinned even more, and there were a pair of ruts in the path. The wagon wheels slipped into it, shaking its contents. Blueblood heard the chain rattle along the bottom, and his master grunt.

"Sorry master," Blueblood said, looking back at him apologetically. His master raised an eyebrow at him.

"You keep saying that," he said. Blueblood stared back at him, unsure of what to say.

"You say 'sorry master', and 'yes master', and 'alright master'," the old pony continued. "Why?"

"Because..." Blueblood said slowly, "because you're my master. You bought me, so..."

"You never asked my name," the old pony interrupted him. "Do you not care what it is?"

"N-no, I..." Blueblood said. He turned away from the old pony, looking down. He wasn't sure what he should say. "I... you're my master, and... I..."

"I have a name," the old pony said again. "I asked yours. So why didn't you ask mine?"

"I-I didn't want to be rude..." Blueblood mumbled. "It wasn't my place to ask..."

"Speak up, Red," the old pony demanded. Blueblood winced, and answered again.

"I didn't want you to get mad at me!" he said, "I didn't know if I was allowed to ask!" He looked back through half closed eyes. The old unicorn was staring at him strangely. He couldn't decipher the expression – it was like the old pony was judging him, but there was something missing, if that was it. He remembered – Blueblood remembered, he reminded himself of the distinction – the expressions of the nobleponies who judged each other. There was always some degree of arrogance in those gazes. But there wasn't one here, even though the old pony was regarding a slave. He was just... watching the white pony. Like he was sizing him up. Blueblood stopped walking, captivated by the old pony's gaze.

"Ask me my name, Red," the old pony said. Blueblood blinked, and lowered his head.

"What... what's your name, master?" he asked slowly.

"White Brook," the old unicorn said simply.

"Do you... would you like me to call you that, from now on?" Blueblood asked. Brook shrugged vaguely.

"No... call me what you like," he said. He and Blueblood shared a gaze for a moment, staring back and forth underneath the green light filtering through the leaves. Brook looked away. "Home is still a long ways away," he said. "You should get moving."

"Oh!" Blueblood said, turning around again, "right... sorry." He set off again, pulling the heavy wagon along the old road. The road dwindled even more as he walked, narrowing until the sides of the cart brushed against the

foliage. Blueblood's legs were aching, but he pushed on. The bush around them grew thicker and thicker, the enormous leaves stretching out and hiding the sky, casting a green light over everything on the path. Blueblood stumbled once or twice over roots stretching into the path, but he never fell. He pulled on, though the muggy air in the bush made his mane cling to his neck. He blinked the sweat out of his eyes, pressing on. Brook never spoke – Blueblood wasn't certain if he was even paying attention, or if he was just staring off into space. It wasn't his place to wonder, he told himself, but he wondered anyways. He couldn't judge anything from the old pony's expression. He - no, he told himself. Not he. Blueblood – had always been good at judging expressions, and moods. Blueblood had been good at figuring out what ponies were thinking... and how he could use it. It wasn't Blueblood pulling that cart, though. He told himself that, over and over. It wasn't Blueblood. It was Red. It was Red who shook his head, chasing the thoughts of Blueblood's life away. It was Red who was starting pulling harder, despite the burning in his legs and the aching in his hooves. Not Blueblood. He told himself that, over and over, until he almost believed it.

Eventually he managed to shut the thoughts out of his mind. It wasn't hard, once he started to focus on the burning in his legs. He pushed on, pulling the cart down the narrow road. The sun swam across the sky as he walked, dipping in the west. Just as the sky took on a hue of orange, the bush started to clear.

"We're close now," Brook commented idly from the wagon. "Should make it before sundown, easy." Blueblood nodded, and pushed on. Brook had been right – the bush continued to thin out, and the path widened a bit as well. The green world gradually parted, allowing Blueblood to see the orange sky for the first time in hours. It was a welcomed change of pace, to say the least. Blueblood took the wagon through a turn, and he finally saw their destination.

The woods dropped off just a little ways away. A few trees still dotted the landscape, but for the most part the land in front of them was clear and flat. Blueblood could see it start to drop off and begin to roll again in the distance. His new home was much closer, though. The path led just a few hundred feet away, to a large wooden house. Blueblood pulled the cart down the path, taking a better look at the house as they approached.

It was two stories high, a fairly simple home. A balcony stretched out from the top floor, casting shade over a porch on the bottom. It looked much newer, compared to the rest of the house. The wood was old, but it looked sturdy. Windows peppered the west side, letting light into the building. Not too far away there was a shed, in much poorer shape than the house. Vines and moss crept up its sides, covering the door. They were probably the only things holding it up; it leaned visibly to one side. Blueblood looked around the open field, taking in more of the scenery, and he noticed a patch of soft, brown earth.

The soft earth stretched out beside the home, a few dozen feet square. As he got closer Blueblood saw that, despite being softer than the other ground, it still looked as though it hadn't been touched in a few months. He blinked. It looked like a very small farm, he realized; one like the ponies outside Port Ponzance had been working, only it hadn't been touched yet.

While the little farm and the house were in good condition, the rest of the field looked much like the shed; unkempt, and overgrown. Weeds of all sort sprouted everywhere, and trees dotted the landscape. Nearby the house an enormous stump was rooted, almost the size of Blueblood himself. Blueblood just looked around as he walked, taking it all in. Despite the clearing, the house may have well have been built in the deep wilderness. As if declaring this, that this place still belonged to the wilderness, an enormous river cut through the landscape not a hundred feet away from the home. Deep, wide and incredibly, unbelievably blue. Blueblood stopped, just staring at it. It was breathtaking. Behind him, Brook chuckled. Blueblood looked back at him, and saw that he too had been staring at the river.

"The River Aloe," he said. "She cuts right through the whole peninsula." Blueblood followed his gaze, looking back at the river. The pair stared at it for a few minutes in silence, before Brook cleared his throat loudly.

"Come on, Red. Take the wagon up to the house there. Just around the side will do."

"R-right," Blueblood said, tugging the cart to life again. He pulled it around the side of the house, settling tight against the structure. Brook nodded at this, and Blueblood ducked out from under the bars. He stepped away from the wagon gratefully, but Brook caught his attention again.

"Just going to leave me stranded up here?" he asked. Blueblood cringed, and trotted back to the cart.

"Sorry, master," he said, offering the old unicorn his hoof. Brook took it, leaning against the younger stallion as he sat along the edge of the wagon.

"Careful now," he said, "give me your shoulder." Blueblood did as he was beckoned, and Brook slung his bad hoof around the stallion's neck. Planting his other hoof firmly on the wagon, he swung himself over the edge, slowly lowering himself to the ground. "There we go," he said, three of his hooves on the ground and the fourth, bad hoof still around Blueblood's neck. He looked to the west, peering critically at the rapidly falling sun.

"Come on Red," he said. "Let's head inside." Blueblood nodded, and followed the old pony around and into the house.

The light in the front room was weak, the sun as low in the sky as it was. Blueblood peered around the main room, squinting through the darkness. His eyes eventually started to adjust to the low light, and he found that Brook had gone off somewhere. Blueblood looked around, not wanting to be too far away from his master if the old unicorn needed his help. He soon learned where his master had gone, however, when he saw a glimmer from a nearby room, and the entire house was filled with light. The sudden brightness stung at Blueblood's eyes and he crouched down, covering them in pain. He uncovered them again when he heard the familiar shuffling gait of the the old unicorn approaching. He took one hoof off his eye first, peeking around the other. Brook was standing above him, staring down with one eyebrow raised.

"What are you doing?" he asked simply. Blueblood stood, and answered shyly.

"I, um. The light hurt my eyes," he said. Brook nodded.

"I should have warned you," he said, "I just needed to get close enough to the middle of the house to light them all at once."

"Oh, no," Blueblood said. "It's not a problem, master."

"No?" Brook asked, looking back at the white stallion. Blueblood flinched, and took a step back.

"No, I mean... if you want to, next time, but... I won't mind if you don't..." he said, looking away. Brook sighed, and shook his head.

"We'll see," he said simply. "Welcome home, Red. Have a look around. I'm going to fetch something."

"Alright," Blueblood said, as his master limped away. The white stallion stood in the centre of the room, looking around. To his left an old staircase lead up to the second floor, disappearing behind a bend. An old chandelier hung from the ceiling, but it was neither ornate nor particularly safe looking. In all likelihood the only thing that kept it from falling was the fact that there was nothing on it to weigh it down. The rest of the home was little better, with mostly bare wooden walls. There was only a single door in the main room, where Brook had gone through, so Blueblood decided to climb the stairs instead.

He hadn't thought of it while he had been standing on the main floor, but Blueblood's legs ached. It was his feeble attempt at climbing the stairs that alerted him to this – it was slow going, and a bit painful, but he reached the top soon enough. Like the balcony outside, the second floor looked much newer than the ground floor, though its decorations were no less spartan. Once again it was plain wood walls, the wood was simply more fresh.

Blueblood found himself at the end of a small hallway. There were three doors along the hall – one on either side, and one on the far end. Blueblood crept down the hall slowly, peering at the doors. He took the one on his right first, gently prodding it open and peering inside.

It appeared to be a bedroom. A bed, which he assumed to be Brook's, was pressed into the corner beneath a window. The fading orange light of the sunset poured through it, casting a beam across the room and onto Blueblood. He looked down, noticing once again the colour it cast over his coat. He entered the room slowly, looking to the left and right. The room was spacious, with an old, soft-looking rug in the centre. The walls were lined with bookshelves, full of ancient-looking volumes. Blueblood walked up to one of the bookshelves, reading one at random.

"The Soul of the Hoof," Blueblood read aloud, "by Silver Tongue." He tilted his head, and read another. "Gold leaves, and other collected works... The Stallion Who Was Thursday... A Book for all and None... All's Quiet in the Eastern Sky... The Stranger..." He stepped back, shaking his head. Most of these books he had never heard of. He could only guess that they even were books based on the fact that he did recognize a few titles. He had never read any of them, though – he had only the vaguest idea of what they were about; old, dusty books about old stallions sitting around and talking.

He looked at the other bookshelves – they were filled with similar books. Poetry, philosophy, 'classical literature' – Blueblood wondered vaguely if Brook had really read them all. He shook his head again, and backed out of the room. There was nothing else to see in there, and as he backed out he chastised himself.

They're Master's books, he thought to himself, It's not your place to question, or snoop. You're a slave now – don't pry, don't question. He nodded, the thought set firmly in his mind, and turned around.

The door behind him was much more worn, signs of hoof-scratches evident on the brass handle. Blueblood sat for a moment before opening it, wondering if he should go through. Brook had told him – ordered him – to look around, though. He gulped, and pushed the handle down, swinging the door open.

There was no room beyond the door. It lead onto the balcony that he had seen from the path. The balcony was wide and nearly clear, save for a chair and small table near the railing. Blueblood trotted out, looking at the view.

It was wonderful – no, wonderful didn't do it justice. It was perfect. The river lay across the landscape like a ribbon, gleaming in the evening sun, turning its waters a sort of purple. Beyond its far bank Blueblood could see the forest start up again, every bit as wild as the path he had dragged the cart along not long ago. He could see the landscape dip and bulge in the far distance, stretching on into the haze of sightlessness. A gentle breeze played against Blueblood, sweeping his mane across his face and tingling his coat. He leaned over the railing, and sighed. It was fantastic. He wondered what it was like for Brook, living here. Did he see this sight every

night? Blueblood wondered if it ever got old... Blueblood has always loved looking out over Canterlot in the evening, watching the white city gleam and turn to gold. He shook his head sharply, jumping back from the railing and covering his eyes.

"No," he said aloud. "No. That isn't my view. It isn't my world. I'm different now. I'm not Blueblood anymore... Canterlot isn't my home. Not my home... not my home." He looked out from under his hooves, staring sadly at the vista before him. "This is my home now," he whimpered. "It's... it's better this way. It is." He told himself that, over and over. It was better to start over. He had been terrible before, an awful pony. How could he ever make up for everything he had done, in his entire life? He couldn't. He had to start over. He had to put his past behind him, forget about all the bad things he had done. He would take his punishment, and start over with it. He had heard something about that once – some old, outdated religion. Reincarnation? Karma, perhaps?

He stood up, and retreated from the balcony. It was too hard for him to look at it – it reminded him too much of Blueblood. He tried to shut Blueblood out of his mind, tried to be Red, and turned to the third and final door.

"Home," he said definitively, pushing the door open. The latch was old and hard, and the door creaked loudly when it opened. It seemed like no pony had come in here for a long, long time. Years, maybe.

Inside the room was a desk. It was a plain looking writing desk, with an old stool, quill and ink, and a set of parchments. Blueblood trotted into the room, taking a closer look. The parchments were all yellowed and curled up, and the ink in the well was dried. There was a window in front of the desk, but it was coated in thick dust. Looking around, Blueblood saw more writing materials – blank scrolls, journals, spare quills. Brook must have been quite the writer, before. There were more bookshelves, too, but Blueblood didn't bother looking at them. He assumed they would contain much the same content as the bookshelves in Brook's room. Something else caught his attention.

A pair of letters sitting on the desk, sealed with wax. There was no stamp on the wax, just a red blob sealing the letters. For a moment, Blueblood considered opening one of them, but he knew that his Master would be angry if he did. This room was old, and unused – the master probably

wouldn't approve him being in there at all, he thought. He turned around, preparing to leave the room.

Then he saw the soldier.

There, hiding in the shadows of the room, an Aloa soldier. The armour gave it away – silver, gleaming in the light that streamed through the windows. It was swathed in decadent green and blue wrappings, tied with a golden medallion, depicting a river delta – the symbol of Aloa. Blueblood couldn't see the soldier's face, obscured by shadow. The armour covered the rest of its body, plates along the legs and sides. Even the horn was covered, tucked inside a dangerous-looking blade.

Blueblood started, and fell backwards. The soldier loomed above him, tall and imposing. He shuffled backwards, knocking over scroll stands and quills in his quest to get as far away from the soldier as possible, as fast as possible. The soldier didn't move any closer, just standing and staring.

Why isn't he doing anything? Blueblood screamed in his mind. Why is he just standing there? Isn't he here for me? Isn't he with Iron?

He pressed himself against the back wall, his mind racing. No, no, he isn't here for me, he thought, he can't be! He's here for Blueblood! Not me, not Red, Blueblood! I'm not Blueblood anymore, so they can't hurt me anymore! I'm not! I didn't do all those things that made Iron hate me, I didn't get kidnapped by the Aloans, so he can't be here for me! He isn't here to hurt me, he isn't! I'm not Blueblood! I'm Red, I'm Red, I'm Red, he isn't going to hurt me! Please, please, please auntie, don't let him hurt me!"

He told himself that, over and over and over, practically begging himself to believe it, to believe that the soldier wasn't there to hurt him. He was so intent on convincing himself that he wasn't Blueblood, that he hadn't been that awful pony and that the soldier wasn't here to hurt him that he didn't even notice that he had been screaming.

"Red!" Brook shouted, suddenly beside the white pony. Blueblood hadn't heard him coming up the stairs, or even down the hall so impossibly fast. Not that this meant much; even as Brook shouted at him, Blueblood barely heard.

"Red! Red, what is it?" Brook shouted. "What's the matter, Red?" He took a hold of Blueblood's shoulders, shaking him. Blueblood clung to the old stallion, still staring dead at the soldier. Brook followed his gaze, spying the figure in the darkened corner of the room. He set himself between Blueblood and the figure, shouting again.

"Red, calm down," he shouted, but Blueblood payed him no heed. Brook kept shouting, but Blueblood wouldn't listen. Eventually Brook took hold of him and dragged him out of the room, slamming the door behind him. He stood before the cowering stallion, and slammed his good hoof down, shouting, "RED!"

His voiced bellowed, echoing through the house. Blueblood stopped screaming, and looked up at the green unicorn.

"It's alright, Red," he said quietly. "It's just armour. Nothing to be afraid of."

"W-what?" Blueblood asked slowly. His mind was beginning to come back to him, but the image of the soldier in the study was still fresh in his mind. Brook crouched down, looking him in the eyes.

"Armour, Red – it was only armour. It can't hurt you. You're fine."

"I... I..." Blueblood said, as more and more of his mind came back, "I... armour?"

"That's right," Brook said. "Just my armour."

The two sat on the floor for a few minutes, while Blueblood tried to stop shaking. Eventually, he looked up at his master.

"You're a soldier?" he asked softly. Brook sighed, and looked away from him.

"Once," he said simply. "A long, long time ago. But not any more. I haven't touched that armour... haven't looked at it in years."

"But the armour... it was so clean."

"Spell on it," Brook said. "Repels dust, rust – anything, really. Keeps it clean." He stood sharply, saying, "That's enough. No more talking about that." He turned, and trotted back to his bedroom door, opening it.

"Come in here, Red," he said. Blueblood stood shakily, and walked to the door. The room had changed just a bit since he had last seen it – a blanket had been folded and placed on top of the bed.

"There's nowhere else for you to sleep," Brook said. "You'll have to sleep in here." Blueblood blinked, and nodded, stepping inside. He took the blanket off the bed and pulled it to the rug in the centre of the room. He tugged the blanket over top of himself, and curled up on the rug. Brook stared at him from the doorway, and sighed. He stepped in and closed the door behind him. With a flick of his horn he doused the lights – all the lights in the house, probably. The only light left was the final lights of day, slipping away through the window. It was no longer orange or red, having turned blue while Blueblood was in his master's study. Brook limped across the room, settling into his bed with another sigh. Blueblood peered at him from the floor.

"... Master?" he asked quietly. Brook shifted in his bed, looking over at the stallion.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," Blueblood said.

"For what?"

"For... for being frightened by your armour," the stallion said, looking down in shame. Brook stared at him. Blueblood couldn't see his expression, silhouetted by the moonlight as he was, but Blueblood imagined it was that same odd expression he always looked at him with.

"You can't help that," Brook said finally. "There are things we can't control. Don't apologize for them."

"But... I'm sorry you had to come snap me out of it," Blueblood persisted. Once again, Brook was silent. He shook his head, and lay back down.

"It's been a long day, Red. You've had it hard. Sleep now. You start working in the morning."

"Alright, master," Blueblood said. He lay his head back down, shifting into a more comfortable position – he found it easy on the old, soft rug. Despite the scare not long ago, it was not long after he closed his eyes that he felt the hand of sleep pulling him down. He let it take hold of him, and before too long he drifted down into oblivion.

Chapter 7

In Which Something is Kept

Blueblood stirred gently in his sleep. He mumbled to himself, wordless sentences spoken to no pony. His legs twitched gently, and his brow creased. The prince was dreaming.

He was out in the field around his master's house. A iron collar was strapped around his neck, weighing his head down. He walked aimlessly around the field, pulling out weeds. His master watched him from high above on his balcony, stretching up into the sky until Blueblood could no longer see the top. Occasionally he would shout down commands, demanding that Blueblood do some inane task or another. Sometimes he was told that he had missed weeds. Other times he was told to dance for his master's amusement. Once he was simply ordered to hold still, and a small glass of water fell down from the great tower and struck him in the head. It didn't matter what it was; no matter what the command, no matter how humiliating or degrading, Blueblood did as he was told. New weeds always sprouted up whenever he pulled one, his master always had new demands. The weeds stained his fur, colouring it a deep crimson. After working for ages, his entire coat was red. Still he worked, pulling up every weed he could find, obeying every command. The collar wore him down, and his body ached, but he worked. He would work forever.

On the corners of his vision, a figure stood. He couldn't make out the details of it. It stood stock straight and tall and was so white that it shone, even amongst the fur-staining weeds. Whenever Blueblood turned to look at it, it darted away. But it was always there, staring at him.

Blueblood continued to work, and the weeds grew higher around him. Their stems stretched into the air, reaching past his head. All he could see was a swaying world of plants. He pushed through them, blundering blindly for his master's tower, but he could not find it. Then, he saw a movement in the weeds. He headed for it, thinking it might be his master with another order for him. The weeds parted, and Blueblood saw that it was not his master, but the figure that had been watching him.

The figure was a stallion; a tall, proud unicorn with a pale blond mane. His features seemed twisted and distorted, as if he were melting. It peered at him strangely, an enormous, cruel grin plastered across its face. It spoke at him, but it didn't speak in words. All that came out of its throat were garbled noises, like a cooing mother, mixed with arrogant laughter, and crying. Blueblood found he could understand it, though.

What are you? It seemed to say, leaning in to look at Blueblood. Blueblood tried to answer, but the collar was tight around his throat, keeping him from speaking. The figure jiggled, like it was laughing, and leaned in again, tilting its head. Its grin widened, becoming impossibly large.

You aren't better than me, it said. It seemed to laugh again, and took a step toward Blueblood. He stepped back, but the figure followed him. *You aren't better than me*, it repeated. Its face was almost pressing against Blueblood's. He started to shake, and he turned and ran.

The figure pursued him through the weeds, calling that same garbled message after him. *You aren't better than me!* It seemed to laugh as it chased him. Blueblood looked over his shoulder at it. It was only walking, but it was managing to keep pace. It twisted its head left and right, and its smug smile stretched off its face. *You can't leave me*, it called out, *I'll catch up to you!* Blueblood squeezed his eyes shut, and kept running.

The field of weeds kept growing higher and higher. It seemed to stretch on forever as Blueblood pushed the plants down to run. The iron collar weighed him down, threatening to pull him down onto the ground. It seemed to get heavier with every step that he took. He stumbled through the weeds as the figure slung taunts and jeers at him. Suddenly, the weeds fell away. For a moment, Blueblood was relieved – until he realized that he had run over the bank of the river.

He plunged into the water, dragged down by the collar. He struggled against it, but it wouldn't come off. He was starting to run out of breath, air leaking out of his lungs as he fell deeper and deeper into the bottomless river. Its blue-green waters were getting darker, until there was nothing but blackness – except for the figure.

It had followed him into the river, becoming nebulous in the water. Even down here it shone. Its body stretched out in all directions, but that grin was still there in the centre. Even underwater, it spoke to him.

I'll catch up to you, it said. A long, spindly limb stretched out from its centre, reaching for Blueblood. It stretched, longer and longer, longer than any limb should ever be. *You can't leave me*, it said again. Its voice terrified Blueblood, and he tried to swim deeper into the river to escape it. It followed after him, its single limb stretching after him.

Blueblood's lungs were empty now, but he still swam further down. His legs were turning to stone, and he couldn't swim any longer. He twisted around, and saw the figure still stretching after him. It was almost upon him now, nothing but a sick, twisted grin, and a hoof reaching out to grab him. Blueblood trembled in the deep as the hoof took hold of his shoulder. It washed over him, oozing across his body like taffy. He wanted to cry out, but he couldn't speak. The figure washed over him, completely covering his body, and pulling him in. It wrapped itself around him, and the world went black.

Then, it was awash with light. Blueblood stood in a brilliant white world. Behind him was a golden throne fit for a god, inlaid with jewels and plush cushions. Ponies were chained to it, despondent and weak. The throne was at the top of a gigantic staircase, that seemed to stretch into the clouds below. There was nothing below them, save for white. From that same white great marble pillars erupted, framing the scene before Blueblood.

Crowds of ponies stood before Blueblood, prostrating themselves. A voice rang out over them, made of those same laughs and cries that the figure spoke in. This time, to his surprise, Blueblood recognized the voice as his own. He didn't mean to, but he was speaking.

None of you are good enough, he said to the ponies before him. I am greater than all of you. You shall all serve me. You shall serve my whims, and what you say means nothing.

He felt his head turn, once again without his volition, surveying all of the ponies. There were Earth ponies, Pegasi and Unicorns before him. None of them mixed; they were all grouped together. He swung his hoof at the pegasi, and demanded the dance for him. They did so, and he heard himself laugh. Then he swung his hoof at the earth ponies. He didn't command them, instead simply berating them. He called them weak, and worthless. Then, he turned to the unicorns, and he saw that not all of the ponies were separated. In the centre of the unicorns there was a single

crimson earth pony. Blueblood walked towards the earth pony, cowering amongst the unicorns at the edge of the staircase. As he approached, Blueblood saw that the red pony was wearing an iron collar, and was dripping wet. He stood before the red earth pony. He stood before himself, cowering on the floor.

The red Blueblood looked up at him, fear clear in his wide eyes. Blueblood looked into them, and he saw himself. A white unicorn, horribly twisted and distorted. The only clear feature was his grin – arrogant, cruel and petty. He tried to stop himself, but he raised his hoof, and put it against the red Blueblood's forehead, right where his horn had been.

You are not better than me, he said, and pushed. The red Blueblood tumbled down the stairs, falling endlessly.

Blueblood's eyes snapped open.

As always, he felt that same painful awareness. By now he was able to ignore it though, and he lifted his head slowly, peering sleepily around the room. Light spilled through the window, falling across Blueblood's blanket in a broad line. Looking over his shoulder at the window, Blueblood confirmed what he had known the moment he awoke: his master was gone.

Blueblood stepped out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him. He noticed that the door to the balcony was opened just a crack, and he nudged it open further. Poking his head through, he found his master, leaning over the banister and staring out over the river.

It was a beautiful scene. The river gleamed in the morning light; its glare hurt Blueblood's eyes a bit, but he kept on looking. The light seemed to bounce all across the field, casting everything in a brilliant, clean white. In spite of the wilderness, or perhaps because of it, the world seemed pure. Blueblood walked out further onto the balcony, and his master looked over his shoulder.

"Morning, Red," he said simply, turning back to the scene. "You came to join me?" Blueblood lowered his head, and took another shuffling step forward.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What for this time?" Brook asked. Blueblood looked down, pawing at the floor nervously.

"Sorry," he said, "for waking up late."

"It's hardly late," Brook said dismissively. "Sun only came up an hour ago. Plenty of time left in the day."

"But," Blueblood said again, "If you wanted to, you could have woken me..." Brook was silent.

"Come here, Red," he said. Blueblood did as he was told, walking up beside the old unicorn. Brook didn't look at him, still staring out over the field. Blueblood sat beside him, following his gaze. Occasionally he would look back at his master, who still remained silent. Once again, he wore that curious, empty expression.

"I could have woken you," Brook said finally, "but I didn't." Blueblood blinked at him, expecting more, but the old unicorn had returned to staring. Blueblood stared too. He looked out over the river, over the forest in the distance, but he didn't really see. His mind was returning to his dream. Though the field bore only the vaguest resemblance to the one he had seen while he slept, it still reminded him of it. It reminded him of that strange white figure, grinning at him amidst the weeds. He shook his head, chasing the frightening thoughts away, and his master spoke again.

"It's good you slept in," he said, getting off of the banister. "There's a lot of work to do. You'll need the energy. Let's get breakfast." Blueblood nodded, and Brook lead him back into the house and down the stairs. He pulled a pair of buckets connected by a rope out of a cupboard, and gave it to Blueblood. "Fill these in the river," he instructed, "then bring them back here." Blueblood nodded, and slung them around his neck.

He trotted out the door, and down to the river. He hadn't been close to it before, but now that he was he saw that it was nothing like the river that flowed through the mainland. While that had been deep, and dark, this river seemed almost crystal clear in comparison. Its waters had a faint aqua hue, but he could clearly see the river bed, even in the middle. He took a few steps into the river, and watched the sand kick up in a cloud around his hooves.

He had expected the water to be chilly, but that was not the case. It was warm; nearly the perfect temperature. There were lakes and pools around Canterlot, but he had never gone swimming in any of them; Mountain water was much too cold for him. He stooped down, letting the buckets around his neck fall into the river and be filled up. When he tried to stand up straight again, however, he found that it was not so easy. The rope dug into his back, weighed down by the heavy buckets of water, and he made his way back to the house. He tried to walk steadily, but the weight of the buckets made his gaunt rough, and some of the water sloshed out of the buckets and onto him. They were still mostly full when he arrived back at the house, but not so full that anything spilled over.

"Bring them here," Brook called from one of the back rooms as Blueblood entered. He followed the voice and found his master in a small room containing a meager table, a few stools and a wood-burning stove, fire already burning. "Good," Brook said. "Pour one of the buckets into that pot."

Blueblood did as he was told, though not without some difficulty. It was hard to grip the bucket between two flat hooves and it often jostled in his grip, spilling water over the floor. He looked at his master shyly, who didn't seem to be paying attention, focusing instead on the state of the fire. Blueblood finished filling the pot soon enough, and Brook turned around. He nodded impassively at the reasonably-full pot, and gripped the handle in his mouth, setting it onto the stove. He opened a cupboard, pulling out a heavy sack. He looked between it and the pot for a moment, before sighing. His horn lit up slightly – if he hadn't been watching, Blueblood wouldn't have even seen it glow – and the sack lifted off the ground. It drifted effortlessly over the pot, and poured oats into the hot water. Brook put it back in its cupboard, and turned back to the pot.

"Come here, Red," he said idly. Blueblood joined him at the small stove, staring at the pot. "You know how to make oatmeal?" Brook asked. Blueblood shook his head.

"No, master," he said. Brook raised an eyebrow at him, but gestured toward the pot with his bad hoof.

"You'll learn," he said. "It's easy. Just boil the oats in water until it starts to thicken. Think you can managed that?" Blueblood nodded, and Brook did

so as well. "Good," he said. "Then you'll do that every morning. Get two buckets of water from the river, and use one to make oatmeal."

"What's the other one for?" Blueblood asked.

"Washing up," Brook told him. He dipped his hooves in the second bucket, washing them in demonstration. He scrubbed his bad hoof carefully, gently rubbing the dirt out of it. Blueblood watched him for a moment, before the green unicorn nodded towards the stove. "Watch the meal," he said, "don't let it burn."

"Right," Blueblood said, turning back to the pot, "sorry." He watched the pot bubble on the stove, stirring it occasionally with a wooden spoon that Brook had given him. After a while the mixture started to turn into a sort of paste as the oats blended with the water, and Blueblood took the pot off the stove. He almost scalded his mouth, and he dropped it onto the table, splattering the oatmeal.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly. Brook shrugged.

"There are bowls in the cupboard," he said, "and spoons. Get two out."

"R-right," Blueblood said, trotting over to the cupboard. He found the spoons and bowls as Brook had told him – oddly, there were more than two. There were five bowls and spoons, as well as five forks, knives, plates and cups. He found this odd, but ignored it, taking the bowls and spoons in his mouth and bringing them to the table. He set them down, and ladled the pastey oatmeal into them. He was about to sit down to eat, when Brook coughed.

"Was up," the old pony said. Blueblood grimaced, and walked to the bucket of water. He scrubbed his hooves, and returned to the table. Brook peered at his now-spotless hooves, and nodded. "Good," he said. "Go ahead and eat."

Brook took hold of the spoon in his good hoof. With a time-honed skill that Blueblood wouldn't have expected of the unicorn – or any unicorn, for that matter – he ate his breakfast. Blueblood tried to do the same, but he has not used to using utensils with hooves. He fumbled with the spoon, unable to keep hold of it without any digits. Eventually, he resorted to sticking his face into the bowl.

Just another thing to get used to, he told himself, probably better for a slave to eat like this anyways...

He tried to convince himself that he wasn't Blueblood once again, but in truth his heart wasn't really in it. His mind kept going back to his dream. He didn't understand why. It was just a dream, after all, but something about it bothered him. Maybe it was the figure's strange, oversized smile that made him uncomfortable, or the way it sucked him in. Maybe it was all those ponies that had bowed before the figure. Whatever it was, he had trouble focusing on anything else. It seemed to be autopilot that got him through his meal, as he was done before he knew it. His master wash finished as well, staring idly at him.

"Done?" he asked. Blueblood nodded slowly.

"Yes," he said. Brook nodded as well, and stood up from the table.

"Wash up," he said. "And wash the bowls and pots. Then meet me outside." Without waiting for a reply he limped past Blueblood, and out of the house. Blueblood did as he was told, washing the excess oatmeal off the bowls and his face, and then followed after his master.

Brook was standing around the side of the house, staring at the shed. Blueblood walked up slowly, and Brook peered over his shoulder at the white stallion.

"We need to get this shed opened, Red," he said. "I'll give you a hoof with the vines." He trotted up to the old structure and bit one of the vines surrounding it, tearing it off. Blueblood did the same, and he immediately had to wonder if Brook was a bit more than he seemed. The old unicorn seemed to be ripping the old plants off effortlessly, but Blueblood struggled to tear his vines. They eventually came loose in a single chunk, and Blueblood tumbled onto his back, the mass of plants still clutched in his mouth. Brook paused for a moment to stare at him, now draped in a net of vines.

"Can you get up?" he asked. Blueblood struggled under the vines, but eventually found his way upright.

"Y-yes," he said, his head low, "yes, sorry." he trotted back to the shed, shaking off one of the vines that had wrapped around his hoof, and returned to helping Brook.

With the one mass of vines gone, the rest of the job was much easier. The other weeds and plants tore off in Blueblood's mouth, and there were some where he had to do little more than bite down on them to tear them away. In the end the shed was bare, leaning dangerously to one side. Blueblood reached out gently, prodding open the door. The entire structure gave a whining creak, and shuddered visibly. Blueblood grimaced, but pushed the door open more. For a moment, it seemed fine. The door swung cleanly on the hinges, nothing to stop or slow its path – except for the wall of the shed.

The door struck the inside wall, and the shed shuddered again. It leaned even further, and a loud groan was heard. Both Brook and Blueblood leaped back as the shed came crashing down, boards breaking and splintering. A few of the larger things in the shed stuck through the mass, but most of it was lost in a pile of old, rotted wood. Brook sighed, and Blueblood's head sunk.

"Sorry, master," he said. Brook prodded one of the planks, which splintered easily.

"It's not your fault," he said. "This shed was old. The vines held it up, but it wanted to fall." He shifted a few pieces of lumber around, and shook his head. "We'll need a new one," he said. "That means new wood."

"Would you like me to get some, master?" Blueblood asked. Brook shook his head.

"I'll take care of it," he said. "You need to get to work. First, clear all this. You need what's under there."

Blueblood stepped closer to the pile of wood, shoving the broken planks aside. It was easy, but there was a lot of wood to go through, it seemed. After a minute of shoveling, Brook told him to stop.

"There," he said, pointing a piece of metal sticking through the rubble. "That's what you need." His horn lit up, and the piece of metal started to rise through the rubble. As it rose, Blueblood saw that it was not a small tool like he had imagined. The metal formed a large, curved v shape

coming to a sharp point in the front. It was connected to a pair of wooden bars with a heavy collar attached.

"What is it?" Blueblood asked. Brook held the device in mid-air, staring at his slave.

"You've never seen a plough before?" he asked. Blueblood looked between his master and the plow.

"No," he said slowly. Brook blinked at him, but didn't comment. Instead, he levitated the plough and walked around the house. Blueblood followed him, and the pair circled around to the patch of rough soil. Brook set the plough down, the metal v pointed into the ground. "Come here," he said without looking at Blueblood. Blueblood did as he was told and Brook took a hold of him. He steered the stallion in front of the plough, and dropped the collar around his neck.

"You use a plough to till the soil," Brook said. "Walk." Blueblood looked back at Brook, who stared at him expectantly. He gestured for Blueblood to move. The stallion nodded, and started to walk, only to stop dead when he reached the end of the rope connecting him to the plough. He tried again, pulling against the rope this time. The plough twitched, but the earth didn't give way. He looked back at Brook, who had raised an eyebrow at him. Despite this clue, the unicorn's expression was as indecipherable as ever. Blueblood looked forward again, and shook his head. He took a step back, then pushed forward as hard as he could. This time, he felt the plough behind him budge, just slightly. Encouraged by this meager success, he strained against the ropes. Little by little he felt the plough behind him shudder into life, dragging through the dirt. He grunted loudly, head down and heaving hard, and the plough started to move faster. Soon, he was able to take a step forward. Then another. Before long, he was trudging slowly through the field, the plough dragging behind him. Brook limped along beside him silently, watching him work. It took him a while – he wasn't sure how long exactly, though it felt like ages – but he eventually reached the far end of the small patch. He stopped, beaming at his master. Despite his heavy breathing, he was proud of what he had done, however meager. Blueblood wouldn't have been able to do that, he thought to himself, but Red had. Brook nodded to him.

"Good," he said. "That's one row done. I'll turn it around for you."

"Why?" Blueblood asked. "How many are there left to do?" Brook levitated the plough out of the ground, setting it behind Blueblood once again.

"Fifteen should do," he said. "Maybe twenty." Blueblood stared at him blankly. Brook stared back for a moment, before nodding at the plough. "Well, get moving," he said. Blueblood fought the urge to sigh, and pulled against the ropes again.

It took hours, but Blueblood finally managed to plough the entire patch of land beside the house. The earth was soft and brown, squishing under the two ponies' hooves. Brook took the yoke off of Blueblood's neck, and the two ambled away from it. Blueblood's legs ached miserably, but he didn't say anything. He was stumbling a bit though, and it did not escape Brook's notice.

"Sit here," he said. Blueblood did as he was told, letting his weary legs rest. Brook sat beside him staring out at the river. The two were silent, save for Blueblood's occasional grunts as she shifted around to keep from hurting his legs. In the end he flopped onto his side, splaying his legs out across the grass. Brook peered sidelong at him, but his gaze soon returned to the river, not saying a word. Blueblood closed his eyes, feeling the breeze wash over him gently. The ache in his legs began to numb, and he felt it becoming difficult to open his eyes again. He could hear his master breathing rhythmically beside him. He felt peaceful. The midday sun warmed him, and he felt his mind lull softly.

Then, in a flash, he saw the figure from his dream again, his arrogant grin too wide for his face. Blueblood's eyes snapped open, and he jerked violently.

His master was still sitting beside him, but the sun seemed to have moved along in the sky. He blinked, looking around. He saw that the rubble of the shed had been cleared in the distance, piled neatly, and that there was an axe sitting beside Brook. He shied away from the axe for a moment, before realizing what had happened. He lowered his head ashamedly, and started to apologize.

"No sense in working you to death," Brook cut him off. "Everypony needs a break." Blueblood nodded silently. He was still ashamed that he had fallen asleep. He berated himself mentally.

That isn't good, he thought, It isn't what a good slave would do... it's something that Blueblood would do! And I'm not Blueblood... right? He shook his head softly, chasing his doubts away.

"What did you dream about?" Brook asked. Blueblood blinked at him. "You were twitching," Brook said by way of explanation, "what did you dream about?"

"I... don't know," Blueblood lied. "I don't remember." The grinning figure still made him uncomfortable; afraid, even. He didn't even want to remember it, much less talk about it. So he put it out of his mind, and stood up on shaky legs. Brook stood as well, gathering the axe with his bad hoof.

"We'll rebuild that shed," he said. "We need a place to keep the plough out of the rain."

"Alright." Blueblood nodded. Brook limped back to where the shed had been, Blueblood following along beside him.

"Some of the boards we can reuse," he said, gesturing to a pile of planks. Unlike the rest, old and rotted, these looked fresh. Blueblood pressed a hoof against one to test it. It felt sturdy enough. "Most," Brook continued, "are rotted through. I gathered more wood while you were out, we can cut planks out of those. The nails are all still good, we can use them."

"How do we start?" Blueblood asked. Brook levitated the axe, over to a small log that stood upright. The axe spun in mid-air, slamming into the log and shearing in half with a snap. One half of it fell away, but the axe spun around again before the second half could fall. The result was a thick plank of wood.

"You keep giving me logs," he said, "I'll cut them. I'll tell you when we've got enough." Blueblood nodded, and trotted to a stack of logs nearby. He grabbed one off the top, fumbling with it between his hooves. He eventually managed to set it upright, and Brook swiftly chopped a plank out of it. Blueblood grabbed the plank and put it aside, replacing it with another log. It was slow going at first; Blueblood had trouble grasping the logs between his hooves, and even more trouble setting them standing up. Brook never spoke, focusing on his work. The axe spun swiftly and precisely, hacking through the wood in an instant. It always cut along the grain of the wood, no matter which way Blueblood set the log.

Eventually, Blueblood began to pick up his pace. Through practice, he became more accustomed to working with his hooves. In all the time since he had lost his horn, he had never once tried to use them for any work. He tried not to think of the time when he had his horn – that was Blueblood's time, and no matter what he felt about it he would not be Blueblood any longer – but he knew that back then he had used his hooves even less, if that was possible. He had always prided himself on having manual dexterity above ordinary ponies. He had been proud of what his magic allowed him to do. Now, though, he had no magic to help him. As they neared the bottom of the pile of logs his hooves moved more dextrously. He and Brook had developed a rhythm; place, cut, move the plank. Though he still fumbled occasionally, Blueblood was able to place the logs almost as fast as Brook could cut them. He shoved another plank aside and reached for a new log, only to find that none found his grasp.

He turned around, looking at the place where the log pile had been. There was nothing there, save for a few pieces of logs that had been knocked over by Brook's axe. He looked to his other side, seeing the large stack of planks. Then he looked to Brook, who rested his axe on his shoulder. A slight smile played across his lips – Blueblood thought it might have been the first he had ever seen from the unicorn.

"We've got enough now," he said. "Good work, Red." He put his axe on the ground, and took a plank in his band hoof. He limped to the round ground where the shed had been, and beckoned for Blueblood to come closer.

"The shed will have two layers," he said, "to keep it steady. The first thing we need to do is drive the planks into the ground." He set the edge of his plank on the ground, balancing it carefully, then put his weight on it. The plank sunk into the ground halfway, and Brook stepped off. "Set yours right up against mine," he said. Blueblood grabbed a plank off the pile of old lumber, but Brook shook his head. "Those are too weak for the base," he said. "Take one of the new ones." Blueblood nodded, and took the new plank. He imitated Brook, driving his plank into the soft ground. Brook inspected it, and nodded.

"Good," he said. "Do that for about... ten planks." Blueblood did as he was told, driving the planks into the ground. When he was finished, his master instructed him in setting down the rest of the shed's perimeter. In the end, while it had no door to speak of, it seemed like it would be a good-sized

shed. Brook took another plank and set it along the ground, inside the perimeter. He drove a pair of nails through it, connecting it to the outside plank.

"You line these up," he said, "and I'll nail them together. You can use the old planks now." Blueblood nodded. One by one he set the planks up, and Brook nailed them together. They started to build up, higher and higher.

As they gradually reached up, someone began to bother Blueblood. "Master?" he said slowly. Brook looked around the half-built shed at him, a pair of nails hanging in mid-air.

"Yes?" he asked shortly. Blueblood lowered his head.

"Well," he said quietly, "I just... why are we using the old wood?" Brook blinked at him.

"The wood is good," he said. "Why wouldn't we?"

"Because," Blueblood said, shrinking away. "The old shed broke. The wood... it can't be any good, if it broke, right? That's why were making a new one. The old one was bad, so we need a new one." Brook stared at him for a while. While they had been working a sort of life had come over his face, if only just. It was draining away now, though, and his face returned to that strange, impassive expression as he regarded the slave. Eventually, he spoke.

"The shed was broken," he said. "But the wood is still good."

"But it broke," Blueblood said again. "Isn't that what you do with broken things? Replace them?"

"Sometimes," Brook conceded, a hint of sadness in his voice. "Not always. Just because something is broken, doesn't mean it's worthless. No matter how badly something is broken, there's always something worth saving." He circled around the shed, and told Blueblood to hold out his hoof. He put the nails on the stallions hoof.

"See those?" he asked. "Those came from this shed too. But they're still good. No rust, and plenty strong. You see? Even though the shed was

broken, there are still parts of it that can be salvaged. You don't have to through out the whole thing."

Blueblood stared at the nails in his hoof. Brook nodded at him, and said. "Always remember. Nothing is ever to broken to save. No matter how bad it is, you never just replace something."

The words hit Blueblood like a punch in the stomach. He sat down, still staring at the nails in his hoof. He didn't understand what he felt, or why he was feeling it. All he knew was that he felt. He felt an intense tightness in his chest, like worry. He felt somehow empty, like there was something that was missing. He didn't know what it was, though.

Maybe I miss home? He thought idly. He blinked and shook his head. *No!* he thought, *I can't miss home! I am home! I have no other home! I'm not Blueblood! Not anymore! Never again!* He shook his head, and he began to tremble slightly. For some reason, some reason he couldn't understand, he remembered the figure from his dream.

"Red," Brook said, shaking Blueblood from his daydreams. The white stallion blinked at his master, who was levitating another pair of nails. "Let's get back to work. I want this shed done tonight."

"R-right," Blueblood said. He tucked the nails into his mane, and joined Brook in working.

Blueblood was silent for the rest of the night. He and Brook finished building the shed without incident and moved the plough inside, as well as a few other tools. It seemed that they finished just in time; clouds began to form overhead as the sun set, and the two stallions barely made it inside before the downpour began. Blueblood cooked a meager meal at Brook's instruction, and then returned to the bedroom. Brook did little to stop him; he spoke just as little as his slave that evening. Blueblood didn't know when exactly Brook went to bed himself; he had fallen asleep long before. All he knew is that when his eyes opened blearily, Brook was still sleeping.

The old pony snored gently on his mattress, face towards the door. Blueblood crept downstairs, careful not to wake him, and got ready to make breakfast.

Blueblood's sleep had not been a restful one. He had been plagued by visions – not proper dreams or nightmares, just images. Snatches of sounds, and pictures. Among them the figure from his dream the previous night featured prominently – staring, staring at him with that its enormous, twisted grin. It shook in that odd imitation of a laugh it had, and taunted Blueblood. *You aren't better than me*, it had said, over and over. Blueblood tried hard to shake the image out of his mind, and set about his work.

After he finished preparing the oatmeal, Blueblood crept back upstairs and woke his master. The pair ate their meal in silence, as they had done the evening before. When they were done, Brook took him outside again. He brought him around the back of the house, and spoke.

"You're going to plough this," he said. Blueblood looked at him, and Brook waved his bad hoof at the land. "The small plot of land you ploughed yesterday is enough to feed me, for a while," he continued. "But not for you. So you're going to plough enough land to keep us both fed for the whole year."

"How much land is that?" Blueblood asked quietly. Brook waved his hoof again.

"From the back of my house to that stump should do," he said. He gestured to the gigantic stump Blueblood had seen when he first came to the house, sitting at almost the size of a pony. It was a long ways away from the house; the resulting plot would be several times the size of the small farm he had ploughed yesterday."

"Y-you want me to do it today?" he asked slowly, peering at his master. Brook didn't look back at him, but shook his head gently.

"No," he said. "You'll work until your done. That won't be done today." He left Blueblood staring at the land, and went to the shed. He returned carrying the plough above his head, and set it down behind his slave. Once again he slipped the yoke over Blueblood's neck, and nodded to him. "Get to work," he said. "I'll be on the balcony if you need me."

"Right," Blueblood said, but Brook had already left. Blueblood watched him limp away for a while, before he turned to his work.

As he had the previous day he threw himself against the ropes that connected him to the plough. It was much harder to drag the plough through solid ground, though. He tugged and strained for a long time, but the plough finally started to trail after him. It cut through the thick, wet ground, slowly following behind Blueblood. As he strained, he found his mind wandering. There was little for him to focus on as he pulled the steel wedge through the ground, so all he could do was think. Once again the figure from his dream was on his mind. He didn't understand it. He didn't know what it was, or why he was so afraid of it. He didn't understand the things that it said to him. He tried to write them off as just the simple ramblings of the subconscious, but he couldn't shake the cold, empty feeling that he had when he thought of what it said. *You aren't better than me. You can't leave me. I will catch up to you.* He shuddered and pulled harder, his head down.

Try as he might, though, he couldn't escape the cold feeling in his gut. He thought of what Brook had said to him when they were building the shed, but that just made him feel worse. It made him feel sick. Worst of all, it made him think of Canterlot.

If anything was worth keeping, it was his memories of home. He thought about his family – about his auntie Celestia, who used to fly him over the city when he was a foal, and sneak him cookies when she thought his mother wasn't looking. He thought about auntie Luna, and how he had tried to talk to her when she came home, but she had never liked to speak to him. He thought of his mother, and his heart ached. He remembered returning to her after a long day with his tutors when he was little, worming his way into her warm embrace and sitting there. He remembered playing with her in the palace's courtyard. The sick, empty feeling in his chest only got worse the more he thought of her.

"It doesn't matter," he said aloud, "It doesn't matter anymore. It's better this way." He squeezed his eyes shut, and pushed as hard as he could with the plough. "Equestria can have a better prince now," he told himself, "and I can be a good slave. I don't have to be Blueblood. I'm not Blueblood! I'm not! I'm not!" He threw all his weight against the ropes, practically running with the plough behind him. He told himself, over and over, that he was Red. He told himself that he was not Blueblood. He couldn't handle being Blueblood, couldn't handle all that Blueblood had done. He didn't want the guilt anymore, he didn't want to be worthless. So he ran. He ran from his

past. He ran, as much as he could, through the field, dragging the plough through the earth behind him. He didn't watch where he was going. Suddenly he felt the line behind him jerk and tumble, and he heard an awful, metallic scraping noise. The sudden shock threw him to the ground, and he felt the plough jump out of the earth. He had suffered a few scrapes from his tumble, but he was no worse for the wear. When he turned around, however, he saw that the same could not be said for the plough.

The metal wedge lay on its side on the field, thrown up by the enormous stump. Its edge had a great dent, and a gash ran along the left side, tearing the plough open. Blueblood stared at it, open-mouthed. Even he, with no knowledge of farming experience, could tell. The plough was broken.

"Oh, no," he moaned. He walked slowly over to the remains of the plough, and looked at it carefully. The wood was cracked, but not broken. The metal was fairly thin – he might be able to bend it back into place, he thought. After all, he had broken it in the first place. He pressed his hoof against the thin edge of metal that had been torn up, and pushed as hard as he could. It bent, just slightly, and he smiled weakly. He pushed again, trying to press it back into place. As he pressed though, the edge bit into his hoof.

"Ah!" he cried in pain, pulling his hoof back. A thin red line ran across it, a small trickle of blood coming out. He stared at the blood, and at the plough. "Gotta fix it," he concluded quietly, and started to push again. The metal bit into his hoof, cutting deeper, but he ignored the pain. He pushed against the torn metal, hammering it with his hoof and moving it back into place bit by bit. Soon, the edge had been pushed back down. The two edges still didn't meet, and there was still an ugly cut between them. Blueblood sat down, and moaned again. He felt like he was going to cry.

"Great," he said to himself. "Just great. This is another thing Blueblood screwed up!" He pounded on the plough, cursing the stallion he used to be.

"Worthless!" he cried. "Worthless! There's nothing good about him! I'm not him anymore! I'm not! I'm Red now, and this is why! He never did anything good, he just broke things, just like this!" He put his head in his hooves, still cursing himself. "Worthless," he whispered, "stupid, selfish, and worthless..." He heard a familiar shuffling gait, and looked up.

His master was trotting towards him across the field. Perhaps he had heard the commotion, or perhaps he simply wanted to check on Blueblood's progress. Either way, fear gripped Blueblood's heart. Brook would see what he had done to the plough, and he would be furious. He would probably beat Blueblood, or take his food away. He vaguely recalled the other slaves on the boat talking about what their masters had done to punish them, and his mind filled with all sort of elaborate terrors. Flogging, or cutting him with a knife, or throwing him down the stairs. Brook was a unicorn, and Blueblood would never be able to fight back against his magic. He could only imagine what the old pony had in store for him. He tensed up, visibly shaking as his master walked up to him.

"What happened?" Brook asked.

"I-I... I broke the plough," Blueblood said quietly. Brook inspected the tool, and looked at the trail it had left. It had sliced through the ground neatly, even cutting through some of the stumps roots. There had been a large rock trapped in the roots, though. The plough must have struck it, and been dragged along a hard edge as Blueblood ran past. Brook hummed, scratching the beard that ran along his chin.

"Hm," he said simply. "Hm." Blueblood shrunk away, shaking like a leaf. Brook took a step towards him, and the white unicorn cowered before his master.

"Please," he said weakly, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry... Please don't hurt me, master. I-I, I won't do it again, I'm so sorry, please..."

"Hush," Brook said softly. Blueblood squeezed his eyes shut as Brook reached out to him. Images of Iron flashed through his mind, and he quaked in terror. He tried to fight them down, telling himself that it wasn't Iron, and this had nothing to do with the earth pony. It was he, Red, who had made this mistake, and it was Brook who was going to punish him for it. It didn't help much, but he kept himself from crying out.

He felt the heavy yoke slip off his shoulders.

"How's your neck?" Brook asked. Blueblood slowly opened his eyes, and saw the old pony holding the yoke in his front hooves. "You must have fallen."

"W-what?" Blueblood asked slowly. Brook reached out, and Blueblood flinched away. The old pony put his bad hoof on Blueblood's neck, rubbing it gently.

"Are you hurt?" he asked. Blueblood stared at him. The old soldier looked almost concerned. Blueblood didn't understand what he meant.

"I..." he said, "I'm fine. I'm not hurt."

"Good," Brook said. He turned back to the plough, and Blueblood slowly stood up.

"Master... I'm sorry," he repeated. Brook didn't look at him.

"It's alright," he said. "It wasn't personal. It was an accident."

"But... I broke the plough," he said, "It's the only one we have..."

"It's not so bad," Brook said, still not looking at the stallion, "It'll be fine." Blueblood blinked at him. He didn't – couldn't – understand what the old pony was talking about.

"It's... broken," Blueblood said. "We need a new one."

"Who says?" Brook asked. He almost seemed to laugh. He turned around, facing his slave. "This one is fine."

"But it's broken," Blueblood said again. "We can't use it. It won't work."

"Yes, I know. You've said that." Brook looked between the plough and the slave, and told him. "We can fix it."

"But, it's so badly broken," he said, "It's torn open."

"Didn't I tell you, Red?" Brook asked. "Nothing is ever too broken. Something can always be salvaged." The words hit Blueblood every bit as hard as they had the last night.

"But how!" he objected. "Look at it! How can we fix that?"

"It won't be easy," Brook conceded.

"Then why bother?" Blueblood cried. "Why not just replace it? Or, or, if we want to salvage it, just melt it down and start again?" Brook looked at him a bit sadly, and shook his head. He was silent for a while, but eventually he spoke.

"This is different from a shed, Red," he said. "A shed is just wood. You can get wood anywhere. Some things are harder to come by. Here, look at this." He turned around, beckoning Blueblood to take a closer look at the busted plough. "What do you see here, Red?" Blueblood looked between the plough and Brook, the sick feeling rising in his stomach.

"I see..." he said, "I see a broken plough. It's got a gouge in it. It's worthless."

"That's wrong," Brook told him. "It's broken, yes. But it isn't worthless. Everything has worth. The metal is still good. The wood is still strong."

"But why is it so important to fix it? If the metal is still good, why not just smelt it into another? Why can't we just start over?"

"Starting over takes a long time," Brook said. "We'd have to melt the metal, then forge it again. Some things don't just come along every day."

"But... but..." Blueblood felt his chest begin to ache, without knowing why. Brook continued speaking, rubbing his hoof over the old metal.

"I'm not saying it will be easier," he told the stallion. "It won't be. It'll take a lot of work to fix it. But it's worth it."

"How?" Blueblood asked. "How is it worth it? What's so special about it that we can't just start over?"

