

## Chapter 8: In Which A Crime is Remembered

It was raining.

It had been raining for nearly a week straight, all throughout the peninsula. Most ponies were able to go about their ordinary days regardless; rain was simply what happened in Aloa in the springtime. Farmers still tended to their fields, unicorns in the cities still walked to their jobs, or to do their errands. Some of them pulled their wrappings up over their heads into a hood, others let the cool water drizzle down their face and neck. None of them gave any ill regard to the weather. As far they were concerned, this was all ordinary. Even the rare unicorn who didn't care for the rain knew that at least they had a nice, warm house waiting for them when they got out of the rain.

One pony, far away from any city, considered this wryly. He had a yellow coat, partly covered by his blue-green wrappings. They wound around his body, covering his limp blue mane like a hood. He sat, perched on a log, shivering miserably and staring through a gap in the trees. His name was Wet Mane, and he was not a happy pony.

A week ago he and his partner, who now slept nearby, had been sent out into the middle of the woods to watch over two ponies. They couldn't let the ponies know that they were there, which meant that they couldn't set up a proper camp for the risk of being seen. They couldn't even build a fire; the smoke would give them away in an instant. So Wet sat on his log, scowling out from between the trees. Beside him, his partner rolled over, and opened his eyes.

"Morning, Brig," Wet said. Brig, a tough-looking brown unicorn, sat up. His blanket fell off of him, and he immediately began to shiver as well.

"Cripes!" he said, wrapping the blanket around him. "Yeah, good morning to you too." Wet smiled wryly.

"I didn't say it was good," he remarked. Brig snorted in response. He got to his hooves slowly, being careful to keep the blanket wrapped around him, and walked to a tree nearby. There were seven scratches etched into the tree, marked clearly against the rough bark. Brig yawned, and dragged his horn along the tree trunk. He etched another mark into it, bringing the count to 8, then went to join Wet on his log.

"Anything happen?" he asked.

"Guess," Wet said. "They haven't gone outside since he broke the plough. They've both been in there since the rain started. Like any sane pony would be."

"If any sane pony would be inside," Brig asked, "why are we sitting out here?" Wet blinked at him a few times.

"I'm gonna say," he said slowly, "not wanting to die?" Brig mulled this over, then shrugged.

"I suppose," he said, "I think we're still crazy either way. I'm too tired to care right now."

"You're tired?" Wet asked, chuckling humourlessly. "You were just sleeping."

"Not for an hour, I wasn't," Brig laughed, "I was trying to get back to sleep, and not listen to your teeth chatter."

"Oh, well I'm sorry I woke you up then, your majesty," Wet mocked. Brig snorted, and punched him in the shoulder. Wet rubbed himself, and continued. "Anyways, it's just as well. It's

about mid-morning now.”

“Is it?” Brig asked. Wet nodded. Brig shivered again, and pulled the blanket tighter around him. “Cripes,” he said, “this is all crazy. Why the heck are we sitting out here on our flanks, soaking up the rain and watching some princeling do nothing all day?”

“Because we don't want to die, remember?” Wet said. Brig paused, and grunted.

“Oh yeah,” he said, “right. Speaking of not wanting to die, what's White Brook up to?” Wet shrugged, and strained his eyes to look through the trees.

“Same as ever,” he said. “He's just... standing out there.”

“He's just standing?”

“Yup.”

“What... is he practicing or something? Keeping the rain from hitting him?” Wet shrugged.

“Nope,” he said. “He's not using magic at all. He's just standing out in the rain, staring.” He and Brig shared a glance, before shrugging.

“Well, at least he's not staring at us,” Wet said. Brig nodded in agreement. The two unicorns continued to stare through the gap in the trees at the house in the field. Brook stood on his balcony, heedless of the rain. He seemed to be staring a million miles away, out over the river and the forest beyond. The two soldiers wondered what he was doing, what he was thinking about. Brig thought that perhaps he was trying to keep his mind keen and sharp through meditation. Wet imagined that he might be reliving his great adventures, pining for his youth. Whatever he was doing, they both thanked the heavens that his focus was squarely away from them. Between Iron and White Brook, neither stallion could decide who's wrath they would less like to be on the receiving end of.

The rain was only falling harder now. An enormous raindrop fell from a leaf above Wet's head, dropping squarely onto his nose and splashing in his face. He stared miserably at the wet patch on his face, and found himself laughing in spite of their situation. Brig looked at him oddly, but Wet just kept on laughing. He couldn't not laugh. It was the only thing that kept him sane amidst all that had happened in the past few weeks.

He and Brig had been medium-level guards at the Aloa capital before all this. When they had been assigned as part of Ambassador Red letter's personal guard on his visit to Equestria. They thought that is was going to be a holiday; lounging in the palace as honoured guests of one of the richest nations in the world while Letter was in the meetings. Instead they had found themselves dragging the prince into a carriage and taking him to Aloa. Wet had nearly been sick when Iron forced them to hold the poor pony down so he could cut his horn off. Even now, he didn't like to think about it. Since then the pair had been dashing from city to city, following after the prince. It was exhausting, and what was it all for? To keep some psychotic earth pony at bay. There were times when Wet felt guilty about it all. In the end, he was only chasing after the colt for his own safety, but that's what all the soldiers were doing. Each one of the ten guards were terrified that they would be the one to finally send Iron over the deep end. But what could they do? Wet stopped laughing, and looked at Brig.

“You know,” he said, shivering, “I don't think my name has ever been more appropriate than it is right now.” Brig chuckled, and he opened up his blanket, offering half of it to Wet. The yellow unicorn scooted in gratefully, and the two wrapped the wet blanket tightly around them. It

didn't help much, but at least it was something. Wet sighed, and chuckled again.

"Hey Brig?" he asked.

"Yeah?" his partner asked.

