

Chapter 15: In Which 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; no pony 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 clapping 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-wracking 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 hordes 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 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. "Nopony 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 no pony 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.”