"It's one of those things you can't make easily. Those things are the most important to take care of. Even when they're broken, they're still worth a lot. All their parts, everything somepony went through to make them. We have to make sure they last. By repairing them, and with a bit of help, we can even make them better than they were before." Blueblood swallowed hard. He felt like someone had cut his gut, and replaced it with ice.

"Those things are the most important things of all," Brook said quietly. "So we can't just make another one. It won't be the same... things like ploughs. Things like books, and houses... and ponies."

"What?" Blueblood asked, blinking. Brook didn't look at him. He just kept running his bad hoof across the plough, back and forth.

"A plough is like a pony. Even when a pony is broken, you can't just throw it out. We have to try to fix it. It's worth a lot, even then. No matter how bad it seems, a pony is never worthless, Red." Blueblood just stared. He swallowed hard.

"Why?" he asked. "Why are you telling me this?" Brook sighed.

"I don't know what happened to you, Red," he said. He looked away from the stallion, and paused for a moment. "I don't expect you tell me. But you were broken, weren't you?"

"I-I..." Blueblood said. He wanted desperately to lie, and say that he was alright. But he couldn't. Not anymore. "I was."

"It doesn't matter how badly broken a pony is," Brook said. "You can't just be a new pony. I know you want to sometimes, Red. I know... but you can't. You just have to deal with being broken."

Blueblood had begun to shake again. He was terrified, but it was a new kind of fear, one he didn't understand. "I... no!" he said. "I'm not broken! I'm fine! There's nothing wrong with me!" Brook didn't turn around, but he shook his head. Blueblood spoke again, trying to convince him. "I was broken before, but I'm not anymore! Blue... the old me, he was broken! But Red isn't broken! Red is fine! I started over, I can do it! There's no reason why I can't, I'm doing fine." A strange sort of pain wracked through his body. His heart hollow, and cold. This time, Brook turned around. There was even less of a hint of an expression on his face than usual.

"You are who you are, Red," he said. "No amount of wishing can change that. You're still broken."

"No I'm not!" Blueblood screamed. "I'm not broken! I'm fine! I'm better now! He... He was stupid! He was stupid, and he was selfish, but I'm not! I'm good! I can be a good slave, I can do what you tell me to! I can follow

orders, I can make you happy! Please, please just let me be a good slave!" he begged. The pain was intense, and incredible. His chest felt as if somepony was trying to rip him apart from the inside out. "I won't be stupid anymore, or selfish, or, or worthless, I promise! I won't be worthless anymore." He shouted miserably, repeating himself. "I don't want to be worthless!"

"You aren't," Brook said quietly. "You are worth something."

"I don't want to be the old me," Blueblood whimpered, "I don't want to..."

"I know, Red." Brook sighed, and put his bad hoof on the stallion's shoulder. "I know it hurts. But you have to accept it. You're broken. You're bad. But remember. No matter what you did, you will never be worthless. And there will always be something worth saving. That's why you can't start over. No matter how much you want to." He closed his eyes, and turned away. Blueblood still lay on the ground, sobbing. The image of the figure from his dream came again. He couldn't leave it. It caught up to him.

He's...he's right, Blueblood realized, I never changed. I was never a new pony. Just the same stupid, selfish Blueblood. The same idiot pony, just trying to hide from how awful I was. Gods... I couldn't even take responsibility for how bad I am... He looked up into his master's empty expression sadly. The pain had passed, but he still felt hollow.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "You're right. I... I'm broken. I'm stupid, and selfish, and I'm broken." Brook nodded slowly.

"Head inside," he said. "You'll be cleaning the house until I've fixed the plow."

"Okay," Blueblood said quietly. He stood slowly, and walked past his master. He looked over his shoulder once, but the old pony hadn't moved at all. He had sat down, and seemed to be staring into space. Blueblood turned back, and headed inside.

I'm still the same Blueblood, he thought sadly, Still stupid. Still selfish. Still broken.

Chapter 8

In Which A Crime is Remembered

It was raining.

It had been raining for nearly a week straight, all throughout the peninsula. Most ponies were able to go about their ordinary days regardless; rain was simply what happened in Aloa in the springtime. Farmers still tended to their fields, unicorns in the cities still walked to their jobs, or to do their errands. Some of them pulled their wrappings up over their heads into a hood, others let the cool water drizzle down their face and neck. None of them gave any ill regard to the weather. As far as they were concerned, this was all ordinary. Even the rare unicorn who didn't care for the rain knew that at least they had a nice, warm house waiting for them when they got out of the rain.

One pony, far away from any city, considered this wryly. He had a yellow coat, partly covered by his blue-green wrappings. They wound around his body, covering his limp blue mane like a hood. He sat, perched on a log, shivering miserably and staring through a gap in the trees. His name was Wet Mane, and he was not a happy pony.

A week ago he and his partner, who now slept nearby, had been sent out into the middle of the woods to watch over two ponies. They couldn't let the ponies know that they were there which meant that they couldn't set up a proper camp for the risk of being seen. They couldn't even build a fire; the smoke would give them away in an instant. So Wet sat on his log, scowling out from between the trees. Beside him, his partner rolled over, and opened his eyes.

"Morning, Brig," Wet said. Brig, a tough-looking brown unicorn, sat up. His blanket fell off of him, and he immediately began to shiver as well.

"Cripes!" he said, wrapping the blanket around him. "Yeah, good morning to you too." Wet smiled wryly.

"I didn't say it was good," he remarked. Brig snorted in response. He got to his hooves slowly, being careful to keep the blanket wrapped around him,

and walked to a tree nearby. There were seven scratches etched into the tree, marked clearly against the rough bark. Brig yawned, and dragged his horn along the tree trunk. He etched another mark into it, bringing the count to 8, then went to join Wet on his log.

"Anything happen?" he asked.

"Guess," Wet said. "They haven't gone outside since he broke the plough. They've both been in there since the rain started. Like any sane pony would be."

"If any sane pony would be inside," Brig asked, "why are we sitting out here?" Wet blinked at him a few times.

"I'm gonna say," he said slowly, "not wanting to die?" Brig mulled this over, then shrugged.

"I suppose," he said, "I think we're still crazy either way. I'm too tired to care right now."

"You're tired?" Wet asked, chuckling humourlessly. "You were just sleeping."

"Not for an hour, I wasn't," Brig laughed, "I was trying to get back to sleep, and not listen to your teeth chatter."

"Oh, well I'm sorry I woke you up then, your majesty," Wet mocked. Brig snorted, and punched him in the shoulder. Wet rubbed himself, and continued. "Anyways, it's just as well. It's about mid-morning now."

"Is it?" Brig asked. Wet nodded. Brig shivered again, and pulled the blanket tighter around him. "Cripes," he said, "this is all crazy. Why the heck are we sitting out here on our flanks, soaking up the rain and watching some princeling do nothing all day?"

"Because we don't want to die, remember?" Wet said. Brig paused, and grunted.

"Oh yeah," he said, "right. Speaking of not wanting to die, what's White Brook up to?" Wet shrugged, and strained his eyes to look through the trees.

"Same as ever," he said. "He's just... standing out there."

"He's just standing?"

"Yup."

"What... is he practicing or something? Keeping the rain from hitting him?"
Wet shrugged.

"Nope," he said. "He's not using magic at all. He's just standing out in the rain, staring." He and Brig shared a glance, before shrugging.

"Well, at least he's not staring at us," Wet said. Brig nodded in agreement. The two unicorns continued to stare through the gap in the trees at the house in the field. Brook stood on his balcony, heedless of the rain. He seemed to be staring a million miles away, out over the river and the forest beyond. The two soldiers wondered what he was doing, what he was thinking about. Brig thought that perhaps he was trying to keep his mind keen and sharp through meditation. Wet imagined that he might be reliving his great adventures, pining for his youth. Whatever he was doing, they both thanked the heavens that his focus was squarely away from them. Between Iron and White Brook, neither stallion could decide who's wrath they would less like to be on the receiving end of.

The rain was only falling harder now. An enormous raindrop fell from a leaf above Wet's head, dropping squarely onto his nose and splashing his face. He stared miserably at the wet patch on his face, and found himself laughing in spite of their situation. Brig looked at him oddly, but Wet just kept on laughing. He couldn't not laugh. It was the only thing that kept him sane amidst all that had happened in the past few weeks.

He and Brig had been medium-level guards at the Aloan capital before all this. When they had been assigned as part of Ambassador Red letter's personal guard on his visit to Equestria they thought that it was going to be a holiday; lounging in the palace as honoured guests of one of the richest nations in the world while Letter was in the meetings. Instead they had found themselves dragging the prince into a carriage, taking him to Aloa. Wet had nearly been sick when Iron forced them to hold the poor pony down so he could cut his horn off. Even now, the unicorn didn't like to think about it. Since then the pair had been dashing from city to city, following after the prince. It was exhausting, and what was it all for? To keep some

psychotic earth pony at bay. There were times when Wet felt guilty about it all. In the end, he was only chasing after the colt for his own safety, but that's what all the soldiers were doing. Each one of the ten guards were terrified that they would be the one to finally send Iron over the deep end. But what could they do? Wet stopped laughing, and looked at Brig.

"You know," he said, shivering, "I don't think my name has ever been more appropriate than it is right now." Brig chuckled, and he opened up his blanket, offering half of it to Wet. The yellow unicorn scooted in gratefully, and the two wrapped the wet blanket tightly around them. It didn't help much, but at least it was something. Wet sighed, and chuckled again.

"Hey Brig?" he asked.

"Yeah?" his partner asked.

"Have you ever been much of a betting pony?" Brig glanced at him. The chocolate-coloured pony had been partners with Wet for a long time, but he still had troubles deciphering what Wet was thinking sometimes. Wet was younger than he was, and he had always had an energy to him. Wet was always thinking about their orders. He always thought about everything; about the orders given, about how to carry them out, about what the result would be. Brig preferred simplicity in his career; take orders and follow them. Despite this he had to admit that Wet's method worked well for him. So well, in fact, that it had begun to rub off on Brig. More and more often he found himself wondering after his superior's motives – especially lately. He didn't like the way Letter and Iron talked. He didn't like Iron acting like he was the one in charge, and he especially didn't like that it seemed to be the case. Iron was unstable, that much was clear. Taking orders from a pony like Iron made him nervous. He couldn't predict Iron at all. For all he knew the earth pony could go off at any moment, and that made him worry for his and Wet's safety. For once, Brig thought he knew what Wet had on his mind.

"Not really," he said. "If I'm going to be having things decided for me, I'd rather at least a pony be doing it."

"Yeah, me either," Wet agreed. "So I've been thinking. What are we doing gambling, then?"

"What do you mean?" Brig asked.

"I mean, we're playing the odds just by sitting out here. So why are we doing it?"

"Now hold on," Brig said, "I'm pretty sure we already had this conversation. Except I was the one asking why we're sitting out here."

"No, no," Wet said, waving his hooves. "This is different, hear me out here. If White Brook catches us out here, we're screwed. But if we got back to Iron with nothing, we're screwed, right?"

"Right," Brig conceded reluctantly. He didn't much like where this conversation was going. But then, he hadn't liked where most of this situation was heading. He, like his partner, could see the ordeal rapidly going south. But they were soldiers. They followed their orders; what else could they do?

"And I mean, it's just a matter of time, right?" Wet continued. "We can't just sit out here forever. Either we go back to Iron, or White Brook catches us. So we're basically betting that the prince does something before either of those things happen."

"I... guess so," Brig said.

"So why are we just sitting here?" Wet asked. Brig sighed.

"We're soldiers, Wet," he said.

"Yeah, I know," Wet said, "they give us orders and we follow them. But come on, Brig. We don't have any control here. You said it yourself – if something is going to happen, I'd rather it was a pony who decided it."

"Well, what are we supposed to do, Wet?" Brig asked. "I don't like this any more than you do, and you know that. But we have a duty to the Ambassador. It's not like we didn't know we'd risk our lives now and then."

"This isn't just risking our lives, Brig," Wet persisted. "This is practically suicide. Seriously, we shouldn't have to take this mission! Do we even know that this is what the King planned?"

"Well if it is, then we couldn't show our faces if we defected," Brig said. "This is our job, Wet. We're not just going to run off somewhere. And where

would we even go? We're soldiers. Not much we can do without someone to give us orders."

"He's doing just fine," Wet said, gesturing to Brook. "Look, Brig. It's more than just the whole death on the line thing. You're right, I've been in more dangerous situations. It's just... none of this sits right with me. Seriously, this is huge. Why is there only ten of us on this? The entire kingdom should be in on this. We should be marching up to White Brook's door and telling him that his slave is a prisoner of the King."

"Do you want to give it a try?" Brig asked sourly. He looked over to Wet. The stallion had a clear expression of worry on his face.

"That isn't what I'm saying, Brig," he said. "We should be getting out of here. Cut and run. Iron isn't here, he isn't going to know."

"But we'll know, Wet," Brig sighed. "I don't like this either. But we're soldiers. Our duty is to Letter, and if he wants us to take orders from Iron, then our duty is to him too. We just have to deal with that... now come on. I don't want to talk about this any more... let's talk about something else."

Wet sighed. He would let it go – for now. He was about to make a joke about the weather, when he noticed that it was no longer raining over top of them – but only over top of them. The rain began to fall on them again, and the pair heard heavy wing beats landing behind them. They looked over their shoulders, gaping at what they saw.

"Oh no," the figure said, with a voice as clear and cold as ice. "We think you should keep talking about that. And We think you should very seriously consider what your friend has to say."

Blueblood knelt in a large room, just off to the side of the entrance to Brook's home. The furniture was shoved against the walls, allowing him to reach almost all of the wooden floor. Beside him was a bucket full of soapy water. He took hold of it, and splashed it across the floor.

Blueblood had spent the entire week cleaning the inside of Brook's home. The old pony hardly spoke to him, only doing so to give commands. A part of Blueblood worried that he had somehow offended his master, but he didn't think too much about it. He didn't think too much about anything. The

white-maned stallion was running him ragged; he had spent almost a full day on each room in the house, and the house had a lot of rooms.

The first time Blueblood thought he had finished cleaning a room, Brook had seen it and immediately ordered him to do it over. It had taken some time, but the slave eventually managed to find out exactly what the silent pony wanted, mostly through trial-and-error. His master demanded perfection from him. The rooms were all immaculate; the wooden floors cleaned and polished, the walls washed spotless and the stains and dust washed out of the furniture. Blueblood's muscles ached from all the hard work, but he never complained. Not that he had much chance, even if he wanted to; Blueblood never saw his master most of the time. The unicorn would spend his days either staring at the river, or reading in his bedroom. He came to see Blueblood's progress at the end of the day, and would either approve or disapprove of the slave's work. Strangely, he never once went into his study to read. Blueblood had tried to enter to clean it, but it was made clear to him that this room, as well as another room on the main floor, were forbidden.

Blueblood gave a protracted sigh, and took up a well-worn cloth in his hooves. He pushed it through the puddles of water on the floor, scrubbing them clean. The wood was covered in years worth of dust and mud, and cleaning it wasn't easy. The stallion's shoulders ached and burned as he worked the cloth back and forth over a particularly stubborn stain, but the ache didn't matter. He felt it constantly now; a dull, hollow throbbing in the middle of his back. It felt as if somepony had taken something out of him. He felt exhausted almost constantly, now. He wasn't even sure if it was the work that was doing it to him anymore, or if the empty feeling was natural.

Just like the spoon and the axe, he had had trouble maneuvering the cloth with his hooves alone at first, but as with everything he slowly grew accustomed to it. He no longer fumbled with the rag, no longer tumbled off balance when he used his front hooves to work. Learning to work with his hooves was shaping up to be much easier than he had expected. Before long he would be almost as good as he had been with his magic, he told himself. Truth be told, he wouldn't have been much better with his magic, even if he could still use it. He had hardly had to clean himself before, let alone another pony's home.

He thought about this listlessly as he scrubbed, just how much his life had changed. He no longer tried to tell himself that he was different from before. That too was a surprisingly easy habit to drop. Now, in retrospect, he imagined he had never really believed that he could start over. No, this was no new life for him. This wasn't a chance to start over. This was his punishment, and he deserved it. That was the truth of his situation: some higher power had finally chosen to punish him for all the cruel deeds he had committed.

Blueblood sighed, and straightened up. His back snapped and popped as he did so, and he rolled his shoulders slowly. The room still had a long ways to go; most of the floor was still covered in grime and the walls were coated in dust. There was a small window facing the river as well, but the outside world was obscured from the inside.

The room seemed to be a den; there were a few chairs and sofas lining the walls, all of them dirty, worn and stained. On the west wall there was an old stone fireplace coated in ash, and every bit as dusty as the walls and floor. Blueblood looked around for a moment, thinking about where he would start. He decided to work his way towards the fireplace first, then work his way out from there as a way of keeping his bearings. Not that it was wholly necessary; he could clearly tell what parts of the floor he had and had not washed. He bent over again, setting his hooves on the rag and scrubbing his way westward.

Hours later, he had made a lot of progress with the room. The floor was spotless, as were the walls. He hadn't touched the fireplace, furniture or windows though. He would get started on them soon, after he had brought Brook his lunch. It was almost noon now, and Blueblood ambled out of the den and into the home's meager kitchen. He retrieved an old loaf of bread and a block of cheese from the cupboard, and took a pair of slices off of each; one thick slice, and one thin slice. He arranged the cheese slices on top of the bread, and set both on a platter. He carried the platter up the staircase, and knocked on his master's bedroom door.

"Come in," Brook said. Blueblood nudged open the door, and stepped inside.

Brook was laying on his bed, a large book laying open in front of him. His mane was still wet, and Blueblood guessed that he had only recently come

inside to read. The old pony went out to stare at the river every morning, rain or shine. Sometimes Blueblood thought that he would have faced down a hurricane to watch the river. He could believe it, when he looked into his master's face. With the faraway eyes, and that same passive expression no matter what happened, Blueblood could see him walk into a storm without an ounce of fear. And he could see him winning. Brook was staring at him now, his head held straight up. It was intimidating, and Blueblood lowered his head under the unicorn's gaze. He trotted across the small room and set the platter on the edge of his bed.

"I brought you lunch, master," he said quietly. Brook nodded at him, and took the smaller slice of cheese and bread. Blueblood blinked at him, and noticed that he had a letter opened on top of his book. It looked like it had been delivered very recently.

"Eat up," Brook said. "You'll need your strength this afternoon. I want the room you're working on finished as fast as you can. I'd like to spend the evening in there."

"Yes, master," Blueblood said. He took his cheese and bread, biting into it. The food was certainly not as lavish as what he had eaten in Canterlot, but there was something about it that he liked. It wasn't delicious, but if Blueblood had known the word he might have called it "hearty". The cheese crumbled in his mouth, and the bread was soft and chewy. It, like all the food he had learned to prepare from Brook, was surprisingly filling. He and Brook took their lunch in silence, the old pony staring out the window into the rain. Blueblood looked away from him, trying to focus on his meal. When he was finished, he got to his hooves respectfully.

"Do you need anything else, master?" he asked. Brook shook his head, without looking at the slave.

"No," he said. "Go back downstairs and finish cleaning." Blueblood nodded, and took the platter. He trotted back downstairs and deposited the platter in the kitchen, washing off the crumbs. Then, he returned to cleaning.

The fireplace was difficult to clean. He tried to scoop the ash into a bucket, but it coated his hooves and spilled over the floor. He wiped his brow, leaving behind a thick black streak. He sighed sadly, knowing that he would need to wash himself later, along with the rest of the room and the dirt patch on the floor. He dragged the bucket full of ash outside and deposited

it, returning to his work. With the bulk of the ash gone all that was left was to scrub the stone clean. This proved easy, aside from the soot shaking off and into his fur. Once this was done, he turned his attention to the furniture.

The chairs and sofas were wooden, with thick sacks of stuffing serving as cushions. Blueblood dragged the sacks off of their frames, and set them aside for a moment. He cleaned the wooden frames, then thumped the cushions with his hooves, shaking the dust out of them. Once he was done he returned them to their frames, and looked around, groaning. He had shaken enough dust out of the cushions to coat the floors again.

"Way to go," he mumbled to himself. He shook his head, and knelt down once more.

It was not long before the floor was clean again. Blueblood panted softly as he looked it over, rubbing his brow. He had worked his hardest, just like Brook had demanded. This room, if anything, was even cleaner than the others. The walls and floor were spotless; they almost gleamed in spite of the old wood. No amount of dust shaking would make the ancient furniture look new, Blueblood knew, but he had done the best he could without being able to wash them out. They would never have dried in time while it was raining outside, he had learned that lesson early on. There was a small chair in another room that was still a bit soggy.

The fireplace looked as good as new. There wasn't a hint of ash on the old stone – most of it having taken up residence in Blueblood's coat, turning him a light gray colour. The only thing that was left to clean was the grimy window.

Blueblood stared into it. The only thing that he could see was dust. He could barely tell that it was a window, in fact. He dragged the tip of his hoof across its face, taking a small pile of dust with it. At the very least, it left a line of clean window. It would be easy enough to wash. Blueblood dipped his hoof in his water bucket to clean it off, then took up the cloth. He splashed it against the window and dragged it across, leaving a thick line of clear glass. He peered through it, and saw the river in the distance, obscured by the rain. He blinked once, and squinted. He thought that he saw something on the river, as well. It looked almost like a house seated atop a boat.

"Red," he heard Brook call from the stairs. "Is the room done?" Blueblood started, and scrubbed the rest of the window hastily.

"Y-yes master!" he called. Brook stepped into the room, and raised an eyebrow at him. Blueblood looked down, and it was only then that he realized just how dirty he had become. He looked ashamedly at his master, who shook his head.

"Come with me, Red," Brook said. Blueblood trotted out of the room after him, and followed his master outside. The rain was pouring as hard as ever, and it wasn't long until Blueblood's coat had been cleaned. The white pony spluttered in the downpour, but Brook didn't seem fazed by it.

"We have company," he said simply, walking straight ahead. As Blueblood followed after him, he saw that he had been correct about the river. A boat with a large shelter in the middle floated near the river bank, a large stallion standing out in the rain with a thick rope.

"Help him with that," Brook said. Blueblood nodded, and approached the stallion. Even up close it was difficult to make him out in the rain. Blueblood took hold of the rope in his mouth, and he thought he saw the figure nod to him gratefully. The two ponies strained with the cord, pulling the boat closer to the shore. The stallion levitated a heavy stake and planted it into the ground, before making a gesture Blueblood didn't understand. The unicorn shook his head after a short pause, and wrapped the rope around the stake, lashing it tight. He shouted something to Brook over the rain, and the old pony nodded. He flipped his head and his horn lit up. Another rope and stake floated off the deck of the ship, tying and planting themselves in the bank in half the time it had taken Blueblood and the strange stallion. He shouted something else, and Blueblood caught a snippet of it.

"...Soaked to the bone in all this!" Brook nodded, and leaned in to his slave.

"Go back inside!" he shouted. "Get something for us to dry off!" Blueblood nodded and dashed back into the house. He resisted the urge to shake himself dry as he stepped out of the rain, and trotted into a small storage room. One shelf was lined with old blankets that could be used as towels. He grabbed a bunch in his mouth, and dragged them backwards into the main room. He heard Brook limp inside, followed by several other pairs of hooves. Setting the blankets down, he turned and spoke quietly.

"I brought blankets, master, to -" He stopped dead, staring at the ponies before him. His legs began to tremble, and he found that he had to sit down. The hollow feeling in his back turned to a sharp pain, and for a moment he forgot to breathe.

Brook had stepped aside to let in his guests, all of whom were sopping wet from the rain. There, in the door of the house, stood 7 unicorns. There was the unicorn that Blueblood had helped bring in their home; a silvery-blue pony. Beside him stood a round, yellow-green mare with a sand-coloured colt hiding between her legs. There were a pair of young stallions and a pair of fillies with them as well. The mare blinked at him, until Brook spoke.

"To use as towels," the old pony said, finishing Blueblood's sentence for him. Blueblood remembered what he was doing, and turned around.

"Y-yes," he said past the lump in his throat. "I brought blankets. You can dry off with them." He took the blankets in his mouth again and dragged them closer, handing them out. He tried his best not to look at the ponies, but he found himself exchanging a glance with the mare. His stomach lurched, and he moved past her quickly. He could feel her staring at him, until her husband took gentle hold of her shoulders.

"Seagrass," he said, wrapping a blanket around her, "are you cold at all?"

"No," she said slowly. "No, I'm fine. Thank you, dear."

Blueblood had finished handing out the blankets, and he stepped back from the group. He hadn't brought a blanket for himself; he shivered gently along the wall of the room. In truth, he didn't know how much of it was shivering, and how much of it was nerves. Seeing this family again made him sick to his stomach. He stared at the floor, trying his best not to look at them, but he could feel Seagrass's eyes on him. She remembered him, he knew. The rest probably did as well. Remembered him insulting them.

"Here," Brook said, cutting through the awkward silence. "The den is clean. We can sit in there." He turned back to Blueblood, and said, "Red. Fetch some wood from the kitchen for a fire."

"Yes, master," Blueblood said, happy to have an excuse to get away from the family for a few moments. He trotted into the kitchen while Brook lead the family into the next room. There was a small pile of dried logs;

Blueblood thought they would be just enough to build a meager fire in the fireplace. He gathered them all, balancing them on his back, and walked back to the den.

He moved as slowly as he could. If anypony had asked, he would say he didn't want to spill the logs. There was not far between the kitchen and the den, however, so he still made the trip in almost no time at all. He crept into the room, and saw the furniture gathered around the fireplace. Brook and the family had all wrapped themselves up in the blankets, and Blueblood's master looked over at him idly when he walked in.

"Ah," Brook said, "good. This will warm things up." He gestured for the salve to walk over to the fireplace, and stood as Blueblood approached. He took the logs off Blueblood's back, arranging them in the opening. When he was satisfied with their positioning, he took a step back. He paused for a moment before his horn lit up, and there was a small flash in the fireplace. Blueblood peered in, and he saw that his master had lit a small flame on one of the logs. The flame spread, and before too long there was a crackling fire in the pit. Brook took his seat once again, and Blueblood stepped away from the group, skirting the walls and looking down shyly.

"So, Brook," the silvery pony said. "What can we do for you? You've got to be short on something, all the way out here in the middle of nowhere. We might just be shipping something you need."

"Oh, I don't doubt it," Brook said, smiling faintly. "But it's raining outside, and I have company. I'd rather not think about business right now, thank you Seastone." The stallion laughed, and grinned at the old pony.

"Well, that's more than fair enough," he said. "So how have you been? It's been ages since we saw you last... things are a lot different here, aren't they?"

"Different," Brook mused, "different. A bit different, I suppose. It always is." Seastone nodded knowingly.

"How's the hoof?" he asked. Brook shrugged.

"Not terrible," he said. "But I'm not as young as I once was. I need... help, these days." His voice was quiet, and Seagrass looked over the old pony's

shoulder. Brook turned around as well, peering at Blueblood. The white stallion looked up meekly, in case his master wanted something of him.

"I went in to town a while ago," he said. "This is Red."

"...Hello," Blueblood said softly. He had begun to shiver gently again. Seagrass looked at him softly.

"Hello, Red," she said. "You look cold. Are you alright?"

"Yes," Blueblood said, "I'll be fine... thank you, miss." He pawed at the ground uncomfortably, hoping that that would be the end of it, but the mare continued.

"Why don't you come sit over here by the fire?" she asked. "You're soaking yet. You didn't even get a towel for yourself. Come over here, colt." Reluctantly, Blueblood got to his hooves and crossed the room. He took a seat beside the small couch that Seagrass and Seastone sat on, sitting between it and the fireplace. He could feel the heat of the flames right now, and they helped a lot. He slowly stopped shivering as the heat permeated through him, but he still felt sick; worse, if anything.

"There, isn't that better?" Seagrass asked sweetly. Blueblood nodded.

"Yes," he lied. "Thank you." Seagrass looked at him for a moment longer, before turning back to Brook.

"Is he..." she asked, the unspoken question hanging in the air. Brook nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I found him in an auction house. I wasn't expecting much, but there he was. Very lucky." Seagrass didn't reply, instead looking at her husband. The stallion didn't say much either. There was silence for a while, before Brook spoke again.

"So," he asked, "how about you? How have you all been doing, hm?"

"Oh, we've been getting by," Seastone said, clearly grateful for the change of subject. "It's been a lot of the same old, you know. Back and forth, back and forth. We've had a chance to stop in to a couple of cities, though. Getting the kids out a bit more."

"Sounds like fun," Brook said, turning his attention to the couple's children. "So you lot have been out in the cities, eh? Getting into trouble?" The fillies giggled, and the little yellow colt shook his head vigorously.

"Nuh-uh, Uncle Brook," he said happily. "I've been making sure they stay safe! Papa asked me too."

"Did he now? Brook asked. Blueblood saw a smile creep across his master's face as he spoke to the colt. "And you've been listening to your papa?" he asked. The colt nodded again.

"Uh-huh! I followed after Seaweed and Rocky, to make sure they didn't get in to any trouble!" The young stallions rolled their eyes, and their parents chuckled warmly. Brook seemed to chuckle as well, though Blueblood couldn't be sure. It almost felt surreal to see the normally cold unicorn being kind to the family. It made Blueblood's back ache even worse. He was finding it hard to stay upright, now. He wanted to lay on the floor, but he kept himself from doing so, though his head drooped heavily.

"So what has you out in the cities?" Brook asked. "I thought you liked to stay with smaller folk, like me?"

"Oh, we do," Seastone said. "And we still ship to them. But somepony asked us to make a delivery to outer Ys a few weeks back, and ever since then we've been getting bigger and bigger loads! We've even taken a few passengers on, now and again. It's good Silver. We're thinking of expanding the home, you know." He chuckled shyly, and Brook smiled openly at him.

"Good for you," he said. "Moving up in the world. You know, I think this calls for a celebration. I don't get many reasons, these days." He gestured to Blueblood, who sat up.

"Red," Brook said. "I want you to go down to the cellar. There should be an old green bottle near the door. Bring that up, and fetch a few glasses as well.

"Yes, master," Blueblood said, getting to his hooves. He trotted out of the room, and it felt like a hand around his heart had relinquished its grip. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief, despite the still-present ache in his back. He walked through one of the side hallways, which led to a dreary staircase

carved out of the earth. Blueblood walked down it slowly, sighing dejectedly to himself again.

He took his time in the cellar. Not that it was difficult to take his time; in the pitch blackness of the cellar he had a difficult time finding the bottle Brook had pointed out to him. Even when he found it, though, he found himself sitting in the dark for a while longer. Sitting near to Seagrass and her family made him feel ill. There was always a painful tightness in his chest and stomach. It was a feeling that he was becoming more and more familiar with lately, but it still hurt. Especially when he saw her looking at him. There was a sort of sadness in her eyes that he couldn't make out. Was it pity, perhaps? Regret? Just thinking of what he saw in her eyes sent a stabbing cold pain in his guts. The rest of the family wasn't much better. Even the young stallions, who had seemed so rightfully disdainful of him the last time they had met, looked at him sadly. He climbed the stairs again, the dusty old bottle gripped in his mouth. He fetched the glasses from the kitchen, and headed back. As he padded slowly towards the den, he could hear them talking.

"Brook," Seagrass asked. "About Red. Is he... I mean..."

"Sweetie, we shouldn't," her husband cut in. They were both silent, then, and Blueblood heard his master sigh.

"She has every right, Seastone. It's not ideal. But I'm getting old... I can't do everything around here anymore. I needed help." Blueblood paused outside the room, as much out of a strange compulsion as choice.

"You could if you wanted," Seagrass said. "Is it really that hard for you?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes are better than others. But I could, if I needed too..."

"Then why? Or, why not hire a servant?" There was a long silence, before Brook spoke again.

"I don't always pull out that bottle to celebrate," he said. His voice was quiet, reserved. "But I haven't done it since he's been here." There was another silence, and he spoke with more of the confidence that Blueblood remembered. "He'd still be out there," he said. "I'm no noble, you both know

that as well as anypony. This is good, though. He's a good slave. He works hard, he does what I ask, and he doesn't complain. I'm lucky to have him."

Blueblood swallowed hard, and stepped into the room, cutting the conversation off. The three grown ponies all looked at him, and he set down the bottle and glasses.

"Here you are, master," Blueblood said, taking a step back. Brook nodded, and opened the bottle. A thick, pungent smell filled the room, and Brook breathed deeply. He poured the drink, deep brown and clear, into the glasses, and Seagrass and Seastone each took one. The three ponies each took a glass – Seagrass and Seastone with their magic, and Brook holding it lightly in his hooves – and lifted them gracefully. Then, as one, they drank deeply.

"Thank you, Red," Seagrass said gently. The white stallion took a step backwards as he felt his heart tighten again, and he lowered his head.

"No," he said. "It's alright." He sat down, away from them again, and looked around.

He noticed that the children had left while he was in the cellar. In all likelihood they had gone off to play whatever game they had played while Blueblood was on the river with them. He climbed onto one of the couches carefully, watching Brook to see if the old pony had any objections, and settled in. The three ponies chatted idly, like old friends. Blueblood ignored them, for the most part. He felt more exhausted than usual, but he tried not to let it show. More than anything else in the world right now, he wanted to climb the stairs and settle onto the rug in his master's bedroom, but he knew he needed to stay in case Brook needed him. So he lay on the sofa, staring out the window.

The rain was only coming down harder now, pounding against the glass. It was so hard he couldn't tell if it was day or night anymore. The steady pounding of the water droplets against the glass provided a backdrop to his master's conversation, threatening to lull him to sleep. He set his head down, and tried to take his mind off of the creeping feelings that came from being around the family.

He focused on the sounds of the rain, and after a while little else got through to him. He lay with his eyes open, not seeing, not hearing, not

comprehending. He didn't realize that the steady beat of the raindrops had been joined by little hoof-falls until he felt the couch jostle slightly. He blinked, and looked down.

Sandy, the little yellow colt, was leaning against the couch and staring up at him. "Hi," he said.

"Hello," Blueblood replied slowly. He glanced around the room, and saw that his master and Sandy's parents were watching the pair idly. Sandy, however, didn't notice.

"You work for Uncle Brook, don't you?" he asked. Blueblood rubbed his neck shyly.

"Yes," he said. "Sort of. He's my master, he... Is master really your uncle?" Sandy thought about this for a moment.

"I don't think so," he said finally, "'cause he's a lot older than mama and papa. But they always call him my uncle Brook anyways."

"I see," Blueblood said. He searched for something else to say, but couldn't find anything. Sandy continued to stare up at him, questions clearly running through his mind.

"How did you get out here?" the colt asked suddenly.

"I'm... sorry?" Blueblood asked.

"We gave you a ride, remember?" Sandy asked. "To Riverbank. You said you were going east. So how come you're out here?"

"I..." Blueblood said. The colt clearly didn't understand his situation, and he wasn't sure of what he could say to explain it, or if he even should. "I... It's sort of complicated," he said sadly. Sandy blinked at this, but moved on to his next question.

"I'm Sandy," the colt said. "Do you remember me?" Blueblood looked away from him as he continued. "Mama and Papa gave you a ride, and I talked to you." Blueblood felt his stomach twist painfully.

"Yes," he said. "I remember you." He remembered acting smug and haughty, and looking down on the curious little pony. He remembered insulting his family and his home, and spitting in the face of their generosity. He may as well have yanked on the colts tail, as far he he cared. Sandy, however, seemed oblivious to the treatment Blueblood had given him in their last meeting, and continued asking questions.

"Do you ever play with uncle Brook? He plays with me, sometimes."

"N-no," Blueblood said, looking carefully at his master. The old pony had regained his neutral expression, his eyes occasionally flicking to the pair as he tried to uphold a conversation with Sandy's parents.

"How come?" Sandy asked.

"Well... I work for the master. So... I guess I just always work. I don't really play..."

"That doesn't sound like fun," Sandy said. Blueblood put his head down.

"Maybe not," he said. "But it's... it's alright. I don't mind."

"But don't you ever play?" Sandy asked. "You can't have to work all the time – there can't be that many chores in the whole wide world! You aren't working right now."

"I have to stay close to master," Blueblood said, "so I can be there if he needs me for anything." Sandy dashed away from the couch suddenly, trotting over to the old crippled pony in his chair.

"Uncle Brook?" he asked, leaning up against the old pony's flank. Brook looked down at him, sipping from his drink.

"Hm?" he asked simply.

"Do you need Red right now?" the colt asked. Brook scratched his beard for a moment.

"No," he said, "I don't believe so. Why do you ask?"

"I wanna play with him!" Sandy said. His mother spoke up from the sofa.

"Sandy dear, can't you play with your brothers and sisters?"

"None of them wanna play with me," the colt said sadly. "Seaweed and Rocky are just talking, and the fillies are playing filly games." he stuck out his tongue, and his mother smiled.

"Well, alright," she said. "If Uncle Brook says it's alright for you to play with Red, then you can."

"Great!" Sandy said. He turned back to Brook and looked up at him pleadingly. Brook smiled faintly at him.

"You can play with him, Sandy. I don't think I'll need him tonight."

"What?" Blueblood asked. The yellow colt took hold of his hoof, trying to pull him off of the couch.

"Go play with him," Brook said. "I don't need you right now. I'll be fine without you around for a few hours."

"Uh, well," Blueblood said, getting down from the couch, "If you're sure, master..."

"I am," Brook said. "You could use a break. Go play with the colt, Red." Blueblood gulped, and did as his master commanded. Sandy beamed, and bounced out of the room, followed by a very reluctant Blueblood.

True, he was glad to be away from Seagrass's sad eyes, but something about the little colts enthusiasm and inability to recognize what was going on made it all the worse. Blueblood followed the colt as he bounded through the house, into another large room. It was one that Blueblood had cleaned a few days ago, but there wasn't anything in it. It, like many other rooms in the house, was completely bare. Sandy, it seemed, thought that this was the perfect room to play in. He turned on Blueblood, who sat down, and put his hooves up on the stallion's legs.

"What do you wanna play?" the colt asked.

"I, um," Blueblood said, unable to move lest he shake the colt. "I don't know. What do you like to play?"

"We could play a game my papa taught me, where we try to fool each other," Sandy said. "Or we could play prince and knight. I really like that game!"

"Okay," Blueblood said cautiously. "That doesn't sound bad. How do you play it?"

"I'll be the prince," Sandy said, "and you're my knight! You have to protect me from the bad things that try to hurt me. Unless you want to play the prince?"

"No," Blueblood said quickly, shaking his head. "No... you can be the prince. That's alright."

"Okay!" Sandy said happily. He trotted to the wall of the room where he sat, straight upright and looking as regal as a colt possibly could. "Come before your prince, Sir Knight," he said in his best princely tone. Blueblood approached him, and sat in front of the proudly-staring colt.

"Kneel, Sir Knight," Sandy commanded.

"Yes, Master," Blueblood said, kneeling. Sandy huffed at him.

"You're not supposed to call me master," he said. "You're supposed to call me 'my prince', okay?" Blueblood blinked.

"Oh," he said, "I'm sorry, um, My Prince."

"That's better, Sandy said. "You can stand now, Sir Knight." Blueblood did as he was told, standing up. Sandy rose as well. "Do you promise to protect me, Sir Knight?" he asked.

"I... do, My Prince," Blueblood said quietly.

"Do you promise to fight anypony who tries to hurt me, or any monsters?"

"I do," Blueblood said again, more sure this time. This felt more comfortable, to him. Being commanded by the colt, instead of praised. Sandy smiled at him.

"Then you can be my champion," he said, "and you can fight for me."
Blueblood knelt again.

"Thank you, My Prince," he said.

"Stand, Sir Knight," Sandy said, and Blueblood stood. All of a sudden, a look of fear came over Sandy's face, and Blueblood looked over his shoulder. There was no pony, nothing in the room with them, but Sandy still pointed and looked afraid.

"Sir Knight!" he said urgently. "A kraken is attacking the castle! Fight it off!"

"What?" Blueblood asked, looking around."

"The kraken, Sir Knight! One of its tentacles are right behind you!"
Blueblood looked around at the empty room, standing awkwardly. Sandy watched him, before huffing again.

"You're supposed to fight the kraken," he said sourly.

"But there's nothing there," Blueblood said. Sandy tilted his head at him.

"I know that! But you're supposed to pretend," he said. "You're no good at this." Blueblood lowered his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. Sandy patted his leg comfortingly.

"It's okay," the colt said. "I'll show you how." He got up on his hind legs, tottering unsteadily, and started to wobble away from Blueblood. "The kraken's got me!" he shouted. "Help me, Sir Knight! Use your sword!"

"My sword..." Blueblood said. He looked around himself awkwardly, Sandy still tottering away unsteadily. He set his head, and cantered over to the little colt. "I'll save you," he said, unsure of himself.

"Use your sword to cut the kraken's tentacle off!" Sandy told him. Blueblood nodded, and swung his head in front of the colt. Sandy dropped to all fours, and jumped away.

"You did it!" he said, doing a little dance. "But look out! There's another tentacle behind you!" Blueblood spun around, lashing his head out, teeth

clenched as if he held a sword between them. Sandy laughed and shouted encouragement, clapping his hooves together. He continued to shout out instructions, warning the stallion of "tentacles" coming to snatch him up.

"Stay close to me, My Prince," Blueblood said, swinging his head around again, "so I can protect you from the kraken!" Sandy darted in, sticking beside Blueblood as he swung and circled. He laughed giddily, jumping up on Blueblood's back and holding on to his mane as his knight bucked and bounced around the room.

"Be careful of the fallen tentacles," Sandy warned him. "Their blood is lava!" Blueblood smiled in spite of himself, and began to make wide hops over the old stains on the floor.

"Haha!" he whooped theatrically, cutting down another imaginary tentacle and flipping his mane out of his eyes. Sandy leaned past him, pointing at the window.

"There, Sir Knight! Do you see the kraken's face?"

"I see it!" Blueblood exclaimed. "I'll run across its tentacles to attack it!" He dashed to the window, Sandy laughing excitedly and bobbing on the big stallion's back. "Yah!" he shouted, swinging his head at the window sill.

"Take that, kraken!" Sandy shouted. "Make the finishing blow, Sir Knight!" Blueblood nodded, and spun around, leaping into the air as he did so. His body twisted in the air, and he gave a shouting laugh.

"Eat my blade, fiend!" he shouted. As he reached the ground once more he thrust down his hooves, striking hard against the floor. He reared his head to strike, and a brilliant light came from the window. A few moments later an ear-splitting boom came, shaking the house. Sandy yelped, and leapt off of Blueblood's back. The white stallion stopped, watching the little colt flatten himself against the ground.

"Hey, what's the matter?" he asked. Sandy peaked out from under his hooves.

"It's a storm!" he said. "With lightning, and thunder!" Blueblood tilted his head quizzically.

"Yeah," he said, "but... so? It's just a little storm."

"I don't like storms," the colt whimpered. "They're loud, and scary, and they make the house shake bad. Papa said we can't go out in a storm, or we'll fall off the house!"

"But," Blueblood said, "you aren't in a boat. We're on land, away from the river. You can't fall off out here."

"But it's still loud and scary," Sandy said. He got off the floor and dashed over to Blueblood, worming his way between the slave's legs. "You're my knight," he said, "so protect me!" Blueblood didn't say anything. A gigantic lump had raised in his throat, and his chest felt instantly tight.

"I... I..." he said quietly, "no, I..."

"You promised to protect me," Sandy said, hugging his leg. "You promised. So protect me from the storm, okay?"

"Oh... okay," Blueblood said. His guts felt like ice, but he sat down, putting a hoof against the colt's back. "I'll... protect you from the storm, My Prince," he said. Sandy hugged his leg tighter.

"You don't have to call me your prince anymore," he told Blueblood quietly. "You can just call me Sandy."

"Alright." Blueblood gulped. They sat in silence for a while, before the colt spoke again.

"...Red?" he asked.

"Yes?"

"How come you changed your name?"

"What?" Blueblood asked, blinking.

"When you were with us, you said your name was Blueblood. How come Uncle Brook calls you Red now?" Blueblood looked at the colt, a strange pain in his chest.

"Because..." he said, "because... I don't know. I thought that I shouldn't be called Blueblood anymore, for a while. I was wrong, though... but I guess it just stuck."

"How come you wanted to change your name?"

"I don't know..." Blueblood said, "I guess it just... it hurt to be Blueblood. So I didn't want to remember anymore." Sandy looked up at him. Blueblood knew that the colt could see the sadness and pain on his face.

"Do you still remember, though?"

"I do," Blueblood said sadly.

"I'm glad," Sandy said, "I know Papa and Seaweed didn't like you, but I did. I thought you were neat. I'm glad you're still Blueblood. You're nice."

The colt's words struck Blueblood's heart like a knife. *No I'm not*, he thought. *I'm not nice. Your dad was right about me.* He wanted to cry, but he didn't. He couldn't. He sat in silence, an intense and indescribable pain in his chest. He wanted to apologize, to tell the colt that he was wrong, and that he was a worse pony than the child could imagine, but he couldn't. It still hurt to be Blueblood. It still hurt to remember, and he remembered more clearly than he ever had before, with the shaking colt in his hooves, but no words came to him. Thunder continued to crash, and every time the colt would jerk and squeal. But every time, he shook and squealed just a bit less. Soon, he wasn't shaking at all. When the pain in his chest subsided, Blueblood spoke again.

"Sandy?" he asked quietly, unable to raise his voice any more. The colt didn't respond, so Blueblood shook him gently. He still didn't move, save for his sides slowly rising and falling as he breathed. He had fallen asleep. Blueblood choked again, and picked him up slowly. He trotted back through the house, and into the den.

The rest of Seastone and Seagrass's children had returned, and were lying all over each other on the couch. Blueblood guessed that they must be asleep as well, from the hushed tones their parents and Brook spoke in. The three ponies looked over at Blueblood when he entered. He lowered his head sheepishly.

"There you are," Brook said. "We were wondering where you two got off to."

"We... were playing," Blueblood said. "Sandy got scared when the thunder came. I think he's asleep now, though." Seagrass slipped off her seat, and walked over to the slave. She took her foal gently, and smiled at his sleeping form.

"That sounds like our Sandy," she whispered, rocking the colt gently. "Thank you, Red." She put him with his siblings, and he settled in between Seaweed and one of his sisters, sighing happily in his sleep. An eye crept open for just a moment, set on Blueblood, but closed soon enough. Blueblood looked away from the colt sadly.

"They'll be staying with us tonight," Brook said. "There's no way they're getting back out to their home in this weather."

"Should I set up a room for them, master?" Blueblood asked quietly. Seastone shook his head.

"The kids are already asleep," he said, "No need to move them all. We'll be fine in here. You did a good job cleaning it, colt." Blueblood nodded to the compliment.

"I'll..." he said, "I'll get some dry blankets." He stepped out of the den before the unicorns could object, and went back to the closet, grabbing the remaining blankets off the shelf. There were only enough for the children, so he quickly went upstairs and into the master's bedroom. His blanket lay on the rug, neatly folded right where he had left it. He brought it back down, adding it to the pile, which he brought into the den.

"Here you go," he said. Seagrass smiled at him, and pulled the blankets over her children, before gently kissing them each good-night.

"Thank you, Red," she said to him. "You've been a lot of help this evening."

"No," Blueblood said. "No, I -" Seagrass wrapped him in a hug, cutting him off. He tried to swallow down the lump that rose in his throat, and found himself blinking back tears.

"You're a good stallion," she told him quietly. "I'm sorry this had to happen to you. But Brook is a good master."

"N-no..." Blueblood said again, "I-I... I'm..." Seastone came over too, and put a hoof on Blueblood's shoulder.

"You keep on being good, colt. I'm sure somepony'll smile on you someday."

"No, It's okay," Blueblood insisted. His heart was beginning to race. His back ached fiercely, and he felt like somepony had emptied him out; like he was just a shell of a pony. He felt cold, but burning at the same time. Seagrass let go of him, and looked at him sadly. The stallion looked away from her, and quaked. His heart pounded in his throat, making it hard to breathe.

"Red," Brook said. "I don't think I'll need your services tonight. You may go to bed."

"A-alright," Blueblood said shakily. He took a step back, and bowed to the three ponies. "Th-thank you," he said quietly, and he left. He trotted quickly across the main room and up the stairs, before anypony could stop him, and went into the bedroom.

As always, the only light in the bedroom was the dim light from the window above his master's bed. He was glad of the dark. He didn't want to see anything right now. He didn't want to hear anything, or feel anything. He wanted oblivion, but he settled for the dim light, the patter of the rain and the soft rug. He lay down and curled up, shivering gently without a blanket to keep him warm. His chest still ached from seeing the family.

Seagrass, Seastone, and Sandy. They were all wrong about him. He wasn't a good pony, like they thought. He was just doing what a slave should, because that's what he was. He was a slave. He was a slave because of how awful he had been. They didn't know about all of the horrible things he had done. They didn't know about the awful, burning pain in his chest when he saw them and when he remembered what he had done to them, and they didn't understand that he deserved every bit of what happened to him. He shuddered on the rug. He deserved the stomach-churning hurt. He deserved to be a slave. He didn't deserve their sympathy, or their forgiveness, or even their pity. He deserved punishment,

he told himself, and that was what he was getting. Because he was an awful pony, he told himself. Because he had been cruel, and because he had never thought of anypony but himself.

He curled into a tight ball, alone with his feeling of pain and sickness, and slowly drifted into the oblivion he so desperately sought.

Chapter 9

In Which a Stallion is Good

Celestia's sun rose slowly in the eastern sky, casting its light over the dampened world. Port Ponzance, far out of the shadows of the mountains, gleamed. The brilliant rays set the sea ablaze with light and caught the tiny droplets of water left from the previous night's storm, turning the dusty yellow sandstone to gold. Even the streets seemed to glow as the light spread through them, illuminating every dark corner and hideaway of the city. Ships pulling in to port needed no foghorns, no lighthouses; only the glow of the coastal city.

Though ships moved steadily in and out of the busy port, it was earlier still than most ponies would be up. Only a sailor or a soldier would be awake at this hour. Such it was that an inn in the centre of the city saw several ponies awake; very, very awake.

The former captain Iron Towers stalked up and down a room the size of a modest house. His normally short-cropped mane had begun to grow in, splaying wildly across his face and neck, and a ragged line of fur had begun to form along his chin. There was a wild look in his eyes, dead set on the two soldiers that stood before him. There was a tiny bit of spittle at the corners of his mouth. In spite of all this, he still held himself straight upright and with a distinct military air, as if it was something ingrained into his very being. Wet Mane, one of the soldiers before him, thought that he looked remarkably calm – a thought which absolutely terrified him.

"So," Iron said finally, still pacing. "If I understand this right: you abandoned your post, left the pony that could decide whether or not we live or die unwatched, and returned to me with your tails between your legs – all of this, because you were chased off by a single pegasus." There was a barb on the final word that made Wet cringe.

"Well, sir," he said carefully. "It wasn't one pegasus. She said 'we'... she had others with her." Iron stopped pacing, eying the nervous unicorn.

"Did you see any of these other pegasi?" he asked pointedly.

"I... we did not, sir," Wet admitted.

"Then how do you know," Iron said, walking up to the soldier, "that you didn't fall for a bluff?"

Wet swallowed hard. He didn't have an answer for that. True, there was the lightning that had chased them out of the forest the night after the pegasus had visited them, but those were few and far enough between that it could have easily been the mare chasing them on her own. True, it had followed them almost to the city, but there were storm clouds all across the countryside, and that was by no means rare. Fortunately for him, the ambassador spoke up.

"I think we have a more pressing concern, Iron," Ambassador Letter said. Iron turned to glare at him.

"Just what could be more important than looking after the whelp?" Iron asked. Letter spoke softly, doing his best to placate the unstable earth pony.

"The fact that somepony knows that Blueblood was there," he said. Iron stopped dead, staring at him. It looked as though his mind was struggling to make the connection, but nothing was coming. Letter spoke again, explaining. "It was a pegasus. We don't have pegasi in Aloa. Somepony knew that the prince was there, and that somepony wasn't an Aloan." A flash of recognition shot through Iron's eyes, and he ground his teeth. Wet could feel the anger radiating off of the gray pony. His eyes flicked to his partner beside him, who looked every bit as nervous as he did.

Wet and Brig had had a very long discussion about what they were going to do, after they had been chased out of the forest. Wet hadn't wanted to come back. He had tried everything, every argument he could think of to convince Brig that they should just run. Brig, for his part, had held firm. Nothing Wet had said would even budge the chocolate-coloured pony from his position. Their duty was to Letter, he had insisted, and to the crown. That meant no matter what, they had to return to the ambassador. Going back to the forest wasn't an option. That had been the first thing they tried, and that was what had lead to the impromptu thunderstorm in the woods. In the end Wet had given in, and they returned to the city just before the sun rose, to find Iron waiting for them.

He didn't seem to sleep at all. Perhaps that was what made him so dangerous, what had robbed him of reason. Even now, standing in the room with him, Wet wanted to just leave. In fact, he wanted it now more than ever. He risked another peek at Brig while Iron seethed with his back to them, and he could see that Brig too was having second thoughts about returning.

"Somepony knows," Iron repeated, beginning to pace again, "somepony knows. They know we've got the whelp... how do they know? How do they know!" His hoofsteps were heavy, pounding through the room. The ordinarily soft clip-clop had been replaced by a deadly thudding as Iron slammed his hoofs down on the stone floor. He whirled on the two soldiers. "How do they know!" he demanded of them.

"Iron," Letter said quickly. "They wouldn't know." He lifted a teapot and poured it into a small porcelain cup, which he pushed in Iron's direction. "Have some tea," he said. "It will calm your nerves, and help you think clearly." Iron glowered at him, and marched over. His face erupted into a picture of rage, and he slammed his hoof down on top of the teacup. When he lifted his hoof again there was a clear mark on the table, and the porcelain had been reduced to powder.

"I DON'T NEED TEA!" he roared. Letter leaned back defensively and Iron took a few deep breaths. "My head is perfectly clear," he said callously. "What's wrong with yours? This could be the end of us – if we're lucky. Celestia could have us strung up in dungeons, torturing us until we're old and gray! This pegasus could damn us, you IDIOT. We need to find her, and put her in the ground!"

"We don't know that the pegasus is Equestrian," Letter said quietly. Even he looked nervous beneath Iron's furious gaze, now. The ambassador's leash on Iron was straining. "She could be from Mihaan, or Acnipppo for all we know."

"Then how did she find out about it," Iron said, a dangerously quiet edge to his voice, "and why does she care? She's Equestrian, and she'll bring the blasted princess down on our heads if we let her get away!" He spun on the two soldiers once again, and marched up to them. The wild look into his eyes seemed to glow with a primordial flame, an intense anger beyond thought or reason.

"You two," he hissed at them, like an adder in the grass. "You two left because of her. You two find her again. Pull her down to earth, and make sure this never gets back to Equestria. Got that?" Wet took a step back, and Brig spoke up.

"With respect sir," he said, looking dead ahead, not a trace of fear in his voice, "she's a pegasus. We can't fly. How are we supposed to catch her?" Iron ground his teeth.