"Have you ever been much of a betting pony?" Brig glanced at him. The chocolate-coloured pony had been partners with Wet for a long time, but he still had trouble deciphering what Wet was thinking sometimes. Wet was younger than he was, and he had always had a strange energy to him. Wet was always thinking about their orders. He always thought about everything; about the orders given, about how to carry them out, about what the result would be. Brig preferred simplicity in his career; take orders and follow them. Despite this he had to admit that Wet's method worked well for the yellow unicorn. So well, in fact, that it had begun to rub off on Brig. More and more often he found himself wondering after his superiors' motives – especially lately. He didn't like the way Letter and Iron talked. He didn't like Iron acting like he was the one in charge, and he especially didn't like that it seemed to be the case. Iron was unstable, that much was clear. Taking orders from a pony like Iron made him nervous. He couldn't predict Iron at all. For all he knew the earth pony could go off at any moment, and that made him worry for his and Wet's safety. For once, Brig thought he knew what Wet had on his mind.

"Not really," he said. "If I'm going to be having things decided for me, I'd rather at least a pony be doing it."

"Yeah, me either," Wet agreed. "So I've been thinking. What are we doing gambling, then?"

"What do you mean?" Brig asked.

"I mean, we're playing the odds just by sitting out here. So why are we doing it?"

"Now hold on," Brig said, "I'm pretty sure we already had this conversation. Except I was the one asking why we're sitting out here."

"No, no," Wet said, waving his hooves. "This is different, hear me out here. If White Brook catches us out here, we're screwed. But if we got back to Iron with nothing, we're screwed, right?"

"Right," Brig conceded reluctantly. He didn't much like where this conversation was going. But then, he hadn't liked where most of this situation was heading. He, like his partner, could see the ordeal rapidly going south. But they were soldiers. They followed their orders; what else could they do?

"And I mean, it's just a matter of time, right?" Wet continued. "We can't just sit out here forever. Either we go back to Iron, or White Brook catches us. So we're basically betting that the prince does something before either of those things happen."

"I... guess so," Brig said.

"So why are we just sitting here?" Wet asked. Brig sighed.

"We're soldiers, Wet," he said.

"Yeah, I know," Wet said, "they give us orders and we follow them. But come on, Brig. We don't have any control here. You said it yourself – if something is going to happen, I'd rather it was a pony who decided it."

"Well, what are we supposed to do, Wet?" Brig asked. "I don't like this any more than you do, and you know that. But we have a duty to the Ambassador. It's not like we didn't know we'd

risk our lives now and then.”

“This isn't just risking our lives, Brig,” Wet persisted. “This is practically suicide. Seriously, we shouldn't have to take this mission! Do we even know that this is what the King planned?”

“Well if it is, then we couldn't show our faces if we defected,” Brig said. “This is our job, Wet. We're not just going to run off somewhere. And where would we even go? We're soldiers. Not much we can do without someone to give us orders.”

“He's doing just fine,” Wet said, gesturing to Brook. “Look, Brig. It's more than just the whole death on the line thing. You're right, I've been in more dangerous situations. It's just... none of this sits right with me. Seriously, this is huge. Why is there only ten of us on this? The entire kingdom should be in on this. We should be marching up to White Brook's door and telling him that his slave is a prisoner of the King.”

“Do you want to give it a try?” Brig asked sourly. He looked over to Wet. The stallion had a clear expression of worry on his face.

“That isn't what I'm saying, Brig,” he said. “We should be getting out of here. Cut and run. Iron isn't here, he isn't going to know.”

“But we'll know, Wet.” Brig sighed. “I don't like this either. But we're soldiers. Our duty is to Letter, and if he wants us to take orders from Iron, then our duty is to him too. We just have to deal with that... now come on. I don't want to talk about this any more... let's talk about something else.”

Wet sighed. He would let it go – for now. He was about to make a joke about the weather, when he noticed that it was no longer raining over top of them – but only over top of them. The rain began to fall on them again, and the pair heard heavy wing beats landing behind them. They looked over their shoulders, gaping at what they saw.

“Oh no,” the figure said, with a voice as clear and cold as ice. “We think you should keep talking about that. And We think you should very seriously consider what your friend has to say.”

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Blueblood knelt in a large room, just off to the side of the entrance to Brook's home. The furniture was shoved against the walls, allowing him to reach almost all of the wooden floor. Beside him was a bucket full of soapy water. He took hold of it, and splashed it across the floor.

Blueblood had spent the entire week cleaning the inside of Brook's home. The old pony hardly spoke to him, only doing so to give commands. A part of Blueblood worried that he had somehow offended his master, but he didn't think too much about it. He didn't think too much about anything. The white-maned stallion was running him ragged; he had spent almost a full day on each room in the house, and the house had a lot of rooms.

The first time Blueblood thought he had finished cleaning a room, Brook had seen it and immediately ordered him to do it over. It had taken some time, but the slave eventually managed to find out exactly what the silent pony wanted, mostly through trial-and-error. His master demanded perfection from him. The rooms were all immaculate; the wooden floors cleaned and polished, the walls washed spotless and the stains and dust washed out of the furniture. Blueblood's muscles ached from all the hard work, but he never complained. Not that he had

much chance, even if he wanted to; Blueblood never saw his master most of the time. The unicorn would spend his days either staring at the river, or reading in his bedroom. He came to see Blueblood's progress at the end of the day, and would either approve or disapprove of the slave's work. Strangely, he never once went into his study to read. Blueblood had tried to enter to clean it, but it was made clear to him that this room, as well as another room on the main floor, were forbidden.

Blueblood gave a protracted sigh, and took up a well-worn cloth in his hooves. He pushed it through the puddles of water on the floor, scrubbing them clean. The wood was covered in years worth of dust and mud, and cleaning it wasn't easy. The stallion's shoulders ached and burned as he worked the cloth back and forth over a particularly stubborn stain, but the ache didn't matter. He felt it constantly now: a dull, hollow throbbing in the middle of his back. It felt as if somepony had taken something out of him. He felt exhausted almost constantly, now. He wasn't even sure if it was the work that was doing it to him anymore, or if the empty feeling was natural.

