

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 that piled 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? Some pony 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."

"Then 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. Nopony 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 slavers 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 scrabble 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 Aloa. 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. It was absolutely packed with ponies, and 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.

Every single pony packed into the streets was a unicorn. Some horns were bare, but some had been adorned with golden rings and jewels. Every single one of the ponies was swathed in richly coloured wrappings, beautiful cloths thrown about their neck and chests and tied with medallions. Some ponies wore their wrappings simply about their necks, but others had wrappings that covered their flanks, and tied 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 was 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. 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 lead them inside.

Blueblood did his best not to rattle his chains as he followed after the two slavers. The soft sound of a pony's voice echoed through the halls. 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. The hallways were dank and hardly used, supported only by mildewed wood. They were led down a set of stairs, and found themselves at their final destination. Before the line stretched a long hallway, doors on either side. They were told to march down the middle, and then stop. 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. 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 anypony 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 looked around randomly, as if he were searching for something. 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 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."