"You're unicorns, aren't you? You all think you're so great, so blasted clever. You find a way to do it – make a trap, build something that can fly, shoot her wings off with your precious magic for all I care! Just get rid of her. Have. I Made. My. Self. Clear?" He growled angrily at Brig, who saluted.

"Perfectly, Sir," he said. Iron didn't acknowledge him, simply turning away from them. He moved to walk away, but he stopped when Wet spoke up.

The lieutenant didn't know why he was speaking. He didn't even mean to – all he knew was, he found himself voicing all of his concerns to exactly the wrong pony.

"Sir, I don't think there's anything we can do. For all we know she could be back in Equestria as we speak! I think it's time we left it alone – run for the border, or ask the king for protection. I -" As he spoke, Iron's back hooves lifted off the ground. Brig tensed, leaping into his partner and checking him aside. Iron's hooves lashed out with lightning speed, striking Brig square in the face. There was a deafening CRACK, and Brig was flung across the room. He struck the far wall with a meaty slap, and dropped to the ground. Wet stopped in mid-sentence, staring open-mouthed at his partner. He shook momentarily, before dashing over to the brown pony.

His neck was bent at an unnatural angle, his jaw slack and eyes wide and unseeing. Brig was dead.

"Brig?" Wet said. "Oh gods, Brig..." He put his hoof on the corpse, shaking it gently, as if he didn't quite believe that Brig was truly dead. "Brig," he said again, "Brig, Brig, Brig..." Iron turned around again. His expression was one of absolute, almost divine rage. His mouth hung open, ragged breaths rolling across his teeth and tongue. His eyes were bugged open, filled with mindless, directionless malice. His entire face was distorted, as if it were

some horrible mask, some mockery of a pony face. It was almost a caricature of rage. There was nothing else in there. No regret, no compassion, no fear. He stomped across the room, and Wet thought he could feel the entire inn shake with every step. The gray pony put a hoof down in front of him, cracking the floor.

"We can't run," he said, his voice unnervingly quiet for his disposition. "We can't hide. We can't escape. She is the goddess of the sun. What part of that don't you idiots get! The GODDESS of the SUN! NOT THE OCEAN, NOT THE FORESTS, NOT THE MOUNTAINS OR THE DESERT OR THE ROCKS! You can RUN from the ocean. You can RUN from the trees. You can run from all of them, but you can NEVER RUN FROM THE SUN!" He was inches away from Wet's face now, screaming at the top of his lungs. "She WILL find us! And she WILL kill us! So if you want to live to see old age, I suggest you get out there and FIND! THAT! PEGASUS!" Wet bolted, galloping out the door and down the street. Iron roared wordlessly. He lashed out, bucking the wall and leaving two deep cracks in it. He galloped to the table, flipping it over and smashing the ambassador's tea set. The fat red unicorn fell backwards, scrabbling away from the mad earth pony. Eventually, lacking anything else to destroy, Iron began to settle down. He breathed heavily, peering around the room, before his eyes fell on Brig's body. He stared at it for a long time, and when he finally spoke he had returned to his more composed, detached tone of voice.

"Letter..." he said. The ambassador got to his hooves, and brushed himself off.

"Yes?" he asked. He too had returned to his cool mood now that Iron had calmed down. The gray pony walked over to Brig's body, still staring at it.

"That soldier was right... the pegasus could already be in Equestria. We need a backup plan." Letter took a few steps forward, tilting his head curiously.

"You have something in mind?" he asked. Iron hummed softly. He put a hoof on Brig's neck, straightening it out with a snap.

"Get your soldiers in here. One of you clever unicorns must know a disguise spell."

"Easy now, colts. Easy... easy..."

Seastone and his two eldest sons slowly lifted a crate off the deck of their home, using their magic to shift it over the edge and onto Brook's cart, which waited for them on the bank. It settled down with a soft thud, and the three unicorns shoved it forwards, among two other crates there. The first crate contained vegetable seeds to plant in the gardens once they were completely tilled, and the other several bottles of a dark red-purple drink. The third crate, the one that had just been put on the wagon, was full of dried fruits.

Brook stood on the deck of the house boat beside Seastone. The stallion turned to him, and asked, "That everything, Brook?" Brook took one last look around the wares that Seastone and his sons had brought out, and nodded as well.

"I believe so," he said. "Thank you, Seastone." The two shook hooves gently, and Seagrass came out of the house carrying a small bundle.

"One more thing before you go, Brook," she said. "We passed through a small town on our way here, and they had a bookstore. I know how much you like to read these days, so I thought I'd pick something up for you."

"Thank you," Brook said. "How much was it?" Seagrass smiled, and shook her head.

"It's a gift," she said. "No charge." Brook smiled faintly as well, and took the bundle from her.

"Thank you, Seagrass," he said. The mare hugged him, and stepped off the boat while Brook reached into his wrappings to pay Seastone.

She trotted onto the bank and around to the front of the wagon, where Blueblood sat quietly.

"And thank you, Red," she said. Blueblood looked at her shyly. Sleep had helped to rid him of some of the sick feeling, and he could at least bear to be around the family now.

"No... it was nothing, miss..." he said, pawing at the wet ground. Seagrass smiled sweetly, and wrapped him in a firm hug.

"You don't need to do that, dear," she told him. "You were a wonderful host. You should be proud of yourself." Blueblood looked away from the mare. That was still something he couldn't do. "Sandy is still sleeping like a foal. I can't believe you'd never talked to a foal before we met you. You're wonderful with children."

"Oh..." Blueblood said, surprised by the compliment, "thank you, miss..." He swallowed, thinking once more about the night he shared with them in their home. "And... I'm very sorry for insulting your family..."

"Oh, hush," Seagrass silenced him. "You have nothing to apologize for, Red. We all make mistakes sometimes. You shouldn't have to carry them for the rest of your life." Blueblood looked at her sadly, and her husband called out from the deck of the boat.

"We're all ready to go, sweetie," he said. Seagrass nodded, and called back.

"Of course. I'll be right there." She hugged the slave firmly again, and trotted back to her home. She climbed aboard just as Brook clambered off into the water, careful not to put too much pressure on his hoof, and Seastone withdrew the lines that kept them tied to the shore. Their home began to drift away, the light breeze catching its sails and helping Seastone as he pushed it along. The stallion and his wife waved from the deck, and Brook waved back to them calmly. He sat on the bank watching them leave, and when they drifted around a bend and out of sight he turned back to the white stallion sitting by the wagon.

"Take this back to the house," Brook instructed. "I'll show you where to put it all away." Blueblood nodded, and put himself against the bar at the front of the wagon, setting it in motion.

The ground was soaked from the rainfall the last night, and the wagon's wheels had sunk in while it sat. Blueblood pushed hard, digging his hooves into the ground as well, but even still it wasn't as hard as it had been to pull it the first time, or to pull the plough through the earth. A week of pushing a ragged cloth through inches of dust and dirt had done him a lot of good, something that even now a faint burning in his muscles could attest to.

It was a short trip from the river the the front of the house, even with the heavy wagon holding him back. They had only brought it so he hadn't had

to make three trips for the heavy crates. Once he had it set outside the house, open back towards the door, Brook began to give him instructions.

"Take the fruits into the pantry," he said, and Blueblood brought out the crate. It was awkward work without any help; he pushed it to the edge of the cart, the rim of the crate sticking off the edge, and from there he had to worm it out and onto his back. He slid it very carefully onto the wooden floor of the house, and from there it was much easier to push it around. He found himself thankful that his master had made him clean the floors so thoroughly; the crates slid easily along the clean wood. Once he had deposited the fruits amongst the other foods in the pantry he returned to the door, where Brook was waiting with another set of instructions.

"The seeds go in the storeroom," he said simply. Blueblood nodded, and unloaded the seeds. This crate was harder than the last, being much bigger with all the different kinds of seeds that they would need to plant to last them the year. Once again though, Blueblood managed to lower it to the ground, and push it into its place in the store room. The next crate, however, would prove to be much more difficult.

"The drinks go in the cellar," Brook instructed him, "where you found the bramby last night. Be careful with it."

"Yes, master," Blueblood said. He lowered the crate onto the ground, wincing as he heard the bottles clink and clatter inside. Most of the trip was simple, pushing the the crate along the ground. Brook sauntered along beside him silently. Soon enough, they came upon the earthen stairs that lead down into the cellar.

Blueblood peered down the staircase. There was an inky blackness at the bottom, obscuring the damp room. The stairway was short, but the steps were small and steep. He thought for a while about how to best approach the task. He would never be able to do it the same way he had brought it down from the wagon; there simply wasn't enough room. He wouldn't be able to get it onto his back, and he didn't even bother thinking about using magic. In the end he walked around the crate, back to the staircase while Brook watched him blankly. He lay on the ground, wrapping his front legs around the crate, and began to inch backwards. Soon he was laying across the stairway, the crate just on the edge. Brook reached out, putting his hoof on top of the crate as it wobbled on the edge of the top step.

"Master?" Blueblood asked, looking up.

"Making sure you don't lose your balance," the old pony replied. Blueblood nodded, and began to creep backwards down the stairs. Brook followed after him, keeping his hoof out in case the crate ever started to tip in Blueblood's grasp.

When they were halfway down the steps, Blueblood reached his back hoof out, feeling for the next step down. He found his footing, and started to lean back. His hoof slipped off the ledge, sending him flying down the rest of the stairs on his stomach. He lifted the crate instinctively, keeping it clear of the stairs that rushed past. Brook limped down the staircase as fast as he could, joining the groaning stallion in the dank cellar.

"Red," he said sharply. Blueblood got to his hooves shakily, and lifted the lid off the crate. All of the bottles inside were still intact, and he breathed a shallow sigh of relief.

"The drinks are all alright, master," he said weakly. Brook looked in the crate idly, then looked back at the slave.

"...And you?" he asked slowly. Blueblood blinked at him. "Are you alright?" Brook repeated.

"Oh," Blueblood said. "Yes... I'm fine," he lied. His stomach hurt fiercely, and his ribs felt like a pony had bounced off of them, but he didn't want to complain in front of his master. Instead, he apologized. "I'm sorry, master," he said, starting to move the bottles from the crate into the shelf.

"For what?" Brook asked.

"For..." Blueblood said, stopping. "For almost breaking the bottles," he said finally. "I already broke the plough... I'm sorry I almost broke the bottles too." Brook stared at him, and sighed.

"I'm going up," he said. "When you're done here, put the empty crate in the store room, and come see me. I'll be on the balcony."

"Yes master," Blueblood said quickly. Brook started his slow ascent of the stairs, and Blueblood returned to shelving the bottles.

Once he had finished, he took the crate back upstairs as his master had asked. It was much easier without all the bottles in it; he found he could just hold the rim in his mouth and carry it up the steps easily. His ribs still hurt, but he ignored it as he tucked the crate away and headed up the stairs. He found that the door to the balcony was ajar, so he nudged it open further and stepped outside.

Brook was laying at the edge of the balcony in a long chair. Unusually, he was not staring out over the river, but at the bundle that Seagrass had given him. The old cloth that had wrapped it was spread open, and in the centre there was a single, small book. Blueblood approached him slowly, and the old pony looked up.

"The Fall," he said simply. Blueblood stopped, and blinked at his master.

"What?" he asked.

"The Fall," Brook repeated. "The book. That's its title."

"Oh," Blueblood said. Brook looked back at the book, running his hoof gently across its cover.

"It's about guilt," the old pony said. Blueblood's stomach lurched.

"W-what would you like me to do now?" he asked quickly. Brook was silent for a moment, before speaking again.

"You know the stump in the back?" he asked. Blueblood swallowed, and nodded.

"The one I... broke the plough on?" he asked.

"Yes," Brook said. "I want you to get rid of it. Take the axe from the shed and chop up its roots. When you've done that, come and speak with me." Blueblood nodded, and went back inside. He left the house, walking across the squishy ground to the shed, where he gathered the axe and headed out to the stump.

In the week since he had last seen it, much of the dirt that had been tilled around the stump had been washed back into its place by the rain. Blueblood sighed and set the axe down, setting about uncovering the roots

of the stump. He found it surprisingly easy to shift the wet earth; it was no longer hard as it had been when he first tilled it, softened by the saturating rainwater. He dug at it with his hooves, pulling the mud aside and revealing the roots of the great stump bit by bit. As he dug, he began to realize that the roots ran deeper and father than he had imagined. He was lucky to have even cut through as much of them as he did before striking the rock. Once he had dug as far as he cared too, he sat down, staring at the immense task before him.

Roots sprawled through the earth like a massive nest of snakes; twisting and writhing over top one another, and slinking deeper into the earth. There seemed to be hundreds of them there, with hardly any gaps in between. Blueblood groaned, but picked up his axe.

"No sense in putting it off," he mumbled, brandishing the tool. He lifted it above his head, and swung it down as hard as he could. The keen blade hacked through a pair of the roots, and for a moment Blueblood thought it might not be so bad after all. He had cut through a few roots in one swing, he told himself, so surely the rest could not be that difficult. He almost permitted himself a smile, until he lifted the axe again.

Beneath the two roots he had cut, more roots snaked away. His face fell, and he took a few more careful swings, tossing away the chips. Sure enough, beneath the layer of roots he could see there was another. He didn't doubt that there were several layers of roots making their way down. He sighed miserably, but lifted the axe again.

He swung the axe, again and again. At first he tried counting how many times he swung the axe, as a way of passing the time. Before too long, though, he had lost track. The rhythmic swinging of the axe and the steady hacking sound of the roots were droning, almost maddening. It would never stop so long as he didn't stop, and he couldn't. Before long it was almost a compulsion. The chopping filled the air, wearing the rest of the world away. Blueblood knew nothing but the chopping; nothing but the burning in his shoulders as he swung the axe once more, nothing but the shake in his hooves as the axe struck down and nothing but that maddening noise.

More than once it culminated in fury on the white pony's part. He looked desperately for something to blame, and every time the blame fell squarely with himself. He lay into the roots with vigour, breaking the rhythm of his

chopping with a bout of irregular, ragged hacking. Those moments soon left him, though, and he returned to his familiar empty feeling, and the regular, steady chopping. Something inside of him was withering, as he cut.

The axe struck down again, and Blueblood stopped. He could hardly hold it anymore. His hooves shook when he tried to lift it, wobbling dangerously. He released the handle, peering at his hooves. They were red, and blisters were beginning to form. Even when he wasn't holding the axe they shook. He sat down, looking at the work he had done.

There was a deep trench around the stump. He had managed to cut through most of the roots, all save for the tap root at the bottom. The trench was nearly as deep as he was tall; sitting down in it as he was, he couldn't see over the top edge. He sighed sadly, and leaned back against the wall of dirt.

His hooves screamed. His ribs ached from the fall down the stairs, only aggravated by the constant lifting and dropping of his front legs. For the briefest of moments, he wondered what he had done to deserve all this.

You know what you did to deserve this, he told himself, squeezing his eyes shut, *You were a wretched pony, that's what! This, all this, is the least of what you deserve!* The dull, empty aching in his back returned to him, as did the tightness in his chest. He listed off his crimes in his mind, reminding himself of all the things he had done to deserve his punishment. He lifted his head to the sky and opened his eyes. Over top of him, standing on the edge of the trench, was Brook.

"Master," Blueblood said. His eyes went wide, and his heart seized in his chest. The old pony was silhouetted by the sun, now high in the sky, and so Blueblood could not see the old unicorn's expression.

"Red," Brook said simply. Blueblood scrambled to his hooves, heedless of the stinging, and apologized profusely.

"I-I'm sorry, master!" he said, "I was just... I wasn't taking a break master, I swear! I just finished cutting the roots, a-and I -"

"I came to see how you were doing," Brook interrupted him. "You were taking a while." Blueblood swallowed, and apologized again.

"I'm sorry I was too slow, master," he said, closing his eyes and bowing his head. He climbed out of the trench, and dared to peek at his master. The old pony was still staring at him blankly, save for a single raised eyebrow. "I'm sorry," he said again weakly. Brook sighed, and Blueblood winced.

"No," the old pony said. "There are more roots than I expected. Good work."

"W-what?" Blueblood asked, looking slowly at his master.

"Good work," Brook repeated. "You don't hear well, do you?"

"I... I'm sorry, master," Blueblood said. He expected the old pony to berate him, but he did not. Instead, he turned and walked back to the house.

"It's midday," Brook said. "You should eat. I will make you lunch. You need the rest." Blueblood stared after him, not sure what to say. Brook stopped, and turned around. "Coming?" he asked. Blueblood shook himself, and ran after his master.

"You don't need to make lunch, master," he said, "I'll do it. I-I don't need to rest at all, I can do whatever you ask. I-I can still make lunch for you..."

"You will do whatever I ask?" Brook said, without looking back. Blueblood nodded.

"Yes, master," Blueblood said. "Anything you order me to do, I will. I don't need to rest."

"I want you to rest," Brook said. Blueblood stopped again.

"B-but master," Blueblood said, "I can make lunch. I don't need to rest, I... I..." His stomach twisted itself into a knot. It was a feeling almost the same as fear, but different. The same feeling he had felt when Seagrass had looked sadly at him, or when Sandy had wanted to play. Brook stopped as well, and turned around slowly.

"I order you to rest," he said simply. "Are you disobeying my orders, Red?" His tone was hard as stone, but there was no malice to it. There was simply firmness; the voice of a commander. Blueblood cringed, and hung his head.

"No, master..." he said quietly. Brook nodded, and continued to limp. Blueblood followed him into the small kitchen, where Brook instructed him to sit at the table. He did so, laying his stinging hooves and chin gently on the tabletop. He watched Brook move around the tiny kitchen, setting a pot to boil and adding in various ingredients: strange things that he had never seen or didn't know the names of. The stinging in his hooves started to go down, and more and more he found himself focusing on the twisted feeling in his belly. He shut his eyes, trying to drive the feeling away, but it wouldn't leave. It was eating away at him.

"Eat," Brook said. Blueblood opened his eyes, and saw that a bowl had been put in front of him. He peered inside it. It looked like some kind of soup, but with nothing in it but broth. He looked at his master, who held the bowl in his hooves and drank from it. Blueblood decided to do the same, setting his hooves around the wooden bowl. The heat radiated through, burning his hooves, but he ignored it. He lifted the bowl to his mouth, and drank.

The broth was thick, almost like sludge. It hit his stomach and seemed to solidify, turning to stone in his belly. It seemed to settle the awful feeling though, something he was grateful for. He sighed, and drank again. The thick broth tasted of vegetables, despite there being none present. There was also a vaguely sweet taste to it, which Blueblood enjoyed. He drained the bowl in a few gulps, and set it down.

Brook had already finished, and was staring idly at his slave. Blueblood's head sank, almost touching the table again. "Thank you, master," he said quietly. Brook nodded silently at him, and stood.

"Wash the bowls," he said. "Then come meet me outside." he left Blueblood sitting in the kitchen, staring at the place where his master had sat moments before. He washed the bowls as his master had asked, and went outside.

Brook had returned to the stump, this time with the chains from the back of his wagon. He had also removed the yoke from the plough, and had it waiting. Blueblood approached him, head low, and Brook turned around.

"Red," he said. Blueblood walked alongside him, looking at the chains and yoke. Brook didn't wait for him to ask what he would be doing. "You've cut most of the roots," the old pony said, "now you just need to pull out the

stump." He lifted the yoke, slipping it over Blueblood's neck. "I'm going to chain you to it," he said idly, "then you just walk. Like with the plough. Got that?"

"Yes, master," Blueblood said quietly. Brook's horn lit up faintly, and the chains came alive. One end of them wound themselves about the Yoke around Blueblood's neck, as well as securing his torso for extra grip. The other end snaked into the trench, wrapping itself around the enormous stump. Brook nodded, and took a seat. Blueblood stared at him shyly.

"Master," he said. "You're going to... watch?"

"Yes," Brook said. "I want to make sure you're doing this alright. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No!" Blueblood said quickly, his head tucking between his shoulders fearfully. "No, master. I'm sorry." Brook didn't acknowledge his apology.

"This will be difficult," he said. "You had best get started. Walk." Blueblood nodded, and moved forward.

He hit the end of the line in a few short steps. The chains went taught, rattling as they shook in the air. Blueblood was stopped dead, but he still pushed forward. Soon the chains were too tight even to shake. They hung in the air, perfectly straight, chaining the stallion to the wood. He pushed forward regardless.

For a long time, he didn't move at all. He pushed more and more every second, but the stump didn't budge. He held his breath, straining forward with all his might, but for nothing. Soon he could no longer hold his breath. He couldn't push any more. With a gasp, the chains went slack, and he dropped to his knees. He knelt, rump in the air, panting. Beside him, he heard his master move. His eyes snapped open and he saw that the green unicorn had stood, and was limping slowly towards him.

"I'm sorry master," he grunted, getting back to his hooves. "I'm sorry. I'm fine, I... it won't happen again, I promise." Brook stayed standing for a moment, but he lay down once more. Blueblood set his head forward, and walked against the chains again.

He didn't put everything he had into it, this time. He was steady. Steady, like he had learned to be with the plough. He pushed hard, constantly.

The soft earth was beginning to shift beneath his hooves, sliding around like muck. He dug into the ground, leaving ruts that grew deeper and deeper. He put his hooves against the back of these ruts, using them to push off of. The chains behind him were as tight as they had ever been. He breathed heavily, seething through clenched teeth. His eyes were squeezed shut, pushing every bit as hard of the rest of him. Every muscle in his body burnt, crying out, but he ignored them.

I don't need to rest, he told himself furiously, and I don't deserve to! This is what I've earned, and now I have to do it! Harder!

He put his head down, throwing himself against the yoke. Behind him, he could swear he felt the stump budge. He dared a look at his master. The old pony was simply staring at him, and for a moment Blueblood imagined that he saw the old pony's eyebrow twitch. To what end, he could never tell, but it sent chills down his spine, setting a spinning and tumbling feeling in his stomach, like a thousand little insects flying around. He set his teeth and pushed all the harder.

Once more he put everything he had, everything he was into pushing. The sick, twisted feeling in the pit of his stomach was like a furnace, spurring him on. He pushed to escape from it. He pushed to be there with it. That feeling became all that mattered to him. His hooves screamed out as the blisters burst, the pus and blood mixing with the dirt and stinging in the open sores. His ribs cried in agony as the chains tightened, pressing against them. They squeezed the air out of him, and his breath came in shallow wheezes. The yoke dug into his shoulders, biting into his flesh. He was in pain, but he pushed on. He needed to. He had to. He deserved too.

"Argh!" he wheezed involuntarily. He threw his head up, scowling in pain and effort, and kept pushing. Brook leapt to his hooves.

"Red!" The old pony said, limping over with surprising speed, but Blueblood ignored him. He felt the yoke cut into him, felt the blood running down his shoulders. "Red!" Brook shouted again. "Stop!"

"No!" Blueblood cried, "I don't need to!"

"Yes you do!" Brook demanded. "You need to stop. You're hurting yourself!"

"No I'm not!" Blueblood cried again. He still strained against the chains, heedless of his master's shouts. The chains tightened around his sore ribs, and he felt the bones burn. It was like each of them had become a stick of fire. Even still, it didn't compare to the feeling of his stomach being torn apart from the inside. He felt like he was going to vomit whenever his master spoke, but he tried to work past it.

"Red!" Brook barked. "You will stop this NOW! That is an ORDER!"

"No!" Blueblood cried. "No, no! I can keep going! You told me to pull out the stump! I'm going to pull it out, just like you told me to!"

"No you are not!" Brook shouted. He clenched his teeth, and his already shaggy and loose mane flew in his eyes. His entire body shook as he roared at his slave. "I am your master! You will do as I say, and you will stop hurting yourself THIS! INSTANT!"

"NO!" Blueblood screamed. "I don't need to!" Brook's face slipped, and his expression became one of fury.

"Stand! Down! NOW!" he roared. The words seemed to be amplified by some unseen force, echoing through the clearing. Birds in the forest flew away, and Blueblood's mane flipped as if blown by a great wind. The white stallion set his teeth, and threw himself against the chains. They synched around his ribs like a noose, digging into the flesh.

There was a great, resounding snap, almost as loud as Brook's shouting.

Blueblood screamed. He collapsed to the ground, and the chains went slack. Behind him, the stump slowly leaned forward, toppling into the trench.

"RED!" Brook shouted, dropping beside his slave. Blueblood writhed in pain on the ground, screaming breathlessly. He thrashed his limbs like a madpony. Brook moved in beside him without even flinching. Blueblood's hoof caught him in the nose, but he hardly seemed to notice. His horn lit up with a blinding flash, and the yoke was thrown from Blueblood's neck. The chains that wrapped around his body exploded, flying away in individual links. Blueblood took in a deep breath of air, and winced in pain again.

Before he could lash out Brook grabbed hold of his limbs, pinning them against his side. He was shaking, seething with rage. His horn lit up again, and for a moment Blueblood was blind. When his eyesight returned to him, they were back inside the house, on the floor of the main room.

By now, much of the pain had subsided. Blueblood's body still screamed at him, but the pain had paralyzed him now. He lay, perfectly still, breathing deeply. Brook got to his hooves, still furious.

"Idiot!" he shouted at the figure on the floor. "You stupid, stupid colt! What were you thinking! Hurting yourself like that... did you even think what would happen! Did you!" He paced around the room, ranting almost as if he didn't care that Blueblood was there. "What if you're too hurt now? What if I need you, and you can't be there? You can't serve me, because you're hurt! You apologize for almost breaking things... things! What about you, then? Why don't you apologize when you're almost hurt! WELL?" He loomed over Blueblood, watching the stallion wheeze. He chest puffed, in and out, in and out. He sat down slowly, and his breathing became normal. "Stupid..." he said, "stupid colt..."

Blueblood's pain had subsided now. His chest still ached, and his hooves still stung and bled, but they weren't bad. He looked into his master's face, and he thought that he saw sadness. The sick feeling returned to him in full force. It felt as if he had eaten a live animal, like a cat, and it was trying to claw its way out from inside his belly. He thought he would vomit, puke all his guts out all over the floor. Brook shook his head, and limped away slowly, leaving Blueblood on the floor.

The stallion lay there for longer than he knew, wallowing in his sickness. The sight of his master's pain haunted him as he lay there. He fought back tears. They were coming now, along with the sick, painful feeling, and he didn't understand why. More things came with them. He felt cold inside. He felt empty. The aching in his back filled his entire body. He felt like he was a thin piece of skin stretched over ice. A hollow, empty imitation of a pony. Soon, he heard his master's shuffling limp. He braced himself to be yelled at again, or to be punished. Instead, he felt himself slowly lift off the ground. A pillow slipped below his head, and a blanket drifted over top of him. He looked over, and saw his master.

The old pony had regained his passive expression. He was silent as he covered Blueblood, making him comfortable on the floor.

"You stupid colt," he said again. He levitated a bowl near Blueblood's face, and he saw that it was full of soup. His heart lurched in his chest, and a lump rose in his throat.

"Master, I -" he said, but Brook interrupted him.

"Shut up," he said. "Eat. You need to eat. You'll feel better." Blueblood stared at him, but nodded silently. Brook fed him the soup, spoonful by spoonful, and Blueblood took them peacefully. With every spoonful he had to fight back another fit of tears. When the bowl was empty Brook set it on the floor, and shook his head. Blueblood couldn't fight the sick feeling for long.

"Master, I'm sorry," he blurted, before Brook could stop him.

"You should be," the old pony said. "It was a stupid thing to do. You were stupid. You should have stopped. You should have asked me for help, or said it was too hard." He swallowed hard, but sat upright.

"But..." Blueblood said, "you asked me to do it. I was just doing what you asked."

"I never asked you to hurt yourself, Red," Brook said firmly. Any trace of emotion that there had ever been was gone from his voice now. He stared straight ahead, not bothering to look at his slave. Somehow, this only hurt Blueblood more.

"I'm so sorry, master," he said. "Please... I'm sorry. Please don't be mad at me... please don't punish me." Brook was silent. He stared straight ahead. His eyes were unfocused, staring a million miles away. Blueblood couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"Why would I punish you?" he asked finally. Blueblood just stared at him. His eyes watered, but he blinked back the tears.

"Because..." he said weakly, "because I keep screwing up. You ask me to do things, and I mess them up! You wanted me to clear the shed, and I broke it! Then you asked me to plough the fields, and I broke the plough!"

You asked me to dig up the stump, and I hurt myself and you got mad at me! Why wouldn't you punish me! You have every reason to!"

"No I don't," Brook said. His eyes drifted down to Blueblood. "I have no reason to punish you."

"Yes you do!" Blueblood insisted. The feeling in his gut only got worse and worse. It was driving him mad. He rolled over, grunting painfully, and propped himself up on his hooves. "You ask me to do things, and I mess up! That's all I ever do! So why don't you punish me?"

"Red," Brook said slowly. "You're going to hurt yourself again. Lay down."

"No!" Blueblood said. "Why do you care so much if I get hurt? I'll work anyways! Why don't you punish me?"

"Do you want me to punish you?" Brook asked. Blueblood stared at him. The question struck through his heart like an arrow. He began to shake, and the ice in his veins turned to fire. It burned him alive from the inside. The pain was incredible. The aching ribs, the stinging hooves, were nothing compared to this. He didn't cry, but he desperately wanted to. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to curl up, and just stop.

"YES!" he screamed. "Yes, I want you to punish me! I deserve it! So why won't you!"

"Because you don't deserve it, Red," Brook said simply.

"Yes I do!" Blueblood screamed again. "Why are you so nice to me! Why don't you ever punish me, why do you let me rest and make me food! Why me? Why me, instead of some other slave, somepony who deserves it? Why me, instead of some little filly? Some little filly, who's been a slave for her entire life, and never did anything to deserve it like I did?" Tears streamed down his face now, but he kept screaming. "Why couldn't you have bought one of them? You could have let me go to some... to some noble pony! Someone who would treat me like I deserve! Somepony who would beat me when I screw up, somepony who would punish me! Why did she have to go instead? She never did anything... I deserve to be punished master, not her! She deserves to be here, with you! Somepony who won't punish her even when she's bad! So why! Why did you have to buy me,

instead of her! And why won't you punish me!" Blueblood screamed, wailing at the old pony. Brook just stared at him.

"You don't deserve to be punished, Red," he said again. Blueblood screamed, slamming his hoof on the ground.

"Yes I do!" he said. "You don't know me! You don't know what I've done! I deserve it!"

"You think you deserve to be punished, Red?" Brook asked, getting to his hooves.

"Yes! Gods, yes!" Blueblood said.

"You think you deserve to be beaten. You deserve punishment, and pain?"

"Yes!" Blueblood cried again. Brook stood in front of him, staring solidly into his eyes. He set his bad hoof, normally held slightly in the air, flat on the ground. Blueblood stared in awe and fear, tears still pouring down his cheeks, as Brook put his weight forward. He leaned on his bad hoof, putting as much of his mass on it as he could.

"You think this is what you deserve, Red? Pain?" Brook asked coldly. "I've felt this, Red. I've felt this so much. And I've been where you are right now, Red. What you are feeling, that hurt in your chest? That is so much worse than any pain could ever be. It is the most intense hurting you will ever feel in your entire life. It is the worst punishment anypony could ever suffer, and no pony deserves to go through it."

"That... That's not true!" Blueblood wailed. "I deserve it! I deserve it, and I deserve worse! You don't understand, master!"

"Don't I?" Brook asked. "Then tell me. Tell me what you did, Red. Tell me what you did that's so awful that you deserve to feel what you feel right now." Blueblood sobbed, breathing in choking gasps, and he spilled his guts to the old pony.

"I was horrible!" he cried. "I was stupid, and, and I was selfish! I never thought about anypony but myself! I thought the sun and the moon revolved around me!"

"So?" Brook asked.

"How many lives did I ruin!" Blueblood screamed. "Do you know? Do you know how many ponies I made miserable because of what I did to them? And all because I thought I was so fucking special! I'm not, and I never was! I was only ever a horrible, horrible pony! Scum!" There was bitterness in Blueblood's words now, and he was screaming at himself more than he was telling his story. The feeling poured out of him like the tears that poured down his face.

"I was bad!" he repeated, "I was so, unbelievably bad! I was... I was..." He broke down into sobs, and lay on the floor. He cried into the pillow, and for a while there was silence. Then, Brook spoke.

"Is that it?" he asked. Blueblood looked up into his face.

"I... I'm bad, master. I'm a horrible pony," Blueblood whimpered. Brook shook his head.

"No you aren't," he said simply.

"Yes I am!" Blueblood screamed again. "All I ever did was make ponies miserable! How can I not be bad! How can I be anything but bad? How can I not deserve this? I have to be bad... I have to!"

"But you aren't," Brook said, shaking his head.

"That's not true!" Blueblood cried, burying his face in the pillow. "I have to be bad! You're lying!"

"Red, look at me," Brook ordered. Blueblood managed to force himself to look up again, and he saw Brook, laying on the ground in front of him. Some sort of softness had returned to his face. For just a moment the most empty, harshest pony Blueblood had ever met became the warmest.

"Red," he said. "I spent so much of my life as a soldier. I saw so many bad ponies. Some of them I fought along side; ponies who only joined the army for the killing and the violence, or to feel strong. Sometimes they were my commanders, telling me to slaughter ponies because they hated them. Sometimes I was lucky enough to fight against bad ponies, maniacs who needed to die in order for there to be any good left in the world. And do you

know what all of those ponies had in common, Red?" Blueblood sniffed, and wiped tears from his eyes.

"W-what?" he asked. Brook reached out, and put his bad hoof on Blueblood's shoulder.

"Not a single one of them knew that they were bad. They all thought what they were doing was right, or good, or even just justified. A bad pony can never tell when they're bad, Red."

"But... everything I've done," Blueblood said. "How can that not be bad?"

"All the things you've done, Red?" Brook asked. "Were they really bad? Would a bad pony stay with a foal who was afraid? Would a bad pony work himself to the bone to make an old stallion happy? Would a bad pony give up his blanket for another pony, or hurt himself trying to follow orders? Would a bad pony sit here and cry because somewhere a slave is being treated worse than he is? Why would a bad pony do any of the things you've done, Red? How could they?"

"They... they have to be. I have to be," Blueblood said. "Please... please. It has to be me. If I'm not bad... if it isn't because I'm being punished... then why is this happening to me? Why is it all happening, unless I'm bad?" He shut his eyes, and whimpered miserably. Then, all of a sudden, he felt arms around his neck. He opened his eyes, and he saw that Brook had wrapped him in a hug. Tears sprung into his eyes again, and he began to cry anew.

"Sometimes it isn't personal, Red," Brook said. "Sometimes things just happen. But believe me when I tell you this. You are not a bad pony, Red. You are so much better than you understand. You just need to see it."

Blueblood cried. He cried for what felt like hours, sobbing into Brook arms. He cried, and he cried, and he cried. After a while, it seemed like he had finally run out of tears. He sniffled, refusing to let Brook let go of him.

"I'm sorry, master," he said. "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry..."

"I know, Red." Brook said. "I know you are. That's why you're good. Because you're sorry." Blueblood sniffed.

"Even if..." he said, "even if I'm not bad... I was still so selfish. I was so stupid, and so cruel. How can a pony like me ever be good, master?" Brook nuzzled him gently, and his horn lit up. Blueblood heard a noise from behind him, and he turned around.

Brook had used his magic to open the door. Beyond it, Blueblood could see the evening light. He could see the path out into the woods, and the river sparkling in the distance.

"Red," Brook said. "If you believe you can't be good. If you really, truly believe it, then leave. I won't stop you. I'll go to town tomorrow, and I'll buy another slave. I'll treat them well, and never beat them, or speak harshly to them. I'll be better to them than I was to you." Blueblood swallowed hard, but Brook continued. "But I believe in you, Red. I believe you can be good, that you can be so much better than you could ever understand. If you believe in the you that I see, then stay with me. I can help you be good. I promise."

Blueblood stared at the open door. For a brief moment, he could see more than just what lay beyond its frame. He could see freedom. He could see coming back when Brook was sleeping, and robbing him blind. He could see selling the treasures in the city, and using the money to buy a ride back to Equestria. He could see his mother, and his Aunties, and putting this all behind him. He could see his old life again. Everything he had ever had. He would be respected again. He could buy a doctor to make a fake horn, even if he couldn't use magic. He turned back, and he saw his master, looking at him with soft, warm eyes. He sat down, and bowed his head to the old green stallion.

"I want to stay with you, master," he said softly. "I want to be good."

Chapter 10

In Which Care is Given

There was silence in Canterlot Palace, save for the steady sound of hoofsteps. Princess Celestia's golden horseshoes tapped gently on the marble floor, keeping time like the ticking of a clock. She paced back and forth across the room, not saying a word.

She had been preparing to raise the sun when she had received the news, getting as far as rousing herself and getting cleaned up when the acting captain of the guards had rapped gently upon her door. He had told her what happened, and she had immediately gone silent. Luna still hadn't returned to the palace, and so the princess had no pony to confide in. She couldn't tell her niece, obviously. Not yet. The only ponies who could know were her guards, and now was exactly the wrong time to show weakness in front of them. She sighed.

"When?" she asked pointedly. The acting captain, one of her personal pegasus guards, saluted.

"We found it... pardon, him, early this morning, Your Majesty. One of the maids, Lilac. She found him, called us, then I came to you." Celestia nodded.

"The filly... how is she?"

"Shaken," the pegasus said. "But she'll be fine."

"Have you had time to inspect him yet?" Celestia asked, still pacing. The captain shook his head.

"Not yet, Your Majesty. I sent another guard to fetch the doctor while I got you, but they're under orders not to inspect him until you arrive."

"Very good," Celestia said, finally standing still. "Take me to him." The pegasus saluted, and opened the door for his princess. He led her through the palace's winding hallways. They were completely devoid of ponies this early, save for the odd industrious servant checking for something to do. In

times like these Celestia's ancient mind became jaded, and she wondered idly if an earth pony they passed straightening a tapestry might be looking for a raise. For an instant she considered having his pay docked, but pushed the thought away. It was only stress talking, she reminded herself. Even she was not infallible. Today, more than any other, was a day to remember that.

Their path took them down into the less-traveled wings of the palace. The marble floors and walls gave way to simple, dank cobblestone. It seemed appropriate; compared to the opulence of the rest of the palace these hallways seemed almost oppressive. Celestia was beginning to grow impatient of her guard's short-legged strides, and the tips of her wings twitched irritably. Fortunately, they soon came to a small door, and the pegasus stopped.

They entered the room. It was one of many that lead outside, all for various purposes. This was one of the rooms that received packages. Ordinarily these packages contained food, or cleaning supplies and the like, but Celestia gathered that a special delivery had come in this morning. The young mare Lilac was still there, wrapped in a blanket and speaking softly with another guard. Celestia trotted up carefully.

"Are you alright?" she asked comfortingly. Lilac looked up at her, and smiled weakly.

"Yes... thank you, Your Majesty. I think I'll be fine. But..." She paused, and looked down. "I'm very sorry," she said. Celestia shook her head.

"Thank you," she said, "but don't worry about it. This is not the first time this has happened to me. I'm a big girl." She smiled sweetly to the mare, who smiled back. Celestia looked over the mare's head at the group of guards huddled around the back of the room. There was an unarmoured unicorn with them, who Celestia recognized as the palace's doctor. She walked up to him, and ruffled her wings. The doctor turned around, and bowed.

"Your Majesty," he said quietly. Celestia nodded politely to him.

"Have you taken a look at him, yet?" she asked. The doctor shook his head.

"Only a cursory inspection, Your Majesty. I was told to wait until you arrived and gave your blessing to give a full review, as... well, I'm sure you know the procedure." Celestia nodded once again.

"Yes, of course," she said. "What do you know so far?" The doctor shook his head, and shrugged.

"Very little," he admitted. "I know what happened, but I don't know when. It could have been weeks ago, or earlier this morning. I won't be able to tell any more until I take a closer look. Did you want some time alone with him first, Your Majesty?" Celestia tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"Perhaps," she said. "Something about this doesn't sit right with me." She hummed to herself, running through scenario after scenario in her mind. She lived through weeks in instants, watching each new turn of events unfold. Many of them led to somewhere close to here, but never quite here. She rubbed her eyes, and looked up. Something else strange occurred to her.

"Oak!" she said. The red-brown pegasus sitting across from her bowed.

"Your Majesty," he said softly.

"Why are you here, Oak?" Celestia asked. The guard lowered his head shyly.

"I... the princess was sleeping soundly, so I thought I might be able to have breakfast. I heard miss Lilac scream, and came in here. I... have been too caught up to return to Her Highness yet." Celestia struggled to maintain her composure. If Amethyst woke without Oak, she might go looking for him, and she might find the trail leading her here. That was the last thing Celestia wanted.

"Go back to her now, Oak. She mustn't find out about this yet. Is that understood?"

"But Your Majesty," Oak objected, "she should know about this, don't you think? I mean, she deserves to know. To hear it from you, not from a guard or a rumour this time -"

"That was not a request, lieutenant," Celestia said sharply. Oak – and several other guards nearby – winced. The goddess took a deep breath, and spoke again. "She will," she said. "I promise she will. But not yet. Something is wrong here, Oak. I want to make sure that somepony isn't trying to fool me. It... feels wrong." Oak's expression became puzzled, but he saluted regardless.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said. He fluttered across the room, but before he reached the door it swung open on its own.

"Oak!" Amethyst said gratefully. "Thank goodness. I've been looking for you. One of the servants said he saw you come down this way a while ago... where did you run off to, Oak?" The lieutenant leaned away, trying hard not to show his nerves. Celestia did so as well, hiding her emotions much better.

"Ah... I went to fetch breakfast, Your Highness," Oak said quickly. "I wasn't expecting you to be awake so soon."

"Yes..." Amethyst said, "yes, I... had another nightmare. But that's not important. I'm awake now. What's for breakfast, hm?" She smiled widely, trying to put on a brave face for her guard. She looked over his shoulder, but he shifted to block her vision.

"N-nothing here, your highness," he said. "Just a package arriving."

"Really?" she asked, looking over Oak's other shoulder. "It must be some important package, with so many guards – and Aunt Celestia! What are you all doing here?"

"Nothing, dear," Celestia said coolly. "Why don't you and Oak head outside? I'm going to be raising the sun soon, I'm sure it will be lovely to see. It's a very clear morning today."

"Maybe in a minute," Amethyst said. Her brow was beginning to furrow slightly, and she was looking past her nervous guard with interest. "What are you all looking at back there? And why have you got the doctor with you?"

"I-it's nothing to worry about, princess," Oak said, waving his hooves. Amethyst ignored him, quickly stepping around the flustered pegasus. He

tried to stop her, but she marched on heedlessly. Celestia sat in her path resolutely, and the mare marched straight up to her aunt.

"What is it, Auntie?" Amethyst asked pointedly.

"Nothing." Celestia said, every bit as sharp.

"Then why won't you let me see it?" the purple mare asked again.

"Because it isn't worth seeing," Celestia said. The two stared at each other in silence, an unspoken line of communication passing in the way that only family can manage. It was Amethyst who spoke first, and her voice was filled to the brim with fear.

"Auntie... what's wrong?" Celestia sighed, and stepped aside. Amethyst walked past her, peering at what the guards and doctor had been gathered around. The doctor took a step back, sighing sadly.

Amethyst took a slow step forwards. "N-no..." she said quietly. She stepped forward again, lifting a quivering hoof into the air. "No," she whimpered again. "No, no, no, no no no!" She began to scream, and covered her head with her hooves. "NO!" she screamed, almost begging. "NO! No, please, please gods no! Oh gods, why!"

The guards, the doctor, and Princess Celestia had all been gathered around a box. It was short, only a few feet high, but it was long, and packed with straw. Inside it was a unicorn stallion. His coat was white, and his mane the colour of the straw surrounding him. He was turned on his side, so everypony could see his cutie mark: a six-pointed compass rose. He didn't breath. He didn't move. He was dead.

"Why!" Amethyst cried again. She threw herself onto the body, sobbing and writhing as if she were in pain. Every scream stabbed Oak in his heart. He walked slowly to the crying princess.

"Amethyst," he said quietly. The princess looked up at him, tears staining her face. For a moment he shared a sympathetic glance with her, and she threw herself into his hooves. He swallowed, but sat down with her and let her cry.

"Oh gods, why?" she sobbed again. No pony spoke. They let her cry, respecting her loss. No pony in the room would ever tell another soul what had happened, they all knew that. The princess would have to be strong for her country. She would have to lead it well, and never let this touch her. She would need to put on a brave face for the other countries. She would have to be nobility. But for now, she was allowed to be a mother, mourning for her child.

"Oh, my foal," she moaned, her tears finally spent. "My poor, poor foal... how could this happen?" She sniffed, and looked up. "How could this happen, Auntie?"

"I'm so sorry, Amethyst," Celestia said.

"Couldn't you have done something?" the purple princess demanded. "Couldn't you have stopped this? Why didn't you!" Celestia hung her head in shame.

"I don't know," she admitted. "You're right. I could have done something. But I didn't."

"And why not!" Amethyst demanded angrily. "He was your nephew, Auntie! He was... he was my foal, and now he's gone... I told you we should have gone after them! If you had just listened to me, my foal would still be alive! Now he's dead, and IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT! I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY!" She screamed, and began to cry again. Oak held her, letting her sob into his shoulder. Celestia sat silently,

"I don't want to be here anymore, Oak," Amethyst said eventually. "I can't be here anymore. I want to go."

"Of course," Oak said. He helped her to her hooves, and led her to the door. Before they left Amethyst looked over her shoulder, staring at her aunt with hate-filled eyes. Then, she was gone.

The room was silent. The acting captain of the guards shuffled his wings, and spoke.

"Your Majesty," he said, before Celestia interrupted him.

"She'll be fine," she said quietly. "She's scared right now. Heartbroken. She has every right to be angry with me." She closed her eyes, and sighed. "Leave me alone with him," she said. The pegasus saluted, and all the ponies slowly filed out of the room. Soon it was just Celestia and the body. She turned around, and looked at it carefully.

The eyes had been closed – thank goodness for that. He looked almost like he was sleeping, lying there in the straw. She ran a hoof over him gently and found a strange lump in his neck, like the bone wasn't aligned right. She furrowed her brow, and looked closer. There was something wrong, she could tell. It didn't look right. It didn't smell right. Even the air around it tasted just ever so slightly off.

She hummed to herself quietly and looked over her shoulder, confirming that the door was shut tight. She turned back to the body and closed her eyes, breathing deeply. A smell filled her nose like nothing else in the world. It was like smelling fire, or electricity. It almost had no smell of its own, instead smelling of everything else at once. She could smell the mortar between the stones. She could smell the moss and mildew, and the stones themselves. She could smell the old wood in the room. She could smell saltwater.

She felt her mind spreading out, touching everything in the room. The tiny, imperceptible currents in the air playing across her coat, the subtle grit of the stones beneath her hooves. She became aware of every single object in the room with her, no matter how small, and her mind joined with them. She could hear the faint whispers of the long-dead wood that supported the walls, and the steady chipping of the masonry where the cobblestones were born. The room came alive to her, and she became a part of it.

When she reopened her eyes, the world was different. Tiny flecks of gold hung in the air like dust in a sunbeam. They swam, shifting in strange currents and forming ancient and eldritch shapes and symbols. She saw the entire room at once, as if she had left her body and were floating in the air. She smiled in spite of herself; this was not a sight she saw often anymore. She focused her attention on the body. It was swathed in gold, the flecks dancing across its body like ponies at a festival. A fleck clung to every single hair in his coat and mane.

"Magic..." she said softly. Her horn lit up, and the stallion in the box began to glow as well. His fur seemed to bristle, and the golden sparks dashed away from him, flying into the air and sinking into the walls and the wood. Bit by bit, hair by hair, the white of his coat melted away. It was replaced by a deep, chocolate brown. Within moments her nephew disappeared, and in his place lay a new stallion, bare of any gold. And yet, he was not new at all. Celestia remembered him, from weeks ago. A soldier. An honoured guest. An Aloan.

The princess breathed a sigh of relief. She would have to find Amethyst later, when the unicorn had calmed down. For now, though, Celestia had business to attend to. The sun was late to rise, and she was going to have a very busy day. There was much to do, much to prepare for. She would have to leave the castle soon, to visit an old friend. A very, very old friend.

Blueblood and Brook walked out of their home and into the darkness of the morning. Blueblood looked around idly, while Brook moved in the direction of the shed.

"Bring the cart over, Red," he said quietly. Blueblood nodded, and headed around the house to fetch the old pony's wagon. He pulled it around, leading it over to Brook where he sat by the shed. Brook had already propped the door open, and was looking at the broken plough inside.

"Are you going to be alright with this?" he asked Blueblood. The white pony eyed the plough, and nodded slowly.

"I think so, master," Blueblood said. He wrapped his hooves around the plough, and began to walk slowly backwards. He kept the plough on its good side, and it slid along the ground easily enough. When he reached the cart he leaned back, lifting it off the ground slowly. He grunted with the effort, and Brook lifted his hoof slightly.

"Do you need help?" he asked. Blueblood grunted, and put it back down.

"I... might," he admitted. Brook nodded, and his horn glowed faintly. With the help of Brook's magic, Blueblood managed to lift the heavy plough up, and put it in the back of the cart. He leaned against the edge, panting faintly. Brook walked up to him.

"I'm okay," Blueblood said softly. He stepped away from the cart, and Brook nodded. With Blueblood's aid the old pony climbed into the back of the wagon, and Blueblood moved into position to push it once more. "Do we need anything else, master?" Blueblood asked. Brook shook his head.

"No," he said. "We just need the plough. We can find a place to stay, and things to eat in the city. We'll buy supplies while we're there too. But for now, this is all we need." Blueblood nodded, and turned around. "Don't push yourself," Brook told him. "Let the rib rest." Blueblood nodded again, giving a shy smile to the old pony. He set off, pulling the cart back to Port Ponzance.

The week since Blueblood had hurt himself had been a strange one. As always, Brook hardly spoke. In spite of this the old pony had always seemed to have something to do. He wouldn't let Blueblood do anything, and when Blueblood asked he had simply stated that Blueblood needed to rest.

Blueblood's rib wasn't hurt bad. It had bruised where the chain pressed into it, but the pain was dull, and the bone probably wasn't hurt at all. Brook had been silent to these objections, however, and Blueblood had been too shy to push them. So he had simply sat on the balcony, or in the bedroom if it rained. When he was on the balcony, he found himself more and more looking out at the river, and the forest beyond it.

At first, it had simply been something to do. Blueblood had felt guilty about not being able to work at first, but the view had been able to take his mind off it a little. The more he looked, the more it was out of curiosity. He wondered just why his master chose to spend day in and day out staring. As he stared, the reason began to unfold before him.

It was not simply that the view was beautiful, though that was certainly true. The more he saw it, the more he began to see in it. He began to notice the trees in the distance rustling, and the glint of the light off the water changing subtly as the river rippled in the wind. Even when he didn't focus, he could allow his mind to wander. It was peaceful. At times he fell completely into his mind, forgetting about the world around him.

When it rained, and he sat in the bedroom, he found himself reading. Brook had found him sitting in the middle of the room one day, and silently placed a book of poetry in front of him. It had taken Blueblood a while to grow

accustomed to reading the measures, but when he did he found that he enjoyed it.

While the week had not been a hard one on Blueblood, it had not been perfect. Brook had fallen into silence the morning after Blueblood had hurt himself, and Blueblood couldn't help but tiptoe around the silent stallion. In truth, he still found it hard to accept all the help that Brook gave him. At least now, though, Blueblood had recovered enough that Brook would allow him to work again.

When the two ponies next spoke to one another, the sun was high above them in the centre of the sky. In spite of its late rise, it shone brightly. It had not rained recently, but it threatened to again. The air was heavy with humidity, and pearls of sweat were forming in Blueblood's mane.

The road had widened out, and the last of the trees had fallen away. Blueblood pulled the cart through rolling hills now, and the road fell away from them on one side.

"Stop," Brook said. Blueblood did as he was told, and looked back. He was panting slightly, and he had been holding his tongue out to cool himself off, but he closed his mouth shyly.

"Is something wrong?" Blueblood asked. Brook shrugged.

"Let's take a break," he said simply. "Cool off for a while."

"... Alright," Blueblood said. He offered his master a hoof down from the wagon, and the old pony took it. He eased himself onto the ground with Blueblood's help, and trotted down the hillside. Blueblood followed after him, looking back at the cart.

"Shouldn't we stay with the wagon?" he asked. Brook laid down on the grass, and sighed as a breeze blew through his mane.

"It will be fine," he said. "There's nothing in it worth stealing." Blueblood nodded, and sat beside him. A gentle wind blew over the hills. It cooled Blueblood, chilling him where he was damp with sweat. It felt good, after hours of pulling the cart.

"The breeze is nice," Brook said, breaking the silence. Blueblood looked over at him slowly.

"Yes," he agreed quietly. "Is it... always this humid?"

"In the woods? Yes." Brook said. "Out of the woods the dry season is much better." Blueblood blinked at him.

"Dry season?" he asked. Brook stared back.

"Where are you from, Red?" he asked suddenly. Blueblood lowered his head a tad, and answered.

"Um, Equestria, master," he said. Brook nodded.

"I was there... once. It's different. We have two seasons here: wet, and dry. We're at the end of the wet season. In a month or so the dry season comes. The rain stops for half the year, then comes again near the end." Blueblood thought about this for a moment.

"So... during winter?" he asked. Brook shrugged.

"I don't know," he said.

"Oh," Blueblood said, "right. I'm -"

"Don't apologize," Brook cut him off. Blueblood paused for a moment, trying to hold back another apology. He saw the corners of Brook's mouth twitch up for just a moment before the old pony recovered himself. The old unicorn hummed idly, and lay his head on his hooves. Blueblood turned away from him, looking at the view before them.

The land fell away from them in the distance. Hills bobbed up to the left and right, and as the forest reclaimed them it seemed almost like an ocean on land, the dips and rolls immeasurably slow waves playing along its surface. Far away Blueblood could see a thin strip of the River Aloe cut through it, breaking the flow before the land faded into the mists of distance. It still felt surreal to Blueblood, seeing the horizon. It felt like it went on forever.

A breeze cropped up, blowing Blueblood's mane in his eyes. Through the golden strands he could see the forest in the distance shift, its leaves

rippling in time with one another. He lay down, and sighed. In spite of himself, he smiled.

"It's beautiful," Brook said simply. Blueblood looked over at the old pony. He still stared forward, head resting on the backs of his hooves. The breeze blew through again, sending another ripple through the forest. "Perfect," the old pony said.

"Yes..." Blueblood said quietly. "It's nice." He looked back at the vista, and was reminded of Brook's own view from his balcony. A question came to him mind, but he struggled to ask it. "Master," he said slowly. Brook's eyes flicked towards him.

"Yes?" the old pony asked.

"You watch the forest from your balcony a lot," Blueblood said, still slowly. Brook nodded. Blueblood's brow furrowed, and he continued. "Does it ever... do you ever get tired of it?" Brook hummed again, and scratched his beard calmly.

"No..." he said finally. "No. Every time I look at it, I see something new. Something I didn't notice before. It changes every time." Blueblood thought about this. Perhaps Brook had simply watched for longer, and knew the forest more intimately, but Blueblood couldn't imagine being able to notice the subtle changes from day to day.