Just like the spoon and the axe, he had had trouble maneuvering the cloth with his hooves alone at first, but as with everything he slowly grew accustomed to it. He no longer fumbled with the rag, no longer tumbled off balance when he used his front hooves to work. Learning to work with his hooves was shaping up to be much easier than he had expected. Before long he would be almost as good as he had been with his magic, he told himself. Truth be told, he wouldn't have been much better with his magic, even if he could still use it. He had hardly had to clean himself before, let alone another pony's home.

He thought about this listlessly as he scrubbed, just how much his life had changed. He no longer tried to tell himself that he was different from before. That too was a surprisingly easy habit to drop. Now, in retrospect, he imagined he had never really believed that he could start over. No, this was no new life for him. This wasn't a chance to start over. This was his punishment, and he deserved it. That was the truth of his situation: some higher power had finally chosen to punish him for all the cruel deeds he had committed.

Blueblood sighed, and straightened up. His back snapped and popped as he did so, and he rolled his shoulders slowly. The room still had a long ways to go; most of the floor was still covered in grime and the walls were coated in dust. There was a small window facing the river as well, but the outside world was obscured from the inside.

The room seemed to be a den; there were a few chairs and sofas lining the walls, all of them dirty, worn and stained. On the west wall there was an old stone fireplace coated in ash, and every bit as dusty as the walls and floor. Blueblood looked around for a moment, thinking about where he would start. He decided to work his way towards the fireplace first, then work his way out from there as a way of keeping his bearings. Not that it was wholly necessary; he could clearly tell what parts of the floor he had and had not washed. He bent over again, setting his hooves on the rag and scrubbing his way westward.

Hours later, he had made a lot of progress with the room. The floor was spotless, as were the walls. He hadn't touched the fireplace, furniture or windows though. He would get started on them soon, after he had brought Brook his lunch. It was almost noon now, and Blueblood ambled out of the den and into the home's meager kitchen. He retrieved an old loaf of

bread and a block of cheese from the cupboard, and took a pair of slices off of each: one thick slice, and one thin slice. He arranged the cheese slices on top of the bread, and set both on a platter. He carried the platter up the staircase, and knocked on his master's bedroom door.

"Come in," Brook said. Blueblood nudged open the door, and stepped inside.

Brook was laying on his bed, a large book laying open in front of him. His mane was still wet, and Blueblood guessed that he had only recently come inside to read. The old pony went out to stare at the river every morning, rain or shine. Sometimes Blueblood thought that he would have faced down a hurricane to watch the river. He could believe it, when he looked into his master's face. With those faraway eyes and that same passive expression no matter what happened, Blueblood could see him walk into a storm without an ounce of fear, and he could see him winning. Brook was staring at him now, his head held straight up. It was intimidating, and Blueblood lowered his head under the unicorn's gaze. He trotted across the small room and set the platter on the edge of his bed.

"I brought you lunch, master," he said quietly. Brook nodded at him, and took the smaller slice of cheese and bread. Blueblood blinked at him, and noticed that he had a letter opened on top of his book. It looked like it had been delivered very recently.

"Eat up," Brook said. "You'll need your strength this afternoon. I want the room you're working on finished as fast as you can. I'd like to spend the evening in there."

"Yes, master," Blueblood said. He took his cheese and bread, biting into it. The food was certainly not as lavish as what he had eaten in Canterlot, but there was something about it that he liked. It wasn't delicious, but if Blueblood had known the word he might have called it "hearty". The cheese crumbled in his mouth, and the bread was soft and chewy. It, like all the food he had learned to prepare from Brook, was surprisingly filling. He and Brook took their lunch in silence, the old pony staring out the window into the rain. Blueblood looked away from him, trying to focus on his meal. When he was finished, he got to his hooves respectfully.

"Do you need anything else, master?" he asked. Brook shook his head, without looking at the slave.

"No," he said. "Go back downstairs and finish cleaning." Blueblood nodded, and took the platter. He trotted back downstairs and deposited the platter in the kitchen, washing off the crumbs. Then, he returned to cleaning.

The fireplace was difficult to clean. He tried to scoop the ash into a bucket, but it coated his hooves and spilled over the floor. He wiped his brow, leaving behind a thick black streak. He sighed sadly, knowing that he would need to wash himself later, along with the rest of the room and the dirt patch on the floor. He dragged the bucket full of ash outside and deposited it, returning to his work. With the bulk of the ash gone all that was left was to scrub the stone clean. This proved easy, aside from the soot shaking off and into his fur. Once this was done, he turned his attention to the furniture.

The chairs and sofas were wooden, with thick sacks of stuffing serving as cushions. Blueblood dragged the sacks off of their frames, and set them aside for a moment. He cleaned the wooden frames, then thumped the cushions with his hooves, shaking the dust out of them. Once he was done he returned them to their frames, and looked around, groaning. He had shaken enough dust out of the cushions to coat the floors again.

"Way to go," he mumbled to himself. He shook his head, and knelt down once more.

It was not long before the floor was clean again. Blueblood panted softly as he looked it over, rubbing his brow. He had worked his hardest, just like Brook had demanded. This room, if anything, was even cleaner than the others. The walls and floor were spotless; they almost gleamed in spite of the old wood. No amount of dust shaking would make the ancient furniture look new, Blueblood knew, but he had done the best he could without being able to wash them out. They would never have dried in time while it was raining outside, he had learned that lesson early on. There was a small chair in another room that was still a bit soggy.

The fireplace looked as good as new. There wasn't a hint of ash on the old stone, most of it having taken up residence in Blueblood's coat, turning him a light gray colour. The only thing that was left to clean was the grimy window.

