

Chapter 3

“You really think it’ll help?”

“Sure!” said Brother Scroll, “I mean, hold on...”

It was evening, and they were walking down the road. Neither of them were feeling very good. It had been a bad first day - they’d witnessed two murders, and no pony was interested in hearing about friendship.

Brother Scroll stopped, sitting back on his haunches, taking one of their books and flipping through it.

“Right here,” he said, “good friends can have a lot of fun by going out on the town - restaurants, parties, plays, all kinds of stuff.”

“And this is a...”

“Tavern,” said Brother Scroll, closing the book and putting it back into his saddlebag, “we can get food and meet ponies.”

“Sure,” said Brother White, “sounds great.” It actually didn’t sound great to him. He’d been met with nothing but racism ever since he arrived, but it wasn’t as though the day could get worse for him.

He hoped.

The tavern they went to was in pretty much the same condition as the rest of the town - “bare essentials,” so to speak, all made of wood. Brother White fondly remembered one place he liked eating at back home. Whole building looked like an ice cream cone. No such places here - everything was brown or grey or black.

But he didn’t complain out loud. He looked around as they entered. Two adjectives described the place - loud and hot. There was a fireplace that seemed larger than necessary, with a fire that took up roughly a quarter of the space provided by the hearth.

There were a lot of ponies in there, mostly stallions, save for the barmaid, a cream-colored filly with what appeared to be a frothy mug for a cutie mark. The stallions were all loud, and conversations were nearly unintelligible. Occasionally the Brothers could hear somepony trying

to sing.

Brother Scroll tried to keep up the cheerful attitude White had exemplified earlier. “Hi!” he said when they walked in, to no pony in particular.

As he had spoken to no pony in particular, no pony answered him. Brother White walked up to the counter.

“What can I getcha?” asked the barmaid. She spotted his horn. “Say... we don’t get any of your kind around here.”

“I noticed,” said Brother White flatly. A colt next to him grunted.

“Oh, lookit him with his fancy tie,” the colt muttered, “them horners...”

“I got a tie, too...” said Brother Scroll, indicating his matching red tie.

Brother White ignored him. “I’m with the Fraternity.”

“Oh, so *that’s* why they didn’t shoot you,” said the barmaid. “Sorry,” she added, seeing his pained expression.

During all this, Brother Scroll was looking around at the other ponies. He was nervous about this place, and he wondered whether the book’s advice had been right.

“Could I have a glass of milk?” Brother White asked.

The barmaid looked at him like he’d asked for a bucket of sludge. “Aren’t you a little old for that?”

“Uhh, White?” said Brother Scroll quietly to them, “I don’t think they regularly drink milk. Except for foals.”

“Why not?” asked Brother White. *Another wonderful piece of luck*, he thought.

“Well, they don’t have cows.”

“Oh.” Brother White sat there for a while. The racism occurred to him. “Figures. You have a bathroom?”

“Right over there,” said the barmaid, “over to the left, next to the staircase.”

“Thank you,” said Brother White, following the instructions.

Brother Scroll took his place at the counter. “You’ll have to pardon him,” he said, “it’s been a rough day...”

“Hey, he didn’t do anything wrong,” said the barmaid, filling another colt’s glass, “you’re from where, again? Equestria?”

“That’s right,” said Brother Scroll, nodding.

“And they let horners just come and go everywhere?” asked the colt next to them.

“Yes, and we don’t use racial slurs,” reprimanded Scroll.

Brother White didn’t actually need to use the bathroom. It was a terrible bathroom, anyway, rank with the stench of ammonia and feces. Crude graffiti, from which he learned that the barmaid’s name was Tap, was scrawled over the walls of the stall. Brother White just sat there, staring ahead of him at the door of the stall.

"I have no idea what I'm going to do," he said.

He came out a few minutes later, not having relieved himself at all, and returned to the counter.

Brother Scroll, meanwhile, had been invited to a nearby table, with some colts who, for a change, were not extremely rude.

“So, what’s this book you’re selling?” asked one of them.

“It’s the Book of Friendship, and we’re not selling,” responded Brother Scroll, “you can just have it. Go on, take it.” He held it out to the colt, who, curiosity and courtesy compelling him, took it and started looking through it.

“You see, there was this unicorn filly named Twilight Sparkle,” Brother Scroll continued.

“A unicorn?”

“Yes, a unicorn,” said Brother Scroll, quickly, so as to get past that part, “and she was the star pupil of our Princess Celestia. She was tasked by the Princess to make some friends.”

“Princess?” asked one of the colts, “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously,” said Scroll, “and in this book, we have her collected letters...”

“That explains all these *Dear Princess Celestia* things...” said the pony reading the book.

“But there’s more to the book than that - it also has other stories and lots of advice: party games, how to resolve an argument, that kind of thing.”

“Huh.”