"You've been looking too, haven't you?" Brook asked. Blueblood blinked in surprise.

"Y-yes," he said. Brook nodded.

"Do you think about things, when you look out there?"

"Yes," Blueblood said again. Brook stared into the distance. His eyes had a far-away quality to them.

"What do you think about, Red?" he asked. Blueblood looked out at the scenery for a while, thinking.

"I... don't know," he conceded. "I guess I just... think about whatever comes to me. Everything." He lowered his head, but Brook smiled faintly.

"Everything," the old pony repeated. He sighed, and Blueblood thought he could hear peace in that sigh. "Everything is a good thing to think about," Brook said. He lay his head on his hooves again, that faint smile still on his face. Blueblood looked at him for a moment, then turned away. Another breeze came, playing through Blueblood's mane. He stared out at the forest before them, and he smiled as well.

Hours later, Blueblood hauled the cart up to the walls of Port Ponzance. The enormous gates that broke the wall were still wide open, but a pair of guards stepped into their path. Blueblood was nervous for a moment, but the guards ignored him, nodding instead to Brook in the back of the cart.

"Afternoon, sir," one guard said. "What brings you to Port Ponzance?"

"A bit of trade," Brook told him. "I need a plough fixed up. Do you need my medallion?"

"No, that's alright," the guard said. "No need to do everything – you've got a slave with you, I doubt you're trying to sneak in." The two guards stepped aside, and Blueblood pulled the wagon through the gates. The guards nodded to Brook once more, still ignoring Blueblood. Brook nodded back to them faintly.

"Master?" Blueblood asked, after they he had walked for a while longer. Something had been on his mind since they spoke to the guard at the gate.

"Yes?" Brook asked. Blueblood looked back at him, lowering his head slightly.

"How did the guard know that I was your slave? Do you really not have any earth ponies in Aloa?" Brook shrugged.

"Few enough," he said. "But that isn't how." He ran his hoof along the cloth wrapped about his shoulders, and tapped the medallion tying them gently. "These," he said. "This far out, everypony wears wrappings and a medallion. Only slaves don't."

"Oh..." Blueblood said, nodding. That meant that everypony who saw them knew that he was his master's slave. Not so long ago, that would have made him happy. Longer ago than that, it would have made him livid. Now, he didn't quite know how to feel about it.

It was late in the afternoon now, and much of whatever bustle the city might have had was beginning to die down. The streets were still full of ponies, but it was not as packed with them as it had been when Blueblood was first brought here. Brook told him to head back to the market lane, and he complied. The wide lane was easy to find, especially since the spoke-like road from the gate brought them right to it.

The street here was more populous, and Blueblood often found himself nodding apologetically to groups of ponies who were forced to break around the large wagon. In truth, he wasn't sure of exactly where he was going. Brook never gave him any cue to stop, so he simply kept walking. The market street seemed to stretch on forever, bending and curving just enough that Blueblood could never quite see the end of it. Just as his legs were beginning to grow sore from the day's walk, Brook spoke.

"Turn right here," he said. Blueblood nodded, and turned into a small alleyway. It tucked between the sides of two shops, leading away from the stores and merchants. The alley began to narrow gradually, and before long Blueblood was starting to wonder if he would be able to keep pulling the cart. The walls of the buildings on either side stretched high up above, hiding the low sun and putting the two ponies into darkness. In the distance Blueblood saw a point of light. He kept moving towards it; not that he had any choice. The walls kept creeping close and closer, and as they reached the other side of the alleyway Blueblood would have sworn that the wagon nearly scraped along the walls.

He stepped out into the light, and blinked. His eyes had adjusted to the dark of the alleyway, and the open sunlight was blinding. When he was able to open his eyes again, he took a look around.

They were in a large open square. The ground was paved with old, loose cobblestones. The buildings were pressed together, walling the square off save for a few narrow streets like the one they had just come through. The buildings stretched two or three stories tall each, and on the second stories Blueblood saw wide balconies, similar the one on Brook's home. Also like Brook's home the places beneath the balconies were shaded porches, sinking back into the shadows before the buildings proper began. The buildings cast a large shadow over half the square, but the half that was still lit shone gold as the waning sun cast orange upon the yellow sandstone.

No building seemed to have the same purpose as its neighbor. Several were undecorated, and Blueblood imagined that they were homes. Others had stands set up out front, selling various goods. One had long, rich sheets of cloth hung from its rafters and laying folded on its bench. Another was covered in metal implements – kitchen utensils, farm equipment, even simple lengths of chain. The air around the house behind this stand seemed to shimmer, and Blueblood could see a thick plume of smoke rising up from its chimney.

"There," Brook said. "A forge. That's what we need." Blueblood nodded, and pulled the cart over to it.

The shimmer in the air had been heat – as Blueblood drew close he could feel it radiating outwards. He saw a red glow coming from the window inside, and guessed that the forge must be just inside.

With Blueblood's help Brook clambered down from the wagon, and limped over to the door. He rapped on it sharply, making a deep thudding noise. There was silence for a while, then the door creaked open.

A gigantic stallion stood before the two, golden-brown of coat and with a fiery red mane and tight silvery wrappings. "Hullo," he said gruffly, grinning at the pair. Blueblood stared at him – he had never seen a pony quite so full-looking. The smith was almost as wide as his door frame. Brook, however, did not seem surprised.

"Hello," he said, nodding respectfully. "Are you the blacksmith who made these tools?"

"That's me, yeah," the smith said, beaming proudly. "You need something forged?"

"Not forged," Brook said, shaking his head. "I just need a repair done."

"Well, I can repair whatever you have for me!" the smith said. "What do you need fixed up?" Brook limped back to the cart, gesturing for the smith to follow. He did so, brushing past Blueblood without a thought.

"Managed to break a plough," Brook said offhandedly. "Need it fixed up before we can get back to work. Dry season is coming soon." The smith

leaned over the side of the cart, humming knowingly. He inspected the plough, nodding to himself.

"You weren't kidding that you did a number on it," he said. "Cut it the whole way through. Well, I can fix it right up. It won't come cheap, though."

"I can afford it," Brook said simply.

"Well, no offense sir, but I don't know that." The stallion shrugged, and Brook sighed.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I suppose that's fair." He unpinned the medallion tied to his wrappings, and handed it over to the smith. The smith turned it over, inspecting whatever was on the back. As Blueblood watched him, he saw the stallion's brow raise in surprise.

"White Brook?" he asked incredulously. "The Raging River? Commander of the -"

"Yes," Brook said sharply, cutting him off. "That was... a long time ago." The smith gave him the medallion back, and grinned.

"It's an honour to meet you, sir. I'm... sort of surprised that it's just a plough. From you, I would have thought your armour or something..."

"It's been a long time since that armour did anything that would need repairs," Brook said. "Nearly twenty years. I'm just a farmer now. Is that all you need?"

"Oh!" the smith said. "Yes, of course. I'm sure you'll be able to afford it easily. I'll even give you a discount."

"No," Brook said. "That won't be necessary. I have more than enough."

"That's very generous of you, sir," the smith said. Blueblood watched him oddly. The way that he spoke to Brook – it was like he was meeting his childhood hero. His tone was almost reverential, and Blueblood could see his head bobbing humbly as he spoke. It was subtle, but Blueblood understood what it meant exactly.

"Actually," Brook said, "I hate to ask this. We just came to the city, and don't have anywhere to stay for the night. Is your home large enough for two guests?"

"Oh yes," the smith said, beaming. "I'd be honoured if you would stay with us while you're in town. I'm sure my wife would be as well."

"Hm," Brook said, nodding. Blueblood wasn't certain, but he seemed to be losing that sense of calmness about him. He seemed slower, duller somehow. He took a step towards his master, but the old pony lifted his head and looked towards him. "Red," he said suddenly. "Can you take the plough into our host's forge, and put away the cart?"

"Yes, master," Blueblood said, nodding to him. He reached into the back of the cart, dragging the heavy plough out. The smith didn't move to help him, instead waiting until Blueblood managed to pull it out and get it onto the ground. When he had, the smith opened the door into his house and held it.

"Just bring it in here," he said. Blueblood nodded, and began dragging the plough backwards along the ground. The smith watched him as he did so.

The inside of the house was sweltering. Blueblood had been right; the forge sat in the opening of the house, right beside the window. It seemed to be a small foyer, as there was another door just feet away from them. He dropped the plough by the forge, then returned outside to the cart.

"Take that thing around the back," the smith said. "You think you can find the way around our house?" Blueblood nodded silently, and began to pull the cart along. It seemed light as a feather without the heavy plough and his master in the back. Before leaving the square he risked a glance over his shoulder at his master. The old pony was sitting by the fountain, staring off into space. It was much like when he would look out over the river, but was different somehow. Blueblood stared at him for a moment, before shaking his head and pulling the wagon into another alleyway.

The path around the smiths house was simple to find; it was a simple gap in between the back of his building and another, leading to a tight square. Blueblood was forced to climb over the cart to get back out, which took a bit of time. When he returned to the front of the house, Brook and the smith had disappeared. Blueblood nudged the door to the smith's house open gently, poking his head inside. The forge was empty, so he did the same

with the next door. There he saw his master, sitting at a table with the smith and a much smaller mare. Brook spotted him, and nodded gently.

"Come in, Red," he said. The smith didn't pay any attention, but the mare stared at him in shock. Blueblood stepped inside, but went no further than the door. He stood awkwardly, pawing at the ground as the mare gaped at him.

"Um... is something wrong, miss?" he asked her. She closed her mouth as if she had just realized she was staring, and turned to her husband.

"A... a foreigner?" she asked incredulously.

"My slave," Brook said simply. "Red." the mare stared at him again, but looked at least somewhat more comfortable this time.

"Oh..." she said, "I see. That makes more sense.

"Yes," Brook said again. He seemed more succinct than usual, to Blueblood. He was almost certain something was wrong now, but he couldn't imagine for the life of him what it was. His wondering was interrupted as Brook beckoned him to come closer. "Come sit down, Red," the old pony said. "Our hosts have offered us dinner."

"Ah, yes," the mare said, standing up from the table. "It's almost ready, I think." she stepped away, going to a stove along the wall. Blueblood sat at the table beside his master, and looked at him carefully. Brook gave him a strange glance, but his eyes soon snapped back to the smith.

"So," the golden pony said, "what brings you into the city? Just the plough?"

"Yes," Brook said, nodding slowly. "Just the plough, and gathering a few more supplies. We'll be able to start planting soon, but we're running out of food in the meantime. Need to be able to last until the first crop comes in, and the traders don't come by often." The mare returned, levitating a large, steaming pot of stew. She laid down bowls, and began to ladle the stew into them. She heaped it into Brook's bowl, smiling sweetly at him as she did so, but when she came to Blueblood she spooned in a meager portion of broth and a few token vegetables. Blueblood thanked her regardless, but he could see Brook eying his bowl.

The mare poured herself a bowl, and sat beside her husband. "So?" she asked. "Shall we?" Brook hummed, and reached in front of Blueblood. He took away Blueblood's bowl, placing it in front of himself, and giving Blueblood his bowl instead. Blueblood stared at him, but Brook simply nodded.

"Yes," the old pony said. "Let's."

There was a strange air hanging over the meal. Brook seemed to sag, if that were possible. The smith and his wife, however, were exuberant. Pride seemed to emanate from them, and they beamed at Brook from across the table. The two feelings seemed to meet in the middle, fusing into a strange sort of awkwardness. The smith's wife, for her part, seemed blissfully unaware of this.

"So is it true?" she asked. Brook looked up at her, and she continued. "That you live out in the middle of nowhere, all on your own?"

"No," Brook said. "Red lives with me. But I used to." The mare rolled her eyes faintly – Blueblood barely saw it – but she continued.

"Why?" she asked. "Why not live in a city?" Brook shrugged.

"You can't farm in the city," he said. "I like the woods." His words were soft, and he didn't seem to be looking at the mare directly. Blueblood was silent as he ate, watching Brook out of the corner of his eye. It was still barely noticeable, but he could see it more clearly now. His shoulders had gone slack, and his neck hung forward just slightly, his eyes cast barely downwards.

"But you could always live just outside the city, couldn't you?" the smith asked.

"Hm." Brook said shortly, cutting off the conversation. There was silence for a moment, before the smith coughed.

He struck up another conversation, this one directed away from his guest. Brook joined in occasionally, giving his opinion, but he never seemed to lose that slacked quality that Blueblood noticed. Still, he chatted politely with his hosts, and the four ponies ate together. The already low sun

dipped lower as they ate, and it was almost dark by the time they had finished.

The smith leaned back in his chair, patting his belly happily. "Ah," he sighed. "That was wonderful, sweetie."

"Oh, no," she said, "it was nothing. If I had known we would have company I'd have made you something better, sir."

"Nonsense," Brook said. "It was delicious." The mare smiled coyly.

"Well, thank you sir," she said. "Why don't I go light some candles – it's beginning to get dark in here."

"That sounds like a good idea. We'll clear things up in here while you do that," the smith said. His wife trotted into another room, and he turned to Blueblood.

"Why don't you clear up these bowls, hm?" he asked. Blueblood nodded, and stood, but Brook stopped him.

"Red," he said shortly. Blueblood paused, and the smith looked at the old green pony in surprise. "You're my slave," Brook continued. "Not his. You don't have to clean up if you don't want to."

Blueblood stood still, looking between his master and the smith. The air in the room was heavy, the tension palpable. Blueblood could almost feel the smith's confusion. Brook simply stared at the golden unicorn, his hooves folded in front of his face. From the smith's perspective Brook's expression must have been more impossibly difficult to read than normal. Blueblood was torn on what to do, for a while, but eventually began to gather up the bowls.

"These ponies were kind enough to let us stay with them," he said quietly. "This is the least I can do for them." Brook hummed, and nodded.

"That's very polite of you, Red," he said. Blueblood lowered his head, and smiled. He gathered the rest of the dishes silently, carrying them to a basin of water. He washed them quickly, stacking them neatly on the counter. The mare returned, carrying a few lit candles, illuminating the room.

"There we are," she said, placing the candles on the table. "How's that, sir?" Brook nodded politely to her.

"It's lovely," he said. He got to his hooves, however, and grunted softly. "But," he said, "I'm sure you two would hardly want to spend a wonderful evening like this with an old stallion in your way."

"Oh no!" the smith insisted. "It's not a problem at all, sir! We'd love to spend the evening with you. I'd love to hear some of your old stories."

"No, no," Brook said tiredly. "I insist. I know what you young pony's are like. Besides, I'm not as young as I once was. I can't go forever like you can. If you would show me and Red to our room, We'll be out of your manes."

"Oh... well, of course," the golden stallion said. He stood, and trotted into the next room. Brook limped after him, and Blueblood followed alongside his master. They walked through a living room, and the smith showed them into a small bedroom.

It was well-kept for what must have been a simple guest room. There was a medium-sized bed in the corner, tucked in beside a wardrobe. Across from these there was a stool and a writing desk. There was a board with several strangely carved pieces on it, all neatly in their places.

Brook limped inside the room, looking around. "I hope this is alright, sir," the smith said, bowing his head slightly.

"Yes, thank you," Brook said. "But, do you have a blanket you could spare for Red?" The smith blinked, and tapped his hoof on the ground.

"I think we might," he said, stepping out of the room. He returned in a few moments with a thin sheet, which Brook took gratefully.

"Thank you very much," he said. "Enjoy your evening."

"No, thank you," the smith said. "Enjoy your sleep. I hope everything suits you fine, sir." He bobbed his head again before he left, closing the door behind him. Brook sighed deeply when he left. Blueblood thought that he was looking a bit less tired than before, but he still seemed so much older than normal.

"Do you know them, master?" Blueblood asked. It didn't seem like that was the case – the smith had been amazed at who Brook was, for whatever reason – but it seemed odd that they would take them into their home if they didn't. Perhaps that had something to do with how Brook was acting.

"Hm?" Brook asked, straightening up slightly. "No, I don't know them. I've hardly ever needed anything forged before." Blueblood's brow furrowed.

"Then... why would they take in strangers for the night? Are you... famous?" Brook snorted, and smiled humourlessly.

"Famous," he said. "Hm. Yes, I'm famous... in a way." He gave a protracted sigh, and slumped forward again. Blueblood lowered his head, and took another step forward.

"Master," he asked quietly, "what's the matter?" Brook sighed again, and looked at the white stallion. He rubbed his eyes, and smiled faintly.

"No," he said. "It's nothing. I'm sorry if I seemed short, but... 20 years is a long time. Sometimes things change."

"That's not..." Blueblood said quietly, but decided not to finish. If his master didn't want to talk about it, Blueblood would respect that.

"No," Brook said again. "That isn't why they took us in. I forget, sometimes, you are Equestrian."

"Why?" Blueblood asked, tilting his head.

"Culture," Brook said simply. "Aloans are much closer to one another than Equestrians. We have to care for each other. It's how we started. So, if an Aloan needs a place to stay, they can just ask another to spare a room. Most houses have a guest bedroom like this one."

"Is that why you don't have inns?" Blueblood asked. Brook nodded.

"We have some, but only for large parties, or rich ponies. But yes, travelers will just stay with locals." Blueblood thought about this. It seemed to make sense – until he remembered the mare's reaction to him.

"But," he said, "the smith's wife..."

"We care for Aloans," Brook said again, perhaps a bit sadly. "Aloans. Nopony else."

"Oh..." Blueblood said. Brook shook his head. He looked at the desk, and Blueblood followed his gaze. He was staring at the game set on it.

"Do you play?" Brook asked him.

"What?" Blueblood asked.

"Casualty. The game. Do you play?"

"N-no..." Blueblood said. "I... think I've seen it before, but I've never played. I don't think I know how."

"That doesn't surprise me," Brook said. "It's a common game. They say the gods invented it to settle disputes before kingdoms and armies."

"Really?" Blueblood asked. Now that Brook said that, he remembered where he had seen it before. He remembered seeing a set in auntie Celestia's bedchamber. The set had been cast from gold and silver as opposed to simple painted stone like this one, but the pieces all looked the same. Brook stood, limping over to the set. He touched it gently with his bad hoof, then turned back to Blueblood.

"Would you like to learn?" he asked. Blueblood tilted his head, but smiled faintly.

"Yes," he said. "I would." Brook nodded, and lifted the set off the desk. He brought it over, and sat on the floor across from Blueblood.

"Do you know anything about it?" Brook asked. Blueblood shook his head shyly.

"No," he said. Brook nodded.

"The goal is to capture your opponents throne." he tapped a gold-coloured square on the edge of the board. "At the same time, you must lose as few pieces as possible. You can capture your enemies throne, but still lose if you lose too many pieces." Blueblood tilted his head, his brow furrowing.

"Why?" he asked.

"The game mimics a war between two kingdoms," Brook explained. "If you capture your enemy's kingdom, but you don't have enough ponies to hold it, then the victory was worthless. Every piece is valuable. You cannot waste any of them. Do you understand?"

"I think so," Blueblood said. "You can't sacrifice a piece to get ahead. You have to respect all of them, because they're all useful in the end."

"That's right," Brook said. "Some of the pieces move differently from one another, but each is useful. You must use each one to its utmost potential to win." Blueblood nodded.

"I understand," he said.

"Good," Brook said. "Now, this piece is your infantry..."

Blueblood slid an infantrypony onto the golden square on Brook's side of the board, and grinned widely. "I won!" he said happily. Brook shook his head.

"Look again," he said. Blueblood looked down at the board, and his mouth fell open. He barely had any pieces left – less than half as many as Brook. The old pony had cleared a path for him, then systematically destroyed his force while Blueblood had focused on pushing ahead.

"You lose," Brook said. Blueblood laughed weakly, and flopped his head down.

"Yeah..." he said.

"You need to pay attention to everything on the board," Brook said. "You can't afford to lose sight of your army, just because you've broken away from the fray. You were too focused on capturing my throne, and you let me take your units."

"Yeah..." Blueblood said again. "I... really messed that up, didn't I?" Brook nodded.

"In a real war, my forces would have been enough to rebel from the inside. This kind of loss is the worst kind. If you had taken my throne and won, I would not have been able to start another war. Now though, I could rebel and rip apart the country from the inside. When a game is lost like this, both sides have lost in the end." Blueblood stared at the board, and he suddenly understood just why Brook had beaten him so badly. While Blueblood had seen it as a game, Brook had treated each unit as an actual soldier on the battlefield. The white pony bowed his head.

"I guess... I'm not that good at this."

"No," Brook said. "You did very well." Blueblood looked up.

"Really?" he asked. Brook nodded.

"Yes," he said. "You were able to get a piece through my defenses. You read my line and found a gap. That's good, for a beginner." Blueblood smiled proudly, and rubbed his flushing face.

"I... thank you, master." he said. Brook nodded.

"Did you enjoy it?" he asked. Blueblood nodded as well.

"Yes, master," he said. "It was... fun. And interesting."

"I'm glad," Brook said. He stood up slowly. "It's getting late... we should probably sleep now." Blueblood nodded slowly. He stared at the board in front of him. The pieces were all where they had been when he lost the game, in strange positions around the board. His were haphazard, but looking at it now Blueblood could see a sort of organization to Brook's pieces.

Brook had treated the pieces like actual soldiers on a battlefield. Blueblood had treated them like pieces of painted stone. He hadn't played the game properly; he hadn't cared about his units.

"Master?" Blueblood asked. Brook turned to look at him.

"Yes, Red?" he asked. Blueblood looked up at him, smiling shyly.

"Before we go to bed... will you play one more game with me? I'd... like to try it again. Properly, this time. I promise I'll be better." Brook walked over, and lay down. A warm, earnest smile spread across the old pony's face. His horn lit up, and all the pieces slid into their places.

"I know you will," he said.

Chapter 11

In Which an Expedition is Made

Miles away from Port Ponzance, miles away from any city in Aloa, a vast forest spread across the land. Strange tropical trees sprouted from the ground in droves, keeping the land safe from any ponies who might try to build there. The forest stretched on for miles and miles, across hills and over the mighty river that cut through the peninsula. The world inside it was a deep blue-green, painted by the moonlight filtered through the leaves far above. Every tree seemed the same; a pony could get lost in the forest forever if they weren't careful.

Wet Mane had not been careful. He had run through the forest blindly, following the flying pony. Now, he was lost. He trudged slowly between the trees, and sighed.

"Great," he said. "Just great." He stopped, and sat beneath a large tree that looked exactly the same as all the others. He had lost the pony's trail hours ago, and now he was completely lost. He had no idea how deep into the forest he was, or which way to go to get out of it. The earth here was bare of any grass, and the pools of rainwater all around were stagnant. If he couldn't find his way out soon, he would be every bit as dead as Brig.

He sighed again, and thought about his late partner. He wished that he had fought harder to convince him. He wished that he had been able to talk Brig out of returning to Iron. Wet had known that the gray earth pony was insane; they both knew it. Even so, they had gone back anyways, and for what? For their duty? If they were both going to die, what did duty matter?

Wet slid lower down the tree, lying on his back in the dirt and rubbing his eyes. He hadn't stopped to rest for hours; days even. His body ached, and demanded sleep and sustenance. He might not be able to feed himself, but sleep was something he could provide. He shifted again, getting as close to comfort as he could on the hard ground, and drifted to sleep.

In his slumber, Wet Mane dreamed. The dreams came in flashes and snippets, never a solid image. He dreamed of feelings; feelings of fear,

feelings of despair, feelings of oppression. He saw the vague image of a great spectre: an enormous pony, stretched and distorted like a painting that had been left in the rain, with a ghastly grin. Wet tossed and turned, as if he were trying to run from the strange pony in his mind, but could not escape. No matter where his mind turned the spectre was always there. Throughout it all he felt another presence as well. It was subtle and faint, skirting along the edges of his consciousness, but it was always there. It kept the spectre away from him, but never came to him directly. Even as far away as it was though, he could always feel it, as deathly cold as ice.

Wet's eyes snapped open. The world was dark. The moon had slung low, and twilight was coming soon. The yellow unicorn's eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light, and as he did he realized that there was a pony sitting across from him. Her coat was an amazingly deep blue, and almost seemed to sink into oblivion. It was like looking into the night sky. She blended into the night almost perfectly, and her bright azure eyes seemed to glow. She stared at him, silent and unblinking. As if to formally announce her presence, she shuffled her wings quietly. Wet stared at her, open-mouthed.

"You..." he said slowly.

"Me." she answered, her voice piercing through the night. Wet just stared, but finally managed to recover himself. He jumped to his hooves, and his horn lit up. A band of magic appeared around the mare, pinning her wings to her sides.

"You're coming with me," he said firmly. The mare spread her wings, dissipating the magic about her middle without a trace of effort. Pain shot through Wet's mind, but he shook it off. "Stay where you are!" he said.

"No," the mare said. She beat her wings powerfully, and took to the skies. She flew in circles above Wet's head, higher and higher. She paused for a brief moment, hovering and staring down at him, before taking off flying. Wet chased after her, dodging and weaving between trees and hopping over fallen logs and roots. He managed to keep pace with her as she flew among the high branches, but only just. More than once she would stop and sit on a branch, as if she were waiting for him. He grit his teeth, and ran faster. The mare was taunting him, but he would catch her yet. Brig was dead because of her, and he wouldn't let that be in vain.

He pumped his legs harder and harder. He was starving, and exhausted, but he kept running. A singular goal kept him moving forward: catch the mare. She weaved through the branches ahead of him, egging him on. His horn lit up, tossing a rock at her from the ground. She dodged it deftly, spinning in the air around it. Wet scowled, and launched another spell. Bullets of hardened air flew at her, but she dodged around them just as easily. She didn't even seem to be trying. She turned around, beckoning him closer, then disappeared through the trees. Wet growled at the darkness, and dashed after her.

He weaved between a tight line of trees, and when he left them he saw open air. He gaped, slowing to a halt. The trees fell away into sparse clusters before him. Grass began to sprout up, and not far away he could see a small stream. He ran to it, forgetting his quarry instantly. He slurped up the water greedily, drinking his fill. He sat down, and looked around. The blue mare was nowhere to be seen. He had lost her again.

"Well..." he said sourly, "at least I'm not in the woods anymore." He stood up and began to graze, filling his empty belly. Grass was hardly the tastiest meal he'd ever had, but hunger is the best seasoning.

Glad as he was that he was no longer lost, he wasn't sure what to do. If he tried to return to Port Ponzance, he'd be killed. He had no trail on his quarry, and no idea where she had gone. Perhaps she had returned to wherever she came from, or perhaps she was content to simply toy with him for a few more days. He lay down on the grass, grumbling to himself.

"You know what to do," a voice said. Wet whipped his head around, but there was nopony there. For a moment, he thought that he had imagined it.

"I know what to do, huh..." he said. The option was clear, of course. He could always run away. Head for the hills somewhere, and never look back. They couldn't kill him if they couldn't find him. Maybe he'd spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder for somepony after him, or maybe not. At least he'd be alive for a little bit longer.

He rolled onto his back, and looked up at the dark sky. Brig had died in defense of his duty. Shouldn't Wet be willing to do the same? He grunted, covering his eyes.

"Duty," he snorted. "Duty to a madpony. Gods, what did I get myself into?" He heard a rustling noise, and uncovered his eyes. He sat up, and he saw the winged pony sitting staring at him, as she had done in the forest. He jumped to his hooves, binding her once more with his magic. She didn't react.

"I've got you now!" he said.

"You do, unicorn," she replied calmly. "But why?"

"I'm going to take you back to my commander," Wet told her. "He'll probably kill you. It's not personal... It's just my duty."

"Duty to a madpony?" she asked. There was a wry edge to her voice. Wet gritted his teeth, and did his best to ignore it.

"It's you or us," he said. "If you don't die, we'll all be killed."

"They'll be killed," the mare said. "Who says you have to die, unicorn?" Wet narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Any other pony would have been trying to talk their way out of this, but she didn't seem to care one way or another from her tone. Like she was content to live or die.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"You already know the answer," she said. "Run."

"Run?" Wet scoffed. "And abandon my duty?"

"Your duty to a madpony," she said again. "You wanted to run once. Why didn't you?"

"Because... I had a-"

"Duty," the mare interrupted. "What do you owe them?" Wet blinked.

"I... I... Iron will kill me if I don't bring you back!"

"You uphold duty to a pony who would kill you?" the mare asked. "Enough to kill a pony who saved your life?"

"Who... saved my life?" Wet asked.

"I did," the mare answered. Wet released her, and stepped back. She was right. She had lead him out of the forest. If she hadn't, he would have starved to death. She had saved his life.

"He doesn't care about you, unicorn," the mare said. "You owe him nothing. You aren't protecting him, you're protecting yourself. So run. An innocent pony should not have to die to protect another." Wet sighed.

"I'm not going to kill you," he said. "You can go."

"Of course you won't unicorn," the mare said, almost humorously.

"I have a name, you know," Wet said. The mare raised an eyebrow.

"I don't recall you asking my name," she said. Wet sighed again.

"What's your name, p-"

"I don't recall saying I would tell you it, either," she interrupted him. She spread her wings, and took to the skies again. "I know you won't kill me," she said. "I wasn't talking about me. I was talking about the prince." She beat her wings, flying higher and higher until she faded into the blackness of the sky, leaving Wet staring upwards blankly.

The smith's anvil rang out as his hammer struck down, sounding like the peal of a bell with each strike. It shot through Blueblood's mind sharply, shaking him to life. His eyes popped open, and as they adjusted to the dim light he remembered where he was.

He lay in the middle of the guest room, wrapped in the thin sheet that the smith had provided for him the previous night. The game set sat a few inches away from his nose; the pieces were still placed haphazardly about the board. Blueblood and Brook had wound up playing it several times before they had finally gone to sleep, but Blueblood had never managed to even come close to winning. Every time after the first Brook had shut down both his offense and defense, cutting through and taking the throne as soon as he had enough of an advantage over Blueblood to win.

Blueblood wasn't actually sure when they had stopped playing. He didn't remember ever deciding to go to sleep, and he certainly didn't remember

pulling the blanket around himself, but there it was. He looked at his master, who was still fast asleep on the bed, and smiled faintly.

Blueblood stepped outside the guest room, closing the door gently behind him. He trotted to the kitchen, where the sound of the hammer was much louder, and poked his head in. The smith's wife was there, and she looked over at him.

"Yes?" she asked pointedly. "Did you need something?"

"Master is still sleeping," Blueblood said quietly, trying his best to ignore her sharp tone. "I thought that I might bring him breakfast. Do you have anything you could spare?"

"Oh, of course," she said. She got up from the table and trotted over to the counter, where half a fresh loaf of bread sat. "Here," she said. "I'm sure he'd appreciate this."

"Thank you," Blueblood said quietly, taking the loaf from her. When he brought it back into the guest room, his master had already begun to stir.

"He gets to work early," the old pony murmured to himself. He peered over at Blueblood, who had just entered. "Good morning, Red."

"Good morning master," Blueblood said, bowing slightly. "I brought you breakfast." Brook smiled faintly, and sat up.

"Thank you," he said. Blueblood gave him the loaf, which Brook tore in half. "I don't suppose you got anything for yourself?" Brook asked, peering at the white pony. Blueblood smiled sheepishly, and lowered his head.

"Ah... no, master," he said. Brook shook his head, and handed half the loaf to Blueblood, who took it gratefully.

"Thank you, master," Blueblood said. Brook nodded, and bit into the bread. Blueblood followed suit, and smiled. The bread was still warm, and perfectly baked. The crust was crisp and crunchy, and the bread was soft and chewy. It tasted of herbs, tingling faintly on Blueblood's tongue. He hummed with pleasure, chewing happily. Brook's faint smile grew a bit larger, and he took another bite out of his bread.

The two ponies finished their breakfast soon enough, and Brook trotted out with Blueblood trailing close behind. They went to into the front room, where they found the golden-brown pony hunkered over his forge. The sound of his hammer striking over and over was deafening in here, and Blueblood had to cover his ears. Brook ignored it, tapping the gigantic pony's shoulder. The smith stopped, and turned around.

"Ah, good morning sir!" he said. "I hope I didn't wake you – I know it can get loud sometimes."

"Oh, no," Brook said, shaking his head. "I wasn't expecting you working this early, though."

"I like to work early," the smith said, smiling proudly. "I do my best work early, I think." He shifted aside, showing Brook what he had been pounding in the forge.

He had been working on the plough, hammering the torn edge back into place. He had managed to get most of it aligned; a narrow crack ran down the side of the plough like a seam.

"Looks good," Brook said. "Looks like you'll be finished soon. We'll be able to get out of your manes, then." The smith sighed, and shook his head.

"I'm not so sure about that," he said. "I've got it realigned, but just trying to melt the edges back together isn't going to work. It'll be far to weak. It'll break again the minute you try to plough anything with it. I need to melt down some more steel to bond it, but I'm all out of scrap."

"So you don't have any more metal for it?" Brook asked. The smith nodded.

"That's right. I'll need to get more metal. That'll take a while." Brook looked at him.

"Can't you just go to the market?" the old pony asked. The smith shook his head.

"No," he said. "They don't sell good steel there. There's a small steel mill across the city that has good steel, I'll need to go there, but it'll take all day to get there." Brook thought about this for a moment.

"I imagine you have other things to do?" he asked. The smith shrugged.

"Well..." he said, "you're my only actual order, but that might not last. And I've got another side project I've been working on to sell. Not as important as your plough though, sir." Brook nodded.

"Don't worry about getting that steel," he said. Both the smith and Blueblood looked at the old pony. "Red and I needed to gather supplies while we were in town. I can gather food on my own. Red can go and fetch your steel for you." The smith blinked.

"That's very generous of you to offer, sir," the smith said. "But if you need your slave I couldn't take him from you -"

"I just said I don't need him, didn't I?" Brook said. "I managed before I bought him. I'll be fine." He turned to Blueblood, and nodded to him. "Red," he said. "Will you be able to fetch steel from the mill?" Blueblood nodded.

"Of course, master," he said. He was a bit surprised that Brook wanted him to go out and get it, but he didn't argue. He knew that he could do it, at least, and he trusted that his master would be fine on his own, so he was more than willing.

"Good," Brook said. He turned to the smith again, and asked, "Do you have any saddlebags for him?"

"I... think so," the smith said. "Let me just go find them..."

The smith had returned before too long with the saddlebags. Blueblood had put them on easily enough, and he and Brook headed outside. The old pony had paused for a minute, going inside to retrieve something, leaving Blueblood alone in the square.

He sat on the edge of the fountain, staring over the top of one of the buildings. The sun had only risen an hour or so ago, and its light was still creeping its way into the boxed-off collection of homes and shops. It had rained last night, but most of the water was already gone, either draining off into the ocean or turning into a thin mist that hovered just above the ground. The air was warm, and relatively dry for a coastal city. Blueblood breathed deeply, taking in the morning air.

He had never stopped to do this back in Canterlot. He had paused momentarily to appreciate the beauty of a morning, to be certain, but he had never soaked it in like this. He had always rushed along to something that he had managed to convince himself was more important. He could barely remember what any of those things had been, now. He couldn't imagine what he must have thought was so important. Hard as he tried, he could never picture just what he had done in those days. He imagined that he simply spent most of his time sitting around, or waiting for something to entertain him. He sighed to himself, and shook his head.

He heard shuffling hoofsteps behind himself, and turned around. Brook had returned from inside the smith's house. He carried no saddlebags of his own; he had told Blueblood that he would take the wagon into the market, and had been silent when Blueblood had asked how he would do that. Instead, the old pony carried a thick, folded cloth.

"Master," Blueblood said, nodding to him. Brook nodded as well.

"I have this for you, Red," he said. Blueblood tilted his head, looking at it.

"What is it?" he asked. Brook unfolded it, stretching it wide for Blueblood to see. The cloth was long and thin, like a scarf. It was a beautiful crimson red, as deep and vivid as a rose, and seemed to shine and shimmer magenta where it caught the light.

"It's a wrapping," Brook said. "I bought it for you yesterday... so you would be able to go through the city. This way, nopony will know you're my slave, and they'll leave you alone."

"Master..." Blueblood said quietly. He stared at the cloth, running his hooves over it gently.

"I thought the colour was... appropriate," Brook said quietly.

"Thank you, master," he said. He smiled widely at his master, who smiled back.

"Here," Brook said. "Let me tie it for you." He wound the cloth around Blueblood's neck deftly, years of practice guiding his old hooves. It felt strange; tight around Blueblood's neck and draping over his shoulders, but

it was warm. When he was done, Brook took off his medallion, and used it to bind Blueblood's wrapping.

"You can show this to the mill workers when you buy the steel," Brook told him. "They'll recognize the name, and know I'll be able to pay him back."

"O-of course," Blueblood said, looking at the medallion. It was solid gold, and gleamed in the morning light. It bore the insignia of Aloa: Two small island and one large island arranged triangularly in the mouth of a river delta. It was one of the few things that Blueblood remembered learning about Aloa. The country was deeply proud of its origins as a fishing colony, one which had eventually spread out over the entire Aloan peninsula, as well as a small portion of the mainland.

"But, master," Blueblood said. "How will you be able to buy supplies without it? Won't they need to see it as well?" Brook smiled.

"I have other ways of identifying myself," he said. "But I came to Port Ponzance prepared. Silver is all the identification most will need." He gave a small smile, and put his bad hoof on Blueblood's shoulder. "Do you know where you're going?" he asked. Blueblood nodded slowly.

"I think so," he said. "The smith told me the name of the steel mill. He said it's west... I can ask for directions if I need them." Brook nodded.

"That's good. Be well, Red."

"Thank you master," Blueblood said. "You too." He and Brook exchanged a final nod, before the old pony turned away and went to retrieve his wagon from behind the smith's home.

Blueblood headed west, just as the smith had instructed. The westernmost exit of the square was a narrow alleyway, nearly identical to any of the other alleys leading outward. As he travelled along the cobblestones seemed less well-worn, and older. The gap between the buildings began to narrow, the darkness deepening. Blueblood looked up at the thin stretch of sky, high above him. It cut in like a line of sapphire, bright against the darkness. The buildings stretched at least three stories up here.

Soon the cobblestones faded away, and the street began to wind. Blueblood found himself making turn after turn in the narrow back alleys as

he came upon sharp bends and three-way corners. The cityscape seemed to shift and mutate as he walked, like some perverse discordian labyrinth. He trotted through wide and clean streets, and through narrow and dirty streets. Most were vacant; once or twice he spied a pony in the distance, but they had disappeared before he could call out to them.

He had no idea if he was even going west anymore, or if he had been turned around and was now heading east. He had no idea where he was in relation to the square where the smith lived, or to anything at all. The only thing he knew was that he was far enough away from the port that the streets didn't even slope enough to give him a hint at his direction.

He trudged through the endless maze of alleyways, feeling for all the world like a mouse in some absurd experiment. He hoped that he would at least stumble across a major street, or find somepony who would help him soon. He found himself at another wall, and groaned angrily. He turned right without even stopping to consider the choice, and found himself heading into another tight street. It twisted and turned sharply, but it kept its cobbled ground. He came across no other streets while he walked. This path was completely closed in. At the very least the houses here were lower, and he didn't feel so much like he was trudging through a pit. He turned another sharp corner, and saw a pinprick of light ahead of him. His heart leaped, and he dashed towards it. Perhaps it was a main street, he thought to himself. Finally something away from the claustrophobic network of back alleys, where he could find his bearings properly. A place where he could find another pony who could give him directions. He galloped down the tight street, and into the blinding light. For an instant he couldn't see, his eyes having long since adjusted to the gloom, but as he blinked away the blurriness the scene was revealed to him.

Instead of a street like he had hoped, Blueblood found himself in another simple square. The ground was dusty, and the air was still and dry. Like the smith's square, this one was completely boxed in by homes. Unlike his, there were no shops to be seen. The doors to the stone houses were tucked away in the shadows of their balconies, as if hiding from Blueblood. The windows on the second stories were either dark or had their shutters drawn. The square seemed to be abandoned.

Blueblood sighed, and trudged slowly to the fountain in the centre of the square. He sat on the edge of it, resting his head in his hooves.

He would keep walking soon enough, of course. But for now his hooves were tired, his legs were tired, and he was tired. He was tired of the winding corridors, and the hundred same-coloured buildings surrounding him on all sides. He sighed despondently, rubbing his eyes. He sat there for a few moments, before straightening up again.

No point in just sitting around here, he told himself. I need to keep moving if I ever want to find that mill. Just as he was preparing to get to his hooves, he felt something bounce off the back of his head.

"Ow," he said, rubbing the back of his head. The object that struck him had bounced over his head, and now landed at his feet. It was a leather ball, about the size of his head, and it made a soft ping noise as it bounced along the ground. Blueblood reached down, and picked it up.

"Hey mister," he heard a young voice yell from behind him, "sorry about that!" Blueblood turned around, looking to the source of the voice. A small group of colts had run into the square, probably playing some foal's game.

"Can we have our ball back, mister?" a big colt in front asked. He stood ahead of the group, probably their leader.

"Right," Blueblood said. "Sorry." He tossed the ball across the square and it sailed perfectly, landing in front of the colt. "Actually," Blueblood called out to them, "could you help me out? I think I'm a bit lost."

The colt looked at Blueblood strangely, and another foal tapped his shoulder and whispered something in his ear. He seemed to consider this, and gestured to the other colts. They all huddled closely together, Blueblood staring at them awkwardly from the fountain. Every so often a scrawny colt would poke his head out from the group, making Blueblood smile. He looked like a flamingo with his pink fur and his big, ungainly head seated on top of his scrawny neck. Eventually the group broke their huddle, and their leader trotted toward Blueblood, the ball floating above his head.

"Okay mister! We'll help you if you play with us first!" Blueblood blinked at him.

"Play with you?" he asked carefully. The colt nodded, and grinned widely.

"That's right!" the little red pony said. "You have to play with us first."

"Um..." Blueblood said, "well... alright. What are you playing?"

"Keep away!" the colt shouted gleefully. His friends darted around the square, and he tossed the ball over Blueblood's head. Blueblood watched it sail past him, and a colt plucked it out of the air with magic. Blueblood stood up, getting ready for the next pass. Instead of tossing it over his head like he expected, the colt whipped it to a friend at his side.

The colts tossed the ball in haphazard and unpredictable ways, making it impossible for Blueblood to follow where it went. He dashed to and fro across the square, trying to get closer to the prize, but for nothing. After a few minutes of this, another colt sent it sailing over the white stallion's head. Blueblood grinned, and leaped into the air.

"Aha!" he shouted, reaching out for it. For just a moment it looked like he had it; the ball was inches away from his grasp, and headed right for him. Suddenly, it began to glow, and jerked away from Blueblood's hooves. The colts all laughed as Blueblood came back to the ground, staring in confusion at the ball.

"Haw!" the leader of the colts laughed, levitating the ball. "What's the matter? Can't you use your magic to catch it?" Blueblood stared at him.

"I... don't have magic," he said quietly. The scrawny pink pony laughed, and called out to his friend from across the square.

"See? I told'ya!" he said. "He's an earth pony, like my Pa told me about! No magic at all!" The other colts laughed, and started to toss the ball again.

The leather ball zigged and zagged across the square, making it even harder for Blueblood to catch it, if that were possible. It spun and wove in impossible paths, dancing out of Blueblood's grasp every time the colts let him get close to it. More than once the ball would spin around him, just to ping off the back of his head. Blueblood dashed after it, but the colts always managed to keep it out of his grip.

Blueblood was beginning to get frustrated. The ball was hitting him more and more, and it was very obvious that the colts were just making fun of him now. He felt like he wanted to shout at them, but he didn't. He finally

just sat in the middle of the square, glaring sourly at nopony in particular. The colts laughed harder, tossing the ball at him, bouncing it off his head and shoulders. He sighed dejectedly, less frustrated now than just tired. The colts clearly found this hilarious. A poor earth pony, unable to keep up with their magic. Blueblood had one thing they didn't though: patience. The colts weren't even using their magic now, just kicking the ball at him. Blueblood waited until the leader took his turn, kicking the ball and that back of Blueblood's head. The white stallion whipped around, catching the ball inches away from his face.

"Gotcha!" he shouted, grinning at the gaping colt.

"...Wow," the colt said slowly. "That was SO COOL!" Blueblood blinked at them, but the colts all ran forward, crowding around him.

"That was awesome!" one of the colts shouted. "Earth ponies really are super fast and strong and stuff!"

"Oh," Blueblood said, still surprised, "no, I'm not that strong, or fast."

"You mean earth ponies get STRONGER than you!" another asked incredulously.

"O-of course," Blueblood said. The colts were swarming around his legs now, bombarding him with questions.

"Are earth ponies really all armoured?"

"How much can you lift?"

"Can you really make a tree grow in seconds?"

"Can you make an earthquake by stomping really hard?"

"Hey!" Blueblood said, waving his hooves. "I'm sorry, but I need to go. My master needs me to get some steel... do you know how to get to the White Hot steel mill?" The colts all looked among each other, and their leader shook his head and shrugged.

"Sorry, mister," he said. "Our parents don't like it when we go too far. We've never heard of it."

"Oh..." Blueblood said. "Well... that's okay, I guess."

"Sorry mister," the gangly pink colt said again. The colts had begun to move away from Blueblood, taking their game into another alleyway.

"Goodbye!" the leader called back to him, waving his hoof excitedly. Blueblood smiled, and waved back.

"Goodbye," he said. When they were gone he put his head in his hooves, and sighed again. It had been fun, playing with the colts, but it hadn't exactly gotten him any close to the steel mill. He sat on the ground, thinking to himself. If he tried hard enough he could at least find west again from the open square. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"That was pretty sweet of you," a voice said from behind him. Blueblood yelped, and spun around. The voice had come from a mare, sitting in the fountain.

Her fur was a vivid, icy shade of blue, complimented by her deep emerald eyes. Her mane was blue as well, and seemed to be tipped and tinged with a golden colour, like a lapis lazuli. She sat half-submerged in the fountain, leaning on the rim and cradling her head on the backs of her hooves. Blueblood swallowed.

"Um," he said quietly, "I'm sorry miss, I didn't know you were there. H-how long were you watching?"

"Just a few minutes," she said, smiling sweetly at him. "You were pretty cute with those colts. Friends of yours?"

"Oh... no," Blueblood said. "I didn't know them... I was just asking for directions." The mare laughed, her voice like bells.

"Well, you're an awfully patient pony," she said. "Most ponies I know would have cuffed them on the ear after sitting through barely half that."

"They're just foals," Blueblood said, taken aback by the prospect of hurting them. The mare laughed again, and leaned against the edge of the fountain.

"Well, you're sweet," She said. "What's your name?" Blueblood smiled in spite of himself.

"Red, miss," he said. "And... yours?" The blue mare smirked, and held out her hoof.

"Azure," she said. Blueblood walked up to the fountain, shaking her hoof gently.

"It's nice to meet you, Azure," he said. He tilted his head, and asked, "But, if you don't mind me asking... why are you sitting in the fountain?" Azure laughed again, and water splashed out of the fountain, spraying Blueblood in the face. He spluttered, shaking the water out of his mane and face, and when he looked back he saw a finned tail sticking out of the fountain as well.

Blueblood gawked at Azure. Leaning in, he could see where the tail had come from. She had no back hooves; her body blended seamlessly into the flipper. Halfway down her body her fur seemed to harden, morphing into fine, sparkling scales. A fin protruded from her back, and on where her flank would be was the image of a scroll.

"What's the matter?" Azure said, laughing and waving her tail at Blueblood. "You've never seen a sea pony before?"

"N-no," Blueblood said, shaking his head and breaking his gaze from Azure's sleek body. The sea pony mare leaned on the fountain again, reaching out and brushing Blueblood's forehead. He winced away but she ignored him, patting his head where his horn used to be.

"Well," she said, "I've never seen a unicorn without a horn before. So I guess we're even."

"O-oh," Blueblood said, "I'm actually an earth pony..." He swallowed again, lowering his head. Azure's smile only widened.

"You're all earth ponies to me, Red," she giggled. "What makes you so special?"

"That's, um, my species name," Blueblood lied. The mare had a very magnetic personality, and he wasn't certain whether to run, or move closer. "We don't have any horns... or any magic."

"Well, that hardly seems fair," Azure said. Blueblood shrugged.

"It's not so bad. We're stronger. I guess." Azure smiled, and rested her chin on the ledge of the fountain.

"I'll bet," she said. "You look pretty tough. Say, didn't you say you were looking for something?"

"Hm?" Blueblood asked. "Oh, yes... I'm trying to find a steel mill on the west side of the city... I think I'm lost, though. I'm... not from here."

"I'll bet I could take you there," Azure said, straightening up. "I'm a messenger. I know the city like the back of my hoof!"

"Really?" Blueblood asked. "Thank you, miss. That would be wonderful!" He paused, and his eyes narrowed. "But..." he said, "how are you going to take me there? And... how did you even get into the fountain?" Azure giggled, and leaned forward. She wrapped her hooves around Blueblood's neck, pulling him close to her.

"Watch," she said gleefully. She leaned back in the fountain, forcing Blueblood to lean over the edge.

"W-wait!" Blueblood said as he was pulled over. "I-I'm not a good swimmer!" Azure ignored him, sinking into the water. She pulled Blueblood down with her, submerging him in the fountain. He held his breath, blinking in the dark water. Azure giggled, her voice echoing strangely in the deep. She pursed her lips, and blew.

A bubble of air formed as she blew, expanding around Blueblood even as he stared at it in confusion. It encircled his entire body, expanding even further. Soon a very confused Blueblood was lying on his back, on the base a large and slippery sphere. He could breathe perfectly, and he wasn't even wet anymore. Azure swam to the top of the bubble, and laughed at him.

"You land ponies all look so funny underwater," she said playfully. "You make the best faces."

"...What?" Blueblood asked, still not sure what had just happened. Azure laughed harder, her peals of laughter resounded by the water.

"It's magic," she said. "Don't worry, you're safe in the bubble. You'll never run out of air, and nothing can pop it until I let it go."

Blueblood struggled to right himself, eventually finding his way back onto his hooves. Azure swam around the bubble in playful circles, apparently taking the opportunity to inspect Blueblood from every angle. Blueblood reached out, prodding the bubbled wall. It stretched where he poked it, squeaking like wet rubber. It felt thick, somehow.

"Wow," Blueblood said, "this is amazing!" Azure smiled, swimming to his front and putting her hooves against the bubble.

"Well, thanks," she said. "But if you think that's impressive, wait until you see this!" She swam to the top of the bubble and set her hooves against it, beginning to push it down. The sudden movement dropped Blueblood on his bottom, and he slid back down onto his back. Azure grinned at him from on top of the bubble, and swam faster.

The bottom of the fountain seemed to be a well. It stretched deep down, and the light faded more and more the deeper they went. For a moment Blueblood was nervous that they would sink completely into blackness, but he soon realized that there was light below him. He couldn't roll over to view it, but in a few moments he didn't need to; they had reached the end of the fountain. Instead of stopping, the bottom was open. Azure pushed the bubble through the hole, and Blueblood gaped slack-jawed at what he saw.

The light from below had come from several open pools at various places in the city, and from several giant crystals. The crystals seemed to protrude from the bottom of the city itself, glowing softly like blue moons. Some stuck out in sharp clusters, others stretched all the way to the sea bottom below.

Port Ponzance was supported by hundreds of gigantic stone pillars, stretching from its foundations to the sea bed like the legs of a great

colossus. The pillars were perfectly square, and Blueblood could see door-shaped gaps peppering them. Sea ponies would swim in and out of these holes every so often, waving to each other happily. They were like buildings, breaking up the gigantic, blue-tinged world. It was as if there was an entire other city built beneath the ocean, giving thousands of sea ponies a secret place to live. Blueblood could see specs of light coming from shafts like the one he and Azure had just come through; no doubt more fountains, one in every square in the city.

Sea ponies of every size and colour swam past. There were sea ponies almost as big as the smith, trundling past without a thought as other sea ponies darted around their enormous bodies, and flocks of colts and fillies who darted through the water, giggling and squealing. Every sea pony's sounds carried for miles, blending together into a soft hum; a choir of millions.

On the ocean floor more sea ponies swam, tending to fields of strange crops and herding stranger fishes. Blueblood stared at it all breathlessly. He couldn't think of a single thing to say. Azure drifted beside him, smiling.

"So?" she asked. "What do you think of your first sea pony city?"

"It's..." Blueblood said, unable to find words past his rapture, "It's beautiful..." Azure swam circles around Blueblood's bubbles, laughing her beautiful laugh. She eventually settled on top of it, resting her head in her hooves.

"Isn't it? I see your city every day, but it's just never the same. Too straight, too even. Too mechanical." She drifted down until her face was in front of Blueblood's, upside-down in the water. Her mane flared out, the golden flecks sparkling as they caught the light. "Forget what they tell you up there, Red. This is how Port Ponzance really got started." She kicked out her flipper, starting to push Blueblood through the city.

"Really?" Blueblood asked.

"Oh yeah," Azure said. "They all think that Port Ponzance got started as a trading hub a few hundred years back, but why do you think that was? It's all because of us." She weaved Blueblood through the pillars deftly, barely even paying attention to where she was going. She would dance around the bubble as she spoke, spinning it to make turning easier.

"We've lived down here for years longer than they did. They started coming here because we gave them protection, you know. They would give us stuff like gold and silver and food, and in return we would keep them safe."

"Who's 'them'?" Blueblood asked. Azure was below him now, and she grinned up wickedly.

"Pirates!" she said gleefully.

"Pirates?" Blueblood echoed. Azure giggled, and swam away from the bubble.

"Oh yeah," she said. "All the worst pirates came to Cape Ponzance, back before it was a port. Captain Kit, Red Beard, Calico Jackal; all the best of the worst. They all went a-pillagin', then came back here to share their loot with the sea ponies! Eventually they started setting up permanent residence and selling their loot to inland ponies, and it just sort of became a trading hub after that. Of course these days they like to say that it was a few merchants who had to weather a storm in here, but I know how it really happened." She grinned at him, and winked. "But don't go spreading it around, 'kay?" Blueblood grinned back, and nodded.

"Don't worry," he said, laughing. "But how do you know all this?"

"You think a messenger doesn't learn a thing or two?" Azure asked slyly. "I hear lots while I'm making my deliveries." She swam forward sharply, bumping the bubble with her hip and pushing it forward, knocking Blueblood over again. "Speaking of," she said, swimming back up to the bubble, "I've got a pony to deliver! Now, where did you say you needed to go again?"

Blueblood and Azure drifted up a wide fountain, surfacing in the centre of a wide-open square. The buildings here were different than in the square where Blueblood had met Azure: they were much larger, and very clearly not homes. They were in an industrial sector somewhere deep within the city.

Azure popped Blueblood's bubble, helping him onto the edge of the fountain. "This is your stop," she said sweetly.

"Thank you, Azure," Blueblood said. She nodded at him, and leaned on the edge of the fountain.

"Don't thank me just yet. You probably don't know how to get back from here, do you?" She smirked as Blueblood blinked and lowered his head sheepishly.

"Um..." he said, "no, I don't."