Blueblood stared into it. The only thing that he could see was dust. He could barely tell that it was a window, in fact. He dragged the tip of his hoof across its face, taking a small pile of dust with it. At the very least, it left a line of clean window. It would be easy enough to wash. Blueblood dipped his hoof in his water bucket to clean it off, then took up the cloth. He splashed it against the window and dragged it across, leaving a thick line of clear glass. He peered through it, and saw the river in the distance, obscured by the rain. He blinked once, and squinted. He thought that he saw something on the river, as well. It looked almost like a house seated atop a boat.

"Red," he heard Brook call from the stairs. "Is the room done?" Blueblood started, and scrubbed the rest of the window hastily.

"Y-yes master!" he called. Brook stepped into the room, and raised an eyebrow at him. Blueblood looked down, and it was only then that he realized just how dirty he had become. He looked ashamedly at his master, who shook his head.

"Come with me, Red," Brook said. Blueblood trotted out of the room after him, and followed his master outside. The rain was pouring as hard as ever, and it wasn't long until Blueblood's coat had been cleaned. The white pony spluttered in the downpour, but Brook didn't seem fazed by it.

"We have company," he said simply, walking straight ahead. As Blueblood followed after him, he saw that he had been correct about the river. A boat with a large shelter in the middle floated near the river bank, a large stallion standing out in the rain with a thick rope.

"Help him with that," Brook said. Blueblood nodded, and approached the stallion. Even up close it was difficult to make him out in the rain. Blueblood took hold of the rope in his mouth, and he thought he saw the figure nod to him gratefully. The two ponies strained with the cord, pulling the boat closer to the shore. The stallion levitated a heavy stake and planted it into the ground, before making a gesture Blueblood didn't understand. The unicorn shook his head after a short pause, and wrapped the rope around the stake, lashing it tight. He shouted something to Brook over the rain, and the old pony nodded. Brook flipped his head and his horn lit up. Another rope and stake floated off the deck of the ship, tying and planting themselves in the bank in half the time it had taken Blueblood and the strange stallion. He shouted something else, and Blueblood caught a snippet of it.

"...Soaked to the bone in all this!" Brook nodded, and leaned in to his slave.

"Go back inside!" he shouted. "Get something for us to dry off!" Blueblood nodded and dashed back into the house. He resisted the urge to shake himself dry as he stepped out of the rain, and trotted into a small storage room. One shelf was lined with old blankets that could be used as towels. He grabbed a bunch in his mouth, and dragged them backwards into the main room. He heard Brook limp inside, followed by several other pairs of hooves. Setting the blankets down, he turned and spoke quietly.

"I brought blankets, master, to -" He stopped dead, staring at the ponies before him. His legs began to tremble, and he found that he had to sit down. The hollow feeling in his back turned to a sharp pain, and for a moment he forgot to breathe.

Brook had stepped aside to let in his guests, all of whom were sopping wet from the rain. There, in the door of the house, stood 7 unicorns. There was the unicorn that Blueblood had helped bring in their home: a silvery-blue pony. Beside him stood a round, yellow-green mare with a sand-coloured colt hiding between her legs. There were a pair of young stallions and a pair of fillies with them as well. The mare blinked at him, until Brook spoke.

"To use as towels," the old pony said, finishing Blueblood's sentence for him. Blueblood remembered what he was doing, and turned around.

"Y-yes," he said past the lump in his throat. "I brought blankets. You can dry off with them." He took the blankets in his mouth again and dragged them closer, handing them out. He tried his best not to look at the ponies, but he found himself exchanging a glance with the mare. His stomach lurched, and he moved past her quickly. He could feel her staring at him, until her husband took gentle hold of her shoulders.

"Seagrass," he said, wrapping a blanket around her, "are you cold at all?"

"No," she said slowly. "No, I'm fine. Thank you, dear."

Blueblood had finished handing out the blankets, and he stepped back from the group. He hadn't brought a blanket for himself; he shivered gently along the wall of the room. In truth, he didn't know how much of it was shivering, and how much of it was nerves. Seeing this family again made him sick to his stomach. He stared at the floor, trying his best not to look at them, but he could feel Seagrass's eyes on him. She remembered him, he knew. The rest probably did as well. Remembered him insulting them.

"Here," Brook said, cutting through the awkward silence. "The den is clean. We can sit in there." He turned back to Blueblood, and said, "Red. Fetch some wood from the kitchen for a fire."

"Yes, master," Blueblood said, happy to have an excuse to get away from the family for a few moments. He trotted into the kitchen while Brook lead the family into the next room. There was a small pile of dried logs; Blueblood thought they would be just enough to build a meager fire in the fireplace. He gathered them all, balancing them on his back, and walked back to the den.

He moved as slowly as he could. If anypony had asked, he would say he didn't want to spill the logs. There was not far between the kitchen and the den, however, so he still made the trip in almost no time at all. He crept into the room, and saw the furniture gathered around the fireplace. Brook and the family had all wrapped themselves up in the blankets, and Blueblood's master looked over at him idly when he walked in.

"Ah," Brook said, "good. This will warm things up." He gestured for the salve to walk over

to the fireplace, and stood as Blueblood approached. He took the logs off Blueblood's back, arranging them in the opening. When he was satisfied with their positioning, he took a step back. He paused for a moment before his horn lit up, and there was a small flash in the fireplace. Blueblood peered in, and he saw that his master had lit a small flame on one of the logs. The flame spread, and before too long there was a crackling fire in the pit. Brook took his seat once again, and Blueblood stepped away from the group, skirting the walls and looking down shyly.

"So, Brook," the silvery pony said. "What can we do for you? You've got to be short on something, all the way out here in the middle of nowhere. We might just be shipping something you need."

"Oh, I don't doubt it," Brook said, smiling faintly. "But it's raining outside, and I have company. I'd rather not think about business right now, thank you Seastone." The stallion laughed, and grinned at the old pony.

"Well, that's more than fair enough," he said. "So how have you been? It's been ages since we saw you last... things are a lot different here, aren't they?"

"Different," Brook mused, "different. A bit different, I suppose. It always is." Seastone nodded knowingly.