“Well,” said Tap, “he’s certainly enthusiastic.”

“Well, why shouldn’t we be?” asked Brother White. “It’s what we’re here to do, after all.” He decided to try his luck with ordering a drink again. “Sarsaparilla?”

“Nope.”

“Root beer float?”

“No.”

“Oh yeah, no milk,” Brother White said, feeling a little stupid for not remembering that. “Apple cider?”

“Cider?” asked Tap, almost relieved that he’d named something they had. “Sure thing.” She took a bottle from under the counter and placed it in front of him.

“Thanks,” said Brother White, opening it with magic. Eager to have some sort of relief, he lifted it to his mouth and- SPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!

Tap narrowly avoided getting covered in that terrible mixture of drink and saliva.

“What is that?” asked Brother White.

“Hard cider,” she responded.

“Guess I get where the name comes from...” he tried drinking it a little more slowly. That helped.

“Hey, White, I think I’m doing good!” said Brother Scroll, sitting next to him. “They actually seem interested and one of them took the book!”

“Thanks,” said the colt in question, giving him the book back, “that was... interesting.” And he left the bar.

“Well, for a little while, anyway...” said Scroll. He watched as Brother White took another drink. “What is that?” he asked.

“Cider,” said Brother White.

“Hard cider, actually,” corrected Tap.

“Whatever that means...”

“Uhh...” Brother Scroll said, “is that... alcohol?”

“Yeah...” said Tap, as though it were obvious. She had to wonder - just how clueless were these two colts? It wasn’t like they were idiots or anything, but that lack of awareness was jarring.

“What’s that?” Brother White inquired, though only half-interested.

“It’s a thing in drinks that makes you, well...” Brother Scroll said, unsure, “we don’t have it in Equestria.”

“Guns, alcohol...” Brother White listed, “lack of cows... how do you know all this stuff?”

“I read,” said Brother Scroll, “that’s what my cutie mark means.” He smiled, pleased with himself. Tap put a bottle in front of him. “Huh?”

“On the house,” she said, “you two could use a little booze.”

“I don’t know...”

“It’s not that bad,” said Brother White, “once you get used to it.”

Scroll looked at Brother White. He did seem to be a little more chipper than he had been a few minutes ago...

Some time passed.

“Hey, fratboy!” shouted a colt. “Can you ponies sing where you’re from?”

“Can I sing?” asked Brother White, slurring his speech a little, “I’ll tell you somethin’, mister - I was the tenor section leader for three years straight, all while holding a 4.0 GPA. Lemme see if I can sing a...” he stumbled a little bit, almost dropping the bottle from his telekinetic grip, “an ode to this... this fine, fine drink of yours.”

He got up on a table, and began to sing.

*“Let me drink in your wonderful nectar
Of this very particular kind
And I think I’ll thank my friend the lector
For his very astute kind of mind.”*

Brother Scroll was just sitting at the counter. He hadn’t drank quite as much as Brother White, but he was still tipsy. He wasn’t joining in the festivities.

“Hey, you alright?” asked Tap. She was concerned - he seemed like a foal with the way he acted.

“Yeah...” said Brother Scroll. He giggled bashfully.

“What’s so funny?”

“You’re purdy...” said Brother Scroll, a dopey expression plastered on his face.

Tap laughed, half at Scroll’s expression and half at the remark. She was used to receiving crass, drunken catcalls from her job. Looked like Scroll was going to fit right in.

“You wanna come upstairs?” she asked.

“Alright,” Scroll said through increasingly frantic fits of giggles. She left the counter and walked up stairs, while Scroll followed, swaying slightly as he walked.

“O never shall I recall sorrow

*With a bottle beside me to stay
Without hope or a care for tomorrow
And the worries of life held at bay."*

She led him to a room with one musty bed, which Scroll sat on, still giggling.

"Funny?" Tap asked, smiling.

"Well, not really," said Scroll, "not many ponies have been nice to us today."

"Well, that's not very fair," she said, sitting next to him, "I'll be nice to you." She kissed him on the cheek, making him blush.

She leaned over, causing him to lean back, until he was lying down. He wasn't giggling anymore.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"No..." Brother Scroll said, his breathing a bit heavier than before, "it's just that, well..." his voice went very quiet, "this is my first time."

"I know."

The next morning, White and Scroll found themselves back at the mission house. They weren't in their beds, but just on the floor in the main room.

"Uggggghh..." White groaned as he got up off the floor, "my head..." he put his hoof to his head, and he found, oddly, that his tie was around his head and not his neck.

"What about *my* head?" Scroll asked. He looked at White. "Wow, you look..."

"What?" asked White, looking for a mirror. As there were none around, he had to head to the bathroom. He found that his mane was scraggly and he had a black eye.

"What happened?" asked Brother White, coming out of the watercloset.