"Well, don't worry," she said. "I'll take you back to where you're staying once you've got that steel."

"Really?" Blueblood asked. "You'll wait out here for me?" Azure giggled, and splashed water at him.

"I'm not exactly going to get up and walk down the street," she laughed. "I've got nothing better to do; today's my day off. I'll wait out here for you. Just don't keep me waiting for too long." She smiled coyly, and Blueblood smiled shyly back at her.

"Aheh," he laughed awkwardly, "I'll try. I'll be right back, Azure."

"I'll be waiting," she said. Blueblood trotted away from her, chancing a quick glance back. She was resting on the edge of the fountain, leaning on one of her hooves and smirking.

The steel mill was obvious; it was an enormous, plain stone building with gigantic metal towers stretching up behind it. Blueblood trotted up to the doors, knocking on them politely. He waited for a moment, but no answer came. He knocked again, but still no pony came out to greet him, so he pushed open the door, peeking his head inside.

It was clear why no pony had answered him, at least. The mill was full of an amazing din, as if an infinitely long piece of metal was being scraped across a spike. The constant screeching droned over the entire interior, but annoying as it was the workers inside seemed to ignore it.

The mill was filled with big, bustling unicorn stallions, all trotting around with some place to be. Some were levitating gigantic bubbling cauldrons of molten metal, others were inspecting ingots on a factory line. Others still were pressing and molding the steel into strange shapes. Blueblood trotted

cautiously into the fray of the building, skirting around the edges of the room. Ponies rushed past him, ignoring him completely. He kept his head low, afraid to venture further into the building lest he find himself in somepony's way. A nagging feeling in his gut was telling him, over and over, that he shouldn't be here. Still, his master had given him a job and he needed to do it. He swallowed hard, and ventured deeper into the strange chaos of the mill.

Strange machines swung too and fro, and more than once Blueblood had to dodge out of the way of a hefty unicorn with a large load. Shouts of "One side!" and "Watch it!" flew, and Blueblood ducked apologetically to each.

"Sorry," he said, dodging another irritable unicorn, "sorry..." He ducked onto a catwalk, and took the moment of peace to get his bearings. The mill was even more chaotic in here, almost completely packed with bustling ponies. As he looked around, Blueblood spotted one pony who didn't seem to be working. He was a great, steel-gray stallion, standing on the centre of a catwalk and looking over the workers. Blueblood approached him, trotting up carefully.

"Um," the white stallion said slowly, "excuse me..."

"I'm busy," the stallion said sharply. Blueblood winced and took a step back, but tried to catch his attention again.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but -"

"I'm busy!" the pony snapped again, whipping his head around to face Blueblood. He paused and looked Blueblood up and down, stopping to focus squarely on his forehead. "Oh," he said. "An earth pony. Well. Look, colt. I've got work to do, here. I need to make sure none of these idiots manage to kill themselves. I don't have time to deal with you. Go find somepony else." He enunciated the last sentence slowly and clearly, as if he only half expected Blueblood to understand. "You got that?" he asked.

"Yes," Blueblood said quietly. "But, I'm sorry, but -" The gray stallion groaned.

"I. Do. Not. Have. Time. For. You," he said, leaning close to Blueblood. Blueblood shrunk back, crouching low as the stallion leaned over him. "What part of that don't you get, Rocky?"

"I just need to buy some steel," Blueblood said quietly. The stallion sighed.

"Look, I don't care what you want, colt. I've got work to do here. Sales isn't my problem, so get out of my mane! Scram!" He brandished his hoof as if he was about to strike Blueblood, who darted backwards.

"Okay!" Blueblood yelped. "Okay, I'm sorry! But... can I just ask a question?"

"Whaddaya want!" the stallion barked. "I already told you I don't do sales, didn't I? Or did you forget that already? Now beat it Rocky, before I kick your rump out of here myself!" Blueblood wanted to shrink back again, but he forced his legs still. His heart was pounding in his chest, but his master had given him a task. He needed to see it through.

"I know that," he said, mustering some confidence. "I just need to know who will sell me some!" The gray stallion scoffed at him.

"Why should I care who you find to sell you something? It's not my problem. Gods, I'll bet you even forgot to bring any silver, Rock-head!"

Blueblood frowned. His fear was beginning to give way to something else. This stallion reminded him vaguely of the old homeless pony he had met in Riverbank: dismissive, rude and gruff. It frustrated Blueblood, just a little bit.

"N-no," he said, still holding his head low, "I didn't bring Silver, but-"

"Well, there you go then!" the stallion shouted. He was clearly angry now, and he waved his hooves theatrically. "Look, Rock-head! If you don't have Silver, then it doesn't matter one bit who I send you to! Your not going to be able to buy any, so stop wasting my time and get out of here! Seriously, dense earth ponies!"

Blueblood frowned. The angry pony still frightened him, but with every word he was fanning the flame of frustration in Blueblood's belly more and more. The white stallion breathed deeply, and stood up straight. He did his best to put on a confident face, but he didn't think that it was working. The gray stallion just scoffed at him.

"Oh, what?" he asked harshly. "You think you can intimidate me into giving you steel? There's dozens of unicorns here, rocks-for-brains, just in case

you can't count! You'd be done in a minute if you tried anything. Get out of here Rocky, you aren't fooling anypony."

"Stop calling me that!" Blueblood said. The gray stallion just stared at him with a dull, unimpressed expression. "Please, stop calling me Rocky, or Rock-head, or rocks-for-brains," Blueblood repeated. "My name is Red. And I may not have brought Silver, but I brought something just as good." He unclasped Brook's medallion, sticking it in the gray stallions face. the rough unicorn read it, and his eyes bulged.

"White Brook?" he asked incredulously.

"That's right," Blueblood said. "I'm White Brook's s... servant. He sent me to get steel. So I need to get steel. Who can I buy some from?"

"U-um," the stallion said, suddenly very humble, "yeah... right this way, I'll take you to somepony who can sell you some steel..."

Blueblood smiled. He felt like a weight had just been dropped from his chest. His legs were weak, and his heart still pounded furiously, but he felt good. He followed the gray stallion, showing his medallion to a clerk and fetching four steel ingots. He packed them into his saddlebags, then trotted happily out of the mill.

Azure was still waiting for him in the fountain, and she smiled as he returned.

"Well now," she said, "that's more like it! You've got you steel?"

"Yeah!" Blueblood said happily, sitting on the edge of the fountain. "Thanks, Azure." Azure blinked at him.

"Me?" she asked. "Why are you thanking me?" Blueblood blinked, and pawed at the ground sheepishly.

"Um, well... you brought me here, and waited for me," he said. "So, I guess... thanks for that? I guess I'm just in a good mood right now," He grinned, and Azure stared at him.

"You're welcome, Red," she said, giggling. "Are you ready to go back?" Blueblood nodded.

"I think so," he said. Azure smiled. She flicked her tail, propelling herself up to Blueblood's height. She leaned close to him, wrapping her hooves around his shoulders.

"Well then," she said, "we'd better get going. It's a long trip back; you made it pretty far before I found you. Lots of time to talk, you know."

"Really?" Blueblood asked, smiling shyly.

"Oh yes," she said. She leaned back, pulling Blueblood into the fountain with a splash.

It was late in the afternoon when Blueblood and Azure resurfaced in the fountain in front of the smith's home. The bubble raised to the surface, and Blueblood jumped out with a pop. He landed on the edge of the fountain, and turned back to Azure. She leaned on the edge beside him, smiling up at the white pony.

"This is your stop," she said. Blueblood grinned at her.

"It is," he said. "Thank you, Azure." She giggled.

"Oh, don't worry about it Red," she said. "It's not like I had anything better to do. Besides, it was fun."

"Well," Blueblood said, chuckling faintly, "I guess this is goodbye, then."

"I guess so," Azure said, sighing dramatically. Blueblood shuffled his hooves.

"Goodbye, Azure," he said. She smiled sweetly at him.

"Goodbye, Red," she said. "Maybe I'll see you again some time?"

"Maybe," Blueblood said. She smiled, and sunk into the water. Blueblood watched her sink down the well until she slipped out of sight in the darkness. He stepped down from the edge of the fountain, and turned around.

Brook must have been watching for him. The old pony was limping across the square, now. Blueblood smiled at him, and trotted over.

"Master," he said. Brook nodded to him.

"Red," he said simply. Blueblood unclasped Brook's medallion, and gave it back to him.

"Here, master," he said. "Your medallion." Brook took it, attaching it to his own wrappings, and sighed.

"Thank you, Red," he said. "It was nice to be at least somewhat anonymous, for a while. But it's nice to have it back." The two stallions smiled at each other, and Brook gestured to the fountain.

"Who was your friend?" he asked. Blueblood looked over his shoulder.

"Oh," he said, "Azure? She's... a sea pony. She helped me find the mill, after she found me playing with some colts." Brook raised an eyebrow at this.

"Playing with some colts?" he asked. Blueblood shrugged, and chuckled sheepishly.

"Well," he said, "I... sort of got lost. They said that they would give me directions if I played with them, so I played with them a while. Then Azure found me, and took me to the mill, and back here."

"Sounds like you had an eventful day," Brook said, smiling faintly. Blueblood smiled shyly.

"No, it was nothing exciting," he said. Brook smiled wider, and nudged Blueblood with his nose.

"Well... it sounds like you were pretty good, to me," he said, chuckling faintly. Blueblood stared at him, but Brook didn't seem to notice. "Come on," the old pony said. "Our hosts have almost finished preparing dinner. We shouldn't keep them waiting."

He began limping his way back to the house. Blueblood was still for a moment, still staring. A slow, earnest smile broke across his face, and he trotted after Brook.

Chapter 12

In Which a Garden Grows

It was a dull morning in Canterlot. The sun was high above the white city, its light pale and weak. It seemed to meander more than journey across the sky, as if it were tired or distracted. It did not help that the city's weather team had determined today the perfect day for cloud cover. The city was cast in a dull, almost gray pallor. Thin clouds drifted through the streets higher up the mountainside, creating a thick fog. Ponies all across the city mulled about their tasks, as listless as the sky itself.

Canterlot Palace stood in stark contrast to the rest of the city. The very air around seemed alive; ponies within all bustled about, consulting one another on their tasks and looking for something to do. There seemed to be a vaguely disorganized air about it, but nopony gave the slightest hint of urgency or concern. They moved briskly about their tasks, existing in a subtle state of panic.

Celestia had not been seen in almost two days. Those ponies who dealt with her prayed that she would return in timelier fashion than her sister, who had not been seen in nearly a month. The Palace could operate on its own for a time, but issues were piling up and they needed the goddess.

Princess Amethyst trotted briskly through the hallways, a scroll sealed with the insignia of Aloa clutched between the teeth of her bodyguard Oak. The two ignored the servants, trying their best to look as if they had somewhere to go. In truth Amethyst had no more idea what should be done than the rest of the staff; she simply needed to put on the face of importance and competence for her ponies.

The pair found themselves in the royal family's wing, and they turned into Amethyst's bedchambers. The princess flopped onto her bed, and sighed.

"Oh, gods," Amethyst moaned. Oak sat respectfully away, silent as Amethyst continued her moaning. "First Auntie Luna, and now her?" she complained. "Where on earth has she gone, Oak?" Oak placed the scroll on the floor.

"I don't know, your highness," he said. Amethyst looked back at him, and sighed sadly.

"Would you even tell me if you did, Oak?" she asked. Oak looked down, ashamed, and Amethyst sat up. "I didn't mean it, Oak," she said. "I'm just tired. I'm sorry. Do you know what the staff thinks?"

"Most of them don't ever see Her Majesty," Oak said. "They wouldn't know the difference. But everypony knows something is happening – they can feel it in the air."

"Do they know what is happening?" Amethyst asked. Oak shook his head. She sighed, and flopped back onto her bed again. "Well that's a relief," she said. "At least I'm not the only one in the dark this time."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," Oak said.

"Don't be, Oak," Amethyst said, shaking her hoof weakly. "I know why you did it. I know why Auntie wanted you to do it. I'd have done the same." She rubbed her eyes, and sat up. "Besides, it's not important anymore."

"Princess?" Oak asked. Amethyst gestured to the scroll in front of Oak.

"My duty is to rule when my auntie cannot," she said. "Unless she decides to show up right now, we need to seriously consider what might be inside that scroll."

"Then perhaps it is best I decided to cut my trip short," a voice said. It was soft, and warm, but there was an edge to it. Amethyst and Oak both turned in its direction.

Celestia landed on Amethyst's balcony, and entered the room. The purple unicorn gawked at her for a moment, before leaping off her bed and running into the goddess's embrace.

"Auntie!" Amethyst exclaimed. "You're back! Oh, thank goodness." Celestia pressed her neck against the unicorn's, sighing.

"I'm afraid I may as well be gone for the next few minutes," she said.

"Come with me to my chamber, Amethyst. You can tell me what's wrong after I have some tea."

"Of course, Auntie," Amethyst said, nodding. Celestia strode out of the bedchamber, Amethyst and Oak following as closely behind her as they could. The goddess's long legs propelled her across the marble floors, forcing the two mortal ponies to trot to keep up with her. The three ponies made their way through the hallways in silence, heading up the tall, thin spire to Celestia's room. The alicorn threw open the door, flopping gracelessly onto her enormous pillow even as her teapot came alive and set itself to boil.

"Auntie!" Amethyst cried, running to her. "What's the matter?" Celestia smiled weakly at her.

"Politics, dear. Politics are the matter." With Celestia's encouragement the tea brewed itself within moments, and she poured three cups. She passed one to Amethyst and Oak each, taking hers and drinking from it gratefully. Amethyst and Oak were silent, watching her as she drank. When she was finished she set her cup down and sighed.

"That," she said, "is much better." She looked up, and smiled at her niece. "Now, what's this letter you're so concerned about?" Amethyst nodded to Oak, who produced the scroll. Celestia took it, levitating it in front of her face. She turned it around, fixing her eyes on the seal. She sighed again, and her neck drooped.

"Of course," she said. "He would reply as soon as leave. When did this come in?"

"Just yesterday, Auntie," Amethyst said. "What's the matter?" Celestia shook her head, breaking the seal.

"We'll see," she said. "Perhaps it will actually be news, and not just a retread of our conversation." The scroll unfurled, and Celestia began to read.

To Her Highness Majesty Celestia of Canterlot, Queen and Goddess of the sun in the sky...

Celestia sighed, skipping over her paragraph-long official title and on to the body of the letter.

Your Majesty, I wish to take this opportunity to extend my sincerest condolences for your troubles at this time. I understand that a death, or even a loss in the family can be devastating, even for one such as yourself. If my own daughter Princess Golden Dreams had gone missing I know that I would certainly be distraught as well.

I also understand that the timing of this unfortunate incident is by no means ideal. With the treaty meetings just beginning at the time of your loss, I understand your frustration from a political standpoint, and I sympathize with your feelings that the incident is foul play. Equestria lost a large amount of sway without the Prince attending the meetings, and I'm certain that his talents with speech and persuasion would no doubt have turned the tide of the proceedings much more in your favor than was the case.

All that said, your accusations against my country were both unfounded and deeply offensive. Neither myself nor anypony in my court had seen your nephew since the night before the incident occurred, and to accuse them of conspiracy goes beyond offensive. It is an insult and an affront to my culture and my country, and thus to myself personally.

I will remind you Princess, that it was you yourself who invited us into your castle. My daughter and ambassadors were polite and humble guests in your home, and had done nothing to invite your scorn. I am acutely aware of the nature of Aloa and Equestria's relations in the past; however I had believed we left the war on equal and friendly terms. If this is not the case, and you have so little trust for us that your first instinct is to blame us for your troubles, then I would advise in the future you do not bother with the facade of friendship.

I will say again that the loss of Prince Blueblood is deeply troubling. If the nature of his disappearance is indeed one of foul play it bodes ill for all of our families, and even if not you still have my deepest sympathies. However, the court and country of Aloa have had no hand in this, and I sincerely hope that this is the end of the issue between our two countries.

Yours,

His Majesty Ocean Gold II, King of Aloa.

Celestia sighed, laying her head against the pillow. "I thought as much," she said.

"What did the letter say?" Amethyst asked. Celestia shook her head, re-rolling the scroll.

"Nothing I haven't heard before," she said. I suppose it explains why Ocean was so irate when I visited him, if he thought I had already heard all this."

"Heard all what?" Amethyst pressed, leaning forward. Celestia shook her hoof.

"It's not important," she said. "Let me handle it."

"No!" Amethyst shouted, slamming her hoof down. Celestia stared at her in shock. Oak simply lowered his head.

"I'm sick and tired of this, Auntie!" Amethyst shouted. "You've been keeping me in the dark for weeks – first that my son had gone missing, and then that he was -" she stopped, choking, but continued, "that he was dead, and now this. A letter came to us from Aloa, Auntie. An official letter from the king. What's happening, darn it!"

"Amethyst," Celestia said, "I'm sorry. I wish I didn't have to do this, but... I don't want any of this getting out. I haven't told anypony about any of this yet. The incident is bad as it is, we can't have word of this getting out to the populace -"

"Word of what!" Amethyst interrupted. "What is this about!" She glared at her aunt fiercely. The goddess was too tired to hold back her emotions, and shame was clear in her eyes. Amethyst's mouth fell open as she slowly came to the realization. "It's about Blueblood, isn't it?" Celestia sighed.

"I'm sorry, Amethyst," she said slowly. "I should have told you sooner... that stallion we found wasn't Blueblood." Amethyst's face lit up for just a moment, before screwing into a picture of fury.

"Dammit Auntie!" Amethyst shouted. "Again? He's my Son! I have as much right to know this as anypony else – more right! Why won't you ever tell me what's happening!" She jumped to her hooves and started to march out before Oak leapt up as well, catching her gently. She looked at him sadly, and he gestured back towards Celestia. The alicorn was holding out the letter for Amethyst.

"Nopony knows yet," Celestia said. "But you're right. You deserve to know. I won't keep any secrets from you anymore. Here." Amethyst took the letter slowly, and read it. When she was done she looked up at her aunt, speechless.

"The stallion was a disguised Aloan soldier," Celestia said. "The body is with the doctor. He's the only one who knows anything, and it isn't much."

"So it was them?" Amethyst asked. Celestia shook her head.

"I still don't know for sure," she said. Amethyst brandished the letter.

"What do you mean we don't know for sure?" she asked fiercely. "He's obviously lying!"

"I went to him directly, Amethyst," she said. "Blueblood wasn't in the palace."

"Then they must be keeping him somewhere else!" Amethyst said. Celestia poured another cup of tea, and set it in front of her.

"Please Amethyst, try to be calm. I've considered that."

"How do you expect me to be calm when somepony has my son hostage?" Amethyst barked. Oak put a hoof on her shoulder gently.

"Princess," he said softly, "please. This isn't helping right now. Please calm down." Amethyst glared at him, but her expression softened.

"You're right," she said finally. "You're right. Thank you, Oak." She drank her tea, and Celestia continued.

"I spoke with the King himself," Celestia said. "He was... less than pleased with my visit, and made it fairly clear he had no intention of discussing it further with me. It could be fear, but he's never been fond of me at the best of times. I found Prince Tidus as well. He didn't know anything about it, but knowing him he simply might not care."

"So..." Amethyst said quietly. She had been in this situation once before, almost twenty-five years ago. She was young then. Now she had more

experience, and she knew what was coming. The question hung in the air, and everypony in the room knew what it meant. Celestia sighed.

"Now we wait. We sneak, we spy, and we plan." She smiled weakly. "Now, we are politicians. Very, very careful politicians."

Many miles away, the sun was of little concern to the citizens of Aloa. The sky was overcast; a thick, flat gray sheet hanging high above their heads. Light filtered through weakly, casting the peninsula in a dark gray pallor. The clouds were empty, at least, and the air was dry. It would not rain today. Many farmers were taking this opportunity to plough and plant their seeds before the dry season came upon them. The heat would be nothing to sneeze at, then, and the farmers all wanted the hard work to be through.

Brook and Blueblood sat on the balcony of Brook's home, looking out over river. They had returned home the previous night, several months worth of food and a beautifully forged plough in tow. The sun had been low in the west sky when they had returned, and Blueblood had been exhausted from the trip back. Even as the pair ate their breakfast in the open air, Blueblood still yawned widely.

"Tired?" Brook asked. Blueblood shook his head.

"No master," he said. "I'm just... still waking up. I'll be fine."

"If you're still tired from yesterday, you don't have to work." Brook said again.

"I'm fine, master," Blueblood said. "Really. I'll be able to work easily. The new plough looks like it could cut through anything." Brook nodded.

"We should eat up, then," he said. "We'll need our strength."

"We?" Blueblood asked. Brook nodded, but did not elaborate. The two ate their meal in silence, staring out over the forest.

Blueblood had missed the view. The city had been nice, but it had felt claustrophobic compared to this. He sighed happily as a breeze whipped up, rustling the leaves in the distance. When Blueblood and Brook had finished their breakfast they returned into the house, depositing their dishes

in the kitchen. Then they made their way out to the shed, bringing out their freshly-repaid plough.

Blueblood had not exaggerated. The plough was exquisitely forged, a keen edge running down its middle. The metal gleamed almost in spite of the dim light, as if it were proud of its own polish. Brook lifted the plough magically, and brought it out to the field. Blueblood slipped on the yoke, and followed after him.

The old pony set the plough on the ground, and Blueblood stood in front of it. He felt his master hitch him to the plough, but the old pony spoke before Blueblood could begin walking.

"Do you remember where you were ploughing before?" he asked. Blueblood nodded slowly.

"You said from here to the stump, up to the back of the house." He turned back to look at his master, and asked, "Right?" Brook nodded.

"That's right. Take it easy, this time. We'll make it in plenty of time." Blueblood smiled at his master, and nodded.

"Alright," he said. He began to walk, settling easily into the hard resistance of the plough. There was soft rumbling noise from behind him as the earth was shoved aside, falling into small hill on either side of the trench Blueblood had created. He found a steady pace, and soon enough the weight of the plough seemed to disappear.

He almost found himself laughing at how easy it was. Compared to taking the cart all the way home filled to the brim with supplies, and to pulling a pony-sized stump out of the ground, this was as easy as carrying a foal on his back. A wide grin spread across his face, and he picked up his pace slightly.

"Don't go too fast," Brook said from behind him. "Keep it steady. We want the trench to be as even as possible."

"Right," Blueblood said, slowing down again. "Sorry, master."

"It's alright," Brook said. "You're doing well." Blueblood smiled wider.

The pair reached the far end of their new field in hardly any time at all, and Blueblood slowed to a stop. He turned around to look at his master, and saw the old pony's horn fading. Blueblood blinked at him.

"Yes?" Brook asked, catching Blueblood look.

"Were you just using magic?" Blueblood asked. Brook nodded.

"I was pushing the plough," he said. "Helping you along, to make it easier." Blueblood lowered his head. So it wasn't that the ploughing had been easy, he thought to himself, but that he had had help.

"You... didn't have to do that, master," he said. "I can pull the plough just fine on my own." Brook smiled, and put his bad hoof gently on Blueblood's shoulder.

"I know you could," he said. "But you won't be saying that when we're done here." His horn lit up again, and the plough lifted into the air. Blueblood trotted beside the line he had just ploughed, and Brook placed the heavy plough down behind him.

"Ready?" the old pony asked. Blueblood nodded, his head still low. The pair set off again, cutting another line into the earth.

The task remained easy, for a while. After a few hours though, Blueblood's shoulders began to feel stiff, and sore. He ignored it, pulling on. They cut line after line into the earth, criss-crossing back and forth across the field behind Brook's home. Line by line they made their way closer and closer to the old house, and closer and closer to being ready to plant. Blueblood pushed on. He knew that it was important that they finish as soon as possible, so he never complained or asked for a break, even when his master offered them. He didn't need them, at least as first. But line after line the ache in his shoulders grew steadily worse, becoming a dull, hollow burning.

The sun was low before Blueblood knew it. He had no idea just how many lines had been cut into the earth, but they were only a few yards away from the house, now.

"How are you feeling?" Brook asked. Blueblood had sat down, and was panting faintly. He looked back at his master and smiled.

"I'm fine, master," he said weakly. Brook nodded, but did not seem completely convinced.

"Do you think you can managed a few more lines?" he asked. Blueblood nodded, getting back to his hooves.

"Of course," he said. Blueblood set the plough behind him, and they were off again. His shoulders ached fiercely, his sides and flanks joining in now. He throbbed with every step, but it wasn't a bad pain. It wasn't sharp, and he didn't feel as though he was being hurt, simply that he was working hard. He let the burning drive him forward, as if it were and engine deep inside him.

"Just two more lines," Brook said as they turned around again.

"Just two more lines," Blueblood echoed, nodded slowly. He dragged the plough along, feeling his master push harder. Together the pair cut another line into the hard earth, turning around for one final push. Blueblood stared dead ahead, marking the end of the field as a finish line in his mind. He pushed himself on, refusing to give up before they reached the goal. Finally, after an entire days worth of pulling, Blueblood reached the end. He dragged the plough to the end of the field, finishing the job entirely. He dropped to his knees, sighing in relief. The aching in his muscles felt like cheering, as if his body itself was congratulating him for finishing. He breathed deeply, grinning from ear to ear.

"Are you alright?" Brook asked, walking up beside him. Blueblood looked up at the old pony, still beaming.

"I'm fine," he said. "Just tired... thank you, master." Brook smiled as well, and sat beside him.

"You did well today, Red. Rest up. I'll cook dinner tonight." Blueblood laughed weakly, and nodded.

"Thank you master. I don't think I'd make anything good right now anyways." Brook smiled wider, and helped Blueblood to his hooves. Together the pair slowly made their way inside the house, finally taking a seat at the table in the kitchen. Blueblood practically lay on top of it, his chin and front legs resting on the old wood. He almost fell asleep as Brook worked, the old pony making his way slowly too and fro across the kitchen.

Brook made a strange brew, and while it cooked he boiled and ground potatoes into a thick dough, making a heavy bread out of them.

Brook served the meal with little fanfare, and the two stallions dug in. The meal was thick, warm, and hearty. It seemed to fill Blueblood with every bite, the savoury stew blending with the heavy, tasteless bread and sitting heavily in his belly. The tiredness seemed to sink away from his muscles as he ate, and when he was finished Blueblood leaned back, sighing happily. Brook had finished as well, and set his spoon down.

"Did you enjoy it?" he asked. Blueblood nodded.

"Yes," he said. "It was delicious. Thank you, master." Brook smiled, and Blueblood thought that he saw the old pony's head lower slightly.

"Would you..." Brook said slowly, "like to learn how to make it?" Blueblood sat up, blinking at his master. "I just thought," Brook said idly, "there would be less to do once the field has been planted... you'll need something else to do." Blueblood lowered his head as well.

"I'd love to, master," he said. Brook smiled at him. Blueblood tried to smile back, but instead he found himself yawning widely. His entire body ached when he yawned, his stiff muscles begging for rest. He stifled his yawn with a hoof, laughing sheepishly.

"Some other time," Brook said. "It's been a very long day... why don't we get some sleep, hm? There's still much left to do."

"Alright," Blueblood said. "That sounds nice." He and Brook shared a faint smile, before climbing the staircase and heading into the bedroom. Brook clambered roughly into his bed, while Blueblood settled onto the old, familiar rug. He nestled into it, pulling the blanket over himself when Brook spoke.

"Red," he said slowly. Blueblood looked up at him. The old pony was seated upright in his bed, looking down strangely.

"Yes master?" Blueblood asked. Brook's brow furrowed imperceptibly.

"It isn't very comfortable sleeping on the floor, is it?" he asked. Blueblood looked down at the rug, blinking. It had been hard getting used to it at first, but by now sleeping on the hard floor just seemed natural to him.

"It's not so bad," he said, but Brook shook his head. The old pony got out of his bed, and beckoned for Blueblood to stand up.

"Come with me," he said. Blueblood stood, not completely sure of what Brook wanted. The green unicorn left the room, Blueblood following along beside him. The two walked slowly down the stairs, and Brook led Blueblood to an old door in a small wing of the house. Blueblood recognized it vaguely as one of the rooms he had cleaned, but he couldn't remember which. Brook pushed it open, standing aside for Blueblood to look in.

The room was nearly empty inside, save for an old bed tucked into a corner beneath a window. Blueblood took a step inside, looking around. There was still an old rug on the floor, but nothing else.

"It used to be a guest bedroom," Brook said, walking in behind Blueblood. "When I was young... but I don't tend to entertain guests these days." Blueblood turned to him, and his master looking somewhat wistfully around the room. He turned his gaze to Blueblood, and smiled. "How would you like for this to be your bedroom from now on?" he asked. Blueblood stared blankly at him.

"My... bedroom?" he asked. Brook nodded.

"That's right," he said. "I... don't have much furniture for you. But it would be your room... if you want it." Blueblood stared at him, dumbfounded. He swallowed back a small lump that had begun to rise in his throat, and smiled.

"Of course," he said. "Of course, master. Thank you." Brook nodded slowly, his head lowering again.

"Then it's yours," he said. He smiled faintly. "Now... you should go to sleep. We'll plant seeds tomorrow, if you feel up to it."

"Of course," Blueblood said. "Thank you, master." Brook nodded and left the room, closing the door gently behind him,

"Goodnight, Red," he said just before he shut the door.

"Goodnight, master," Blueblood said. The door closed with a click, and Blueblood was left alone in the darkened room. He was too tired from working to think much of it. Instead he simply climbed into his new bed, settling beneath the heavy wool covers. They were warm, and amazingly soft. He sighed happily as he sunk into the thick mattress, and he soon fell into a deep, fast sleep.

Days came and went, blending into one another like grains of sand on the beach. The sun rose and set with perpetual rhythm, the steady beat of Blueblood's life. Every day while the sun was in the sky he would work the fields, Brook watching and helping where he could.

The rainy season lasted barely a few weeks, soon turning over to the arid heat of the dry season. Every day Blueblood would have to cart water over from the river to keep the crops from withering and dying. With his help they persisted, surviving in spite of everything. At first Blueblood had been worried: he was terrified that he might not be able to help them enough, and they would perish and die. For weeks he waited for the rough earth to show any signs of life. Soon, though, his patience was rewarded. A sprout emerged from the ground, its brethren following close behind.

Blueblood watched them as they grew, a strange new feeling welling in his chest. He had never felt anything like it when he had lived in Canterlot. It felt warm, as if the sun itself were in his belly, glowing down onto the plants.

In the evenings Brook and Blueblood sat on the balcony, watching the forest in the distance as if shifted and changed. They talked more and more as the weeks went by, but they were comfortable in silence as well. Some days they wouldn't say a word to one another, simply enjoying each other's company.

Blueblood stirred gently in his bed. His mind was slowly coming alive, and with consciousness came a familiar feeling. It was no longer painful, simply peaceful. He let the thoughts, feelings and impulses flow through him.

He felt the soft tickle of the sheets against his fur, the old fabric full of loose hairs that brushed gently against his coat. The morning warmth seeped into his bones, aided by the early sunlight. Even without opening his eyes he

could almost see it, shining around the room. Blueblood could feel the wood breathe as it warmed. He could feel the subtle currents in the air, and hear the soft rustling of the leaves outside his window.

Blueblood rolled out of his soft bed, trotting into the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Brook joined him shortly, and when the two were finished eating they went out to tend the field, as they had done every day. Where other days always seemed to have plenty to take care of, however, today there seemed to be little to do. They were finished their tasks well before noon, and they returned inside.

"What would you like me to do now?" Blueblood asked. Brook looked thoughtful for a moment.

"...Nothing," he said finally. Blueblood stared at him.

"Nothing?" he asked. Brook nodded.

"The fields have been watered, and weeded. The house is clean... there's nothing for you to do." Blueblood sat down, thinking about this. This was the first time in weeks that he had had nothing to do. There had always been something, some small task to keep him occupied. Tending to the field, cleaning the house, organizing his master's books. He had never had nothing to do, before. He wasn't quite sure what to do with himself.

"There's really nothing you need me to do?" he asked again. Brook shook his head.

"Not for today. I'm sure something will come up soon enough. What's wrong with taking a few days off?"

"Well," Blueblood said, "nothing... I suppose." Brook smiled, and put a gentle hoof on his shoulder.

"You deserve a rest," he said. "You've worked hard. There's not going to be much to do until we can harvest." Blueblood nodded, and Brook trotted past him.

The white stallion thought about all the things that he could do with his new-found free time. He thought about sitting out on the balcony, or about reading. He found himself wracking his brain for anything else that he could

do, but nothing came to him. Try as he might he simply couldn't bring himself to do much of anything. He sat in the main room of the house for a while, trying to muster up the motivation to start reading something, but nothing came to him.

In the end he began to wander the house. He had a strange compulsion to do something – anything – but he couldn't actually bring himself to do it. Occasionally he would stop to brush a bit of dust away from the wall, but they never really needed it. He was simply trying and failing to occupy himself.

He wandered back into the main room, where he found Brook headed through to the kitchen.

"Red," Brook said, "you've been quiet. I thought you were reading." Blueblood shook his head.

"No master," he said. "I wanted to, but... I don't know." He shrugged, and hung his head. Brook peered at him strangely.

"Is it really this hard for you to rest?" he asked. Blueblood sighed, and shrugged.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm sorry master, I just... I just feel like I should be doing something." Brook tilted his head thoughtfully, and tapped his chin.

"Hm..." he said slowly. His expression turned distant, and contemplative. Blueblood had seen him look like this before, but he had never been able to figure out just what he was thinking about. The old pony never spoke of the conclusions he came to, or even what the question had been.

"I think..." he said finally, "I may have something for you to do."

"Really?" Blueblood asked. Brook nodded slowly.

"Perhaps. Come with me."

Blueblood followed after the old pony as he climbed the stairs. To Blueblood's surprise the green unicorn ignored both the balcony and his bedroom, limping down to the door at the end of the hallway. He seemed to

slow more and more the more he walked, as if there was something on the other side of the door that pushed him away.

Brook sat in front of the door, staring at it silently. Blueblood couldn't see his expression from behind him, but he could see his shoulders tense gently, and his head dip almost imperceptibly. He reached out with his bad hoof, setting it against the old door, and pushed.

The door swung open with a deep, rusty groan. Dust spilled out of it, swirling into the air. Brook sighed and stepped inside, followed shortly after by Blueblood. The room was still exactly the same as it had been when Blueblood had come in here before. Thick dust still caked everything in sight, from the ancient wooden desk to the yellowed scrolls and books. Soft yellow light filtered weakly through the grimy window, creeping across the desk. Even the two letters, still carefully sealed, sat in their places. Not a thing had moved.

As Blueblood mentally took stock of the room, something occurred to him. His heart pounded faster and faster in his chest as he continued to map out the room in his mind. If nothing else had moved, that meant that the armour was still there as well. It was only a few feet away from him. He could feel it in the corner. His legs trembled as he slowly looked over.

He had been right. It was still there, gleaming silver. Blueblood jumped back, bumping into his master.

"Red?" Brook asked, surprised. Blueblood ignored him, stumbling back and falling on his rear. He shook all over, his eyes set dead on the armour. It seemed to emanate dread, as if it were angry with him. When he looked at it, he remembered. His mind skipped back through weeks and months. It was as if they had never passed at all, and he was still right there, laying on that slab of rock at the base of the mountains. He could feel Iron's cruel gaze on him, hear his mocking laughter. It rang in his ears like some hellish choir, vibrating through his entire being. His heart pounded like a drum, keeping time with the hideous laughter. He squeezed his eyes shut, lowering his head.

"Red?" Brook asked again, putting a hoof on his shoulder. "Red? Red! Can you hear me, Red?" Blueblood was shaking violently, but he managed to open an eye.

"Red," Brook said. "What's the matter?" Blueblood tried to speak, but his teeth clattered together every time he opened his mouth. He could see the armour over Brook's shoulder, still staring evilly at him.

"T-th-th..." Blueblood struggled. He turned away from the armour, closing his eyes again and gesturing limply at it. Brook looked over his shoulder, and understood.

"Red," he said softly. "Red, you have to listen to me. It's armour. It's empty. It can't hurt you. You're safe." Blueblood stopped shaking as much, and he managed to open his eyes again. "It's only armour," Brook repeated. "Nothing but iron. It can't hurt you." Blueblood winced again, but he breathed deeply.

"It can't hurt me," he repeated.

"That's right," Brook said, nodding. He sat with Blueblood, placing his hooves gently on the white stallion's shoulders. The two sat together until, slowly but surely, Blueblood's shaking subsided. His heart slowed, and the fear that gripped him faded. He still felt its cold hand when he looked at the armour, but he could bear it now. He got to his hooves, slowly and shakily.

"I'm sorry Red," Brook said. "I shouldn't have brought you in here. You don't have to clean it-"

"It's alright," Blueblood said. "I... I'm sorry master. I'm fine." Brook looked carefully at him.

"Are you sure?" he asked softly. Blueblood nodded faintly, not completely sure himself. Still, he would do as his master asked him.

"Yes..." he said finally. "But... master, will you... stay with me? While I clean? And... talk to me?" Brook smiled, sighing faintly.

"Of course," he said. "I'll be right here, Red." Blueblood nodded and smiled weakly. He set about cleaning the room, starting by opening the small window. A soft breeze blew in, stirring up the dust.

"What did you use this room for, master?" Blueblood asked, trying to fill the frightful silence. He needed noise, now. Something to take his mind off the armour in the corner. Brook looked around the room almost dreamily.

"It was my study," he said. "I would... study, I suppose."

"What did you study?" Blueblood asked.

"Magic, mostly." Brook replied. He limped slowly to one of the bookshelves, taking out one of the thick volumes. "There were other things too. Construction, agriculture... I needed something to fill my time..."

Blueblood looked up from his cleaning. Brook was looking somberly at the tome in his hooves. The old pony sighed, brushing the dust off it gently. Blueblood tilted his head. "To fill your time?" he asked quietly. Brook nodded silently.

"Sometimes... you become accustomed to something. Then it leaves, and you don't know what to do. I had to find something else to do, after I..." He set the tome down, tapping his bad hoof against it gently. "I needed a hobby, they told me. I started learning how to build... this place used to be much smaller. I expanded it as much as I could..."

"How?" Blueblood asked. Brook looked at him strangely, and Blueblood lowered his head. "I mean..." the white pony said quietly, "how could you add to your house, on your own?" Brook smiled humourlessly, brushing his hoof over the book.

"Magic, of course," he said.

"But... I never see you using magic," Blueblood said. "It seems like it would take a lot of power..." Brook shrugged limply.

"I don't use it anymore..."

"Why not?" Blueblood asked. Brook was silent for a long time, but eventually sighed.

"You don't use a sword to pick your teeth," he said. Blueblood stared at him, unable to grasp what the old stallion had meant. Brook didn't give him a chance to consider it, however.

"There's a lot of dust here," Brook said. "Why don't you go get a rag and some water?" Blueblood nodded slowly, and trotted out of the room. He felt a weight lift off him as he moved away from the armour, but there was still

another strange weight there. When he returned Brook had placed the old volume back on its shelf, and seemed to be staring a million miles away. His eyes shifted slowly to Blueblood as the stallion entered, setting immediately to work.

Brook was silent for a long time. Blueblood managed to clean up most of the floor before the old pony spoke again.

"Red..." he said quietly. Blueblood looked up from his work. Brook was staring into the distance again, but this time he looked tired, and old. "What happened to you?" he asked. There was an edge to his voice, like he was in pain. Blueblood blinked.

"What... do you mean?" Blueblood asked. Brook gestured weakly to his armour, gleaming in the corner of the room.

"Why... does it frighten you so much? What happened?"

Blueblood looked slowly at the armour. He didn't shake when he saw it, but only just. He looked back at his master, every bit as slowly. The old pony seemed ancient, now. His head hung ever so slightly, his neck sinking between his shoulders. A hard lump raised in Blueblood's throat when he tried to speak. His heart beat hard in his chest. For a moment, he thought about lying. He trembled gently when he even thought about what had happened to him; he didn't think he could bear to say it aloud. But he looked at Brook again, and he couldn't lie.

"I... I'm not from here. Soldiers took me here, and... they hurt me." He shook, but tried his hardest to fight it down. "They hurt me," he repeated. "And... I don't know. I just couldn't... be, anymore. They... took..." He was shaking, again. He couldn't fight it anymore. His heart felt like ice, whenever he thought about it: whenever he remembered that awful, incredible pain. "I'm sorry..." he said weakly. His breath was shallow, and ragged. "I'm sorry master... I can't, I... I..." Brook Put a hoof on his shoulder, and hung his head.

"Don't," Brook said. "I understand. you don't have to." Blueblood swallowed, and nodded shakily. Brook sat with him until he had stopped shaking, and when he had Brook spoke.

"I'm sorry," the green pony said. Blueblood stared at him.

"Why?" he asked. Brook sighed.

"Because I was a soldier, once," he said. "I must frighten you... I'm sorry." Blueblood stood slowly, and shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm not afraid of you, master. You were a soldier a long time ago, but not anymore... right?" Brook chuckled slowly: a dull, empty laugh.

"Yes..." he said quietly, looking at his desk. "Not for a long time... almost 20 years." Blueblood put down his rag, and inched closer to the old stallion.

"What happened?" he asked. Brook reached out, taking the two old letters from the desk and peering at them. He was quiet, almost contemplative.

"It's true, isn't it?" he asked to nopony in particular. "Equestria does wear blinders on its borders." He shook his head. "The same thing happened to me that happens to every soldier some day. 20 years ago there was a war... I was hurt. Too hurt to keep fighting... they gave me enough Silver for the rest of my life, and then some. Then, I came out here. I added to my home... making it what I thought it should be. I thought I would spend the rest of my life studying magic but... in the end, I never did." He looked around the room, concluding, "I haven't been in this room for almost as long, now. Almost 20 years." Blueblood swallowed, and took another step closer. Brook's face seemed empty, now. Blueblood hadn't seen him look so empty in a long time, almost as long as he had known him. In fact, he had only ever seen that expression the moment he first met his master. It hurt Blueblood, seeing it again.

"Why not?" he asked. Brook sighed.

"Because..." he said, "because you don't use a sword to pick your teeth."

"You said that before," Blueblood said. "What does it mean?" Brook stared at him. He looked around the room, and finally down at his hoof. The old pony closed his eyes, and began to hum to himself.

He hummed softly at first, but he grew louder and louder. It was steady, slowing rising and falling in a beautiful rhythm. As he hummed, Brook's horn began to glow. Like his voice it was soft, but grew brighter and brighter. Slowly but surely, the room began to stir. Dust lifted itself off the ground, particles encased in blue light flying through the air like a

hurricane. Spilled scrolls rearranged themselves, and fallen books returned to their shelves. Blueblood watched in awe as Brook took control of everything in the room without even a trace of effort. He simply hummed to himself, calm amidst the chaos. In an instant, the once-filthy room was pristine. Brook opened his eyes, and spoke gently.

"Red... I want to show you something," he said. "Will you come with me?" Blueblood stared, open-mouthed, and nodded.

"Of course, master," he said. Brook nodded, and limped out of the room.

Blueblood followed him down the stairs, and into an old wing of the house. Blueblood could clearly see the changing wood. This was the oldest part of the home, only a few rooms big. Blueblood looked over his master's shoulder as they walked. They came to a stop in front of the one room Blueblood had never seen, the one room he had been barred from entering.

Brook was silent. His hoof hovered in the air, trembling slightly in front of the handle. Finally, he reached out, pushing the door gently. It swung open smoothly, and Blueblood could see inside.

Along the far wall of the room was an enormous bed. It looked large enough for a half-dozen ponies to sleep in; it took up nearly half the room. The only other things in the room were a small, old shelf, and a hearth in the corner.

Despite Blueblood never having entered the room, and never having seen Brook go inside, it was spotless. Everything was placed neatly and free of dust, as if it had been preserved in wax. In spite of the cleanliness, the room seemed bleak, and old. Brook stepped inside, looking around wearily. He sat in the centre of the floor, gesturing for Blueblood to follow him in.

"Red?" Brook asked.

"Yes?"

"How many plates are there in the kitchen?" Blueblood blinked.

"F-five," he said.

"And how many bowls?"

"Five," Blueblood replied again.

"There are also five cups," Brook said. "And five forks, and knives, and spoons. But there are only two ponies living here." He stood, walking to the small shelf. He picked up a picture frame, and returned to Blueblood, holding it out gently. Blueblood took the picture carefully, and looked at it.

There were five ponies in the picture, all unicorns. Two of the ponies were older: a deep green mare with a blue mane, and a pure white stallion. Gathered around their hooves were two colts, and a filly. The filly was pure white, like her father. One of the colts was white-coated, with a deep blue mane. The final colt, sitting in the centre of the picture, was a deep green foal with a brilliantly white mane. Blueblood looked up from the picture. Brook was looking down tiredly.

"This is the home my family lived in," Brook said. My father raised me to be strong, and to love my country." He unpinning his medallion, and removed his wrappings slowly. He turned to the side, and for the first time Blueblood saw his cutie mark. It was a powerful ocean wave, taking the shape of a shield. "I was a gifted magician... and I wanted to use my magic to protect my country. When we were old enough, my brother and I joined the military. They taught us to use our magic as a weapon. I took to it well... I learned how to use all sorts of spells. Spells for cutting, for crushing, for destroying..." He shook his head, putting the picture frame back. "You don't use a sword to pick your teeth. Somepony could get hurt."

Blueblood sat in silence. He didn't know what he could say. Brook was silent as well. His face was still and empty, his eyes focused miles away. He slouched just enough for Blueblood to see; just far enough for Blueblood to understand.

"What happened to them?" Blueblood asked quietly. He hadn't needed to ask; he knew the answer. It almost felt as though it needed to be asked. Brook sighed, as if he too understood what needed to be done.

"My parents were old," he said. "They passed on peacefully, in their bed. My sister died when we were young... she fell in the river during the rainy season. We saved her, but it was too late. She fell sick, and died. My brother..." Brook shook his head. "My brother died in that war, 20 years

ago. He was killed in the last battle I ever fought. Magic... I came back here... I built up our home. And now..."

"And now it's empty?" Blueblood asked. For some reason, he understood. Perhaps it was the nature of growing up in a palace. Hallways upon hallways, filled with nothing and going nowhere. But at least there had been ponies there, if he had cared to talk to any of them. Brook had had none of that. The old pony nodded.

"And now it's empty," he said. "An empty home in the middle of nowhere... with an old stallion that nopony cares about anymore." Blueblood lowered his head, and stepped closer.

"That isn't true, master," he said. "There are still ponies who care about you." Brook looked at him strangely, and huffed.

"Are there?" he asked. "Like the smith? Ponies don't care about White Brook the farmer, Red. They care about White Brook The Raging River. I'm not The Raging River anymore." Blueblood shook his head.

"No," he said. He nudged Brook with his nose, and nuzzled him gently. "I care about you, master. I care about White Brook the farmer."

Brook was still for a long time. Even as his bad hoof slowly inched upwards, wrapping itself around Blueblood's neck he was silent. Finally, he spoke. "Thank you, Red," he said. The two ponies sat on the floor in silence for a long time. They didn't need to speak; they didn't want to. It was peaceful in the silence, and they were happy. Brook's horn lit up, and Blueblood heard a clattering from behind him. When he turned he saw a Casualty set assembling itself. He look back to Brook, who was smiling warmly.

"When I was little," he said, "my father taught me to play Casualty... it's been a while since we played, hasn't it?" Blueblood smiled.

"It has," he agreed. "Can we play again?" Brook nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I hoped you'd want to." The set drifted between the two ponies, assembling itself and setting down. "Would you like to move first?" Brook asked. Blueblood grinned, and reached out. Before he could make his first move, however, and ear-piercing whistle sounded. It was long, and

shrill, like a warning siren. Blueblood dropped to the ground, covering his ears against the deafening noise, but Brook jumped to his hooves, his head snapping to the source of the sound. His entire body tensed, and even after the whistle stopped he stood stock-still, his bad hoof set squarely on the was still for a moment, but relaxed slightly.

"Who is that?" He asked slowly. Blueblood rubbed his ears.

"That was a pony?" he asked. Brook hummed to himself, and began to limp away. Blueblood jumped up, following after him. the two ponies left the house, trotting towards the riverbank. There was a sea pony in the river, carrying a waxy mailbag with him.

"White Brook?" the sea pony asked respectfully. Brook nodded slowly.

"I am," he said. "Who are you?" the sea pony shook his head.

"Just a messenger, sir." he said. "I'm sorry." He reached inside his bag, retrieving a scroll and handing it to Brook. He nodded respectfully once again as the old stallion took it, and swam west without another word.

Brook stared after him, looking between the rapidly disappearing sea pony and the scroll. He sat on the shore, humming to himself again. Blueblood blinked at him. He thought that there seemed to be an edge to Brook, but he couldn't put his hoof on it. It made him nervous.

"What's wrong, master?" he asked. Brook turned over the scroll, showing it to Blueblood. It was sealed with red wax, stamped with the insignia of Aloa.

"It's from the King," Brook said quietly. He unsealed the scroll slowly, and read it. Blueblood waited in silence, holding his breath. He had no idea what the King might want with Brook, but the thought of it frightened him. His heart pounded in his chest as Brook lowered the scroll. The old pony was silent, staring into space. His eyes drifted to Blueblood, and he sighed sadly. Blueblood swallowed, pawing at the ground nervously.

"...It's a summons," Brook said simply. "I'm being summoned to serve as a general. Equestria has declared war on Aloa."

Chapter 13

In Which the Truth is Learned

All across Equestria, ponies rose. Farmers on the great plains went to tend their crops, craftsponies and merchants went to run their shops, and foals rose to get ready for school. Each and every single pony who woke looked to the sky in curiosity, and all for the same reason: though every pony across Equestria was rising from their nightly rest, the sun had not. A thin line of yellow and orange could be seen along the eastern horizon, telling the ponies of the sun's imminent ascent, but the fact remained that it was late. Still, most ponies did not concern themselves with it. It happened now and then, they all told themselves. The Princess must have simply been busy.

It was true Princess Celestia had been busy. For weeks she had been in almost constant contact with the Aloan Royal Court, but a week ago the letters had stopped coming. Celestia had shut herself in her room. The only ponies who visited her were her niece, the captain of the guard and – most worryingly – several retired, high-ranking members of the guard. No other ponies saw the princess during that week, and rumors flew in her absence. It was never the same rumor twice. Sometimes it was that Celestia was ill with a strange disease from her visit to Aloa. Sometimes it was that she was simply too frustrated from her communications to talk to any other pony. Sometimes the rumors were about her interesting choice of companions. In the end, only those ponies who had visited her knew exactly what was happening, with the curious exception of the palace blacksmith.

Princess Amethyst had visited him regularly over the week, always on her own. Rumors flew about this too, as rumors are wont to do. These were always quelled shortly, however, usually by the princess's diligent bodyguard Rowan Oak. He always seemed to be around when they were spoken, swooping in to defend his princess. As the week wore on though, he found himself more and more doubting his own words. Amethyst had not trusted even him with her secret. He had taken to wandering the halls in

worry, in fact. He roamed the opulent palace, trying not to hear the whispered rumors, trying to shove them from his mind. He was in the public wing when he was approached by the acting captain of the guards.

“Lieutenant!” the captain barked. Oak jumped to attention, saluting smartly.

“Captain!” he said respectfully. The captain saluted as well, and both pegasi stood at ease.

“The Princess is asking after you, Lieutenant,” the captain said. Oak ruffled his wings.

“Ah, Princess Celestia, Captain?”

“Princess Amethyst, Lieutenant,” the captain said, a sarcastic edge to his voice. “The mare you are supposed to be guarding?” Oak blinked, and saluted again. It was the first time she had summoned him all week; she had always been too busy before.

“O-of course, captain!” Oak said. “Where can I find her?”

“In her chambers,” the captain said. His serious expression faded into a sly smile, and he shuffled his wings knowingly. “Remember, Lieutenant – I don't want to be hearing about any sort of... untoward conduct. Am I understood?” Oak's face flushed, and he pawed at the ground before saluting.

“Yessir,” he said quickly. The captain smirked again, and Oak flew off, headed for the Princess's chambers. The royal family's wing was deserted as always, giving him time to straighten himself up. He preened his feathers, laying them neat and smooth, and took off his helmet to brush his mane. He sat in front of the princess's door, his heart pounding in his chest, and knocked respectfully.

“Who is it?” Amethyst asked from inside the room. Oak cleared his throat, and spoke.

“It's me, Your Highness: Oak.” There was a clinking and clattering sound from inside the room, before Amethyst spoke again excitedly.

“Oak? Wonderful! Come in, come in! And close the door behind you!” Oak swallowed, and quickly stepped inside, shutting the door tight behind him. He almost forgot to; his jaw dropped when he entered. He was not sure what he had been expecting – or perhaps hoping for – but this was most certainly not it.

Princess Amethyst stood in the centre of the room, clad from head-to-hoof in golden armour. It fit tightly around her body, imitating the unicorn guards' armour. There were, however, distinct differences. The mail was much looser on the sides, and the saddle had been replaced with Equestria's banner: the sun and moon set tightly alongside one another. A long silver scabbard stretched along her side, containing a basket-hilted rapier. All in all, the princess would have been very imposing if she were not so ungainly in the heavy metal. Oak stared at her, open-mouthed.

“What do you think?” she asked proudly, prancing lightly. The joints of the armour snagged, and she came to a jolting halt. She almost fell over, but managed to keep herself upright. Oak recovered himself, and shook his head.

“Your Highness, what in the world is all this?” he asked, dumfounded. Amethyst sighed at him.

“It's armour, of course. How does it look, Oak? Do I look ready for a battle?”

“Ready for a battle...” Oak said, still clearly stunned. Amethyst shook her head, and marched slowly and carefully over to him. More than once she stumbled, but she never quite managed to tumble over. She sat in front of him, and Oak shook his head once more. His face screwed up quizzically, and he searched for the right words to voice his concerns.

“But Your Highness... why!?” he asked finally.

“You remember what auntie said, don't you Oak?” Amethyst asked. “You remember what the last letter we've received from Aloa said?”

“Of course I do,” Oak said. “They've declared war against us. We're going to have to fight them, or apologize for insulting them-”

"We have not insulted them," Amethyst said sharply, "and we are not going to apologize! They have my son, Oak, and we are going to get him back from them! One way or another!" She huffed, and put her hoof down firmly. The armour clanked quietly, and Oak sighed.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness. But... what does that have to do with all this, unless..." He looked at her entreatingly, as if he were begging her to make him wrong. A horrible, tremendous fear gripped his heart. "Your Highness... you aren't seriously considering going out to the war, are you?"

"No, I'm not considering it," Amethyst said. Oak sighed with relief.

"Thank goodness," he said. "Your Highness, I couldn't imagine-"

"I decided that I'm going to the war a long time ago," Amethyst interrupted him. Oak jolted, and coughed hard.