"How's the hoof?" he asked. Brook shrugged.

"Not terrible," he said. "But I'm not as young as I once was. I need... help, these days." His voice was quiet, and Seagrass looked over the old pony's shoulder. Brook turned around as well, peering at Blueblood. The white stallion looked up meekly, in case his master wanted something of him.

"I went in to town a while ago," he said. "This is Red."

"...Hello," Blueblood said softly. He had begun to shiver gently again. Seagrass looked at him softly.

"Hello, Red," she said. "You look cold. Are you alright?"

"Yes," Blueblood said, "I'll be fine... thank you, miss." He pawed at the ground uncomfortably, hoping that that would be the end of it, but the mare continued.

"Why don't you come sit over here by the fire?" she asked. "You're soaking yet. You didn't even get a towel for yourself. Come over here, colt." Reluctantly, Blueblood got to his hooves and crossed the room. He took a seat beside the small couch that Seagrass and Seastone sat on, sitting between it and the fireplace. He could feel the heat of the flames right now, and they helped a lot. He slowly stopped shivering as the heat permeated through him, but he still felt sick; worse, if anything.

"There, isn't that better?" Seagrass asked sweetly. Blueblood nodded.

"Yes," he lied. "Thank you." Seagrass looked at him for a moment longer, before turning back to Brook.

"Is he..." she asked, the unspoken question hanging in the air. Brook nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I found him in an auction house. I wasn't expecting much, but there he was. Very lucky." Seagrass didn't reply, instead looking at her husband. The stallion didn't say much either. There was silence for a while, before Brook spoke again.

"So," he asked, "how about you? How have you all been doing, hm?"

"Oh, we've been getting by," Seastone said, clearly grateful for the change of subject.

"It's been a lot of the same old, you know. Back and forth, back and forth. We've had a chance to stop in to a couple of cities, though. Getting the kids out a bit more."

"Sounds like fun," Brook said, turning his attention to the couple's children. "So you lot have been out in the cities, eh? Getting into trouble?" The fillies giggled, and the little yellow colt shook his head vigorously.

"Nuh-uh, Uncle Brook," he said happily. "I've been making sure they stay safe! Papa asked me too."

"Did he now? Brook asked. Blueblood saw a smile creep across his master's face as he spoke to the colt. "And you've been listening to your papa?" he asked. The colt nodded again.

"Uh-huh! I followed after Seaweed and Rocky, to make sure they didn't get in to any trouble!" The young stallions rolled their eyes, and their parents chuckled warmly. Brook seemed to chuckle as well, though Blueblood couldn't be sure. It almost felt surreal to see the normally cold unicorn being kind to the family. It made Blueblood's back ache even worse. He was finding it hard to stay upright, now. He wanted to lay on the floor, but he kept himself from doing so, though his head drooped heavily.

"So what has you out in the cities?" Brook asked. "I thought you liked to stay with smaller folk, like me?"

"Oh, we do," Seastone said. "And we still ship to them. But somepony asked us to make a delivery to outer Ys a few weeks back, and ever since then we've been getting bigger and bigger loads! We've even taken a few passengers on, now and again. It's good Silver. We're thinking of expanding the home, you know." He chuckled shyly, and Brook smiled openly at him.

"Good for you," he said. "Moving up in the world. You know, I think this calls for a celebration. I don't get many reasons, these days." He gestured to Blueblood, who sat up.

"Red," Brook said. "I want you to go down to the cellar. There should be an old green bottle near the door. Bring that up, and fetch a few glasses as well.

"Yes, master," Blueblood said, getting to his hooves. He trotted out of the room, and it felt like a hand around his heart had relinquished its grip. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief, despite the still-present ache in his back. He walked through one of the side hallways, which lead to a dreary staircase carved out of the earth. Blueblood walked down it slowly, sighing dejectedly to himself again.

He took his time in the cellar. Not that it was difficult to take his time; in the pitch blackness of the cellar he had a difficult time finding the bottle Brook had pointed out to him. Even when he found it, though, he found himself sitting in the dark for a while longer. Sitting so near to Seagrass and her family made him feel ill. There was always a painful tightness in his chest and stomach. It was a feeling that he was becoming more and more familiar with lately, but it still hurt. Especially when he saw her looking at him. There was a sort of sadness in her eyes that he couldn't make out. Was it pity, perhaps? Regret? Just thinking of what he saw in her eyes sent a stabbing cold pain in his guts. The rest of the family wasn't much better. Even the young stallions, who had seemed so rightfully disdainful of him the last time they had met, looked at him sadly. He climbed the stairs again, the dusty old bottle gripped in his mouth. He fetched the glasses from the kitchen, and headed back. As he padded slowly towards the den, he could hear them talking.

"Brook," Seagrass asked. "About Red. Is he... I mean..."

"Sweetie, we shouldn't," her husband cut in. They were both silent, then, and Blueblood heard his master sigh.

"She has every right, Seastone. It's not ideal. But I'm getting old... I can't do everything around here anymore. I needed help." Blueblood paused outside the room, as much out of a strange compulsion as choice.

"You could if you wanted," Seagrass said. "Is it really that hard for you?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes are better than others. But I could, if I needed too..."

"Then why? Or, why not hire a servant?" There was a long silence, before Brook spoke again.

"I don't always pull out that bottle to celebrate," he said. His voice was quiet, reserved. "But I haven't done it since he's been here." There was another silence, and he spoke with more of the confidence that Blueblood remembered. "He'd still be out there," he said. "I'm no noble, you both know that as well as anypony. This is good, though. He's a good slave. He works hard, he does what I ask, and he doesn't complain. I'm lucky to have him."

Blueblood swallowed hard, and stepped into the room, cutting the conversation off. The three grown ponies all looked at him, and he set down the bottle and glasses.