"I dunno..." said Scroll, shrugging, "we were drinking, and..."

“You know what?” said Brother White, preparing to march out the door, “No more drinking. That stuff’s bad for us.” He opened the door and sunlight came pouring in. “Ah!” he said, shutting it. “My head...” he groaned.

“Maybe we should wait until a little bit later to start mission work?” Brother Scroll suggested.

There was a knock on the door. Brother White opened the door a crack, wondering who’d be interested in coming in. He saw a smiling earth pony who was disheveled in a manner similar to himself.

“Hello?” Brother White asked, opening the door a little wider.

“Hey,” said the earth pony, walking in, “thought I’d come by and see how you were doin’. Hope you don’t mind me inviting myself in, the sign on the door says welcome.”

“Umm...” said Brother White, blinking, trying to get his head clear, “yeah, yeah, that’s great, we’re just a little bit...”

“Yeah, I remember my first drink and my first fight,” said the stranger, drifting off into fond memories.

“Fight?” asked Brother White.

“Yup,” said the strange earth pony, “y’know, you proved me wrong about you horners. I always thought you guys were wusses, but, well... you kinda were a wuss, but you’re one crafty bastard, I tell ya. The way you got me with that chair from behind, while you were in front of me,” he laughed, feeling the back of his neck, “but I didn’t let you get all the blows. Forgive me for the black eye, eh?”

“Sure...” said Brother White, his head starting to clear, “pardon me if I don’t want a repeat performance.”

“Baaah, all’s in good fun, isn’t it?” he turned to Brother Scroll, “and you!”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. Saw you goin’ up with Tap,” he raised his eyebrows, “lucky guy, you. How was it?”

“Wait, what?” asked Brother White, going straight back to ‘confused.’ Brother Scroll, however,

was no longer confused. He remembered what happened the night before.

“Well?” asked the earth pony. Brother Scroll bolted out of the mission and tore down the street. He had to get back to the tavern.

“Brother Scroll, wait!” asked Brother White, feebly trying to follow him. Unfortunately, he hadn’t received the same shock to wake him up.

“So, about this book of yours...” said the earth pony, looking at the stack on the desk.

Brother Scroll had a little bit of difficulty finding the tavern, as most of the buildings looked the same, but when he got there, he was all out of breath. The tavern wasn’t as full as it had been - the earth ponies didn’t drink in the morning when there was work to be done, but Tap was there, cleaning the counter-top until she spotted the panting blue earth pony.

“Didn’t wait to get cleaned up to come back, didya?”

“Huh?” asked Brother Scroll, when he realized that his necktie was around his head. He sat down and frantically fiddled with his tie, trying to get it organized. It was a futile effort, more or less - that thing needed to be ironed before it was presentable again. “Well, it’s just...”

“I don’t just give out repeat performances, kid,” she said. Brother Scroll looked up.

“Well, no, I, uh...” Scroll fumbled, trying to find the words, “I just wanted to talk about it...”

“Talk?” asked Tap, sitting down, with a perplexed expression on her face, “you want to ‘talk’ about it? What’s there to talk about?”

“Well, what we did...”

“There’s nothing to say, kid,” she said, before softening her voice, “listen, you’re a cute kid and I thought you’d had a rough day. And I figured if you didn’t lose it now, you never would.”

“So...” Scroll said, his voice a little shaky, “it didn’t... m... mean anything?”

“Not really,” she said, “what, you didn’t like it?”

Brother Scroll’s posture sank. “It’s just...” he said very quietly, “that was my first... I... I...” He looked down at the floor.

“I wanted it to be special...” he said, almost whispering.

A couple of the handful of earth ponies looked at him. It was a rather pathetic scene.

Tap didn't say anything. Never, in a hundred years, did she expect this. Degradation, of course, maybe some obscenities flung in her direction, but... that?

“Listen...” she said, leaving the counter. Her voice was very soft. “You have to learn sometimes, that nothing is special. Things just happen, and they don't ‘mean’ anything.”

Scroll looked up. She could see that he was on the verge of tears.

“Th... that's not true!” he said, choking on his words, “it has to mean something. That *h-happened*,” his voice deteriorated into barely coherent squeaking, “that meant something to me!”

“Scroll!” shouted a voice. Brother White burst through the door, “There you are! Are you...”

Brother Scroll sat on the floor, his mouth clamped tightly shut.

“What's wrong?” White asked. Brother Scroll just shook his head, unable to speak. White looked at Tap, and the two shared an expression of confusion.

“C'mon, Scroll,” said White quietly, helping him get up, “it's okay, it's okay... we've got some work to do.” Brother Scroll nodded, making a sniffing noise, and they left the tavern.

Tap stood there, still feeling confused and about what had just happened. She was snapped out of it by a leery comment from one of the bar patrons. “How come ya never gave me a freebie?”

“Because you can just fuck yourself.”