"Your Highness," he said sharply. He paused, holding himself back. He knew it wasn't his place to criticize the princess; it was his place to protect her, regardless of what she did. But he knew that if she went to the war, there was a chance that she would not be coming back. Even the thought of it killed him, stabbing through his heart like a cold blade. He couldn't bear to see her hurt, let alone subjected to a real war. He had only seen a few months of the last war with Aloa, but it had been horrible. If she saw any of it, then the Princess Amethyst he knew, the princess he cared so deeply about, would never come back. Surely keeping her from it would be protecting her, he thought to himself. Perhaps it was not his place to question, but he could afford to stretch the rules this one time. He steeled himself for the princess's fury, and spoke.

"Your Highness, are you insane!?" he asked. Amethyst scowled at him, and stood up with difficulty.

"For wanting Blueblood back?" she asked, turning away from Oak.

"Apparently, I am." Oak followed after, still trying to reason with her.

"Your Highness, you don't know anything about war! You don't even know anything about fighting!" Amethyst spun upon him, a smile suddenly back on her face.

"But you do!" she exclaimed. "It's perfect, Oak, you can teach me! Then I'll be ready!" Oak just shook his head.

"No... Your Highness, I'm not going to teach you how to fight. I won't help you with this."

"Why not?" Amethyst asked. "Do you think I won't be able to?" Oak was silent. Amethyst fumed, and her horn lit up. She attempted to draw the rapier from its scabbard, but it got caught, and she struggled with it. Eventually she managed to draw it out, brandishing it dangerously.

"Well, then you can help me!" she said. "Make me good enough!" Oak looked at her sadly. He stepped inside the blade and thrust out his wing in the blink of an eye. The sword was shaken from Amethyst's magical grip, flying across the room. Oak looked at Amethyst entreatingly. She looked between him and the sword, and huffed.

"I'm doing this with or without you, Oak," she said decisively. "You can help me, or you can step aside."

"I'm trying to help you, Your Highness," Oak said. "Please! We need you here, where you can manage the war."

"Auntie will be here," Amethyst said dismissively. "She won't need my help."

"Let her go out there!" Oak pushed. "She'll be worth a thousand of you on the battlefield! And you'll be here, and safe!"

"Auntie wouldn't set hoof on the battlefield," the princess said. "Not unless Tidus comes out." Oak winced and tried again.

"And what if Tidus does show up?" he asked. "What if you're there when he arrives? He won't care who you are, Princess! If you go out there..." Oak looked down, and pawed the ground. "If you go to war, you'll be killed, Your Highness." Amethyst stomped her hoof down.

"Don't you think I know that!?" she yelled. "I'm not some little filly anymore,

Oak. I'm willing to do what I have to to save my son. If that means that I die, then so be it."

"But what about him?" Oak asked. "What happens if he loses his mother? You... you have ponies who care about you, Your Highness... Amethyst. We couldn't bear to lose you."

"And I couldn't bear to lose him, Oak," Amethyst said. She was quiet, now. She picked up her rapier, sliding it back into its scabbard. "Last time... last time I was young. I wasn't ready. I'll be ready this time, Oak. The Aloans already took Winter Star away from me. I won't let them take Blueblood too." Oak looked at her sadly.

"But what good is it if you aren't there anymore?" he asked. "Do you think Blueblood wants to lose his mother too? Do you want him too?" Amethyst stared at him, silent. She tried to keep a brave face. She tried not to let her emotions show. Hard as she tried, though, she was more like Oak than she would admit. She couldn't hold herself back. She sniffed sadly, and leaned against her bodyguard's chest.

"I don't want to lose my foal, Oak," she whispered. Oak slowly wrapped his wings around her, comforting her.

"You won't," he said. "I promise you, they'll bring back your son. But please Amethyst... don't go. Stay here, where you're safe. Give him somepony to come back to." Amethyst sniffed again, and Oak could feel her nod slowly.

"You're right," she said. "You're right. But I still need your help, Oak." Oak opened his wings slightly, looking down at her. She looked up at him, and smiled. "I need you to help me be strong," she said. "Just for now. Just until they bring my foal back to me." Oak smiled back at her.

"I'll do my best," he said.

Brook limped slowly out of his home as the sun began to rise. He levitated a large trunk above his head, and Blueblood followed him out with two smaller bags on his back. The pair of stallions moved silently around the

house, depositing their luggage in Brook's wagon. Brook sighed, staring out at the river. Blueblood sat beside him silently, his head low. The two sat in silence, taking in the view one last time. Today they would go into the city, and find a ship. They would go to Ys, the capital city of Aloa, where Brook would serve the king as a general. Blueblood pawed at the ground while they sat. He had fallen into silence last night; they both had. The situation frightened Blueblood, but he couldn't bring himself to admit it. As it happened, he didn't have to.

"What's the matter, Red?" Brook asked. Blueblood's head sank.

"I... I don't like this, master," he said. Brook nodded solemnly.

"I... do not like it either," he said. "But it is my duty to Aloa. If the King asks for me, I must respond."

"But you can't be a soldier again!" Blueblood insisted. "Your hoof... they can't make you fight, can they?" Brook shook his head, and put a reassuring hoof on Blueblood's shoulder.

"They won't make me fight, Red," he said. "A general is a tactician. I'll organize campaigns, and order troops. I won't be on the field unless the war comes out here." Blueblood sighed with relief. That, at least, was one worry gone. Brook coughed quietly, and spoke again. "Of course, I'll need somepony to help me, still," he said. "Somepony I can trust. They'll probably try to give me a pony in the capital... one of theirs. I would like... somepony I know better to help me." Blueblood looked up at him, blinking.

"You want me, master?" he asked. Brook nodded.

"Of course I do," he said. "But they won't accept a slave in the capital.

"Where are your wrappings, Red?" Blueblood nodded, understanding.

"They're in my room, master," he said. "I'll go put them on?"

"Please," Brook said. Blueblood dashed inside, going to his room. His wrappings sat folded on the small table beside his bed. He had not worn them in a few months, but they still had a beautiful sheen to them. He ran

his hoof over the soft cloth, relishing the texture. He wound the cloth around his neck, and returned to his master.

The old pony was seated in the back of the wagon, smiling down at him. Blueblood smiled back, and trotted in front of the wagon to push it.

“Don't bother,” Brook said. “We won't go fast enough. Climb in.” Blueblood stared up at him for a moment, but nodded. He clambered into the back of the wagon, settling in beside his master.

“Master... how are we going to get to the city without somepony pulling the wagon?” He looked over the side, and as he did he saw the wagon's wheel spark with magic. He looked back at his master, whose horn had begun to glow.

“I don't care for magic,” Brook said, “but that doesn't mean I can't use it.” His horn dimmed, and the wagon lurched forward. It rumbled to life, rolling out past the house on its own. Blueblood looked over his shoulder, watching the house slowly drift away. Brook looked back as well, and sighed. The house fell away, the wagon picking up speed as it traveled. Soon they were deep in the forest again, the old house far out of sight. Blueblood sighed, and laid his head down. Brook nodded knowingly, but remained silent.

Neither Brook nor Blueblood spoke for the trip into the city. Brook stared dead ahead, focusing on steering the wagon and keeping it moving. The wagon moved much faster than Blueblood could ever have hoped to pull it, and they were out of the forest in just a little under an hour.

Blueblood used the silence to think, and ponder the situation. His worry over Brook had been part of what bothered him, but it was not the only thing by far. The more he thought about it, the less he could avoid coming to the conclusion that he would be fighting a war against his own country.

Some old part of him wanted to shove the concerns aside. After all, it thought, Equestria was the most powerful nation on the continent. Aloa wouldn't stand a chance in the conflict. Even as he thought that, though, he doubted it. What if Aloa really could win the war? What if they took over Equestria? Or what if Equestria took over Aloa? He couldn't imagine what option would be worse. He thought about the outcome, and he could see

rebellion. Just like in that first game of Casualty, the losing country might rebel, tearing itself apart from the inside. Aloa was too proud to be subjected to the rule of another, and Celestia would never allow her citizens to be put under Aloa's hoof. Blueblood shuddered at the thought. Even if it were not that bad, he knew the costs would be immeasurable. How many ponies would die in the battle?

Why? he asked himself. *What could possibly make Auntie declare war? She wanted peace more than anything...* He lay his head on the edge of the wagon, pondering the war. None of it made any sense to him. Auntie had wanted peace. That was why she had organized the summit. It just didn't make sense for her to declare war. Even if it had been propaganda, and the Aloans had been the ones who declared the war it still made no sense. The Aloans would have no reason to declare war, unless something had gone poorly at the meetings.

Then it struck Blueblood. something had gone wrong at the summit. One of the delegates had been missing - him. He had been kidnapped by the Aloans.

Did auntie find out? he wondered, a sudden tightness in his chest. *Does auntie know what happened to me? But if she does... why hasn't she come for me? Unless she has...* He knew what Celestia would have done first. She would have asked the king about him. And if the king didn't have an answer... would she keep pushing? Would she believe him?

Would auntie really go to war over me? he thought. He didn't want to admit it, but he knew that she would. Both Celestia and his mother would go to war over him. The thought of it made him feel sick in the pit of his stomach, was the knowledge that all that death and devastation was done for him. Hundreds, thousands of ponies would be killed all because of him.

The wagon arrived at Port Ponzance by mid-morning. The gates were flung wide open, with ponies trailing in and out almost constantly. Ponies with wagons, ponies with crops to sell, even just ponies with nothing more than the wrappings about their necks all crowded along the road..

Blueblood sat up, looking down at all of them. Brook shook his head sadly, and Blueblood looked curiously at the old stallion.

“Recruits,” Brook said without being asked. “If war is coming... the kingdom needs recruits. Some of them will be young ponies looking for adventure. Some will want to protect their country. Some just won't have anything else to do.” He sighed, and shook his head again. Blueblood felt the familiar pain of guilt, but it didn't have time to fester as it had before. They soon passed through the gates, and were plunged into a sea of ponies moving about within the city's walls.

Stalls had been set up along the streets, hawking various wares: gaudy jewelry, crops, advertisements for armour and weapons. Recruitment offices had set up stalls on every corner, and lines of young stallions zig-zagged across the streets to fill out the forms. Vendors shouted out advertisements, their voices blending together into an almighty din. There was no words, only noise. Blueblood could hardly hear himself think, and Brook was having a difficult time maneuvering the wagon through the crowd. He propelled it forwards, gently nudging at the ponies in his path until they moved out of the way.

The crowd seemed to mostly be gathered around the gates. Most of the ponies dispersed as they made their way deeper into the city, but the hub road to the docks was still far from empty. Still, Brook was able to move the wagon briskly through the streets, and Blueblood could soon smell the familiar, salty scent of the ocean. He could feel the wagon pick up speed as they began to roll down a steep hill, and in the distance Blueblood caught a glimpse of the ocean again.

It was the first time he had been truly lucid when he saw it. He hadn't appreciated the beauty of the spectacle before, but now he realized just why ponies gravitated to it so. It was magnificent, a sheet of blue stretching out for miles and miles. The morning light reflected off it like a mirror, gleaming brilliantly for the world to see. As they drew closer the the docks Blueblood could see ships pulling in and out of the harbor, passing by the enormous pillars in the water. He only vaguely remembered the ocean gate, but something seemed different about it. He squinted, peering at the top of arches. There seemed to be tiny figures moving back and forth across them.

"Are those..." he asked slowly, "ponies?" Brook looked and nodded.

"It's war time now," he said. "Things are changing. The gates will be ready until the war is over. Those ponies will lower barriers over the arches if an enemy is coming, to keep them away from the city."

"Oh..." Blueblood said. "Would they really attack a city full of innocent ponies?" Brook shrugged.

"You'd know better than me... but we can never be too careful. We can't risk the ponies here being hurt." Blueblood nodded and lowered his head sadly. As if it weren't bad enough that soldiers could be killed over him, was there really a chance that innocent ponies could die? He moaned quietly to himself. Brook looked over at him carefully.

"You've never seen a war before, have you?" he asked. Blueblood shook his head.

"No..." he said. "The one you told me about last night... it would have happened when I was a foal." Brook stared silently at him.

"Red... how old are you?"

"21 years old, master," Blueblood answered. Brook nodded.

"It would have ended a year after you were born, then," he said. "Not enough time to see it... they really didn't teach you about it?" Blueblood shook his head, and Brook sighed. "I don't blame them," he said quietly. "I wouldn't want to remember either..."

The wagon slowed to a halt as they pulled up to the docks. Blueblood got out and helped Brook down, the old pony levitating his luggage out of the wagon. He placed the two small bags on Blueblood's back, carrying the trunk himself.

"We'll find a boat here," Brook said. "Something nice and comfortable. You've never been out to sea before, have you?"

“Once,” Blueblood said quietly. “When I was... well, when I was being brought here. I don't really remember it well.” Brook nodded.

“I see,” he said. “We'll get a big ship. Nice and comfortable. Besides...” The old stallion gave a sly smile. “It'll keep us away from Ys that much longer.” Blueblood smiled faintly as well, and the two trotted onto the docks.

The docks were in chaos. The scent of salt in the air was accompanied by sweat as large, burly stallions dashed about madly. The cranes, ropes and pulleys were all constantly in action as crates full of supplies were loaded onto ships. Large stallions in armour trotted importantly to and fro, and Blueblood shied away from them all nervously. Brook was careful to keep close to him, leading him through the hectic crowd.

Eventually they broke through most of the hubbub and onto a less populated section near the bank. Blueblood saw dozens of sea ponies sticking out of the water, bickering with unicorns or tossing packages out of the water to ponies on ships and docks. Sailors ran up and down gangplanks and across decks, prepping their ships to sail or tying them into port. They barked orders back and forth, devolving into shouting matches between ship captains as they tried to have their commands heard over one another. The very air itself seemed ripe with tension. Everypony here was preparing, and they all knew for what. They all dreaded it, but they were preparing for it nonetheless. There was a somber air beneath the panic; Blueblood could feel it.

Brook limped slowly along the bank, inspecting each of the ships using some criteria that Blueblood couldn't even guess at. He followed after the old stallion quietly, observing the ships as they went past. There were small vessels with a single mast, and larger boats with three or four. Brook stopped in front of one three-masted boat. There was an ancient, grizzled unicorn sitting on the bow, giving orders to his crew. Brook headed up the dock, calling out to the old pony.

“Ahoy there!” he shouted. The ship captain looked down at him.

“Ahoy at you,” he called back. “We're about to ship out, You'll have to make it quick!”

“Where're you headed for?” Brook asked. He was beginning to slip into a naval dialect similar to the sailors on the dock, and Blueblood imagined that he must have been used to sailing when he was a soldier. Aloa had an unparalleled navy, after all.

“We're going to Ys,” the captain said. “Shipping steel. Good business for it out there, now.”

“You might be interested in shipping a couple of stallions out there?” Brook asked. The ship captain scratched his chin thoughtfully.

“Might do,” he said. “Might do. You come on board, we'll talk it over.” Brook nodded, and set the trunk down beside Blueblood.

“Will you stay here with the luggage?” he asked. Blueblood nodded, and Brook limped up the dock and onto the ship. The captain disappeared from sight, no doubt taking Brook into his quarters to barter over prices. Blueblood shrugged the bags off his back, sitting on the dock. He peered over the edge and into the water, staring at his reflection.

He tried to tell himself that there might be another reason for the war. If the Aloans were willing to kidnap him, it was possible that they would do even more for power. It was also possible that they had done something after Blueblood had been gone that caused it. No matter how he try to reason though, he couldn't shake the awful feeling in his gut that this was all his fault. He sighed miserably, staring at the water. His reflection seemed to rippled and distort, and to his confusion another face seemed to be replacing it. It looked like a mare – a mare with an icy blue coat and mane.

The face burst out of the water, a sea pony following along behind it. She leapt up, grabbing Blueblood around the neck.

“Surprise!” she shouted. Blueblood jolted, falling backwards and pulling the sea pony out of the water. She laughed hysterically, flopping her tail on the dock. Blueblood lay on his back, spluttering in shock. The sea pony dragged herself over to him, resting her chin on her hooves. “Hiya, Red!” she said excitedly.

"I... wha... Azure?" Blueblood asked, dumbfounded. Azure giggled happily at him.

"So you do remember me! For a minute there I thought you'd forgotten!"

"No," Blueblood said. "No, I... you remember me?"

"Of course I remember you, Red," she said. She reached out, brushing away his mane and feeling his forehead gently. "You're sort of a hard face to forget around here." Blueblood smiled in spite of himself, and chuckled.

"Thank you," he said. "What are you doing here?" Azure grinned, and patted her flank.

"I said I was a messenger, didn't I?" she asked. "There's load for me to do, now. Everypony wants a message sent to the sailors, or the shippers, or the soldiers. Sometimes they even want me to hand something off to get delivered in another city. It's crazy here, Red." He eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here? You're not... shipping out are you?" a look of concern flashed across her face. Blueblood rubbed his neck.

"Well..." he said, "my master's been called to Ys. To... serve as a general." Azure sighed, and laughed.

"That's a relief. I'd hate to think of you going off to war." She propped herself up on her elbows, and tapped her chin. "Did you say your master was summoned to be a general?" she asked. Blueblood nodded.

"That's right," he replied. Azure's eyes widened.

"That's amazing!" she said. "You'll be living the high life in Ys, you know. Good for you!" She punched his shoulder playfully, and he grinned.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah," Azure said. "I've been there once or twice. It's an amazing city, and if you're working for a military stallion during a war? I'll bet you've never seen anything like it." Blueblood smiled.

“Well,” he said, “I think I might have. But it sounds nice anyways.” Azure grinned at him. Blueblood was about to say something else when he heard his master call out to him.

“Red!” Brook called, appearing on the bow of the ship. “The captain is letting us travel to Ys with him! Bring the luggage on board!” Blueblood got to his hooves, nodding.

“Yes, master!” he shouted back. He turned to Azure, and smiled at her. “I have to go now, Azure,” he said. “Do you need some help getting back into the water?” Azure laughed, and rolled off the docks.

“Of course not,” she said, breaking the surface again. She leaned against the dock and smiled up at the white stallion. “You have a good time in Ys, okay?” she said. “Don’t work too hard.” Blueblood smiled back at her.

“Sure,” he said. Azure winked at him and sank back under the water, and Blueblood grinned wider. He grabbed the bags, placing them on his back, and began to push the heavy trunk along the dock.

Azure swam between the docks, ducking under the surface and bobbing up to look for the recipient of her delivery. She had been around the dock for almost a quarter of an hour before she had seen Red, searching for the unicorn she had been told to find. She hated being at the dock when it was this busy. There were always too many ponies for her to be able to find any one in particular, and looking at all the magic gave her a headache. Even whistling probably wouldn’t work; if she was heard at all she doubted that the unicorn that heard her would care enough to point her in the right direction. She sighed, floating on the surface of the ocean when something caught her eye.

She rolled over and swam closer to get a better view. For a moment she thought she had imagined it, but she had not. There was another earth pony on the docks: a tall, powerful-looking stallion with a steel-gray coat and mane. His mane was long and unkempt, and a ragged beard ran along his jaw. He had a fat red unicorn with him, and the pair were followed by a small pack of soldiers. The earth pony stomped down the dock, growling to

his friend.

“...Lost him!” Azure heard him say as she approached. “How could we ruddy lose him!? He's the only earth pony here, and we somehow managed to lose him! He's pure white, the idiot should stick out like a sore hoof!”

Azure's eyes bulged. Could these ponies be talking about Red? She drifted closer, but something about the earth pony felt wrong to her. There was an edge to him, like there was to a soldier. He felt different from other soldiers, though: less disciplined, and more dangerous. The sort of pony who would start a fight over literally nothing. The very air around him seemed unstable. All of a sudden Azure felt a deep, pressing fear in the pit of her stomach, and she knew she needed to hear what they were saying. She swam beneath the dock, sinking until only the top of her head was above the water, and listened intently.

“Calm down, Iron,” the red unicorn said, trying to placate his friend. “We haven't lost him. We know where he's going, and we know what ship he got on.”

“I know that as well as you, you fat idiot!” the pony called Iron hissed. “What I don't know is, why did we let him get away!? Why didn't we just grab him then and there?”

“Iron please,” the unicorn said, more urgently. “Keep your voice down.”

“Oh, like any of you unicorns is going to care what some earth pony has to say.” Iron scoffed. The red unicorn shook his head.

“Anyways, we couldn't just grab him here. We're surrounded by other ponies, and he was with White Brook. We'd have been caught in seconds!” Iron scowled.

“You keep using that name, White Brook. As if he were somepony I was supposed to care about.” The unicorn sighed.

“Equestrians,” he said. “You were a palace guard, Iron. You would think you of all ponies would know who White Brook is, and why he's

dangerous.” Iron snorted again.

“Dangerous,” he said dismissively. “All I see is an old crippled unicorn. Nothing dangerous about any of you pin-heads.” The unicorn looked like he was about to argue, but Iron spun on him in a flash, stomping his hoof down. The dock they were on shook, and the red unicorn clammed up. Iron scowled, and hissed under his breath. Azure had to swim directly beneath the pair to hear him.

“It doesn't matter who or who isn't with him,” the gray pony said. “He's gone. What are you going to do about it, Letter?”

“If you had listened,” Letter said quietly, “you would know I have a plan. They took a large boat. We know what it's called, and where it's going.”

“So?” Iron asked harshly. Letter rubbed his brow.

“So,” he said, “We take a small boat. We'll get there much faster. Then we can wait.”

“Ah,” Iron said, his voice taking on a cruel, gleeful edge. “A surprise attack. We jump him on the docks.”

“In private,” Letter corrected. “Ys is full of small, tight side streets. We get them in there, and then -”

“I kill them!” Iron hissed happily. Azure gasped, and the two ponies above her stopped. Her eyes bulged as she realized that they had heard her, and sank into the water. Iron looked over the edge of the dock, scouring the water for some sign of a pony. Luckily for her, Azure's eyes and ears were built for the water. She could see him clearly, but he would never be able to see her. His eyes twitched nervously back and forth, but he slowly turned back to his partner.

“Take care of White Brook first,” Letter told him in hushed tones. “Kill him before he knows you're there. Otherwise, you won't get a chance.”

“Don't tell me how to kill ponies,” Iron growled. “I know how to kill ponies. Let's find a boat.” Letter sighed, but nodded. The two set off, their soldiers following after them cautiously. Azure waited until they were all gone before

she resurfaced. She swam too and fro nervously, thinking what she should do.

The ponies on the dock had very clearly been talking about Red. They might not have said his name, but who else could they have been talking about? A pure white earth pony didn't come along every day. She chewed at her hooves nervously for a moment, before diving underwater. She zipped in between the other sea ponies swimming below the docks, passing through the checkpoint and into the open ocean. No ship, no matter how fast, could sail faster than a sea pony – especially not her. Her delivery forgotten, she set course for Ys.

The trip to Ys was a long one. Port Ponzance was located near the middle of the peninsula, and the capital was at its very tip. The trip would take them just over a week, the captain had told them, and that was if they had good weather the whole way. For all the warnings he had about rough weather and storms, though, the grizzled captain was almost supernaturally talented at navigating them away from anything but smooth waters.

Blueblood spent most of his time on the deck. He would often watch the sailors working, and he found himself being put to use more often than not. The gruff sailors would send him running about the decks tying off knots and doing simple tasks like cleaning the deck. Brook watched silently from the sidelines of it all, occasionally giving Blueblood advice and encouragement.

When the sailors had nothing for him to do, however, Blueblood would sit at the bow, looking out over the ocean. He had never seen anything like it before in his life. It stretched for miles in every direction, a perfect blue world. At times Blueblood couldn't even tell where the sea ended and the sky began. It was as if they were suspended in some endless void, completely alone. Their only visitors were brief glimpses of tiny ships along the horizon. Brook and the crew were tense during these moments, and after they all sighed in relief as the ship passed for the second time, Blueblood understood. War time was different from peace time. They couldn't trust any ship that they saw to be a friend; Equestria had allies on the sea, now. Every ship they saw could attack at any moment.

An attack never came, though. The first half of the trip at least had been peaceful and beautiful. Blueblood lounged at the bow, staring out into the endless ocean. His head seemed to swim with each and every dip and swell of the ocean. It felt as if his mind flew through the air each time, stretching out over the ocean and into the beams of the ship with each pass, like some foal's toy. It was difficult to concentrate with it, even as accustomed to the feeling as Blueblood was.

Though the view was magnificent, it did not concern Blueblood at the moment. His mind was occupied with other things: dark thoughts of suffering ponies. He wracked his mind desperately for something that he could do to avert it; something he could do to stop the war before it started. For all he knew the first battles could have been fought already. He tried to think past the absurd feeling and focus, but nothing came to him. He sighed, and heard a familiar shuffling sound. Brook limped up beside him and sat down.

"Red," he said, nodding. Blueblood nodded as well.

"Master," he said. Brook stared out over the ocean, a vague smile creeping into his lips.

"It's beautiful, isn't it Red?" he asked. "The ocean." Blueblood looked over the ocean as well, and nodded.

"It is," he said. "It's... I've never seen anything like it."

"Equestria is in a valley, isn't it?" Brook asked. Blueblood nodded.

"Most of it. Some of it is on the slopes, though," he said. Brook nodded knowingly.

"It must be strange seeing the ocean, then," he said quietly. "You said you don't remember your trip here... did you ever see this?" Blueblood shook his head slowly.

"I don't think so," he said. "They... kept us in the hold. It's nice though, the view." Blueblood sighed again, leaning on the railings.

"What's the matter, Red?" Brook asked. Blueblood could hear the hint of concern in his voice, beneath the stoicism. It made him smile, just a bit, but not because he felt better.

"I... don't know," he said. "I think I'm worried."

"About what?"

"About... all of this. The war. I'm worried about the war." Brook peered at him carefully.

"If your worried about me, Red, I already told you I won't be in danger." Blueblood shook his head.

"It's not that," he said sadly. "I understand that. It's... it's just the whole thing. It feels wrong, I suppose."

"...You feel bad fighting against your own country?" Brook asked. Blueblood sighed.

"I guess," he said. "But I'm worried about everything. Both the Aloans and the Equestrians... I just wish that I could stop it all." Brook nodded solemnly.

"All we can do is try to end it quickly," he said. "But I'm glad you're concerned, Red." Blueblood looked up at his master, who was smiling down at him. "It means you understand." Blueblood smiled back at him. The ship bucked over a swell, and Blueblood's head swam. He blinked, stumbling and putting his hoof to his head. For a moment, tiny flecks of light swam through his vision like fairies, blinking in and out of existence. He shook his head, and Brook put a hoof on his shoulder to steady him.

"Are you seasick?" the old stallion asked. Blueblood blinked again, and shook his head.

"No," he said. "I don't think so. I've felt like this before... just not when I've been awake, really." Brook blinked at him, and Blueblood saw his eyes narrow faintly.

"Not... when you've been awake?" he asked. Blueblood nodded.

"It's how I feel when I first wake up... It's a strange feeling. I guess I'm just not used to it."

"What does it feel like?" Brook asked. There was a strange hint of something Blueblood couldn't identify in his voice. He looked strangely at his master, but tried to explain the feeling.

"It's like..." he said slowly, "it's like I'm not inside myself anymore. Like I sort of... drift out of my body. I can feel my body beside me, almost. I can feel other things, too... everything feels much more intense. Sounds are louder, and things like that." He paused for a moment, trying to articulate the bizarre feelings. "It feels like I'm everywhere at once," he said. "Like I'm not just myself anymore, but..." Brook was staring at him silently, a strangely hurt look in his eyes. Blueblood lowered his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "It must sound weird..."

"It's like you're a part of everything," Brook said suddenly. "You're not just you anymore, you're a part of something much bigger. A part of everything." Blueblood blinked.

"Y-yes," he said. "That's... that's exactly what it's like. Have you felt it before?" Brook nodded sadly. He reached out with his bad hoof, brushing away Blueblood's mane.

"Red..." he said. His voice was quiet, and hurt. "I'm so sorry Red... those soldiers. You said they took something from you..." Blueblood blinked. He felt his legs start to tremble, and his heart start to pound. Brook put his hoof against Blueblood's forehead gently, right where his horn had been. There was a soft scraping noise, and Brook hung his head. "Oh, Red," he said. Blueblood felt a lump rise in his throat.

"Master?" he asked quietly. Brook pressed his neck against Blueblood's, wrapping him in a tight hug. Blueblood began to shake. Brook knew. Even the thought that his master knew, that anypony could know, brought the memories rushing back to him. He shook violently, but Brook never let go of him. Strangely, Blueblood couldn't hear Iron's laughter. He couldn't feel himself being pushed against hard stone, and he couldn't see the cruel spectre of a mad earth pony before him. His shaking subsided, and he

hugged Brook.

"I'm so sorry, Red," Brook said. "It must have been awful... no wonder you were so frightened." Blueblood shook his head slowly.

"It's... alright," he said. "I've gotten used to it. Being an earth pony isn't as bad as I always thought it would be." Brook let go of him, and brushed his forehead again. "Master?" Blueblood asked.

"Yes?"

"How did you know I was a unicorn?" Brook smiled faintly.

"That feeling you described to me... you aren't really an earth pony, Red. You're still a unicorn." Blueblood blinked at his master.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That feeling was magic," Brook told him.

"Magic?" he asked. "But... my horn is gone. I can't use magic anymore." Brook shook his head. He brushed his hoof along Blueblood's forehead, but said nothing. Blueblood blinked at him, tilting his head quizzically, but the old pony seemed to have forgotten he was there. Brook turned to look out over the ocean, his eyes taking on a faraway quality, and he sighed sadly. Blueblood stared at him, but decided to leave the old pony be.

Blueblood grew more and more concerned by Brook's strange silence as the day wore on. True, Blueblood had never known him to speak much, but there was something different about this. He almost seemed to be on edge. Blueblood told himself that Brook was simply worried about the upcoming war, as he had been. The old stallion sat on the bow, staring out over the ocean endlessly. There was a strange tension about him. Not the tension of a pony who was expecting something to happen, but different somehow. He rested his chin on his hooves limply, but his shoulders seemed tense. His eyes had a faraway look, more so than Blueblood had ever seen.

The sun eventually dipped in the sky, and Blueblood left his master at the bow. He was beginning to feel concerned by the old unicorn's silence, but he told himself that he was just worrying. After all, Brook had seemed tired

like this many times before, and nothing had ever come from it. Even as the sun dipped below the horizon and the moon took its place in the sky, Brook didn't move, save perhaps for his head tilting up to watch the stars.

Blueblood had retreated to the cabin the captain had offered them on the boat. It was small and cramped, but Blueblood didn't mind. He and Brook slept in two hammocks slung up along the walls. It was a strange way to sleep, swaying along with the ship. Blueblood rubbed his eyes, climbing into his hammock and beginning to unwind his wrappings when the door opened.

Brook stepped into the room slowly. He didn't close the door behind him, stepping just inside. Blueblood stared at him. There was a pained look in Brook's eyes. His neck hung slightly, and his once-tense shoulders were slack. He looked exhausted and beaten. His eyes set on Blueblood, then cast to the floor. He sat and sighed heavily. Blueblood froze, his wrapping held in his hooves. Concern welled in his gut. He had never known Brook to ever show his feelings before. The old unicorn looked up at him, and Blueblood could finally see what was in his eyes. It was a familiar, dull light.

"Prince Blueblood," Brook said quietly. Blueblood's breath caught in his throat. He stared at Brook, wordlessly and breathlessly. Brook looked at the floor weakly, as if he were trying to nod but did not have the energy. He reached into his wrappings slowly.

"Prince Blueblood," he said again. "That's your name, isn't it?" Blueblood blinked.

"I..." he choked. Brook sighed, and straightened up slightly. His voice regained some of its calm strength, but it was still hurt.

"As of today, you are released from your service to me," he said. "You are a free pony now. But before I set you free, I have one more task for you." He withdrew his hoof from his wrappings, producing an old letter. He placed it on the floor, sliding it forward. "Read this," he said. He stood and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Blueblood stared at the letter on the ground. He felt as though he were in shock, his heart thudding gently in his chest. He slowly climbed out of the hammock, and walked to the letter. His legs trembled, but he ignored them,

picking up the letter.

The letter looked ancient, written years ago. The parchment was dry and yellowed, crinkling softly in Blueblood's grasp. It was sealed with a blob of red wax, unmarked by any seal. Blueblood recognized it instantly. It was one of the two letters he had seen in Brook's study. He gulped, and carefully broke the seal. The ink inside was faded, but still legible.

Prince Blueblood.

My name is White Brook, and I believe that you know who I am. If you are reading this letter, however, it means that you are old enough to at least know what I have done. I am deeply sorry.

What happened was a mistake. I was angry, and foolish. I know that this does not make it right. Perhaps by the time you read this I may have done something to redeem myself, but nothing would make what I have done to you right. I took your father away from you, and what is worse I thought nothing of doing it. I do not have the right to apologize to you. I do not have the right to beg for your forgiveness. I do not even have the right to address you. You must hate me, and I cannot blame you. Even still I want you to know that I am truly, deeply sorry for what I did, more than words could ever describe.

-White Brook.

Blueblood stared at the letter. He read it again, and again. He almost didn't understand what he was reading; his mind was blank. He set the letter on the ground, his hoof trembling faintly. Almost without realizing it, he opened the door and stepped out onto the deck.

The air was cool, and crisp. The night sky was astoundingly clear, and the moon full. Stars swam across the sky in clusters and pools, painting a masterpiece on the dome above the world. Blueblood walked across the deck silently, oblivious to the beauty. He found Brook, seated at the bow. The old pony's head hung low, his shoulders slack. Blueblood sat down

beside him. Brook looked over his shoulder weakly, and he sighed.

"I'm so sorry," he said. His voice was hushed, almost a whisper. Even so, it was perfectly clear in the silence of the night. Blueblood didn't know how to respond. He blinked at Brook, who turned away, ashamed. Blueblood approached him slowly, and found his words pouring out.

"How long?" he asked. "How long did you know?" Brook closed his eyes.

"From the beginning," he said. "The first moment I saw you. I tried to tell myself that I was wrong. I didn't want to believe it, but... you look so much like him. I remember it so clearly."

"What happened?" Blueblood asked quietly. Brook sighed. He shook faintly, as if even the act of remembering it pained him.

"The war I told you about... the war 20 years ago. It was between Equestria and Aloa. I... had a squad under my command of a dozen unicorns. I was... a very different stallion then." He sighed weakly, but continued. "We had information that the palace was putting on a celebration. The defenses would be weak... we were told to attack it directly. We camped in the mountains for weeks, waiting for the celebration.

"The informant let us in when the time came. We thought that it would be easy: get in, get out. We were... we were sent to take a hostage, as a bartering chip." He looked slowly at Blueblood, who was barely breathing. "We were ordered to kidnap you," he said.

"The informant had second thoughts. He called for the guards. I... killed him, but it was too late. The guards heard, and they came for us. We fought our way through them, but most of my squad died. I didn't care. I had a mission." He seemed to cringe at the thought of it, slouching deeply. "I was a different pony then," he said again, almost as much to himself as to Blueblood.

"Those of us who were left, made our way through the palace. There were four of us... we lost two more in the hallways, but we made it to your chamber. The last soldier with me was... he was my brother. My little brother. He was under my command." He smiled humorlessly. "I remember talking to him before the mission. He was excited to be a part of it. He

always looked up to me.” He shook his head, and continued recounting the tale for Blueblood. “Your father was waiting for us in the room. He... killed my brother. Ambushed us when we walked in, and broke his neck. It was a lucky shot, he didn't mean to do it. But... I was furious.” Brook was trembling, now. “I murdered him,” he said. “I murdered your father in cold blood. I'm so sorry.” He closed his eyes, turning away from Blueblood

The pair were silent. Blueblood stared breathlessly, and Brook stared at the floor. Blueblood slowly walked forward, and nudged Brook with his nose.

“Master,” he said finally. Brook shook his head.

“I'm not your master anymore, Blueblood,” he said.

“Yes you are,” Blueblood said.

“No I'm not. I set you free. You aren't a slave anymore. You're free to... do whatever you want.”

“That isn't why I'm calling you master,” Blueblood said. Brook looked at him slowly. Guilt was clear in his eyes. “You taught me,” Blueblood said. “That's why I call you master.” Brook stared at him silently, his face still sunken. Blueblood pawed at the deck, but looked squarely into his master's eyes. “I never knew my father,” he said.

“Because I took him away from you,” Brook said.

“Master...” Blueblood said, “you've given me so much. Anything you took away from me, you gave me back.” Brook blinked, and Blueblood could see him swallow.

“How?” he asked. “What I did was horrible. How can you forgive me so easily?”

“Because I never knew him,” Blueblood said. He leaned forward, pressing his neck gently against Brook's. “How can I miss somepony I never knew? But master, I care about you. You helped me when I needed it, and taught me what I needed to know. You aren't the same pony who killed him. You said it yourself.” Brook looked away again.

"I said I was a different pony," he said. "But that doesn't change what I did. We can't just forget who were, Blueblood."

"But we can be better," Blueblood said. Brook turned to him again. "You taught me that, master," Blueblood said. "You taught me so much." He looked up at Brook, smiling warmly. A slow smile spread across Brook's face, and his eyes glistened.

"Did I?" he asked. He nuzzled Blueblood gently. "I think you learned better than I did..." He pressed his neck against Blueblood's, sighing sadly. "Oh, Blueblood," he said. "I'm so sorry. I didn't even care when I did it. But then Celestia came..."

"You fought Auntie Celestia?" Blueblood asked, dumfounded. Brook chuckled faintly.

"It... wasn't much of a fight," he said. "She broke my hoof, and crippled me. She stopped the war all on her own. She stormed Ys, and dropped me in front of the king. She called Prince Tidus, and threatened to burn the country to the ground if the war didn't end." He shook his head. "They thought I was some sort of hero. But when I went home... It was so empty, without my brother. I wrote those letters. One for you, and one for your mother." He sighed once more. "I'm so sorry, Blueblood," he said. Blueblood smiled, and hugged the old stallion tight. Brook hugged him back gently.

A warm breeze blew through, filling the ship's sails. Blueblood breathed deeply, taking in the night with his master. He finally saw the stars. They were amazing, a million tiny dots in the night sky. He could see galaxies, stretching across the sky like trails of dust. Blueblood sighed happily.

"Master?" he asked.

"Yes?" Brook replied. Blueblood looked up at him, smiling warmly.

"I forgive you," he said.

Chapter 14

Roads Converge

The sky over the open sea was brilliant. A million tiny points of light were suspended above, reflecting off the still water and turning the ocean into a universe suspended in nothing. If it were not for the large ship cutting through the waters and disrupting the illusion, one might think it went on for eternity. The only sounds were those of the softly rippling sails, and the snores of the night sentry.

The boat was a large, four-masted vessel, bound for Ys. It was transporting soldiers: dozens of strong young stallions ready for the impending war. The ship was commanded by veteran officers, but most of the soldiers were fresh recruits. Only a few had been in active service before that night. As such, most of them had not yet adjusted to military life and were fast asleep, exhausted from manning the ship under the rough instruction of the captain and boatswain. Only Wet Mane was left awake, sitting on the aft deck.

Wet leaned against the rails, sighing quietly to himself. His voice seemed to blend with the wind, becoming an element of the night as any other. He stared a thousand miles away, as if he were trying to see the port he had left days earlier. That was not why he was up, however. He couldn't sleep. He hadn't slept well in months, now. Not at night. He could sleep during the day, but at night he could feel eyes, constantly watching him. He knew who they belonged to, who had followed him from the forest near Port Ponzance.

He smiled humourlessly. It was ironic, he thought to himself. He had been sent out to chase her, and she had chased him across the country for weeks. She would appear before him, occasionally. Sometimes she would even speak. He still had no idea what she wanted. He scratched his chin, and looked up.

The moon was full, casting a beautiful pale light over everything Wet could see. She would probably visit him, tonight. He heard the sound of ruffling feathers, confirming his suspicion.

"I thought I might see you tonight," he said without turning around. The winged pony said nothing, and he sighed. He looked over his shoulder, asking, "It's gonna be another silent night, huh?" The pony was sitting across the deck from him, watching silently. Her eyes still shone like stars.

"Not if you don't want it to be," she said. Wet shrugged.

"If I'm gonna be out here anyways," he said, waving his hoof idly. "May as well have company." The winged pony nodded, trotting closer. Her blue coat seemed to shimmer in the moonlight, and Wet smiled at her.

"Some night, huh?" he asked. The mare smiled faintly, and nodded.

"Yes," she said. "It's alright." Wet chuckled.

"So what brings you out here, miss?" he asked.

"You know why I am here, unicorn," the mare answered. Wet shook his head, sighing. He leaned back against the banister, folding his hooves.

"Honestly?" he asked, as much to himself as to the mare. "I don't know. Keeping an eye on me? Trying to teach me something?" He smirked, and chuckled. "Maybe you just like being around me?" he asked. The mare just stared at him. He sighed. "When are you going to leave me alone?" he asked.

"When you reach the border," she answered simply. Wet scoffed, what little goof humour he had fading.

“Well, that's going to take a while,” he said. “Can't say where I'll be deployed. Could be across the border, could be an outpost somewhere in Aloa. Either way, there's still plenty of time before I get sent anywhere. You might actually like Ys. Very pretty. Very noble. You seem like the noble type.”

“No,” she said. “I do not care for nobleponies.” Wet sighed.

“So much for making conversation,” he said. The winged pony turned to him, ruffling her wings.

“You are avoiding the issue,” she said. “As you have for weeks.” Wet groaned, resting his face in his hooves.

At the end of the day, he knew what she wanted of him, at least vaguely. She wanted him to run away, to leave Aloa behind. That was why she had followed him for weeks now. That was why he could feel her watching him every night. The question was, why? He didn't understand why she cared so much about him, why she was so determined to see him out of Aloa.

“Look, I'm leaving the prince alone,” he said. “Isn't that what you wanted?”

“It was,” the mare said, nodding.

“Then why are you still following me?” Wet asked. “Why is it so important that I get out of Aloa to you? Why do you care about what I do so much?”

“The prince is safe,” she said. “I trust this, for now. But you are different.” Wet rolled his eyes.

“Oh, what? I'm not safe?” he asked. “Who am I in danger of?” The mare took a step closer to him.

“Yourself,” she said. Wet stared at her.

“Myself,” he repeated. The mare nodded.

“You are dedicated,” she said. “This is admirable, but what are you dedicated to?” Wet blinked at her.

“My duty,” he said.

“So you always tell me,” the mare replied. “But what is your duty to? To the kingdom? To the ambassador? To the pony that killed your friend?”

“What are you trying to get at, here?” he asked sharply. He didn’t appreciate being reminded of what had happened to Brig. The mare stepped closer again. She was uncomfortably close to him, now. Their noses almost touched when she leaned in. Her eyes shone from beneath her light blue mane, a beautiful piercing blue.

“Why are you so dedicated, unicorn?” she asked. “What is worth endangering yourself by following these ponies for?”

“I...” Wet said, leaning away from her. She moved in, staying close to him.

“I...” he said again.

“Why do you fight, unicorn?” she asked. Wet gulped.

“Because... it's what's right,” he said. The mare tilted her head.

“Killing ponies is what is right, to you?”

“Not killing,” Wet said, shaking his head. “Protecting. I want to protect ponies... and to do the right thing, so that ponies won't have to die pointlessly.”

“Ponies like your friend?” the mare asked. Wet sighed sadly.

“I guess,” he said. He turned out to the sea, looking away from the mare.

“Maybe for ponies like Brig. Maybe just for ponies in general.”

“And this is enough for you?” the mare asked again. “You could have run at any time. You wanted to, once. You could have left Aloa, and began again. They never would have found you. Your duty to what is right is enough to forget your duty to yourself?” Wet hung his head.

“I guess it has to be, doesn't it?” he asked. “It's not like I can run, now.” He leaned against the railing, folding his hooves and laying his chin on his legs. The mare sat in silence as he stared, thinking about his life as a soldier.

He hadn't joined because he had wanted to do the right thing, or to protect ponies. He had joined because he wanted adventure, and because he was proud of his country. Pride was what he had been taught since he was a colt, and it had always been enough for him. It was only lately that he had decided he wanted to protect ponies, since Brig had died. It was what had kept him from running. It was the only thing left connecting him to what he was. He hadn't been lying. It had to be enough for him, now. Everything else was starting to slip away. So, he clung to that duty, for all it was worth. It was not as hard as he had expected, in the end, but it wasn't easy. He sighed, and closed his eyes. Suddenly, he felt a hoof touch him.

He opened his eyes, and saw that it was the mare. She had slid her hoof beneath his legs, placing it over his heart. He stared at her, and she looked back at him.

"I have seen what happens," she said quietly. "I have seen what happens when duty becomes corrupted. You believe you are only doing what you have always done, what you have always wanted to do. But in the end, you are not. Your duty is not to your king. It is not to the ambassador, or to the pony who killed your friend. Your duty is to what you believe in first. If you allow yourself to forget why you do what you do..." She shook her head. "I have seen what can happen first hoof, and it is not good." Wet stared at her, then looked down at the hoof on his chest.

"I still don't understand why you care so much about me," he said. The mare shrugged faintly.

"You have the power to protect many more ponies than you can imagine," she said. "I believe that you can do it, if you have the opportunity. I am giving you that opportunity." Wet looked up at her, blinking.

"How?" he asked. The mare leaned in to him, whispering in his ear.

"You already know," she whispered. "You know why the war is happening. You know how to stop it. Never forget that you are fighting to protect ponies. Protect the prince, Wet Mane. Protect both our countries."

Wet stared blankly for a moment, before his face screwed up with fury. He swung a hoof at the winged pony, but she was already beyond his reach. She had leaped into the air, taking to the skies. He fired bullets of air at her, but she dodged around them with ease.

"Equestrian spy!" he shouted at her. "You started this war, not us! We won't back down to you, and I won't let you use me for your damned country!" His words didn't matter. The mare was already gone.

Wet scowled at the empty air, breathing heavily. The sentry had been jolted awake by his shouting, and was now looking around dumbly. Eventually Wet's breathing slowed, and he sat down. He sighed sadly and hung his head.

Brook and Blueblood sat on the deck of their boat. The sun had begun to rise in the east, its light barely penetrating through a thick blanket of fog. The sailors eased about their morning duties slowly, staying out of the way of the two stallions. Brook dipped his bad hoof into a small bowl in front of himself, filled with a red paste. He lifted his hoof slowly, touching it gently to Blueblood's forehead where his horn used to be. The paste stained his fur a vivid, crimson red.

"There," Brook said. Blueblood blinked, staring at his reflection in another bowl of water. Brook dipped his hoof in it, cleaning off the excess paste, and Blueblood looked up at him.

"Close your eyes," Brook told him. Blueblood did as he was told, and Brook continued to speak.

"Do you feel it?" he asked. "The mark on your forehead. It's a part of you now, every bit as much as your horn was. You know where it is, instinctively. Find it." Blueblood concentrated, focusing on the feeling on his forehead. The paste was still wet, and felt cool against the stump of his horn. In the blackness behind his eyes he tried to focus on that cool circle. The bobbing movement of the ship made his mind reel, and concentrating was difficult. He opened his eyes, and shook his head.

"I can't," he said, rubbing his eyes. "I can't concentrate... my head feels too fuzzy." Brook reached out, putting a hoof on Blueblood's shoulder.

"That's alright," he said. "That feeling is good. Try again, and don't fight it this time. Just let it happen." Blueblood wasn't quite sure, but he trusted Brook. He closed his eyes, and tried again.

"Don't concentrate too hard," Brook said softly. "Know that the mark is there, and let it happen. Be aware of it, and let everything else fall away."

Blueblood breathed deeply, trying to do as Brook instructed. He felt the coolness, even as it started to subside. He could feel the rest of his mind relaxing, the thoughts drifting away. Even still, his mind reeled sickly as the ship swayed and bucked, and he could feel himself leaning dangerously.

“Don't fight the feeling,” Brook coached. “Let it happen, but don't give in to it. Let my voice keep you steady. I'm right here with you, Blueblood.” Blueblood barely nodded in recognition of his master. He could feel himself falling into the mark, and as he did the bucking and swaying only grew more intense. Every twitch was an earthquake, every creak of the boards a cacophony in his ears. The breeze bristled his fur, each individual strand like a tree trunk in his skin. It was amazing, and at the same time excruciating.

The mark and the reeling feeling seemed to be competing, and he wasn't sure which one was winning. Brook spoke soft encouragements constantly, but Blueblood had stopped hearing him. Only the faint mumble of his voice told Blueblood that Brook was still there at all. The feeling was becoming stable, and his mind was completely empty, save for the mark.

All at once feeling seemed to slip away from him. The mark became everything, and at the same time nothing. The reeling feeling was replaced by an almighty awareness, as if he were a part of everything around him. He could feel each and every hoofstep of the sailors, each subtle shift of the wind. He could pinpoint each noise, and tell exactly what made it. He could even feel the water moving beneath them. It was as if they were an extension of himself, or rather that he was an extension of something else. Just another piece of something greater than he could ever be. Even among himself he could feel everything; he was perfectly aware of every part of his body. Even the mark on his forehead felt like another limb.

“Blueblood,” Brook said. His voice rang in Blueblood's ears like an echo in a cave. “Open your eyes,” he said. Blueblood did as he was told, and gaped at what he saw.

Golden particles flew through the sky in bizarre currents and eldritch patterns. The particles clustered around everything, buzzing like tiny insects and flowing in and out of every object. The ocean seemed to be coated in them. Blueblood looked at Brook, who shone with gold. They clustered about his horn, shifting and flowing in a spiral pattern. Blueblood looked on in awe, a slow smile spreading across his face as he realized what he was seeing.

“...Magic,” he said, enraptured by the lights. Brook nodded.

“Most unicorns think of magic as something they create, and form,” he said. “But magic is everywhere, all the time. We simply use what’s already there.” Blueblood saw the magic around his horn buzz into life, swirling into a great vortex that channelled down to the bowl, lifting it off the ground.

“We use our horn as an instinctive channelling point,” he said, “pushing our magic through it, and taking in more.” The particles around his horn stilled, but before the bowl had chance to drop another stream formed around Brook’s hoof, catching the bowl in the blink of an eye. He smiled, and said,

“But that is not the only way. You can use your magic through anything, as long as you can focus on it.”

Realization dawned on Blueblood, and he looked at his reflection in the bowl of water. There, right in the middle of his forehead, was the crimson dot. The magic danced around it like fairies in a circle, bunching in and bulging out. He smiled faintly.

“As long as I have something to focus on,” he echoed. Brook smiled faintly, and nudged the bowl forward.

“Lift the bowl,” he said. Blueblood looked up at his master, and nodded.

He stared at the bowl, concentrating. In truth, he wasn’t quite sure how. He focused on the mark, trying blindly to push magic through it. He saw a few of the golden particles tremble. Encouraged, he focused harder. He

remembered Brook's advice, however, and tried to remain calm. The gold particles shook in front of his face, and as he focused more he pushed outward. A small, weak stream began to form, moving out of his forehead. It was the same as using magic with a horn, but he had to focus on the mark as well. He pushed his mind through it, trying to reach the bowl. The stream moved inch by inch, finally reaching its target. Blueblood grinned, and pushed harder. The stream gripped the bowl weakly, and it began to shake. He pushed as hard as he could, and the particles trembled violently. All at once the particles scattered, dropping the bowl. Blueblood gasped, and the particles started to disappear from his sight. He looked around wildly, watching sadly as they faded away. Brook smiled warmly at his sad expression.

"It's alright, Blueblood," he said. "You did well." Blueblood smiled shyly, and lowered his head.

"Thank you, master," he said quietly. Brook's smile widened.

"We can try again," he said. "This time, relax. It's like seeing the magic in the first place. Don't force it, just let it happen."

Blueblood and Brook continued to practice as the morning wore by. The small bowl wobbled and shook, and sometimes it even lifted off the deck by inches. It was like learning to use magic all over again. Blueblood struggled to grasp it even a little; the golden flecks in his vision made it hard to focus, and his mind was becoming exhausted from the effort.

"Why don't we take a break?" Brook suggested as the bowl fell to the deck once again, rattling gently. Blueblood sighed and nodded. Brook smiled gently and limped to the bow, Blueblood following along. The sun was rising higher in the sky, its warm rays burning away the fog. A thin mist still obscured the distance, but everything on the ship was clear now. The sailors moved about with greater urgency, and Blueblood and Brook found themselves in relative peace at the bow.

Blueblood rested his chin along the railing, staring out into the mist. Brook sat beside him silently. His stoic expression had begun to fade, and Blueblood could see a hint of happiness on his old face. It made Blueblood smile as well.

The sun continued slowly along its arc, and as it went more and more of the fog burnt away. By noon it was almost all gone, and in the distance Blueblood thought that he could see a hint of something. He squinted, peering closer. Sure enough, a hump of land was poking out in the distance.

“Land, ho!” a pony in the crow’s nest shouted down. “12 degrees port!” The soldiers bustled to life as the captain emerged from his quarters, barking orders harshly.

“We’re almost at Ys, you unicorns! Get to work, you don’t want to look like a lazy batch’a diamond dogs, do ya? Come on, look alive for the docks! Drum up some business for us hard-working Aloans! Rig up those knots, get the sails ready for port! Helmsman, start taking us starboard!” Blueblood stared at the sailors scurrying about, and turned back to Brook.

“We’re coming close to Ys, now,” Brook said before Blueblood could ask. “Appearances count for a lot in the capital... I guess you understand that.” Blueblood nodded a bit sadly.

“Yes,” he said. “But why did he say to go starboard? I thought he said the land was port?” Brook nodded, and Blueblood became even more confused.

“The land is the tip of the peninsula,” Brook said, as if it explained everything. “The westernmost point of the Aloan landmass.”

“Then why are we going around it?” Blueblood asked again.

“Because it is not the westernmost point of Aloa,” Brook replied. He gestured in the direction the ship had begun to turn, and Blueblood looked curiously. In the distance, he saw a faint structure. The ship moved closer and closer, and the structure grew. Within minutes, Blueblood realized what it was.

It was an enormous city, miles away from land. Ships were sailing in and out of it in all directions, passing through tall arches in a miles-high wall that circled around the city. Just like the wall at Port Ponzance, unicorns patrolled along the top of the wall, staring carefully down at the ships that passed through.

They sailed closer, and Blueblood got a better view. The gate was made of a brilliantly polished white stone, rising from the water in pillars as thick as a small ship. Blueblood gazed up, following their path into the sky where they arched and met.

The ships mulled about in what seemed like traffic, constantly flowing around one another in an attempt to get closer to, or away from, the gates. Ships of all sizes moved in and out amongst each other, only stopping for the checks at the gates. Platforms stretched out across the water like miniature docks, ponies moving on and off of them, inspecting ships that came through for any suspicious cargo. Blueblood watched silently as one of the guards came aboard. They went into the hold, and returned nodding their heads. Then they inspected the sailors, all lined up and saluting smartly. Finally, they came for Blueblood and Brook.

Blueblood felt his heart start to beat fast as they approached, but he tried his best to remain calm. The guards looked them up and down impassively.

“Can we help you?” Brook asked. The guard inspecting them blinked, but spoke.

“The captain tells me that you aren't part of his crew.”

"That's right," Brook said. "We're passengers." The guard nodded.

"I'll need to see both your citizenships." Brook looked slowly at Blueblood.