"Here you are, master," Blueblood said, taking a step back. Brook nodded, and opened the bottle. A thick, pungent smell filled the room, and Brook breathed deeply. He poured the drink, deep brown and clear, into the glasses, and Seagrass and Seastone each took one. The three ponies each took a glass – Seagrass and Seastone with their magic, and Brook holding it lightly in his hooves – and lifted them gracefully. Then, as one, they drank deeply.

"Thank you, Red," Seagrass said gently. The white stallion took a step backwards as he felt his heart tighten again, and he lowered his head.

"No," he said. "It's alright." He sat down, away from them again, and looked around.

He noticed that the children had left while he was in the cellar. In all likelihood they had gone off to play whatever game they had played while Blueblood was on the river with them. He climbed onto one of the couches carefully, watching Brook to see if the old pony had any objections, and settled in. The three ponies chatted idly, like old friends. Blueblood ignored them, for the most part. He felt more exhausted than usual, but he tried not to let it show. More than anything else in the world right now, he wanted to climb the stairs and settle onto the rug in his master's bedroom, but he knew he needed to stay in case Brook needed him. So he lay on the sofa, staring out the window.

The rain was only coming down harder now, pounding against the glass. It was so hard he couldn't tell if it was day or night anymore. The steady pounding of the water droplets against the glass provided a backdrop to his master's conversation, threatening to lull him to sleep. He set his head down, and tried to take his mind off of the creeping feelings that came from being around the family.

He focused on the sounds of the rain, and after a while little else got through to him. He lay with his eyes open, not seeing, not hearing, not comprehending. He didn't realize that the steady beat of the raindrops had been joined by little hoof-falls until he felt the couch jostle slightly. He blinked, and looked down.

Sandy, the little yellow colt, was leaning against the couch and staring up at him. "Hi," he said.

"Hello," Blueblood replied slowly. He glanced around the room, and saw that his master and Sandy's parents were watching the pair idly. Sandy, however, didn't notice.

"You work for Uncle Brook, don't you?" he asked. Blueblood rubbed his neck shyly.

"Yes," he said. "Sort of. He's my master, he... Is master really your uncle?" Sandy thought about this for a moment.

"I don't think so," he said finally, "'cause he's a lot older than mama and papa. But they always call him my uncle Brook anyways."

"I see," Blueblood said. He searched for something else to say, but couldn't find anything. Sandy continued to stare up at him, questions clearly running through his mind.

"How did you get out here?" the colt asked suddenly.

"I'm... sorry?" Blueblood asked.

"We gave you a ride, remember?" Sandy asked. "To Riverbank. You said you were going east. So how come you're out here?"

"I..." Blueblood said. The colt clearly didn't understand his situation, and he wasn't sure of what he could say to explain it, or if he even should. "I... It's sort of complicated," he said sadly. Sandy blinked at this, but moved on to his next question.

"I'm Sandy," the colt said. "Do you remember me?" Blueblood looked away from him as he continued. "Mama and Papa gave you a ride, and I talked to you." Blueblood felt his stomach twist painfully.

"Yes," he said. "I remember you." He remembered acting smug and haughty, and looking down on the curious little pony. He remembered insulting his family and his home, and spitting in the face of their generosity. He may as well have yanked on the colts tail, as far as he cared. Sandy, however, seemed oblivious to the treatment Blueblood had given him in their last meeting, and continued asking questions.

"Do you ever play with uncle Brook? He plays with me, sometimes."

"N-no," Blueblood said, looking carefully at his master. The old pony had regained his neutral expression, his eyes occasionally flicking to the pair as he tried to uphold a conversation with Sandy's parents.

"How come?" Sandy asked.

"Well... I work for the master. So... I guess I just always work. I don't really play..."

"That doesn't sound like fun," Sandy said. Blueblood put his head down.

"Maybe not," he said. "But it's... it's alright. I don't mind."

"But don't you ever play?" Sandy asked. "You can't have to work all the time – there can't be that many chores in the whole wide world! You aren't working right now."

"I have to stay close to master," Blueblood said, "so I can be there if he needs me for anything." Sandy dashed away from the couch suddenly, trotting over to the old crippled pony in his chair.

"Uncle Brook?" he asked, leaning up against the old pony's flank. Brook looked down at him, sipping from his drink.

"Hm?" he asked simply.

"Do you need Red right now?" the colt asked. Brook scratched his beard for a moment.

"No," he said, "I don't believe so. Why do you ask?"

"I wanna play with him!" Sandy said. His mother spoke up from the sofa.

"Sandy dear, can't you play with your brothers and sisters?"

"None of them wanna play with me," the colt said sadly. "Seaweed and Rocky are just talking, and the fillies are playing filly games." he stuck out his tongue, and his mother smiled.

"Well, alright," she said. "If Uncle Brook says it's alright for you to play with Red, then you can."

"Great!" Sandy said. He turned back to Brook and looked up at him pleadingly. Brook smiled faintly at him.

"You can play with him, Sandy. I don't think I'll need him tonight."

"What?" Blueblood asked. The yellow colt took hold of his hoof, trying to pull him off of the couch.

"Go play with him," Brook said. "I don't need you right now. I'll be fine without you around for a few hours."

"Uh, well," Blueblood said, getting down from the couch, "If you're sure, master..."

"I am," Brook said. "You could use a break. Go play with the colt, Red." Blueblood gulped, and did as his master commanded. Sandy beamed, and bounced out of the room, followed by a very reluctant Blueblood.

True, he was glad to be away from Seagrass's sad eyes, but something about the little colts enthusiasm and inability to recognize what was going on made it all the worse. Blueblood followed the colt as he bounded through the house, into another large room. It was one that Blueblood had cleaned a few days ago, but there wasn't anything in it. It, like many other rooms in the house, was completely bare. Sandy, it seemed, thought that this was the perfect room to play in. He turned on Blueblood, who sat down, and put his hooves up on the stallion's legs.

"What do you wanna play?" the colt asked.

"I, um," Blueblood said, unable to move lest he shake the colt. "I don't know. What do you like to play?"

