

Chapter 3: In Which Hope Fades

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 were 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 were 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. Occasionally though, they did break 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 its 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 its 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 for 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 Aloian 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.