"My assistant doesn't have one," he said. "He's new."

"A slave?" the guard asked. Blueblood saw one of Brook's eyebrows rise faintly.

"Assistant," he said again, an edge to his voice. He untied his medallion, handing it to the guard. The guard inspected it, and his eyes widened.

"General White, sir," he said, saluting. "We've been expecting you. We, ah, thought that you would be on a military ship. My apologies."

"That's alright," Brook said. "You were only doing your job."

"Thank you, sir," the guard said, nodding. "We can arrange a ferry to take you directly to the palace when you make dock, sir."

"Does the King need to see me right away?" Brook asked. The guard thought for a minute.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know, sir," he said. "But we haven't had many military ships come in yet, and none have left for deployment. I can only say that we're still preparing, I can't say how far along we are. Sorry, sir." Brook nodded.

"If the King wanted me there, you'd know," he said. "We won't need a ferry. They can bring my bags to the palace. Red has never been to Ys before. I'd like to show him around before we go to the palace."

"Of course, sir," the guard said. "I'll send a sea pony ahead to the docks. Somepony should be along to take your luggage shortly." He shifted uncomfortably, and asked, "Your assistant... is he a foreigner?"

"From Mihaan," Brook lied. A look of relief came over the guard's face.

"Oh," he said. "I see. Well, you can never be careful at war time, can you?" he asked. He saluted sharply, and Brook nodded.

"No," Brook said. "Thank you." He saluted back weakly, and when the guard had left he sighed.

"I suppose I'll have to get used to that again," he said. Blueblood tilted his head as the ship began to move again.

"Get used to saluting?" he asked. Brook nodded.

"Saluting, and 'Sir', and being looked up to." He shook his head, and quickly changed the subject. "I'll show you around Ys today," he said. "You won't have much time to see it... so you might as well take a little time to enjoy it." Blueblood smiled at him.

"Thank you, master," he said. Brook smiled back.

"You're welcome, Blueblood," he said. Their ship sailed inside the gates, and Blueblood and Brook looked out at the docks across the water.

Wooden docks stretched out like spokes, poking out in a long and slow curve. They went on for as long as Blueblood could see in each direction, and he imagined that the docks must have circled around the entire city. He leaned over the railings, taking in the sight and grinning. Ships weaved around each other and in and out of the docks with ease, navigating the large gap of water between the gates and the city. The water here was

clean and clear, and he could see almost to the bottom if he looked hard enough.

Sea ponies dashed about beneath the water, breaking the surface occasionally to call out to the docks or berate a careless ship. Some of them were delivering packages and letters as they had in Port Ponzance. Blueblood half-expected to see Azure pop out of the water and wave at any moment. He smiled to himself, laughing at the thought that she might have come all the way out here.

Their ships sailed through the open water for several minutes, searching for an open dock, and eventually they found one. They pulled into port, throwing lines down to dock workers who hastily tied them, securing the large ship in place. A gangplank was laid and dock workers began to board the ship even as the crew started bringing the cargo on deck. The iron and steel was prepared to move, but Blueblood and Brook were oblivious to the preparations. They had already retrieved their bags from the small cabin they had been rented and were walking down the gangplank. A young, sleek sea pony was waiting to take the pair's luggage, and after they had given it to him, Brook and Blueblood walked off the docks as quickly as they could.

They had to weave their way around the heavy dock workers, making their way towards the streets inch by inch. Finally they were at the arching white gate, and they passed into the city of Ys. Blueblood gaped at what he saw.

To say that Ys was different from Port Ponzance would be understatement to the degree of insult. There was no comparison. The dusty yellow sandstone of Port Ponzance was gone here, replaced by gleaming alabaster. Every inch of the city seemed to glow; hardly a speck of grime or garbage existed. Blueblood imagined that the inner sector of the city must have been immaculate.

The streets were narrow, barely three ponies wide, though the buildings were far from tight-knit. Great canals cut between streets in a massive grid, with arcing bridges connecting the gaps between streets. The water in the

canals was so pure as to be invisible. Blueblood could see sea ponies pass by. They waved to him when they saw him staring, as they waved to one another whenever two passed. Blueblood could see that many of the buildings stretched down in to the water as well. Two cities existed here, one on top of the other.

Brook took Blueblood deeper into the city, smiling warmly as the young stallion gazed excitedly at the wondrous city on the water.

“You like like a tourist,” Brook chuckled. Blueblood lowered his head, smiling sheepishly.

“You're probably right,” he said, chuckling. Brook smiled.

“It's alright,” he said. “It's a beautiful city, isn't it?” Blueblood grinned, nodding.

“It's amazing,” he agreed. “I never really stopped to look at Canterlot... I don't remember if it's anything like this, but Ys is beautiful.” Brook's smile faded slightly, but he nodded happily.

“I'm glad you like it,” he said. “Sometimes I think this is why we're so proud of ourselves. This is where Aloa began, you know.”

“It is?” Blueblood asked. Brook nodded.

“So they say. They say that this is the place where the first king met the first sea pony. They say the sea pony showed him a gem deposit underwater, here, in exchange for food. The king sold the gems, and shared his wealth with the sea pony. Their fortunes grew, and they started to spread into the peninsula. The palace is built in the centre of the city, where the gems were found. It's also the place where Prince Tidus first accepted Aloans as his children.”

Blueblood listened to the story intently, nearly walking over the edge of the street and into the water. A sea pony shoved him back onto the street, laughing cheerfully. Blueblood smiled, and thanked him as he swam off.

Blueblood and Brook made their way deeper into the city, Brook occasionally pointing out something interesting, or explaining a bit of history. They passed a flat square filled with statues of famous ponies: great kings and legendary warriors. Brook took Blueblood to a park as well, a great island of grass in the centre of a gigantic pool. A half-dozen bridges stretched out to the island, each aligned with a street. The park was walled with buildings, arranged circularly around the pool.

Blueblood took in every detail, Brook smiling happily all the while. The two enjoyed themselves deeply, revelling in each other's company. They were so happy that they failed to notice a pony who had shadowed them from the docks: a tall, powerful pony with dangerous eyes.

They sauntered down an empty street, warm smiles across both their faces. There didn't seem to be another pony around at all, save for the stallion who had been shadowing them. He crept through side streets and alleyways, steadily making his way closer and closer. He moved silently despite his heavy frame, always checking carefully if they had noticed him. They moved along, ignorant of his presence. A slow, cruel smile crept across his lips. He had been looking forward to this for a long time. He would kill the old one first. Not because he was dangerous, like Letter had said, but because it would mean Blueblood would know he was there. It would give the princeling time to be afraid. Time to beg, just like last time. The powerful pony grinned madly, and dashed at the pair.

The water exploded beside Blueblood, causing him to jump back. For a moment he didn't know what was happening. All he could see was a spray of water, and a flash of blue and gold. He followed the flash unconsciously, and only afterwards did he realize what he had seen.

Azure arced out of the water gracefully, spinning in the air. She coiled herself into a tight ball, suddenly stretching out and bringing her tail down

hard. There was a meaty thud as her tail struck the pursuer's head, and he dropped to the ground heavily. Blueblood gaped, and Brook dropped into a ready crouch. Blueblood blinked once, twice as Azure returned to the water, breaking the surface.

"Red!" she shouted.

"Azure?" he asked, dumbfounded. He looked at the pony she had struck, and his heart skipped. It was Captain Iron Towers. Blueblood stumbled back, falling to his rump. Iron got to his hooves, shaking his head and growling fiercely. He set his eyes dead on Blueblood, and a evil grin crept across his mouth.

"Hello, princeling," he hissed. Blueblood trembled, shuffling away from the gray pony.

"I-I-Iron?" he asked, his voice trembling weakly. Iron's grin only widened as he took a step closer.

"That's right, brat," he said. "Miss me? Because I missed you. I've been looking forward to seeing you again." Blueblood shook violently.

"Iron, I... I... please, Iron," he said weakly. His voice was failing him. Iron gave a barking laugh.

"Please?" he asked, mockingly. "Please? Oh, yes please. You want to know what I'm going to do with you, colt?"

"Nothing," Brook said. He stepped between the two ponies, staring intently at Iron. "You will do nothing to him," he said again. Iron paused for a moment, and Brook addressed Blueblood and Azure without turning around.

"Filly," he said. "Do you know where the palace is?" Azure blinked, but nodded.

"I do," she said.

"Take Blueblood there," he said sharply. "Both of you, get out of here. Go to the palace. I'll meet you there." Azure nodded, and turned to Blueblood.

"Red," she said. "Follow me." Blueblood didn't respond. He was still shaking and breathing heavily. Azure jumped up onto the street, taking a hold of him. "Red!" she said. "Listen to me! We have to go!" He still remained silent, until Brook spoke.

"Blueblood!" he said, his voice commanding. "Get out of here! Now!" Blueblood blinked, and shook his head.

"Master," he said quietly.

"I'll be fine," Brook said. "Get out of here now."

"Oh, like hell you do," Iron said, stomping towards the white pony. Brook moved in his way again. The old pony danced deftly in spite of his handicap, always taking up the gray pony's space, but always staying out of his reach. With Azure's help, Blueblood managed to get to his hooves, and she pulled him into the water.

Iron roared with fury, lashing out at Brook. The old pony skipped backwards, widening the gap between them.

"You made me lose him, you daft old pin-head!" Iron yelled. Brook did not respond, staring coldly at the earth pony. Iron lowered his head, pawing at the ground as if he were about to charge.

“Damn unicorns,” he growled fiercely. Brook's eyes began to glow gently, and he spoke. His voice was soft, but clear in the silence. It was strong, and there was a dangerous edge to it.

“Are you the one who hurt Blueblood?”

It took Blueblood a long time to recover. Azure swam through the city streets as fast as she could with Blueblood's bubble in front of her. Other sea ponies leaped out of the way, shaking their hooves after her. Blueblood trembled inside his bubble, but he slowly came to his senses. He shook his head slowly, rolling onto his front and looking at Azure. She smiled at him weakly.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“I... yes,” Blueblood said. “Azure, we have to go back.”

“What?” Azure asked.

“We have to go back for Master.” A dire urgency creeping into his voice

“You shouldn't have let him stay behind like that; Iron will kill him!”

“If this stallion is so dangerous, why do we want to go back, exactly?” Azure asked.

“Azure!” Blueblood shouted. “Please! I don't want Master to get hurt. Iron was after me, not him. We have to at least help him!”

“Your master is fighting him to protect you,” she said, as if she herself were unsure. “You think he wants you to go back there and get yourself in trouble?” Blueblood leaned against the bubble wall, gazing into her eyes. She could see fear, there. More than that, though, there was a deep concern.

"Please, Azure," he said. "My master was there for me when I needed him. He's the only reason I'm worth anything. I'd never forgive myself if he was hurt..." Azure lowered her head slowly, looking away.

"That pony..." she said. "He was nuts. I got a look at his eyes... He terrified me. I've never done anything like that before."

"I know," Blueblood said. "Believe me, I know... but that's why we need to go back. Please, Azure, I need to help him. Please..." Azure looked into his eyes slowly, and sighed.

"Alright..." she said. "For you. But... who are you? Your master called you Blueblood. And that stallion called you princeling... you're not just some servant, are you?" Blueblood hesitated, and hung his head slowly.

"No," he said. "I'm not. My name is Blueblood Star. I'm... the prince of Equestria." Azure stared, and Blueblood winced. There was silence for a moment, then Azure swam around the bubble. She set her hooves against it, pushing it back towards where they had left Brook.

"Azure?" Blueblood asked.

"You wanted to go back to your master, right?" she asked. "I don't really care where you're the prince of. No pony rules the ocean, after all." She smiled at him, and said, "I liked you when you were Red. That's not going to change now that you're Blue. I just wanted to know who you really were." Blueblood stared for a moment, then smiled back at her.

"Thank you, Azure," he said.

Azure pushed the bubble back down the canals, back to where they had left Brook. Blueblood's heart thudded in his chest all the while, half-expecting to see Iron standing over Brook's body at any moment. He was so worried that he almost didn't notice Brook limping down the street as they swam past. Luckily, Azure spotted him and shoved Blueblood's bubble up onto the street, popping it.

"Blueblood?" Brook said, surprised by the prince's sudden arrival. "I told you to go to the palace. What are you doing here?" Blueblood threw his

hooves around Brook's neck, hugging him tight.

"Master!" he cried. "Thank goodness! I was so worried... I came back to help you fight Iron." Brook stood stock still, stunned by Blueblood's worry. He relaxed, and smiled.

"That stallion?" he asked, chuckling faintly. "He was nothing. I scared him off with no trouble. But... thank you, Blueblood." Blueblood let go of Brook, and sat on the street. He smiled back weakly, and Brook spoke again.

"Who was that pony, Blueblood?" he asked. Blueblood's head sunk between his shoulders.

"He... was my bodyguard," he said. "He kidnapped me, and brought me here." Brook nodded solemnly.

"We need to go to the palace," he said. "Right now." He turned to Azure, asking, "Can you take us both there?" Azure nodded.

"Of course," she said. "I can take you both no problem. Just hop in here and I'll make you a bubble." Blueblood and Brook both slid into the water, and Azure blew a large bubble around them.

She moved slower with two ponies to ferry, but she was still much faster than they would have been on the streets. The canals stretched straight into the city, the same as the spoke-like streets in every other Aloan city. Within minutes, Blueblood could see a tall structure starting to poke above the horizon. It was a palace, and the very definition of opulence. It was every bit the rival of his home in Canterlot, made from gleaming alabaster and marble, with gold and silver trim along its doors and towers. Great spires stretched into the skies, and its base was set firmly on the sea bottom. It was marked with holes like a honey comb, with sea ponies swimming in and out like underwater bees. Blueblood imagined they carried messages and packages as Azure had, but he could only guess at their contents. He didn't give them much thought, however. His mind was elsewhere for most of the trip.

Though the danger of Iron had passed, the earth pony still weighed on Blueblood's mind. The very fact that he was in the same city terrified Blueblood. Iron could strike from anywhere, for all he knew. Would he be

forced to live the rest of his life in constant fear of Iron, now that the evil earth pony had found him? He knew that the thought was ridiculous – he would be safe in the palace, of course. Even still, just the thought of Iron being near chilled him to the very bone. He tried his best to shake the thoughts from his mind as they approached the towering structure.

A pair of lightly armoured sea ponies swam into their path, crossing tails armed with three-pronged spikes to bar their entrance. Azure slowed to a stop, swimming to the top of the bubble.

“What business do you have in that palace?” one of the guards asked forcefully. Brook stood, staring strongly back at them. Blueblood noticed one of the sea ponies shrink back slightly under his gaze.

“I am General White Brook,” he said firmly. “War is my business in the palace.”

“Ah...” the guard said, “of course, sir. We'll, ah, need to see your identification, of course -” Brook tore off his medallion impatiently, showing it to them. The guard nodded and moved aside.

“Would you like somepony to escort you to your quarters, sir?” he asked.

“No,” Brook said sharply. Even Blueblood found himself flinching slightly at the force of his voice. “I will see the king.”

“Ah, sir,” the guard said, “I'm certain the king will be pleased to greet you, but he's holding court right now. Perhaps if you waited until he was finished -”

“NOW,” Brook said. The guard flinched, and nodded.

“O-of course, sir,” he said meekly. “We'll send for somepony to take you to the court...”

“The mare will take us,” Brook said, gesturing to Azure. She looked down in confusion, as did the guard.

“Me, sir?” Azure asked. Brook nodded.

“You saw Iron,” Brook said. “We'll need you in the court. Another voice is always good with politicians. It's the only way we can hope to drown them out.” He saluted to the guards, who had moved aside fearfully, and Azure swam them inside.

The underwater tunnels in the palace were much different from the city canals. They were completely dark save for the soft blue light of crystals placed intermittently through the tunnels, casting a strange pale glow over everything.

Brook would occasionally offer directions to Azure, pointing her along the path to the throne room, but beyond that, the trip was silent. The only ponies they encountered along their trip were busy-looking officials, swathed in wrappings that flowed strangely in the water. Brook sat tensely for the entire trip, never making a sound. Blueblood looked at his master carefully, wondering just what had him so tense. Perhaps he was as afraid of Iron as Blueblood, the prince thought to himself. Perhaps that was why they were going to see the king so urgently, to tell him about the earth pony's presence in the city.

Whatever the cause of Brook's intensity, Blueblood was afraid to ask. The stress of seeing Iron again was finally starting to fade, and with the calmness came a sort of exhaustion, as well as a sense of dread. The danger was over for now and he could rest, but he could not help but feel something worse was on the horizon.

The tunnels were beginning to widen as Azure pushed them along, and they were becoming better-lit as well. They occasionally passed by small windows in the ceiling, no doubt portholes into a palace courtyard. Soon the tunnel began to slope gently upward, and it opened into an enormous room.

The room was every bit as large as the throne room in Canterlot. A large platform took up the middle of the surface, bridges snaking their way along to the walls. The platform was supported by enormous, engraved pillars. Sea ponies weaved through the pillars in a line, but Brook paid them no heed.

“Surface,” he said. Azure looked at him oddly, but nodded and did as she was told. She pushed the bubble apologetically around the sea ponies,

bringing it to the edge of the large platform.

The room above the surface was every bit as ornate as below it. It too was lit by phosphorescent crystals, casting a faint aqua hue over the room. The walls were decorated with intricate carvings, some merely decorative and some telling ancient stories of Aloian heroism and history. The figures on the carvings seemed to come alive, dancing along with the warbling light reflected off the water. It cast bright lines across everything in the room. The room felt ancient and regal. In spite of all the differences it reminded Blueblood deeply of Canterlot Palace. For the first time in months, he felt a twinge of homesickness.

At the very head of the platform were three massive thrones, one in the centre dwarfing those two that flanked it. In the centre throne sat a large, regal-looking purple unicorn with a golden mane, swathed in blue-green wrappings. An ornate crown swirled around his head, curling up his horn. It was cast with gold and inlaid with curling silver, an enormous and beautiful pearl in its centre. In each of the thrones at his side sat a mare, one of whom Blueblood recognized immediately as Princess Golden Dreams. The unicorn Blueblood presumed to be the king stared at them, looking decidedly unhappy.

“What is the meaning of this!?” he demanded, slamming his hoof on the arm of his throne. “Open court does not mean that ponies may barge into my throne room whenever they please. Explain yourselves!” Brook stepped forward, and bowed.

“Your majesty,” he said graciously, “I am White Brook.”

“I know who you are,” the king said harshly. “The day you and I last met is very clear in my mind. I may have invited you here, White Brook, but I did not intend that you come to greet me the very instant you arrive at my palace. I hope that you have a much better reason for this interruption than that alone?”

“I do, your majesty,” Brook said. “I hope to do the same thing today as I did last time.” The king paused, and leaned forward. All traces of anger seemed to be gone from him, replaced by a keen and cautious interest.

"You intend to threaten me with death by fire?" he asked. The guards along the walls of the room readied their spears, but the king waved his hoof dismissively at them.

"I intend to end a war," Brook said. Blueblood blinked, and stared at him. The old pony suddenly looked as though he were in a deep pain. The king leaned back in his chair.

"You intend to stop the war?" he repeated, as though he were musing over the statement. "I believe your job is to win the war, White Brook, not to stop it."

"You may be right," Brook conceded, "but I wish to try just the same. If I can stop ponies from dying, I will consider it a victory." The king rubbed his chin gently.

"Are you even aware of the cause of the war, I wonder?" he asked. Brook looked at Blueblood sadly.

"I believe that I am," he said. "I believe that the prince of Equestria has gone missing." The king raised an eyebrow.

"Indeed he has..." he said. "Celestia seems to believe that we are responsible for his disappearance. Tell me, Brook, how you know this?" Brook sighed, and looked at Blueblood again. The wall he kept in front of his emotions was gone, and all Blueblood could see was an overwhelming sadness. A lump rose in Blueblood's throat as he looked at his master. The old pony turned back to the king, and bowed his head. His voice was deeply pained when he spoke.

"Your Majesty... may I present Prince Blueblood of Equestria," he said. The hall went silent as the king slouched back in his chair. Brook's head hung weakly, and Blueblood stared at him. The silence seemed to last for hours, nothing happening save for Blueblood and Brook's silent exchange. A slow realization washed over Blueblood, both grim and strangely wonderful. The old pony looked as tired as he had ever been. He seemed ancient, like a zombie. Blueblood could feel his heart pounding in his throat. The silence was broken by the king scoffing.

"I do not know what you have done since you were in Equestria twenty years ago, Brook," the king said, "but I am beginning to rethink my choice of you as a general. That pony is not the prince. He isn't even a unicorn." He nodded matter-of-factly, and sat back. Brook rose his head, and straightened up some.

"I... know what it looks like," Brook conceded, "but he is not an earth pony..." He trailed off weakly. He seemed as though he himself were not convinced. It was as though he wanted to be wrong. Seeing his master so weak made Blueblood's heart ache. He stood, almost without realizing it, and walked to his master's side. He looked across the room fiercely, and he remembered.

He remembered life in Canterlot Palace. He remembered dancing with princesses, and giving orders to servants. The memories pained him, to be true, but he held on to them. They helped him. He puffed out his chest, and stood straight and tall.

"He is not lying," Blueblood said firmly. "I am Prince Blueblood Star, son of Prince Winter Star and Princess Amethyst Star. The goddesses Celestia and Luna are my aunts, and all of Equestria mine to rule by birthright, as long as the sun and the moon shall traverse the world's sky. Even in the heat of the sun I shall not wither, nor in the dark of the night shall I be afraid, for their heat and their mystery are my sword and my shield."

The words came with practised ease. Blueblood had been made to recite them countless times as a foal, until they were burnt into his memory. It was the Equestrian oath. The royal guardsponies were sworn in under it, albeit a slightly different version. He had been told he would recite it only on his coronation day and matters of grave importance, and this seemed to be the latter. He stood proud and tall, trying not to tremble under the king's appraising glare.

"Let us entertain the notion that you are the prince," the king said. "What has brought you to my throne room sans horn, hm? What course could possibly lead the proud and powerful unicorn prince to stand before me as an earth pony?" Before Blueblood could speak, another unicorn called out to the king. All eyes turned to him: a single soldier, dressed in simple silver armour. He was not one positioned along the walls, but stood at the door as if he had come to seek an audience. His coat was a bright yellow, and

beneath his helmet Blueblood saw a limp blue mane.

“You majesty,” the soldier said, stepping forward to join Brook, Blueblood and Azure, “I can answer that.” The king glowered at him.

“More interruptions!” he growled. “And just who are you?” The soldier removed his helmet, and bowed.

“My name is Wet Mane, sire,” he said. The king raised an eyebrow.

“Wet Mane? You were one of the soldiers sent with Ambassador Letter, weren't you? One of the ten missing soldiers?”

“I was, sire,” Wet Mane said. “That is why I know how the prince lost his horn. Because I held him down while it was cut off.” The room fell into a hushed silence, and Blueblood winced at the memory. His heart pounded as the pony recounted his tale..

“Ambassador Letter had us kidnap the prince,” Wet said. “We were told it was under orders from you yourself. We took him to the border of Aloa and Equestria, and an Equestrian guard cut his horn off with an axe. We tried to keep take him to a safe house in Dune, but he escaped. We've been running across Aloa for the past five months searching for him.” There was silence in the hall, save for the nearly audible scowling of the king.

“Bah!” he shouted dismissively. “Words. Anypony can play act, even a dense earth pony. This is just an Equestrian trick to get us to lower our guard.”

“Wait!” Azure offered, joining in. “He’s telling the truth! I saw a pair of ponies talking at the docks in Port Ponzance! One of them was called Letter, he must have been the ambassador!” She propped herself up on the edge of the platform, leaning in intensely. “They were talking about killing Blueblood - they called him the prince!”

“Lies!” the king roared. “Guards! Arrest this spy, and his treasonous companions as well!”

The guards all readied their weapons, and Brook jumped to his hooves. He and Wet Mane stood at the ready, preparing for an attack. The guards all

mulled tensely along the walls and bridges, some brave ponies creeping forwards. Brook whipped his head around, challenging the guards. They had all heard of him. They had heard legends of his skill and prowess in battle, and they could all see that he had lost none of it.

Blueblood looked fearfully at the guards approaching them. He wracked his mind for some way to convince the king of his identity. His mind raced, desperately grasping. He felt a familiar urgency, deep in his gut. As far away as he was, he was so close to home now. Now, when it truly mattered. He was so close that he could almost see the gleaming marble of the palace, smell his mother's sweet perfume again, and it was slipping away from him.

"You Majesty," he called, stepping forward, "please! Surely there is something I can do to prove myself to you! A secret of the Equestrian royal family, a family heirloom! Send a letter!" The guards were creeping closer, becoming more brave. Blueblood was grasping at straws, now. The king refused to hear him, brushing aside any suggestion. Then, Blueblood noticed the princess.

Princess Golden Dreams, one of the delegates from Aloa.

"Princess!" Blueblood shouted. "Princess Golden Dreams! Surely you remember me? At the summit in Canterlot, on the night of the opening ceremony! We danced for the whole night, surely you must remember me!" The princess stared at him from across the hall. For a brief moment Blueblood thought he saw a flash of recognition across her face, and he dared to hope she might remember him.

"I danced with a unicorn that night," she said. "Not some... simple earth pony. I am a mare of pride, you know." Blueblood's heart sank. He felt the last bit of hope slipping away. He felt his home growing more and more distant. Then he felt something else.

Perhaps it was how much the strange hall reminded him of home. Perhaps it was seeing a look of fear slip through Brook's normally stoic exterior. Perhaps it was even the haughty and arrogant expression of Princess Golden Dreams, so closely mimicking his own from all those months ago. Whatever it was, Blueblood felt something he had not felt in a long time. He

felt a tiny fire flare up in his belly.

There was no indignation. There was no arrogance, no false sense of entitlement or worth. There was no ego. There was only the fire. It wasn't anger, not yet. It was fuel, like a stove or an engine. He was still nervous, there was no denying that, but the flame pushed him on. He took a step forward, heedless of the guards.

"Is that what I am?" he asked quietly. "Some simple earth pony? Tell me, princess, because I am so simple. What do you mean?" The princess raised an eyebrow at him. One or two of the guards turned their focus to him. He knew why. It was the same reason all heads turned when he had walked into great halls. He remembered more than just his oath. He remembered presence. He may have been quiet, and he may have been gentle, but he had presence. Perhaps it was because that his words were so quiet and gentle, amidst the tension of the guards, that they heard him.

"Could you mean that I am some dirt-farming pony from some strange foreign land?" he asked. "Or do you simply mean that I am stupid?"

Even as he spoke, some part of him deep down trembled. Some small part of him was afraid of what he was doing. He was becoming his old self again. He breathed deeply, trying to keep himself calm, and humble. He rebelled against it, fighting to keep the little fire from becoming anger. He would not be the same. He would not be the old Blueblood, never again. The princess opened her mouth to speak, but he didn't let her. "I have been both of those things, Your Highness," he said. "I have farmed the earth. I have been stupid." He paused, feeling a wave of coolness wash over the fire. "I have been very stupid. A long time ago. But right now, I am neither of those things. Because a simple earth pony could not remember the colour of the dress you were wearing that night," he said. He stood up strong and tall. The guards barely moved now, all eyes on him. "It was green. It was beautiful, falling across your body like a waterfall. You wore a perfume that smelled of lilies, and told me that you loved to waltz." He looked her dead in the eye, and said, "I am the pony you danced with, Golden Dreams. I may be a simple stallion, now, but I am a unicorn. I am Prince Blueblood Star."

The room was silent. Princess Golden Dreams slowly lifted a hoof to her mouth. For a moment she looked as though she would speak, but it was

the king who broke the silence.

“SPIES!” he roared, spittle flying from his mouth. “Talk all you want, I don't see a unicorn here! This is just some Equestrian trickery, and I will not stand for it!” He leaned forward in his throne, almost standing up as he yelled. “I will not stand idly by and let Equestria bully its way into my country! I WILL protect my ponies, and my culture from you! GUARDS!”

The guards came closer, more confident. Wet Mane's horn began to glow, and Brook danced nervously. The old stallion's horn never lit up, no matter how close they came. The guards inched closer and closer, surrounding Blueblood and Brook. Sea pony guards emerged from the water, cutting off Azure as well.

“Wait!” Blueblood cried desperately, still trying to win over the furious king. His heart leaped into his throat suddenly, springing into panic. “What if I could prove to you that I was?” The king didn't answer, but Blueblood tried anyways. He tried as hard as he could, focusing on the mark Brook had drawn on his forehead. He felt a strange tingling sensation, but the guards ignored him. He focused with all his might, desperately trying to make some magic – any magic – happen.

Closer and closer the guards came, spears outstretched. Blueblood began to shake, and he could feel his heart pounding furiously in his chest. Brook tried to keep between him and the soldiers, but there were too many. Blueblood's mark bristled faintly. Each hair turned gold, and a sparking glow came off them. Each single strand swayed in some unseen breeze, as if they were a part of a great, invisible current. Blueblood could feel himself reaching out: a tiny, weak strand of magic. It rippled and spluttered, dying feet away from his head. He gasped, and tried again.

“I am a unicorn,” he insisted, pushing himself into the mark. “I am Prince Blueblood Star!” The king stared, suddenly silent. He looked on in awe at the tiny, weak magic emanating from Blueblood's forehead. His eyes darted about, and an expression of disbelief came across his face.

“It can't be,” he said quietly. “You can't be a unicorn. You can't be Blueblood.” His brow furrowed slowly. “There must be some trick,” he said. His expression grew furious again. “This is just some Equestrian trick! Celestia is just trying to get me to let my guard down! I will not stand for her

coming in and trying to rule my country! I will not have her trying to rule over my ponies! I refuse to be fooled by some... cheap parlor trick!"

"Is that what it is?"

Then there was silence. For just a moment, everything seemed still. No pony moved. Even the rippling lights along the walls seemed to freeze in place. The world was still, and silent, save for a single voice. It was strong, yet soft, and ancient. It seemed to come from everywhere at once, echoing through the hall as cold and clear as ice.

"Why do you blind yourself, Ocean Gold?"

The king's eyes bulged, and he sank into the back of his throne. The water in the room shifted and bulged, as if there were some enormous creature swimming beneath it. It stilled in an instant, as if it had become glass, and once more there was silence. Then, slowly, a figure rose from behind the king's throne.

It was an enormous, aqua sea pony, the biggest Blueblood had ever seen. It dwarfed every other pony in the room, easily twice their size. A horn protruded from its forehead in a perfect tight spiral, decorated with a crown even more ornate than the king's own. The most beautiful wrappings Blueblood had ever seen draped across his shoulders, shimmering with every colour of the rainbow and tied with a medallion made from solid mother-of-pearl. It was decorated with an emblem that Blueblood had never seen before: some bizarre, almost living symbol made of twists and curls that seemed to shift and warp as the mother-of-pearl shimmered in the trembling lights.

The pony's mane hung in heavy dreadlocks, each a living, swirling eddy of white water. His eyes were a piercing pale blue, locked dead on Blueblood. A long flipper swung out of the water, wrapping around the throne. The sea pony looked down impassively on the king, who seemed to be trying to become one with his chair.

"P-Prince Tidus," the king said weakly, suddenly devoid of his rage.

"I know you do not share my and my kin's eyes," Tidus said slowly, "but is it truly so difficult for you to see? Horn or no, there can be no mistaking this

pony.”

“You mean,” the king said, “this is really Blueblood?” Tidus nodded. He left the throne, gliding across the open floor to Blueblood. He inspected him carefully, and his eyes glowed briefly.

“Yes,” he said. “This is a unicorn. I recognize his face: he looks like his father.” Tidus smiled faintly at Blueblood. “Do you remember me, foal?” Blueblood gaped at the divine figure before him and shook his head slowly.

“I’m... sorry, Prince Tidus,” he said, “but I don’t.” Tidus nodded.

“I visited you when you were born,” he said. “I always visit when Celestia’s family has a new foal. She is a good friend of mine, you see. We met when she and her sister took the sun and moon.” Blueblood blinked at this.

“Really?” he asked. “But that was thousands of years ago.” Prince Tidus nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “Time goes by so fast, it seems.” He turned back to the king and nodded. “There is no doubt in my mind,” he said, “that this pony is Blueblood Star. Celestia visited me as she did you, Ocean Gold. All she wants is him back. She meant no insult. Why must you place my children in harm’s way with your pride?”

“I...” the king said, shrinking back, “I had no idea that he was here! I thought that he might have been kidnapped by somepony else! Or, or, that he had simply run off! It was Celestia who persisted, your divinity, not I!”

“The loss of a loved one is stressful,” Tidus said, “even for creatures such as she and I. All she wants is her foal returned to her.”

“O-of course,” the king said weakly. “I’ll arrange for a transport immediately. The fastest ship. We’ll send him straight down the River Aloe, right up to the mountains. He’ll be home within the month.” He smiled hopefully, and Tidus nodded.

“This is good,” he said, turning back to Blueblood. “You must be pleased to be going home, foal.”

In truth, Blueblood was still having trouble believing it all. After everything that he had been through, he had given up on ever seeing his home again. A slow, earnest smile spread across his face.

"I'm going home," he said. "I'm going home!" He turned to his master excitedly, saying, "Master, this is wonderful! I can finally go home! Isn't this fantastic? I'll be able to see mother and Auntie again. You can give mother your letter – I'm sure that she'll forgive you if she knows how sorry you are, master. And she'll want to thank you for helping me, I know she will. We can get your chambers set up in the royal family's wing. Canterlot is a wonderful city, and you'll never have to worry about anypony recognizing you at all. It'll be... it'll be..." Blueblood's smile faded as he saw his master's expression. The old pony still looked ancient, and pained.

"...Master?" Blueblood asked. Brook lowered his head faintly.

"I can't go with you, Blueblood," he said. An incredible pain struck Blueblood, as if somepony had run him through. His mouth hung open limply, but he closed it and swallowed.

"You can't..." he echoed. Brook nodded slowly. "Why not?" Blueblood asked. He didn't need to ask. He already knew the answer. But he needed to hear it. It was as if it wouldn't be real until he heard it from his master.

"I'm the general of Aloa," he said. "I would never be allowed in Equestria. Even after you end the war... I couldn't." He sighed weakly. Blueblood nodded slowly, his expression slowly fading, just as Brook's had. The two looked at each other slowly.

To any other pony it would seem as though they were simply staring in silence. No pony in the room knew just what was happening, save for them. No pony understood the nature of the silent exchange. No pony noticed Brook's expression become pained with loneliness, nor could they see Blueblood fighting against tears. They only saw two silent ponies, staring. Blueblood took a step forward, pressing his neck gently against Brook's. Brook sighed, and wrapped a hoof around him.

"Be strong, Blueblood," the old pony said. "Be strong for your ponies."

"I'll try, master," Blueblood said. "For you." He nuzzled Brook gently. "Can you... at least come with me to the border?" he asked. "I want you to be there with me." Brook smiled. His smile was like the sun, bright and full of an amazing, all-encompassing warmth.

"Of course I will," he said. The king sat up in his throne, and scoffed.

"My general!?" he demanded. "Go to the border? Unacceptable! I need him here, in case the Equestrians attack in the meantime. Or what if you're attacked at the border!? I won't have it. White Brook will stay here." Both Brook and Blueblood stared at the king in horror, but Tidus turned on him. His gaze was like ice; it seemed to chill the very air.

"Perhaps," he said coldly, "your general might escort Blueblood as a body guard. As a show of good will between the countries, of course, and to keep him safe on the trip?" The king sank back in his chair.

"Ah... of course," he said. "Excellent suggestion, Prince Tidus. Brook will escort the prince as a show of good will. To the border, of course."

"Very good," Tidus said, his tone warming considerably. Blueblood smiled, and pressed his neck against Brook's. It broke his heart to know that Brook couldn't be with him, but he was determined to make the most of what time they had left. The throne room was silent, and warm. Wet Mane stood, stepping forward.

"Your Majesty," he said to the king, "I would like to go with the prince as well." Once again, all eyes turned to him. The king raised an eyebrow.

"You are one of the ponies who kidnapped the prince to begin with," he said after a moment. "Why would you want to escort him? For that matter, what makes you think you would be allowed to? You are responsible for causing an international incident." Wet bowed his head ashamedly.

"I believed that we were acting under orders from Your Highness," he said. "Even so, what I helped do to Prince Blueblood was horrible. I want the chance to make it right." he raised his head, and spoke with more confidence. "Iron still has eight soldiers with him. They're all terrified of him, and will follow any order that he gives. If any one of those ponies comes close to the prince, I'll recognize them faster than any other soldier. Iron

might still be able to find him. He could try a sneak attack at any time." The king folded his hooves in front of his face, considering this. Azure drifted to the edge of the platform, leaning on it and speaking up.

"He's found them already," she said. "That Iron pony tried to attack them in town today." Wet turned around in shock.

"Iron is in Ys?" he asked. Blueblood nodded.

"She's right," he said. "He was the one who attacked us."

"If he's this close, that's all the more reason for me to go with the prince," Wet insisted. "Iron is completely insane. He'll try to kill the prince as soon as he's out in the open, and he doesn't care if the soldiers are killed. I don't think it even matters to him if he lives or dies." Prince Tidus peered slowly at the king, and for once the king did not shrink beneath his gaze.

"I understand," the king said. "If this Iron is so dangerous, getting Prince Blueblood out of Ys is top priority now." He nodded to Wet. "You will escort him to the border. If you keep him safe, you will be absolved of your crimes." Wet bowed.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," he said. The king nodded.

"You will all sleep in the inner sanctum tonight," he said. "I will arrange for a ship to take you to Equestria first thing tomorrow."

Chapter 15

A Battle is Fought

As midnight touched Ys, the city was silent. Hardly a single pony stirred in the night, tucked snugly in their warm beds. The wet season was on its way, and the ponies of Ys could already feel its damp chill beginning to creep into the air.

The moon was full and bright in the sky. It seemed almost unnaturally bright, as if it were trying to shed as much light as it could. The white stone buildings gleamed a faint, otherworldly blue, the moon's light reflecting off of them like mirrors. In the dark pool of the ocean, the city shone like a beacon. The gates were lowered along the outer walls, warding off all but the most important of ships. It was like a gigantic tortoise: protected from the outside by a great shell of white stone.

Guards crept within the city, sweeping the streets in twos and threes. They carried no torches; not because they were unnecessary, but because they did not want to be seen. They slunk through the streets, quietly making their ways into the homes of ponies and rousing them from their beds.

They were searching for a pair of ponies. One, they had been told, was a short red unicorn, plump of frame and cautious of demeanour. The other pony they searched for was a steel gray earth pony with a mad, dangerous glare.

The red unicorn paced around a small hut on the docks, barely big enough for the ten ponies which resided within. Eight were dressed in armour, skirting nervously along the edges of the building. None of them wanted to move too far into the building, for along the far wall sat the gray earth pony. He stared dead ahead, squinting in one eye from a deep cut above it. The wound had not been covered, and a rough scab ran along it. He glared fiercely at nothing in particular. His eyes were full of an almighty rage, burning like hellfire. His gaze had nothing but contempt and hatred for

all he beheld. The red unicorn would stop occasionally and peer at the earth pony.

"Blast," the unicorn said. "Damn and blast." The earth pony's eye twitched faintly, and the unicorn stopped pacing. He stared back, trying to maintain some semblance of coolness and superiority, but he felt himself failing beneath the gray pony's withering glare. He tried to shake the feeling.

"I told you to kill Brook first, Iron," he said. "I told you he was dangerous. But did you listen to me? N -"

"YES," Iron interrupted. "I did. I tried to kill the old pin-head first. I wasn't expecting that... thing."

"That thing..." the ambassador said, rubbing his eyes. "You mean the sea pony? You are a trained soldier, Iron. I would have thought you could handle a single sea pony mare..." He looked back at Iron, and took a cautious step back. Iron's glare had intensified, and he seemed to radiate an ungodly heat.

"I can handle a single mare," Iron hissed. "I can handle some idiot princeling. I could have handled some crippled old goat. He didn't even try to fight me, the coward."

"Oh didn't he?" Letter asked. "Then where did you get that wound?" Iron scowled deeper.

"He just tossed me away," he said. "He probably thought that was all it would take. The building was hurt worse than I was." Letter sighed, shaking his head.

"White Brook wouldn't... never mind," he said, shaking his head. "We have bigger things to worry about right now." Iron got to his hooves slowly and walked past the ambassador. The red pony tensed as Iron moved past, but the earth pony merely began to pace the room.

"Bigger problems," he said coldly. "Bigger problems." He peered back at the ambassador. "There are no bigger problems," he said. "The prince

needs to die. The old pony will die with him. Those are our 'big problems'." He smirked cruelly. "Not big at all."

"Forget about those," Letter said. The rising of a single eyebrow was all that changed on Iron's face.

"Forget about that?" he asked, his voice taking a harsh edge. "Killing them is what we've been trying to do. It's what we've been trying to do for months. Why would I just forget about that?" The last words were a hissing growl, the message of disapproval clear to everypony in the room. Several of the soldiers winced, pressing themselves against the walls. Letter faltered, but smoothed his curly mane and continued.

"Because we have a bigger problem right now, Iron," he repeated, hoping to calm the irate pony down. It didn't work. Iron growled fiercely, and Letter pressed on before he could interrupt. "They went to the palace. They have to have told the king about what happened. We missed our chance to take back the prince."

Iron was silent for a moment. His expression was completely blank, but his eyes were still brightly ablaze. His breathing began to come in ragged wheezes, and he trembled.

"WHAT?" he roared. All of the soldiers flinched back, and even Letter stepped away from the mad pony. Iron's shoulders heaved as he struggled to contain his rage. He marched across the room, his hooves thudding like sledgehammers against the wooden floor until he was practically nose-to-nose with Letter.

"What do you mean, we lost our chance?" he demanded, hissing through clenched teeth. Spittle flew from his mouth, and his eye twitched faintly.

"I mean," Letter said, trying to back away, "we can't attack him. He'll be surrounded by guards! They'll either keep him in the dungeons or escort him back home – one way or another, there's no way we'll be able to get close to him now. We're lucky if there aren't soldiers out there searching for us as we speak! We can't just run out and attack him!"

“Why not?” Iron seethed. “Because you clever unicorns are there protecting him? Bah! You all think you're so dangerous because of your magic. I can handle anything your little king can throw at me.” He leaned in to Letter's face, inches away. Letter could feel Iron's hot breath against him, ragged and shuddering. “I am going to kill the prince,” he said slowly. The fire from his eyes seemed to be creeping into his voice, giving it a terrifying, empty quality. Letter fought to keep from trembling, and stepped away from him.

“You can't,” he said, trying to regain his composure. “These aren't just civilian unicorns, Iron. These are trained soldiers. Attacking them would be suicide!”

“Not for me,” Iron hissed. He turned away from Letter, stalking back and forth across the room. The soldiers shuffled out of his way along the walls, giving him room to move where he pleased. Letter rubbed his eyes, and ran a hoof through his mane.

“Iron,” he said. “Listen to me. The prince made it to the palace. The king knows about what we did. We're probably wanted for treason and inciting war, and if the prince is still bitter about you cutting off his horn he could find much worse things for us to be found guilty of. Both Celestia and Tidus will want to get their hooves on us. We can't go after him. He's won. We need to get out of here, now!”

Iron stopped dead in the middle of the room. All of the soldiers had shifted away from him; nopony in the room could see his face. All they saw was his shoulders begin to tremble, and his head sink.

He spun in an instant, leaping across the room as he did so. His hoof caught Letter in the jaw, sending him flying to the floor.

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?” Iron roared at the unicorn. His face was a perfect expression of fury. Nothing else existed there. Nothing else could. His mouth hung open, teeth bared and tongue lolling out. His eyes bulged, threatening to leap out of his skull and attack Letter. They were consumed with rage, months of madness and hatred boiling in his mind like searing pitch. He roared wordlessly, stomping his hooves. The wooden floor splintered beneath the blows, and the soldiers tried to sink into the walls.

Letter struggled to get back to his hooves, his jaw aching fiercely from Iron's blow. The gray pony put his hoof against Letter's chest, pushing him to the ground. He stared into Letter's eyes, the red pony trembling in fright.

"What. Did. You. Say?" Iron asked again, slowly this time. There was no less of an edge to the words.

"W-we need to get out of here," Letter said. "There's nothing we can do! We have to run, Iron, or they'll find us for certain! We'll be flogged, skinned alive, dipped in boiling oil!" Iron didn't seem to hear him, pushing his hoof harder into the fat pony's chest.

"You said he won," Iron growled. "The princeling has NOT won! He's a spoiled damn brat! A nuisance! I WON'T LET HIM GET AWAY! I'LL FIND HIM, AND I'LL KILL HIM! HE WILL NOT GET AWAY FROM ME, YOU FAT! COWARD!"

"Iron, please!" Letter pleaded, trying vainly to reason with the mad pony. "We'll be killed! We have to get out of here! A ship is going to the Eastern Islands in an hour! We can board it, and they'll never find us. We won't be in danger. The prince doesn't matter any more -"

"COWARD!" Iron roared in Letter's face. "You fat, stupid coward! If it wasn't for you that prince would have been dead months ago!" He took his hoof off of Letter's stomach, stalking across the room. "You told me to wait!" he snarled. "You told me to wait for when the time was ready. I could have killed him when they were dragging him across the country! I could have killed him at the auction. I could have marched into the old pin-head's house and killed them both right then and there! IT WAS YOU!" He spun on Letter again, and the ambassador scrambled away from him. Iron marched forward, backing Letter into a wall. "IT'S YOUR FAULT HE'S STILL ALIVE!" the gray pony yelled. "AND NOW YOU WANT TO JUST RUN AWAY?" He reared up, and Letter flinched.

For the briefest of moments, Letter thought he would die. He thought that Iron would bring his hooves down, crushing him into oblivion just as he had done to the poor soldier months ago. At least he wouldn't suffer, he thought to himself. The moment stretched longer and longer, and Letter realized that he was not dead. He peeked an eye open, looking up at Iron.

The gray pony was still reared in the air, but he had stopped. There was a puzzled expression on his face. He seemed to be pondering something. He put his hooves down slowly, and Letter saw him start to smile. It was small at first, but it grew quickly. An idea was forming in Iron's mad mind, and a perverse grin crept across his face. It was the most purely cruel thing that Letter had ever seen, and it terrified him to his very core.

"Run away," Iron said slowly. "Run away! Go on, fat stallion, run away!" He gave a barking laugh. "Run onto your boat! I don't need you!" He walked up to one of the soldiers along the walls, who shrank away from him. "All I need is soldiers," Iron said. "Soldiers who can follow orders... like you all, right?" The soldier gulped, and saluted weakly. Iron grinned, and looked at the rest of the soldiers. They all saluted as well, and Iron turned back to Letter.

"Run away, fat stallion!" he laughed. "We'll take a boat of our own. Your precious king will let his guard down eventually. The prince will be alone." He leaned in to Letter's face once more, grinning evilly, and said, "I know exactly where it will be."

Blueblood woke slowly in Ys Palace. The bizarre feeling he knew so well was more powerful than ever before, here. It was as if he could feel every gentle shift in the air, every smooth thread in the soft silk sheets on the plush bed. He could even feel the cold marble floors outside. He struggled to sit up in the oversized bed, yawning widely.

The apartment he had been given was beyond lavish. Blue and green silk clothes were draped over every available surface, and all of the furniture was made of expertly polished and worked mahogany. Mother-of-pearl ornaments decorated the room, and the paintings of masters hung on the walls. Compared to his spartan bedroom in Brook's home, it all seemed so excessive. He rolled out of bed, brushing his long mane into place, and walked to a window.

It was still dark outside. In the distant east, Blueblood could see a line of orange light peeking over the horizon. He sighed, and shook his head. He would board a boat soon, and in less than a month he would be home. Part of him was excited. He would, after all, finally be able to see his

mother and aunt again. Thinking of his poor mother, how worried she must be over him, broke his heart. He wanted desperately to tell her that he was alright, and that she didn't have to worry.

More than excited, though, he was frightened. A lingering fear had come over him after the discussion in the throne room. He had ignored it while they made plans to return him home, and he had ignored it during the feast Prince Tidus had insisted be held in his honour. He had managed to ignore it long enough to fall into a fitful slumber, but he knew he couldn't avoid it for much longer. Soon he would have to face the fear. If not on the boat, surely he would confront it the moment he left Brook's side. He would face it the moment he set foot in Canterlot Palace, perhaps for the rest of his life. For now, though, he could ignore it again. A light rapping came from his door. Blueblood beckoned for the knocker to enter, and a young maid peeked in.

"Your Highness Prince Blueblood," she said quietly. "I'm sorry... were you already woken?" Blueblood shook his head.

"Not by a servant," he said. "I woke on my own. May I help you?"

"I was told to tell you that the ship is ready, Your Highness," she said, bowing. "It is prepared to leave whenever you are ready. Would you, ah, like me to fetch somepony to help you get ready?"

"That's alright," Blueblood said, walking away from the window. He lifted his wrappings from the small desk beside his bed, winding them around his neck. "I'm ready to go." He walked up to the blinking maid, and the pair were silent, staring at one another. Blueblood smiled awkwardly.

"I'm... afraid I don't know my way around the palace," he said quietly. "Could you lead the way to the ship?"

"Oh!" the maid said, jumping. "Yes, of course Your Highness. I'm very sorry..."

They trotted through the decadent hallways, silent save for the soft clop clop clopping of their hooves across the floors. Eventually the maid lead him into a large room with a wide canal cutting straight through the middle of it, leading into the city and out to the ocean. A small, two-masted

vessel floated on the water, and several ponies were gathered around it. Most were the ship's crew, readying the boat to sail, but there was also a small group of soldiers. They were accompanied by the king, Wet Mane, and Brook. Prince Tidus and Azure sat in the canal as well. Blueblood approached the ship, thanking the nervous maid. She darted off to attend to her other duties, and Blueblood joined the group at the boat.

“Good morning, Blueblood,” Brook said, nodding. Blueblood nodded back, and smiled.

“Good morning master,” he said. The king nodded as well.

“Prince Blueblood,” he said. “The ship is just being prepared now. It will take you to a small village east of the Equestrian-Aloan border.”

“Riverbank?” Blueblood asked. The king nodded.

“Yes... how did you know?” He raised an irritable eyebrow, careful not to let Prince Tidus see it. Blueblood rubbed his neck.

“It was the first town I came to,” he said. “It's as far east as I know. And I suppose it seemed appropriate.” The king peered strangely at Blueblood, but continued.

“You'll be accompanied by a small company of guardsponies, as well as a few other small ships. From Riverbank you'll board a trade carriage. The trade routes are kept open during war time, so it should bring you all the way to the palace.” Blueblood nodded.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty,” he said. The king sighed heavily, and shook his head.

“No,” he said slowly. Out of the corner of his eye Blueblood saw Prince Tidus smile faintly. “When you see your aunt again,” the king continued, “tell her I wish to apologize for being so strong headed. I didn't want this war either.” Blueblood nodded.

“Of course,” he said. A husky sailor, the captain of the boat, trotted down the gangplank.

"We're ready to set sail," he announced gruffly. "We can ship out any time, Yer' Majesty." The king nodded.

"Good," he said. "Tell your sailors to be ready, then. You sail immediately." The captain nodded, and trotted back aboard the ship. Wet Mane turned and gave an order to the soldiers, who all marched aboard after the captain.

As the soldiers climbed aboard, Blueblood noticed Azure staring at the ship intently. She was chewing on her hoof, using the other to balance herself as she leaned on the bank of the canal for a better view. Blueblood found himself watching her hesitantly as the ponies boarded. He was the last to step on the gangplank, and he turned away from Azure.

"Wait!" she called out. Blueblood paused, and turned to her. She rubbed her neck awkwardly, asking, "Can I... talk to you?"

"Of course," Blueblood said. The king gave an impatient sigh, but Tidus turned to him sharply.

"Ocean Gold," the god said, "may I speak with you as well?"

"Ah... of course," the king said. He and Tidus moved away from the two young ponies, leaving them alone. Blueblood walked up to the bank where Azure leaned. She pulled herself out of the canal, sitting so she was at the same height as Blueblood.

The golden tips in her mane gleamed in the morning sun, and her eyes seemed to sparkle. She rubbed her neck nervously as Blueblood sat beside her.

"So..." she said, "Blueblood... or I guess I should call you Your Highness?" Blueblood shook his head.

"Please don't," he said. Azure giggled. Her laughter was like bells, even when she was nervous.

"Alright... I guess you really don't seem all that princely." Blueblood smiled shyly.

"I don't really feel it either," he said. They smiled sadly at one another for a moment, sitting in awkward silence. Finally, Azure sighed.

"I guess this is goodbye, isn't it?" she asked. Blueblood nodded.

"It is," he said. "I don't know if I'll ever come back to Aloa." Azure's eyes cast downwards, and for a moment Blueblood thought that she seemed disappointed. "Azure?" he asked. She looked up, and he pawed the ground. "Why did you come to Ys?"

"I heard that pony talking about you," she said. "The one who tried to... attack you. He said that he was going to kill you. I came to warn you."

"But why?" Blueblood asked. "You must have known he was dangerous. Why risk it for a pony you hardly know?" Azure laughed quietly, and smiled.

"It wasn't for a pony I hardly know," she said, nudging him gently. "It was for you." Her smile turned shy, and she looked away from him. "I... I dunno. I know we only met once or twice, but..." she looked back at him, and smiled wider. "I guess I care about you," she said. Blueblood smiled warmly.

"Thank you, Azure," he said. "I care about you too." Azure giggled, and threw her arms around Blueblood.

"I'm gonna miss you, Blueblood," she said. "Will you write to me when you get home?" Blueblood paused for a moment, before hugging her back.

"I'll try," he said. "But how will you get it?" Azure held him at arm's length, and smiled.

"I'm a messenger," she said. "I'll find it. Don't you worry." They hugged again, and Azure jumped back into the canal.

"Goodbye, Blueblood!" she called, waving from the water. Blueblood waved back from the gangplank.

“Goodbye, Azure,” he called down to her. He trotted onto the boat, and the gangplank was raised. The sails were unfurled, and Prince Tidus returned to the ship.

“Are you ready?” he asked. The captain of the ship nodded.

“Aye, Your Majesty!” he called. Prince Tidus reared his head, and his horn lit up. The water beneath the boat swelled, and Blueblood was almost thrown back as the little boat rocketed out of its dock. A swell ran behind the boat, pushing in powerfully through the city, and out of the port. It nearly skipped across the waters onto the ocean. Its trajectory was unstoppable and unchangeable, pointed directly at the tip of Aloa.

For a brief moment Blueblood thought that they would crash, but as it reached the great land mass, the ship began to slow, and the captain spun the wheel to the side. The ship shifted to the side, sliding deftly into the river delta. The sailors scrambled about the ship, working to dodge the tiny craft around the small islands in the delta. All horns were alight as the boat shifted and rocked. They seemed to miss each island by inches, and after a few nerve-racking moments they found themselves on the peaceful water of the River Aloe. The boost the prince had provided still carried the boat swiftly down the river, now with the added power of the wind in its sails. The sailors all laughed heartily as Blueblood picked himself up off the deck. As far as they were concerned, the worst of the trip was over. They slid into a steady pace down the river, following the path it cut to Riverbank.