"We could play a game my papa taught me, where we try to fool each other," Sandy said. "Or we could play prince and knight. I really like that game!"

"Okay," Blueblood said cautiously. "That doesn't sound bad. How do you play it?"

"I'll be the prince," Sandy said, "and you're my knight! You have to protect me from the bad things that try to hurt me. Unless you want to play the prince?"

"No," Blueblood said quickly, shaking his head. "No... you can be the prince. That's alright."

"Okay!" Sandy said happily. He trotted to the wall of the room where he sat, straight upright and looking as regal as a colt possibly could. "Come before your prince, Sir Knight," he said in his best princely tone. Blueblood approached him, and sat in front of the proudly-staring colt.

"Kneel, Sir Knight," Sandy commanded.

"Yes, Master," Blueblood said, kneeling. Sandy huffed at him.

"You're not supposed to call me master," he said. "You're supposed to call me 'my prince', okay?" Blueblood blinked.

"Oh," he said, "I'm sorry, um, My Prince."

"That's better, Sandy said. "You can stand now, Sir Knight." Blueblood did as he was told, standing up. Sandy rose as well. "Do you promise to protect me, Sir Knight?" he asked.

"I... do, My Prince," Blueblood said quietly.

"Do you promise to fight anypony who tries to hurt me, or any monsters?"

"I do," Blueblood said again, more sure this time. This felt more comfortable, to him. Being commanded by the colt, instead of praised. Sandy smiled at him.

"Then you can be my champion," he said, "and you can fight for me." Blueblood knelt again.

"Thank you, My Prince," he said.

"Stand, Sir Knight," Sandy said, and Blueblood stood. All of a sudden, a look of fear came over Sandy's face, and Blueblood looked over his shoulder. There was nopony, nothing in the room with them, but Sandy still pointed and looked afraid.

"Sir Knight!" he said urgently. "A kraken is attacking the castle! Fight it off!"

"What?" Blueblood asked, looking around.

"The kraken, Sir Knight! One of its tentacles are right behind you!" Blueblood looked around at the empty room, standing awkwardly. Sandy watched him, before huffing again.

"You're supposed to fight the kraken," he said sourly.

"But there's nothing there," Blueblood said. Sandy tilted his head at him.

"I know that! But you're supposed to pretend," he said. "You're no good at this." Blueblood lowered his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. Sandy patted his leg comfortingly.

"It's okay," the colt said. "I'll show you how." He got up on his hind legs, tottering unsteadily, and started to wobble away from Blueblood. "The kraken's got me!" he shouted. "Help me, Sir Knight! Use your sword!"

"My sword..." Blueblood said. He looked around himself awkwardly, Sandy still tottering away unsteadily. He set his head, and cantered over to the little colt. "I'll save you," he said, unsure of himself.

"Use your sword to cut the kraken's tentacle off!" Sandy told him. Blueblood nodded, and swung his head in front of the colt. Sandy dropped to all fours, and jumped away.

"You did it!" he said, doing a little dance. "But look out! There's another tentacle behind you!" Blueblood spun around, lashing his head out, teeth clenched as if he held a sword between them. Sandy laughed and shouted encouragement, clapping his hooves together. He continued to shout out instructions, warning the stallion of "tentacles" coming to snatch him up.

"Stay close to me, My Prince," Blueblood said, swinging his head around again, "so I can protect you from the kraken!" Sandy darted in, sticking beside Blueblood as he swung and circled. He laughed giddily, jumping up on Blueblood's back and holding on to his mane as his knight bucked and bounced around the room.

"Be careful of the fallen tentacles," Sandy warned him. "Their blood is lava!" Blueblood smiled in spite of himself, and began to make wide hops over the old stains on the floor.

"Haha!" he whooped theatrically, cutting down another imaginary tentacle and flipping his mane out of his eyes. Sandy leaned past him, pointing at the window.

"There, Sir Knight! Do you see the kraken's face?"

"I see it!" Blueblood exclaimed. "I'll run across its tentacles to attack it!" He dashed to the window, Sandy laughing excitedly and bobbing on the big stallion's back. "Yah!" he shouted, swinging his head at the window sill.

"Take that, kraken!" Sandy shouted. "Make the finishing blow, Sir Knight!" Blueblood nodded, and spun around, leaping into the air as he did so. His body twisted in the air, and he gave a shouting laugh.

"Eat my blade, fiend!" he shouted. As he reached the ground once more he thrust down his hooves, striking hard against the floor. He reared his head to strike, and a brilliant light came from the window. A few moments later an ear-splitting boom came, shaking the house. Sandy yelped, and leaped off of Blueblood's back. The white stallion stopped, watching the little colt flatten himself against the ground.

"Hey, what's the matter?" he asked. Sandy peaked out from under his hooves.

"It's a storm!" he said. "With lightning, and thunder!" Blueblood tilted his head quizzically.

"Yeah," he said, "but... so? It's just a little storm."

"I don't like storms," the colt whimpered. "They're loud, and scary, and they make the house shake bad. Papa said we can't go out in a storm, or we'll fall off the house!"

"But," Blueblood said, "you aren't in a boat. We're on land, away from the river. You can't fall off out here."

"But it's still loud and scary," Sandy said. He got off the floor and dashed over to Blueblood, worming his way between the slave's legs. "You're my knight," he said, "so protect me!" Blueblood didn't say anything. A gigantic lump had raised in his throat, and his chest felt instantly tight.

"I... I..." he said quietly, "no, I..."

"You promised to protect me," Sandy said, hugging his leg. "You promised. So protect me from the storm, okay?"

"Oh... okay," Blueblood said. His guts felt like ice, but he sat down, putting a hoof against the colt's back. "I'll... protect you from the storm, My Prince," he said. Sandy hugged his leg tighter.

"You don't have to call me your prince anymore," he told Blueblood quietly. "You can just call me Sandy."