The days came and went without incident on the boat. The sun and moon rose and fell across the sky, seeming swifter every day. The time almost seemed to pass too quickly for Blueblood. He knew that with each passing day they moved closer and closer to Riverbank, and to Canterlot. With each passing day he grew more and more afraid of what returning home would bring. He couldn't help but think of how he had acted in the throne room at Ys. True, it had been to prove who he was, to stop the war. True, he had had every right to be upset. None of that changed the fact that on that day, standing in the throne room of Ys and addressing the princess of Aloa, he had been overwhelmingly noble.

He hadn't thought of his life in Canterlot for months. He hadn't felt the pangs of guilt when he thought of how selfish he had been in so long he

had almost forgotten about them. Now that he approached his home once again, though, he couldn't fight the rising feeling of fear in his gut.

A week passed aboard the boat. Blueblood spent much of the time sitting along the banisters, watching the scenery. His master joined him, sometimes. The old pony seemed more quiet than ever during the trip, and Blueblood could see that he was in pain. No doubt he felt much the same as Blueblood. When they did sit together, they were almost completely silent.

Brook sat with him now. They were staring over the edge of the ship into the passing forest. They had seen strange creatures creeping through the trees, and beautiful ponds and waterfalls in the depths of the wild woods. Blueblood couldn't help but think of how much there must have been left to see from Brook's home. He sighed, and shook his head. This forest reminded him of Brook's home to a strange degree. In fact, the two seemed almost the same. He narrowed his eyes, and watched more closely. As the ship rounded a slow bend, Blueblood's eyes bulged.

There, not a hundred feet away from the river, was Brook's house. It seemed somehow ancient, now. The beams seemed to sag beneath their own weight, and the building had taken on a dull, gray quality. Blueblood's heart sank as he watched it drift past. This would be the last time he would see the old house. The place where so much had happened to him, and he would never see it again. He swallowed.

"The crops..." he said quietly. "I think they're ready to be harvested." Brook looked silently out at the house. He nodded slowly.

"I think you're right," he said. The two stallions watched the house as they drifted by. Blueblood found himself craning his neck to see it for as long as he could. Eventually the ship rounded another bend, and the house slipped out of sight. Blueblood stared after it for what felt like ages. He could feel his heart rise in his chest. It was as if all the time he had spent in Aloa was trapped in the old house, trailing away from him like a thread on a bolt of cloth. All the time he had spent with his master, all he had learned and all the good he had done, slowly slipping away. Fear crept into his heart, fear he could no longer run from.

"Master?" he asked quietly. Brook turned to him.

"Yes?" he asked. The old pony's voice was quiet, and sad. Blueblood swallowed.

"I'm afraid," he said. Brook sat up a bit straighter.

"Are you afraid of Iron?" he asked. "We won't let him hurt you, Blueblood. I won't let him." Blueblood shook his head.

"That's not it," he said. "I... I know I don't have to worry about Iron." He lowered his head faintly. "I'm afraid of going back to Canterlot," he said. Brook blinked at him.

"Aren't you happy to be going home?" he asked.

"I am," Blueblood said. "I... I want to see my mother again, and my aunts. But..." he found it difficult to say out loud. Brook probed gently.

"Are you afraid they won't recognize you?" he asked. Blueblood shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm afraid of... of..." He looked up at his master. The old pony was waiting patiently for him to finish. Blueblood swallowed. "I'm afraid of me," he said. Brook tilted his head quizzically. Now that Blueblood had finally admitted it, he found his fears pouring out to the old pony one last time.

"I know you don't want to believe me," he said, "but before I met you... I wasn't a good pony, master. I was just a spoiled brat. I took from everypony, and never gave anything back. I was stupid, and selfish, and ignorant." He leaned against the banister, running a hoof over where his horn used to be. "I remember the day that I was kidnapped," he said. "I remember everything about it. Do you know what the very first thing I did was? I insulted a maid for being an earth pony." He shook his head ashamedly. "I was... I was everything wrong with nobility. My mother is a wonderful mare. She'd never be as bad as I was... I don't know how she could even stand to look at me. I know that I can't run away from who I was, master. I know that I have to accept what I did... but I don't want to go back to being like that." He looked up sadly at the old pony. There was an expression of pure understanding on Brook's face. It was the look he had

always given, Blueblood realized. From the very moment they had met Brook had understood him perfectly.

"You taught me everything," Blueblood said. "You taught me how to be good. You taught me how to see beyond the tip of my nose, and how to work hard. I owe you everything master, and..." He sighed. "I don't know if I can be good without you. I'm afraid if I go back to Canterlot I'll just be Blueblood again." For once, Brook didn't pause. He didn't stop to think, or hum to himself. He nudged Blueblood's face with his nose softly.

"I taught you something else, too," he said. "I taught you that broken things can be fixed." Blueblood looked up at him. The old pony brushed Blueblood's mane aside, and shook out two small iron nails. He held them in his hoof, showing them to Blueblood.

"That shed we built together is still standing," he said. "It still has pieces from the old shed, pieces that we salvaged. That plough you broke is still good too. Both of those things were broken, Blueblood. But now they're fixed, and they're stronger than they ever were before." He smiled warmly at Blueblood. "When I bought you, you were broken too. You hated yourself for what you had done, and you wanted to run away from it. But now? You're so strong, now. You're fixed, Blueblood."

"But is being strong good?" Blueblood asked. "You saw me in Ys, how I acted to the princess."

"You stood up for yourself," Brook said.

"I was angry with her," he said. "I hated how she looked down on me because she thought I was an earth pony. I was so close to snapping at her. I was so close to being the stupid pony I used to be."

"But you weren't," Brook said. He brushed Blueblood's mane, smiling warmly. "What you said wasn't cruel, Blueblood. It wasn't stupid, and it wasn't selfish." He pressed his neck against Blueblood's gently, and laughed. "The old Blueblood you're afraid of? He wouldn't have held back. But you did. You're stronger now than he ever could have been." He smiled, and the white stallion found a slow smile creeping across his face in turn.

"You are a good pony, Blueblood," Brook said. "You were always a good pony, you just needed to see it. I believe in you." Blueblood laughed, and pressed his head against Brook's chest.

"Thank you, master," he said. "I'll miss you so much... but I'll try my hardest to be good without you." Brook smiled and nuzzled him gently.

"You will be," he said. He paused, brushing Blueblood's mane gently. "But we still have some time together... I saw that the captain has a Casualty set in his cabin." Blueblood looked up at his master, grinning.

"Do you think he would let us play?" he asked. Brook smiled.

"I think so," he said.

The next week was at the same time the happiest and most painful week of Blueblood's life. He and Brook played Casualty almost relentlessly, only pausing to rest their minds. In these times they would watch the scenery pass over the bow together, or read books that Brook had packed.

Brook played circles around Blueblood at Casualty, as it always had been. As day after day passed, though, the white stallion began to improve more and more. The margin by which Brook won was smaller with every game. Blueblood was always focused intently on the matches, determined to do his best. Bit by bit, piece by piece, he built and improved his strategies.

The days passed as they ever had, and the ship moved along the river. It reached the mainland, leaving the Aloe behind and shifting into the muddy Crate River. They passed small settlements and tiny, ramshackle houseboats along the river as they made their way to Equestria, and Blueblood could see mountains rising in the distance. It was not long before they reached their destination: Riverbank.

The small ship pulled into port without a fuss. The docks were almost abandoned, most of the sailors having shipped out to Ys to lend their boats to the war effort, or to train as military ponies. The only ponies left at the docks were shipping boat crews and the dock managers.

The ship and its accompaniment slipped alongside the rough wooden docks, and the sailors began jumping down to secure them. Blueblood watched over the railings, Brook at his side. The two stallions looked on sadly as the gangplank was lowered.

A Casualty board lay in the front of them. The pieces were scattered in irregular formations about the board. Brook sighed, and looked down.

“Your move, Blueblood,” he said. Blueblood blinked, as if he only just remembered that they were playing, and looked down as well. After a moment's thought he moved a piece, and Brook made his move in response almost instantly. They moved their pieces back and forth only a few more times before Brook set a knight on Blueblood's throne.

“I win,” he declared. Blueblood looked down at the board, and laughed.

“No real surprise, I guess,” he said. “I'd hoped I would be able to beat you at least once... I guess not.” Brook smiled faintly.

“Would you have rather I'd let you win?” he asked. Blueblood smiled, and shook his head.

“Never,” the white stallion replied.

The activity on the docks had slowed, and Blueblood saw the other soldiers disembarking from their ships. The soldiers aboard their boat were preparing to move out, as well. Wet Mane had them standing in a line, and with a salute they all marched down the gangplank and onto the docks. Wet turned away from the soldiers, trotting slowly to Blueblood and Brook. Blueblood shied away slightly. He had gotten more used to Wet in the weeks past, but in truth it was still a bit difficult to be so near to one of his kidnappers. Still, Wet was kind enough, and he almost seemed to tiptoe around Blueblood, as if he himself were afraid of the prince. He stopped at a respectful distance from the pair, and removed his helmet.

“General White Brook,” he said, “Your Highness. The carriage is waiting for us just outside the city. I'm sure they'd like to get going soon... I'm sure we all would.”

"Yes..." Blueblood said slowly. "Yes, of course." He glanced back at Brook, and asked, "Could you... give us a moment alone?" Wet nodded.

"Of course, Your Highness," he said. He trotted down the gangplank, leaving Brook and Blueblood alone on the boat. Blueblood looked down at the board, and sighed.

"I'll miss you, master," he said. Brook nodded slowly.

"I'll miss you too, Blueblood. It will be lonely without you at home." He sighed sadly, and looked away. Blueblood smiled hopefully.

"Once the war is over, you could always move to Canterlot," he suggested. Brook shook his head.

"I couldn't," he said. "I couldn't face your mother or aunt after what I did." Blueblood smiled sadly.

"I understand," he said. "I still believe that mother would forgive you... but I understand." He leaned forward, pressing his neck into Brook's. "Will you write to me?" he asked.

"Of course," Brook answered. Blueblood chuckled gently.

"And will you actually send the letters this time?" He felt Brook chuckle as well.

"Yes," he said. He leaned away from Blueblood, and reached into his wrappings. He pulled out the second letter from his study, and gave it to Blueblood.

"When you see your mother," he said, "will you give her this?" He smiled faintly, and said, "I should finish what I started." Blueblood took the letter.

"I will," he said. "I'll send you her reply."

"I... appreciate that," Brook said softly. The two ponies were silent for a while, neither moving. Finally, Blueblood threw his forelegs around Brook's neck. Brook laughed and did the same.

“Thank you so much, master,” Blueblood said. “I’ll miss you.”

“Be strong,” Brook said softly. “Be strong for your ponies. Be strong for your country. I know you can do it.”

“Thank you, master,” Blueblood said. The two ponies stepped away from each other, and Blueblood turned to walk away.

“Wait,” Brook said suddenly. Blueblood turned around and saw Brook reaching into his wrappings once again. He pulled out a package, and gave it to Blueblood. “I want you to have these,” he said. “A gift.” Blueblood smiled, and took the package gratefully.

“Thank you, master,” he said. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Blueblood,” Brook said quietly.

Blueblood trotted across the ship and down the gangplank. Wet was waiting for him there. Most of the soldiers had gone, save for two or three.

“The rest of the soldiers are sweeping the town,” he said. “They’re checking to see if Iron and the other soldiers are hiding somewhere in Riverbank.” Blueblood nodded slowly. He wasn’t keen on being reminded that Iron could be nearby, but he knew he had to be strong.

“Either way, we should be enough,” Wet said. “If Iron shows up we’ll concentrate on him. The other soldiers won’t be fighting too hard, and they’ll surrender when he goes down. Are you ready to go?” Blueblood nodded again. He breathed deeply, and stood straight and tall.

“I’m ready,” he said. Wet nodded, and gave the order to move out. The four soldiers surrounded Blueblood in a diamond formation, with Wet at point. They trotted across the dock and onto one of the town’s many spoke streets.

They walked in silence, for the most part. Blueblood could see all the way down the street to a small opening in the distant wall. The streets seemed deserted; Blueblood assumed that the soldiers sweeping the streets had shooed the citizens indoors.

The guards' heads were on swivels as they walked, searching back and forth for any signs of trouble. Even Wet looked to and fro, although his heart did not seem to be in it. In fact, he seemed almost nervous compared to the others. Blueblood thought that he might be worried about Iron as well, but he was proven wrong when Wet spoke suddenly.

"Your Highness?" the yellow unicorn asked. Blueblood blinked at him.

"Yes?" he asked. Wet looked over his shoulder, and Blueblood saw a familiar gleam in his eye.

"I... wanted to apologize," Wet said quietly. Blueblood simply stared, and Wet turned away. "What I did to you was horrible, and I don't expect you to forgive me, but I still wanted to apologize anyway." Blueblood still stared, blinking. He wasn't sure what he should say. He wasn't certain if he had forgiven Wet, or if he even could. To say what Wet and the other soldiers did was horrible was an understatement, to be sure, and Blueblood didn't know if such a thing could be forgiven. All he knew is that, in spite of it, he didn't feel any real malice towards the yellow pony.

"You were only following orders," he said quietly. "I forgive you." He saw Wet smile faintly, and the soldier coughed gently.

"Your Highness?" he asked again.

"Yes?"

"May I ask you a favour?" Blueblood tilted his head quizzically.

"A favour? What could I do for you?" he asked. Wet lowered his head.

"Iron... killed one of the soldiers. He was my friend." He sighed sadly. "After I left, I heard that his body was sent to Canterlot. I don't know if it's true or not but..." Blueblood smiled as he trailed off.

"I can look into it," he said. Wet smiled back at him.

"If he is there," he said, "could you bury him? His name was Brig... he was a good pony. He deserves a proper burial."

"I will," Blueblood said, nodding.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Wet said. Blueblood shook his head.

"No... it's nothing," he said. Wet smiled back anyway.

The small procession returned to silence, trotting quickly down the street. They were getting close to the wall, now, and the street was widening out. There was a small square just before the gate. As they approached it, Wet Mane slowed. Blueblood peered worriedly at him, and the other soldiers stopped as well.

"Did anypony else hear that?" Wet asked. The soldiers looked around.

"This is the direction the first group went," one of the soldiers said. "It was the first area we swept. If anypony was here, we'd have found them." There was a soft murmur of agreement from the other soldiers. None moved, however, and they fell into silence. A swift breeze whistled through, and Wet's head turned sharply as a small metallic noise came from an alleyway. It was quiet at first, but it grew louder. Finally, a silver helmet rolled out of the alleyway, coming to a stop and Wet's hooves. The yellow pony stared at it, fear in his eyes, and took a step away from the alley.

There was a throaty chuckling, and a pony slowly faded into view. His dark fur blended with the shadows of the alley, but there could be no missing his eyes. They burned with an almighty hatred. Even the wound above the left eye seemed to glow with hellfire. It curved downward at a sickening angle, like a furrowed brow. He flashed a gleaming, toothy grin, giving him the look of a madly wry jester. He moved closer, the shadows melting away to reveal a steel gray earth pony.

"They found us," Iron said, laughing. Blueblood felt his legs tremble, and he shuffled back. More soldiers appeared from other alleyways, surrounding the small party. Wet's soldiers surrounded Blueblood, ready to defend him. It was Wet who acted first.

"Attack Iron!" he shouted. "Take him out first!" The gray earth pony laughed, and a soldier darted towards him. An ethereal axe appeared beside the unicorn's head, and he swung it at Iron's neck. The earth pony

reared back, the blade of the axe swinging harmlessly under his belly. He brought his hooves down hard on the soldier's head, caving in his helmet. He laughed heartily.

"I've got one of those too!" he cried. He reached behind himself, retrieving a sharp axe from its holder. He charged on the soldiers, laughing madly around the handle of the axe.

Wet's soldiers moved away from Blueblood, forming a defensive line. Wet fired bullets of air, but Iron dodged around them with no difficulty. The other two unicorns both unleashed geysers of flame, trying to trap Iron for Wet to attack. The earth pony simply tightened himself into a ball and leaped through the flames. His thick armour protected him from most of the heat, only singeing the tips of his mane. They smoked, creating a trail of mist as he ran towards them. He swung his axe into one of the soldiers, cutting through his armour like it was butter. The soldier was felled, and Iron turned to buck to the other. The soldier was sent flying, leaving only Wet at Blueblood's side.

Wet roared, rearing his head, and the earth below Iron's hooves erupted in a mass of dust and spikes. Iron leapt from spike to spike, dodging their keen tips deftly and using them to leap high into the sky. He leaped into the sun, and Wet squinted to find him. The yellow pony's eyes bulged, and he flung himself to the side just in time to avoid the axe than spun down from the heavens. It embedded itself in the ground, Iron landing shortly after it. The earth pony never skipped a beat, rocketing after Wet. He caught the unicorn with a headbutt in the chest, sending him sprawling backwards. Wet tumbled across the ground, coming to a still stop nearly a dozen feet away. Iron laughed cruelly.

"You thought that that would be enough for me? Hah! You damned pinheads are all the same, so damn sure of yourselves." He looked around cruelly at the felled soldiers, sneering. "What's your precious magic worth now, huh? NOTHING!" He laughed madly, stomping his hooves and kicking up dirt. Blueblood scrambled away from him, but Iron danced after him. He grabbed Blueblood's tail in his teeth, flinging the stallion across the street.

Blueblood struck the wall of a building heavily, falling limply onto the ground. He coughed, getting to his trembling hooves. He tried to run again, but one of Iron's soldiers blocked his path. They moved in on him, pressing

him against the wall. Iron retrieved his axe from the ground, and was approaching the group.

"You aren't worth anything anymore, princeling," he said darkly. His brow furrowed, morphing from perverse glee into an almost unholy rage. "You were never worth anything. Do you know what happens to worthless things? They get thrown out." He gave a barking laugh, even through his fury. "That's what happened to you, princeling. You got thrown away because nopony wanted you, and now I'm going to finish the job."

Blueblood shook violently, his heart pounding in his chest. Iron stood above him like a monstrous spectre, malevolent and untouchable. His laughter echoed in Blueblood's ears, his scarred, distorted face the picture of death itself. Blueblood tried to press himself into the wall.

"I-Iron..." he said weakly, but his voice failed him. His words died in his throat.

"Going to beg for your life?" Iron yelled. "Go ahead, beg! It won't make any difference, but at least we'll all know what you are! Just some spoiled damn brat! A weakling! A coward! Everything you ever had, handed to you on a silver platter!" He glowered at Blueblood intensely. "I HATE you," he growled. "I hate you so much. I've waited for so long to kill you... before I kidnapped you. I wanted to kill you for so long, and now there's nopony here to stop me. No fat, stupid ambassador to tell me the time isn't right. No aunt to protect you. Nopony. Nopony cares about you, princeling." He leaned in close, hissing in Blueblood's ear. "Nopony ever did." He roared with laughter, rearing back. Blueblood tried to scrambled away, but he felt the soldiers' magic take hold of him. It pressed him against the wall, holding him still as Iron drew back his axe. For a moment the world was silent. There was no sound, save for Blueblood's heart pounding in his ears. Iron seemed to move in slow motion, rearing back. Blueblood could see madness in his eyes.

There was a soft sound, like a droplet of water hitting a pond. Iron stood still for a moment. The soldiers stared blankly as he began to rise into the air, drifting away from Blueblood. Iron roared madly, flailing at Blueblood.

“DAMMIT!” he roared furiously, twisting in midair. “Let me down! I’ll kill the prince yet!”

“No, you won’t.”

All heads turned in the direction of the soft voice. Blueblood peeked around them, and in the middle of the street he saw a single, old stallion: White Brook.

He moved slowly down the street, an expression of pure determination on his face. He seemed almost young to Blueblood, but he moved like an ancient, tired pony. Iron screamed, thrashing in mid-air.

“Kill him!” he roared. “Kill that damned unicorn!” One of the soldiers stepped forward, his horn lighting up. His magic took hold of White Brook, but the green pony didn’t seem to care. He glance impassively at the soldier, who clutched his head and began to scream. The magic around Brook disappeared, and the old pony stood straight and tall as the soldiers looked on in fear and awe.

His voice was quiet, and gentle, but it seemed to come from everywhere at once. “You all know my name,” he said. “Your parents have told you stories of me.” His eyes began to glow softly, and his mane seemed to drip with water.

“The armies of El’Bia speak of me in hushed tones. The warrior bards of Acnipppo sing songs in my honour. I was the pony who protected you when Equestria attacked. I stood along the border as the hoards amassed, and I fought alongside the greatest mages this country has ever seen to hold them at bay. I led the attack on Canterlot Palace. I killed the crown prince of Equestria. I did battle with the goddess Celestia, and I lived to tell the tale. I am White Brook!” he declared. “I am the Raging River! And I will NOT let you hurt my colt!”

The dripping of his mane turned into a mighty torrent, a waterfall of white water. He reared his head and the torrent came alive, whipping across the street. Its tip was the head of a mighty dragon, snaking across the dusty ground. Iron’s soldiers tried to dodge and run away, but the dragon caught them one by one, slamming them into walls and swallowing them whole. In moments the soldiers lay limply on the ground, unconscious or worse.

Brook turned his attention to Iron, the mighty water dragon ripping him out of the air. He flung the earth pony against a wall, but Iron recovered at the last moment. He sprung off the wall, leaping at Brook. The ancient pony hopped away, dodging Iron's mighty blow. The dragon snaked around for another strike, but Iron grinned madly. He whipped his head backwards, flinging the axe at Blueblood. Brook's eyes bulged, the dragon changing course suddenly to catch the axe. Iron laughed madly at the distraction, rearing up. Blueblood watched in horror as Iron's hooves met home, sending Brook flying down across the street. The world seemed still for a moment. Brook didn't move, didn't even twitch. Blueblood forgot to breathe, watching his master. An incredible pain came into his heart and he gasped weakly, like a fish out of water.

Iron howled madly, laughing at the ancient body at his hooves. "DAMN UNICORNS!" he screamed. "YOU ALL THINK YOU'RE SO DAMNED GREAT! YOU'RE NOTHING! I'M THE GREAT ONE, NOT YOU!" He laughed cruelly, turning back on Blueblood. He trotted slowly down the street, as if he was savouring each hoofstep closer. Blueblood sat on the ground, unable to move.

"That's it, colt," Iron laughed. "The last pony who would have ever wanted to protect you, dead. I'd say you should just give up and kill yourself, but that would deprive me of the pleasure." His grin was the embodiment of cruelty. His entire body glowed with a perverse joy, as if the hellfire in his eyes had spread, and filled him up. He stood imposingly over Blueblood, laughing hysterically.

"I WON!" he roared to the heavens. He reared, preparing to strike.

Blueblood moved without thinking. A mighty fire raged in his belly, driving him like an engine. He threw himself forward, driving his head into Iron's exposed chest. The earth pony was flung backwards, landing on his back. He lay for a moment, stunned, giving Blueblood time to recover.

His head pounded from striking Iron's solid chest, but he he stood strong. He shook, not because of fear, but because of an incredible anger. He had watched his master die, and he had seen the pony who did it. Iron got to his hooves, glaring violently at Blueblood. Blueblood couldn't tell

whether his wide-open mouth was a grin, or a scowl. Whatever it was, Iron screamed at him.

“YOU THINK YOU CAN FIGHT ME?” he roared, whipping his head wildly. “YOU THINK YOU'RE A MATCH FOR ME?” He screamed wordlessly, charging at Blueblood. The white stallion leaped out of the way just in time, and Iron pounded his hooves against the building. Two deep cracks appeared in the wall, and Iron ran after Blueblood again.

Blueblood's heart pounded in his throat. The terrible fear of Iron was starting to rise again, and he tried his hardest to keep away. He had been stupid to attack Iron, he knew, but there was nothing else he could have done. Iron came close, and Blueblood lashed out with his front hooves. They caught Iron in the face, giving Blueblood just enough time to scramble away. Iron roared wordlessly, barrelling after Blueblood. He moved with frightening speed, driving his head into Blueblood's back and knocking him away. The white pony struggled upright, rolling out of the way of Iron's hooves as they struck down.

“I thought you wanted to fight!” Iron yelled. “Come here and fight me, colt!” He lashed out, bucking at Blueblood, but the prince ducked under the blow. He scrambled into the square, trying desperately to get away from the boxed-in streets. He had more room to run from Iron, here. He dodged away as the mad earth pony chased after him, only barely escaping. Iron caught him with a glancing blow, sending him spinning into a shop set up along a building. Iron launched himself at the shop, and Blueblood managed to throw himself away from it just in time. The tiny wooden stand exploded, sending shrapnel flying. Iron stood in the wreckage, flailing his head in search of Blueblood.

The prince had hidden behind another stall in the confusion. He covered his head, trying his hardest not to make a sound. Iron prowled the square, looking for any sign of him. The earth pony called out furiously, trying to egg him into battle.

“What the matter, princeling?” he called. “Waiting for somepony to come and save you? There's nopony coming, you damned brat! Come out here and face your death like a stallion, it'll be the first time in your life you've been one!”

Blueblood ignored him, his chest heaving. The gray earth pony was insane; even if he wasn't one of Equestria's best warriors, Blueblood would have never stood a chance against his savage attacks. He was going to lose this fight, and he was going to die. Equestria and Aloa would go to war, and both countries would burn. He breathed heavily, and shook. The fire in his gut was going out.

"There's nopony left to save you, colt!" Iron yelled again. "Even your precious White Brook is dead now! Hah! The old pin-head thought he was so damned special! Where is he now, huh! Dead on the ground!"

Blueblood pinned his ears against his head, trying to block out the taunts. He needed to escape, somehow. He needed to save Equestria and Aloa. He needed to get home. If he ran out of the stall, Iron would see him, and kill him. If he stayed there, Iron would find him eventually. He heard the splintering noise of Iron bucking another stall into oblivion, and the gray pony laughed madly.

"You're nothing!" Iron yelled. "Nothing without somepony to clean up after you! Nothing without your master! Worthless!"

The words pierced through to Blueblood. For a moment, he thought that Iron was right. He had never believed that he could be anything without Brook. He had never dared to believe that he could be a good leader, or even a good pony. But Brook had. Blueblood closed his eyes and breathed deeply, calming his pounding heart.

He stood suddenly, leaping onto the counter of the stall. The flame in his belly flared into an intense fire, its heat raging through his entire body. His eyes were set dead on Iron, full of an intense determination.

"If I'm nothing," he said, his voice strangely calm, "then why are you so concerned about me?" Iron's head snapped to him, and the gray pony roared madly. Blueblood hopped down from the counter, charging at Iron. Iron set his hooves, charging as well.

The two ponies met in the middle of the square. Their chests struck one another powerfully, sending dust flying. Blueblood had expected to be flung back by the blow, but he had merely been stopped, as had Iron. For a moment they stood, necks interlocked, pushing vainly. Iron began to push Blueblood back, lifting him off the ground. Blueblood lashed out, slamming

his head against Iron's. The gray pony didn't react, simply growling deeply as he pushed. In his lashings, Blueblood bit into Iron's wound. The scar opened, a fountain blood spraying out. It splattered on Blueblood's face and Iron reared back, screaming in agony.

"BASTARD!" he screamed, slamming his hooves down. Blueblood dodged out from beneath them just in time, and Iron turned into a flurry of lashing limbs. He was striking out blindly, trying to wipe the blood from his eye and to see again. Blueblood stared at him. There was no reason to his attacks, only fury. It took him a moment to see it, but Blueblood understood. Iron truly was insane, little better than an animal.

Iron finally managed to clear his eye, and he turned on Blueblood. He charged wildly, and Blueblood skipped to the side. He bucked out at the passing Iron, but the soldier dodged to the side. The buck was only a glancing blow. Whatever else was wrong with him, Iron's training still controlled his instincts. Blueblood had the advantage of reason and strategy, however. He goaded Iron into charging, skipping out of the way and attacking as he passed.

Around and around they went, moving through the square like dancers. Blueblood's heart thudded in his ears, and the fire rocked through his body. He could feel the blood pumping, feel his mind racing. Iron was screaming wordlessly, spittle and foam flying from his mouth as he charged. Blueblood turned, bucking him in the face. The earth pony flew backwards like he was a foal, tumbling across the cobbled ground. He jumped to his hooves, stomping madly. His hooves cracked the cobblestone, and he swung his head.

"YOU THINK YOU'RE WARRIOR?" he cried. "JUST BECAUSE OF SOME LUCKY BLOWS?" He charged at Blueblood again, and this time Blueblood met his charge. Once again they pounded against one another, dust flying away from the force of the impact. This time, however, it was not Blueblood who found himself skidding backwards.

The white stallion pushed as hard as he could. For a brief moment he was reminded of ploughing the fields at Brook's home. He pumped his legs steadily, working through the mad pony's strikes. He reared his head, throwing Iron to the ground. Iron rolled out of the way of Blueblood's

stomping hooves, jumping upright again. His voice was like the screaming of a monster.

“YOU AREN'T BETTER THAN ME!” he screamed. “NONE OF YOU DAMNED UNICORNS ARE BETTER THAN ME!” He lashed out madly, catching Blueblood with a glancing blow. The unicorn hopped away, trying to distance himself from the mad pony.

Blueblood was getting tired. He was strong, but he was no earth pony. He was running out of steam, and Iron could keep going all day. While Blueblood was panting for breath, Iron was not even winded. The mad earth pony drove on, refusing to be beaten. He dashed at Blueblood, and the unicorn was too slow to dodge away. One of Iron's hooves caught him full in the face, sending him reeling backwards.

Blueblood's head swam as he stumbled back. Iron laughed evilly, taunting him. Blueblood could hardly hear his words, though. His ears rang, and his head ached furiously. He was only barely staying conscious, now. He fell to his knees, and Iron laughed even louder. The earth pony lowered his head, pawing the ground and preparing to make one final charge. He rocketed forward, and Blueblood's world went still.

Everything slipped away from him. All he knew was what he saw, and the furious aching in his mind. The fire still rocked through his body, concentrating on the centre of the ache. It felt like fire. It felt like ice. It felt like the air, and the earth. His mind reeled, and he took control of the reeling with practised ease, almost through instinct. His mind spread across the square, and the golden light of magic flooded his vision. He could see the flow of it, twisting and curling around the world. Light fled from broken stalls, joining strange new currents and drifting in strange patterns. Blueblood's mind swam, and he couldn't focus on any one part of it. So he focused on all of it.

There were no separate parts, he realized. It was all one single, flowing current. Shifting and twisting and warping, a single flow that moved in and out of everything. He watched Iron charge across the square, the magic swirling across his body and around his hooves. It rejoined the great current, moving through wood and stone, and into Blueblood's body. He reached out instinctively, taking hold of the current around Iron's hoof.

The earth pony stopped dead in mid-run, falling flat on his face. Blueblood's grip around his hoof was impenetrable. It was as if the current was a part of him, like another limb. He lifted it slowly, pulling a furious Iron into the air. Blueblood felt the fire blaze through his body, and he reared his head. His entire body shone with golden light, each single strand of hair bristling with a sparkling glow. The current flicked, rocketing Iron into the air.

Blueblood crouched down, setting his eyes on Iron in the sky. He could feel the current shifting around his hooves, curling into a tight spring. He leaped up, flying into the air. He caught up with Iron instantly, and for a moment the two sat, suspended in the air, unable to move. The current shifted as Blueblood willed it, taking hold of Iron again. A great whirlpool appeared in the air, spinning them both in a tight spiral. Blueblood let go of Iron, flinging him at the ground. He landed with a deafening crash, breaking the cobblestone and throwing up dust. Blueblood landed softly across the square, where it opened into the street. He was facing away from Iron, staring at his master.

The old pony's body still lay limply on the ground. The fire flared brighter in Blueblood's gut as he thought of what Iron had done. He noticed the earth pony's axe, not too far away. He retrieved it, returning to Iron.

The gray earth pony lay on the ground, moaning. The fall had broken him, but it had not killed him. He struggled limply, unable to move as Blueblood approached. He looked up at the unicorn weakly. His eyes were still full of hatred and disdain, but he was smirking.

"You found my axe," he said. Blueblood stared coldly down at him.

"You killed my master," he said. Iron laughed weakly.

"I did," he said. "What are you gonna do about it, huh? You gonna kill me?" Blueblood glared at him. He was going to kill Iron Towers. He knew that. Everything that had happened to him had been Iron's fault. Losing his home, his horn, being sold into slavery. His master's death. The war between Equestria and Aloa. It was all Iron's fault. He deserved to die. Blueblood hesitated.

“Well?” Iron asked. “Aren't you going to kill me? Or do you want some time to gloat, you damned unicorn?” He wheezed, struggling in vain to get up. “You think you're better than me? I would have killed you dead if it weren't for your damned magic. Does that make you better than me? Your magic?” He made a noise that was like laughter and coughing at the same time. “Just do it, bastard,” he said.

Blueblood tightened his grip on the handle. He wanted to kill him. He wanted desperately to kill Iron, so why couldn't he? It would be easy. All he had to do was lift the axe, and let it fall.

“Maybe you don't want to just kill me, huh?” Iron said. “Maybe that's too dirty for you. Don't want to get your hooves dirty, huh?” He wheezed, and grinned madly. “You know what I like about axes, Blueblood? They're versatile. You can do so much with an axe. You can take revenge. You can dispense justice. You can make your way in the world.” His smile disappeared. “Call it what you want,” he said, “just stop looking at me like you're better than me. Damned unicorns... think you're so great. Just do it already!” Blueblood closed his eyes, and lifted the axe.

“DO IT!” Iron screamed.

The axe came down.

There was silence, for a moment. Iron stared at the axe inches away from his nose, a look of disbelief on his face.

“I want to kill you,” Blueblood said. “I want to kill you so badly. But that's something the old Blueblood would do. I won't be like him. Never again.” He closed his eyes, and turned away. “No pony deserves to die,” he said. “Not even you. It isn't personal.” He walked away, and Iron screamed after him.

“YOU THINK THAT MAKES YOU GREAT?” he howled. “YOU THINK THAT MAKES YOU FUCKING GOOD? YOU AREN'T GOOD, YOU LITTLE BRAT! You can walk away, and you can pretend that you did good, but you and I both know what you are! YOU'RE A SPOILED GODDAMN BRAT!” He struggled madly, reaching for the axe at his nose. Blueblood looked back, flicking his head. The axe flew away from the screaming earth pony,

embedding itself high on the wall. Iron screamed at him, thrashing madly and gnawing on the ground.

Blueblood walked slowly down the street. A few of the soldiers were beginning to come to, but Blueblood ignored them. He trotted slowly to the body of his master, lying on the ground. The green pony looked so old, lying there. He was alone, away from the other bodies. Blueblood knelt by him, nuzzling him gently.

"I knew you could do it."

Blueblood blinked. Brook shifted gently, leaning up to nuzzle Blueblood back.

"I knew you could be good," he said.

"Master?" Blueblood asked in disbelief. Brook smiled weakly.

"Of course," he said.

"You... you're alive?" Blueblood asked. "Iron... I thought he killed you!" Brook laughed.

"I fought a goddess," he said slowly. "I'm a lot harder to kill than that." He lay his head back down, wincing faintly. "Gods, I feel old. I stopped being a soldier twenty years ago." He laughed weakly, and shook his head. Blueblood pressed his neck against the old pony's.

"I'm so glad you're okay, master," he said. Brook smiled, and stroked his mane.

"I'm glad you're okay too," he said. "But you have to go now. The carriage home won't wait forever." Blueblood smiled weakly.

"You're right," he said. "you're right." He sniffed, nuzzling Brook one last time. "I need to make sure you'll be okay, master," he said. He looked over his shoulder, looking among the soldiers who were getting up. Wet was the first to his hooves, and he trotted over slowly.

"What happened?" he asked fuzzily.

"Iron attacked," Blueblood said. "He's in the square. He can hardly move." He turned back to his master, saying, "Master needs a doctor." Wet nodded.

"I can... ask somepony for directions to one. You need to get to the carriage, if it's still there." Blueblood nodded weakly. Brook reached up and nuzzled him.

"Go on," he said. "I'll be fine. Right now, your ponies need you. Be strong for them." He smiled warmly. "I know you can do it, Blueblood. I'm so, so proud of you." Blueblood smiled, tears in his eyes.

"Thank you master," he said. He got to his hooves, and dashed down out of the city. The carriage was waiting for him, two nervous ponies ready to pull it to Equestria. He greeted them excitedly, hopping into the back.

The carriage trundled slowly up the mountains, leaving Blueblood nervously in the back amongst its wares. His mind raced, but strangely he couldn't tell just what he was thinking. There seemed to be almost too many thoughts at once, blending together into a strange cacophony of images and notions. It was as if it was only now occurring to him just what had happened, and what was about to happen. His heart began to thump sickly in his chest, and an incredible nervousness gripped him.

He worried about Brook, wondering if the old pony would be alright. He wanted desperately to see his mother again, and to feel her embrace. He thought about what he had done to Iron, and about what he had refused to do to Iron. He trembled, and he wasn't certain whether it was nervousness or excitement.

In spite of how slowly the carriage moved, the trip seemed to pass in moments. The sun dashed across the sky, and before Blueblood knew it, night had fallen. He had managed to calm his mind, and now all that he thought of was how badly he wanted to see his family again. He would miss Brook deeply, he knew, but as the carriage came to a shuddering stop, he couldn't help but smile. After all this time, after everything that had happened to him, he was finally home.

Blueblood leaped out of the back, dashing to one of the servant entrances. The pony who had been pulling the carriage called something

out to him, but Blueblood couldn't hear him. He pounded on the door and a young mare opened it slowly, peering out at him.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but we weren't expecting any ship... ments..." she squinted at Blueblood strangely. "Have we met?" she asked. Blueblood smiled, and offered his hoof.

"Not properly," he said. The mare shook his hoof gently. "I'm afraid I don't have time for a proper introduction," he said, "may I come inside?"

"Uh... why?" the mare asked. Blueblood looked at her entreatingly.

"Please," he said. "It's important." The mare stared for a while, and she couldn't help but nod. "Alright," she said, opening the door for the big stallion, "come in." Blueblood smiled, and trotted inside.

"Thank you, Miss Lilac," he said. Lilac spluttered, but Blueblood had left the room before she could say anything.

"How did he know my name?" she asked to nopony in particular.

Blueblood trotted swiftly through the palace, his red wrappings trailing behind him loosely. They were beginning to come undone, but he had not taken the time to tie them again. He had not had time to worry about it. He had much more pressing concerns.

He remembered the palace. He recognized the old paintings and tapestries hung along the walls, the layout of the ancient building burned into his mind like a map. He found his hooves guiding him almost automatically to his destination. He swept past several surprised servants, pausing only to nod apologetically to them. Eventually he made his way deeper and deeper into the heart of the palace. He found himself in front of a large set of double doors, guarded by several pegasi guards.

"Halt!" they declared, barring the doors with their wings. "Her Royal Majesty Princess Celestia and Her Royal Highness Princess Amethyst Star are attending a war meeting with the generals." Blueblood paused, but stood straight and tall.

"I need to see m - Princess Amethyst," he said firmly. The guards paused for a moment, looking between one another.

"You can't see her," they said. "Not until the meeting is done." Blueblood stared past them, at the door. Much as he wanted to stop the war before it began, he knew that there would be plenty of time between the end of the meeting and the beginning of the battles.

"Alright," he said. "I will wait for them." He took a step back, sitting in front of the door. The guards stared at him strangely and they discussed what to do.

"We have to ask you to go," one guard said. "You can seek an audience with Her Highness at open court tomorrow. Not here." Blueblood shook his head.

"I need to see her as soon as possible," he said. "It can't wait until tomorrow."

"Well, it's going to have to," the guard said firmly. He moved forward to shoo Blueblood away, but he started as the door behind him creaked into life.

The door swung open gently, revealing Blueblood's mother and aunt, flanked by several rough-looking ponies in ornate armour. The group took a few steps forward before pausing. They stared awkwardly at Blueblood, who stood expectantly.

"Ah, You Majesty," the guard said. "I apologize for the stallion, we were just telling him that he had to leave. He insists on speaking to you." Celestia waved her hoof, staring silently at Blueblood. His mother stared, open-mouthed. Blueblood blinked awkwardly, and noticed himself in the polished marble walls.

It was only then that he realized how different he looked from the pony who had disappeared half a year ago. Gone was the toned muscle and barrel chest, and the finely styled blond mane. The haughty expression had disappeared, replaced by a quiet, gentle face. His mane hung long, draping over his muzzle and across his neck wildly. He had grown large and thick from months of farm labour, and the red wrappings hung limply

across his shoulders. His aunt and mother probably didn't recognize him. With the blood of another pony spattered across his face, he probably looked some strange transient, or worse.

"I..." he said, "ah..." He fell silent, staring awkwardly at the two noblemares. Amethyst stared at him. There was a strange look in her eye, like she was trying to understand something. It was as if she were staring at some long-forgotten language. She took a slow step forward, tilting her head quizzically. A look of understanding came over her, and of hope.

"...Blueblood?" she asked quietly. Blueblood smiled widely. His heart soared, and he swallowed.

"Hi, Mom," he said. Amethyst dashed across the hall, throwing herself at Blueblood.

"Oh, Blueblood!" she cried happily. "You're back! Thank gods, you're back!" She held him tight and he laughed, sitting down with her.

"That's right, mom," he said. "I'm home. It's alright." Amethyst was crying with joy, fawning over her son.

"Oh, my foal," she said. "My little foal! I can't believe you came back. I thought I'd never see you again. I thought they'd taken you away from me, just like your father!" Blueblood stroked her mane gently.

"I'm back now, Mom. You can stop this all." Amethyst stared at him, and he smiled warmly.

"The Aloans aren't the ones who kidnapped me, Mom," he said. "It wasn't their fault. Please, stop the war. I don't want anypony die over some mistake."

"I..." Amethyst said, "I..." her voice slipped away, and she sobbed happily into Blueblood's shoulder. Celestia walked slowly over to the pair, wrapping them in her wings.

"I'm glad you're safe, Blueblood," she said quietly. "You were all we wanted back. The war is over."

Epilogue

The Sun Sets

The sun rose slowly in the eastern sky. Its light was full of warmth and happiness, washing over the Equestrian Valley like a golden wave. It washed down through the mountain villages, over the great plains and fields, finally falling on the beautiful city of Canterlot. Its alabaster buildings shone magnificently, and somewhere deep within the palace an ancient pony smiled the sort of smile only somepony who has worked their craft for millennia can manage. Elsewhere within the palace, a young stallion stirred.

Blueblood sat up slowly in his bed. He blinked blearily, and yawned. He leaned back to stretch, but found himself falling backwards into the soft mattress again. He sighed, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He was having trouble adjusting to sleeping in such a large and soft bed. The silken sheets felt bizarre against his fur, and he sank deep into the mattress when he slept. He yawned again, rolling out of the oversized bed.

He trotted across the room, trying not to make too much noise on the marble floors. He made his way to a large vanity desk across the room and sat down in front of it, looking at the various pieces of ostentatious jewelry and clothing laid out. Chief among them was a large, golden crown. It had been crafted by the finest jeweller in Canterlot, summoned specifically to have it made. It was trimmed with silver, and in the very centre there lay an enormous garnet. Blueblood sighed when he looked at it. He had insisted that the stone be red, one of the few things he had managed to win the jeweller over on. The tiny mare had been remarkably stubborn about her design. At the very least Blueblood had convinced her not to craft the garnet into a false horn.

He set the crown aside, glancing at the other objects on the desk. There were several small hair decorations, which he passed over. Various suit necks and collars lay out, and there were more in the wardrobe by his bed. He passed these over as well, running his hoof across a beautiful red cloth. He shook his head, and picked up a brush. He ran it through his hair a few times, keeping it in a vague semblance of place, and stood up. He

trotted to his door, pulling it open slowly. On the other side there stood a very surprised-looking maid, her hoof raised to knock.

“Ah, Your Highness!” the maid, a little blue unicorn, said. “I, ah, came to help you get ready this morning.”

“Oh,” Blueblood said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t really need any help.” The maid blinked at him.

“You are, ah, already ready, sire?” she asked. Blueblood blinked, and looked down at himself. True, his appearance was not as lavish as it had been in the past, but he was still presentable.

“Yes,” he said. “I thought that this would be alright for today. Is something the matter?” The unicorn waved her hooves apologetically.

“No sire!” she said, “I’m very sorry!”

“That’s alright,” Blueblood said. “Have you had breakfast yet? You should take a break.” the maid blinked at him.

“That’s all right,” she said. “I’m... sure I can find something else to do...” She took a step back, and Blueblood nodded.

“Alright,” he said. “Have a nice day.”

“You too?” she said, confused. Blueblood smiled at her, and trotted away.

He walked quietly through the hallways, smiling and nodding good morning to any ponies he passed. It had been nearly a month now since his return to Canterlot, and many of the servants were still growing accustomed to the prince’s new behaviour. They gave him strange glances, and whispered to each other about what had happened. He found that he didn’t mind the rumours. He had found two young stallions discussing him once, and he was surprised to discover just how strange many of them were. Most of the kingdom believed that he kidnapped by bandits, for ransom. Some rumours even said that he had been captured by a dragon, who had eaten his horn. He had surprised a old maid by laughing when he’d heard that particular rumour.

He entered the kitchens quietly, dodging between scurrying chefs. They were preparing the day's meals, of course, readying breakfast for the servants and nobleponies alike. Blueblood slunk up to a stove, sidling alongside a heavy-set beige pegasus.

"Mornin' Highness!" the pegasus said. Blueblood smiled.

"Good morning, Peanut. I don't suppose you have time to join me for breakfast?" The pegasus laughed heartily, and shook his head.

"No can do, Highness," he said. "We have to keep working to feed all those big ponies like you up there." He grinned, giving Blueblood a good-natured nudge. "Why, you alone could keep one of us busy all day, in your prime." Blueblood chuckled.

"Well, I'll lessen the load for you," he said. He poured a small sack of grain into a pot of water and cream, preparing a pot of porridge for himself. Peanut tossed a small hooffull of spices into the pot, winking at Blueblood. The unicorn thanked him, and had his breakfast silently among the chefs.

When he was done he ventured once again into the palace, this time making his way to the garden. He spent most of his day there, walking among the flowers and watching the animals play. Around mid-afternoon a young soldier came galloping up to him, panting heavily. He was an earth pony, his coat a pale orange. Morning Light, he was called. He was not much older than Blueblood himself, but had already begun to move up in the ranks of the guards. He was a talented fighter, Blueblood had been told when the stallion was assigned as his new bodyguard, and extremely vigilant. Blueblood had also happened to notice that he was very prone to worry.

"There you are, Your Highness!" the guard said. Blueblood had been watching a small pigeon hopping across the ground. The bird was brave enough that the guard's approach had not scared it away, and Blueblood smiled up at the earth pony.

"Hello, Light," he said. Morning Light caught his breath, and pawed the earth.

"I've been looking for you all day, Your Highness," he said.

"I'm sorry," Blueblood said. "I thought you must have had the day off. You weren't outside this morning..." Light blinked shyly.

"I... had taken a break," he said. "I thought I could get breakfast before you woke up. I didn't know where you had gone after that. I tried the auditorium, the gallery, the servants' wings -"

"I was just out here," Blueblood interrupted before Light could continue to list off the places he had been. "I'm sorry, Light. I hadn't meant to worry you." Light sighed.

"No," he said, "I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke up. But I wish you wouldn't go off on your own. Something could happen to you." Blueblood smiled wryly.

"I appreciate your concern," he said. "But I doubt I'll run into much worse here than I've been through before." He smiled up at Light. "I was just watching the birds," he said. "Would you care to join me?"

Such was life for Blueblood now. The days came and went without incident or event. He often wondered just what he had found to do in the days before he went to Aloa. He found himself more and more wandering Canterlot Palace's vast hallways, desperately searching for something he could do. He offered to help the servants, but he was invariably turned down. Some days he sat on open court with his aunt, but many ponies were far too preoccupied with their farms and homes to concern themselves with the princess. It was harvest season now, after all. The last of the crops were being brought in, and prepared for the inevitable onset of winter.

He wondered how Brook was managing his little farm. Surely he would have more than enough food to last him through the winter, now. He and Blueblood had exchanged a few letters, but it wasn't the same as being there with him. He wished that he could see the old pony again. He tried to invite him to come to the palace, but Brook wouldn't budge. Blueblood's mother had refrained from commenting on the old pony. Her response to his letter had been one of strange silence.

So Blueblood wandered the halls. Some days he would sit in the library and read. Some days he would go into the gardens, as he had today. Some days he would even venture into the city, striking up conversation with the citizens. He had found a wonderful doughnut shop where the students of Canterlot University liked to eat, and he had taken a shining to it.

Now, though, the evening was fast approaching. Blueblood wandered the halls of Canterlot Palace alone, Light having been dismissed for a break. Blueblood found himself moving higher and higher through the palace, eventually finding his way to his aunt's great tower. He climbed the staircase up the tower, peeking his head inside. It was completely empty. He thought for a moment of turning back, but he noticed that the door to the balcony was open as well. He closed the door behind him gently, and trotted out onto the balcony.

The view was magnificent. All of Canterlot stretched before him. All of Equestria, in fact. He could even see over the tips of the mountains to the west. He strained his eyes, thinking that perhaps if he looked hard enough he could see Aloa again. All that was there were the mountaintops, though. He shook his head, and sighed.

He heard the door creak open softly, and looked back. Luna had entered the room.

"Auntie Luna," Blueblood said as the little goddess came to join him on the balcony.

"Blueblood," she said quietly. Blueblood smiled faintly.

"It seems a bit early to raise the moon, doesn't it?" he asked. To his surprise, Luna smiled.

"I suppose it is," she said. "I like to come up here early sometimes. The view is wonderful, isn't it?" Blueblood nodded.

"Yes..." he said, "it is." He looked out over the view, savouring the cool autumn breeze on his face. Both ponies were silent for a long time. Eventually Blueblood stirred awkwardly, leaning against the banister.

"So," he said. "Auntie Celestia tells me that you were gone for a long time."

"Yes," she said. "I took a small trip. I hear that I was gone almost as long as you were." Blueblood smiled contemplatively.

"About six months," he said. "That's some trip." He peered over at her. "Where did you go?"

"I went out of the country," she said. "The world is so much different now from the world I knew. I like to explore it. To visit other countries, and their ponies."

"Really?" Blueblood said. "I thought you didn't like other ponies?"

"I don't like being worshipped," Luna replied wryly. She smirked and said, "But it is the work of a moment to apply a simple disguise. Most ponies can't tell the difference between a pegasus and an alicorn without her horn." Blueblood laughed.

"I know what you mean," he said. "What were you doing for six months, though?" Luna shrugged.

"A lot of things, really," she said. "I visited a few friends of mine. I had a favour I wanted to ask of one of them. He's an old pony, very nice." she shook her head. "He and I used to talk until dawn. Then I looked after somepony else for a while." Blueblood peered at her, smiling.

"Sounds like you had a bit of a better time than me," he said. Luna smiled, and tilted her head.

"I suppose," she said. "But you had an adventure. There's so little adventure to be had, when you're as old as I am." Blueblood nodded.

"I guess it's all back to normal now, though," he said. "No more war... I'm home again... Iron's trial is almost over. They just have to decide whether to put him in prison, or an asylum."

"And the ambassador?" Luna asked. Blueblood shrugged.

"They haven't found him yet," he said. "There's a dock worker who thinks he either went to the eastern islands, or Ashantimare." They fell into silence again, watching the sun begin to sink along the mountains. Suddenly, Blueblood spoke.

"Auntie?" he asked. Luna peered at him. He was leaning on the banister, wringing his hooves. "What's eternity like?" Luna blinked at him. "I mean," he said, looking up into the sky, "What's it like to live forever? So much changed for me, so fast. None of this feels the same anymore. It's all so strange. Alien, almost." He sighed, and rubbed his eyes. "I'm afraid," he admitted. "Could it happen again? Will it always keep changing like this? In another six months will I look back on myself and wonder who I was?" Luna stared at him silently for a moment.

"Perhaps," she said. "But then, perhaps not. When I was a little filly, millennia ago, these mountains were wild and dangerous. A great forest creeps over the home that I knew a thousand years ago. Countries that I do not know have risen, and countries that I knew once no longer exist." She shook her head. "Things change," she said. "It can be frightening... but you learn to accept the change. You can never fight against it. It simply happens."

"How can you stand it?" Blueblood asked. "Knowing you could wake up one day and be somepony completely different?" Luna smiled sweetly at him.

"I am true to myself," she said. "I found something that I loved more than anything. I always work towards that, and I never let it slip away from me. No matter how much I change, I always have that. I will always be Luna, if I am nothing else." She looked out at the sky, and Blueblood followed her gaze. The sun brushed along the tips of the mountains in the west, turning them to gold in the twilight. "There's nopony pulling the strings," Luna said. "Things just happen. It isn't personal... so it's up to us to make it personal." She smiled faintly, and Blueblood found himself smiling as well.

"Thank you, Auntie," he said. Luna smiled.

"You're welcome," she said. A sly smile crept across her lips, almost imperceptible in faint light. "You know," she said, "I've been talking to big

sister. After how poorly negotiations with Aloa went, she's thinking of sending an Ambassador."

"Really?" Blueblood asked. Luna nodded.

"Oh yes... she's trying to convince me to go, but I'm not certain that I'm really cut out for it. Politics isn't really my world anymore... and besides, I don't know anything about Aloa culture. I think it should be somepony who's spent time in Aloa before." She smirked at Blueblood, who began to smile. "Do you think you know anypony like that?" she asked.

"I might," he said. "Thank you, Auntie." Luna smiled.

"You're welcome," she replied. She flapped her wings, lifting off the high balcony. Blueblood watched her fly into the night, and left the tower. He trotted silently through the emptying halls of Canterlot palace, returning to his room. Light was waiting for him at the door, and Blueblood bid him a good night. Before the white stallion went to his bed, however, he stopped by his desk. There was a small package on it, wrapped in a soft old cloth. He opened it, smiling gently as the sun set.

Inside was an old book of poetry, and two small nails.

Authors Notes

Author's note: So that's that. It's been a hell of a ride, for me. I just wanted to throw out a few 'thank you's here, now that it's all done.

Firstly, A huge thank you to both Vimbert and Vanner of the Ponychan /Fic/ board, my reviewers. You both helped this story along enormously, keeping me on the right track and helping me polish it up. I know that, without you, this story would never have been half of what it is now.

Thanks to everyone on the TVTropes Pony Fanfiction thread for being a test audience, and for offering advice and critique when I asked.

An especially huge thanks to BillyColt for sticking around and giving me someone to talk at when I needed to work through a block or a stubborn idea, and for inspiring me on with music and your own story.

Finally, and most importantly, thank you. You, reading this now. All of you. Everyone who commented, or even just read the story. I've never done anything of this magnitude before, and you guys were a huge source of drive and inspiration for me. Thank you all, and I hope that you enjoyed it.