"Alright." Blueblood gulped. They sat in silence for a while, before the colt spoke again.

"...Red?" he asked.

"Yes?"

"How come you changed your name?"

"What?" Blueblood asked, blinking.

"When you were with us, you said your name was Blueblood. How come Uncle Brook calls you Red now?" Blueblood looked at the colt, a strange pain in his chest.

"Because..." he said, "because... I don't know. I thought that I shouldn't be called Blueblood anymore, for a while. I was wrong, though... but I guess it just stuck."

"How come you wanted to change your name?"

"I don't know..." Blueblood said, "I guess it just... it hurt to be Blueblood. So I didn't want to remember anymore." Sandy looked up at him. Blueblood knew that the colt could see the sadness and pain on his face.

"Do you still remember, though?"

"I do," Blueblood said sadly.

"I'm glad," Sandy said, "I know Papa and Seaweed didn't like you, but I did. I thought you

were neat. I'm glad you're still Blueblood. You're nice."

The colt's words struck Blueblood's heart like a knife. *No I'm not*, he thought. *I'm not nice. Your dad was right about me.* He wanted to cry, but he didn't. He couldn't. He sat in silence, an intense and indescribable pain in his chest. He wanted to apologize, to tell the colt that he was wrong, and that he was a worse pony than the child could imagine, but he couldn't. It still hurt to be Blueblood. It still hurt to remember, and he remembered more clearly than he ever had before, with the shaking colt in his hooves, but no words came to him. Thunder continued to crash, and every time the colt would jerk and squeal. But every time, he shook and squealed just a bit less. Soon, he wasn't shaking at all. When the pain in his chest subsided, Blueblood spoke again.

"Sandy?" he asked quietly, unable to raise his voice any more. The colt didn't respond, so Blueblood shook him gently. He still didn't move, save for his sides slowly rising and falling as he breathed. He had fallen asleep. Blueblood choked again, and picked him up slowly. He trotted back through the house, and into the den.

The rest of Seastone and Seagrass's children had returned, and were lying all over each other on the couch. Blueblood guessed that they must be asleep as well, from the hushed tones their parents and Brook spoke in. The three ponies looked over at Blueblood when he entered. He lowered his head sheepishly.

"There you are," Brook said. "We were wondering where you two got off to."

"We... were playing," Blueblood said. "Sandy got scared when the thunder came. I think he's asleep now, though." Seagrass slipped off her seat, and walked over to the slave. She took her foal gently, and smiled at his sleeping form.

"That sounds like our Sandy," she whispered, rocking the colt gently. "Thank you, Red." She put him with his siblings, and he settled in between Seaweed and one of his sisters, sighing happily in his sleep. An eye crept open for just a moment, set on Blueblood, but closed soon enough. Blueblood looked away from the colt sadly.

"They'll be staying with us tonight," Brook said. "There's no way they're getting back out to their home in this weather."

"Should I set up a room for them, master?" Blueblood asked quietly. Seastone shook his head.

"The kids are already asleep," he said, "No need to move them all. We'll be fine in here. You did a good job cleaning it, colt." Blueblood nodded to the compliment.

"I'll..." he said, "I'll get some dry blankets." He stepped out of the den before the unicorns could object, and went back to the closet, grabbing the remaining blankets off the shelf. There were only enough for the children, so he quickly went upstairs and into the master's bedroom. His blanket lay on the rug, neatly folded right where he had left it. He brought it back down, adding it to the pile, which he brought into the den.

"Here you go," he said. Seagrass smiled at him, and pulled the blankets over her children, before gently kissing them each good-night.

"Thank you, Red," she said to him. "You've been a lot of help this evening."

"No," Blueblood said. "No, I -" Seagrass wrapped him in a hug, cutting him off. He tried to swallow down the lump that rose in his throat, and found himself blinking back tears.

"You're a good stallion," she told him quietly. "I'm sorry this had to happen to you. But

Brook is a good master.”

“N-no...” Blueblood said again, “I-I... I’m...” Seastone came over too, and put a hoof on Blueblood’s shoulder.

“You keep on being good, colt. I’m sure somepony’ll smile on you someday.”

“No, It’s okay,” Blueblood insisted. His heart was beginning to race. His back ached fiercely, and he felt like somepony had emptied him out; like he was just a shell of a pony. He felt cold, but burning at the same time. Seagrass let go of him, and looked at him sadly. The stallion looked away from her, and quaked. His heart pounded in his throat, making it hard to breathe.

“Red,” Brook said. “I don’t think I’ll need your services tonight. You may go to bed.”

“A-alright,” Blueblood said shakily. He took a step back, and bowed to the three ponies. “Th-thank you,” he said quietly, and he left. He trotted quickly across the main room and up the stairs, before anypony could stop him, and went into the bedroom.

As always, the only light in the bedroom was the dim light from the window above his master’s bed. He was glad of the dark. He didn’t want to see anything right now. He didn’t want to hear anything, or feel anything. He wanted oblivion, but he settled for the dim light, the patter of the rain and the soft rug. He lay down and curled up, shivering gently without a blanket to keep him warm. His chest still ached from seeing the family.

Seagrass, Seastone, and Sandy. They were all wrong about him. He wasn’t a good pony, like they thought. He was just doing what a slave should, because that’s what he was. He was a slave. He was a slave because of how awful he had been. They didn’t know about all of the horrible things he had done. They didn’t know about the awful, burning pain in his chest when he saw them and when he remembered what he had done to them, and they didn’t understand that he deserved every bit of what happened to him. He shuddered on the rug. He deserved the stomach-churning hurt. He deserved to be a slave. He didn’t deserve their sympathy, or their forgiveness, or even their pity. He deserved punishment, he told himself, and that was what he was getting. Because he was an awful pony, he told himself. Because he had been cruel, and because he had never thought of anypony but himself.

He curled into a tight ball, alone with his feeling of pain and sickness, and slowly drifted into the oblivion he so desperately sought.