

## Chapter 28

Scroll stood with his back to the tavern's doorway. The fighting was nowhere near the inn, thankfully, but the sounds of commotion still rang there, as though hovering and invisible.

If Scroll's hunch was correct, Buzz would be in the tavern. In addition, they'd need to get some disinfectant and bandages to tend to Carpenter's wounds. They just had to get in, get what they were looking for, and then get back to the library. Thankfully, they hadn't needed to navigate a warzone, and hopefully the fighting wouldn't start carrying on in their direction.

"Alright," said Scroll as he backed into the inn. "We just gotta—" He stopped when his rump backed right into White's. Scroll let out an 'oof' before just turning around and walking up next to him. "White?"

Brother White's usual smile had sunk into a mortified frown. The tavern was pitch black, all its candles and lanterns extinguished. A good thing, to; the ground shook with the battle outside. If a lantern or lit candle had fallen to the floor in the commotion, it could well of set the whole tavern alight. Thankfully, White had thought to bring a lantern with them in order to see. The darkness was not the only thing troubling him, however.

"White, what's wrong?"

"Broken glass..."

Scroll turned to follow his gaze. The lantern's glow cast over the floor, revealing the cause of White's worries. The ground's shaking had stirred the countless bottles from their resting place on the shelves, and the tavern's floor was now covered in a haphazard layer of bottle shards.

"Oh..." said Scroll. "Oh, oh dear."

Barrel walked up behind them. "There's a broom there," he said, pointing to said item on the floor a short distance from the door. "Maybe we could just sweep it up."

"That's a good idea," said Scroll, nodding. Then he stopped. "*Barrel?*"

White snapped out of his funk and turned around, mirroring Scroll's alarm. "You were supposed to stay with the others at the library!"

"I wanted to help," said Barrel.

“Well, okay...” Scroll conceded. “How’d you get Tap to let you come?”

“Oh,” said Barrel. “I just told her I needed to use the bathroom.”

“But...” White blinked. “The library doesn’t have a bathroom.”

“I never said which one.”

White, having that enviable unicorn reach, lifted the broom and began sweeping the broken bottles out of the way. Scroll walked slowly behind him, his eyes darting around the room. Buzz could be in any number of places: the bathroom, the cellar, the mission room, or upstairs.

“Buzz?” White asked out loud, but not so loud that soldiers from outside could hear them. “Are you here?”

No answer.

“We’ll check the rooms,” said Scroll. “Go through the building, see if he’s there.” He looked in the direction of the mission room. “We’ll start there.”

White swept the glass out of the way, clearing a path to the mission room. Though in the day it was a warm, if rowdy, gathering place, the room seemed so much less welcome when it was only dimly lit by a lantern in the midst of gunfire, cannonfire, and the earthquakes. White had to keep sure hoofing in order to not drop the lantern, lest he accidentally set the whole place on fire again. *One battle where the place doesn’t fall down*, White thought to himself, briefly wondering if building the mission house into the same building wasn’t the best strategy for architectural longevity. *Then again, we didn’t have a house*, he reasoned. He shook his head, finding that the complicated thought process was starting to give him a headache.

They went into the mission room, which was a mess. As White held the lantern up to get a better view of the room, he saw upturned chairs and lopsided tables were everywhere. Checker sets had pieces strewn all over the floor. To their relief, there was no broken glass. Scroll stepped out ahead of White, carefully stepping over the upturned chairs and making his way to the cabinet.

“Buzz?” White asked in a stage whisper. No answer. Scroll, however, soon turned away from the cabinet.

“I got the bandages and disinfectant,” he said, swinging a bag over his back. “We’ll get these to

Carpenter.”

The ground shook again, rattling the checker-pieces on the floor.

“Quake’s shaking more than usual,” said Scroll.

“He must be pissed,” said Barrel. “Maybe Monarch’s down here fighting.”

“Maybe there are a lot of banana peels and he’s slipping?” White suggested.

“Whatever the reason,” said Scroll, walking past them. “We gotta find Buzz and get back to the library.”

White resumed his way sweeping a path through the broken glass as the others followed behind him. Barrel, having not told a complete lie to his sister, found himself occasionally glancing at the door to the bathroom.

“The bathroom is actually a good hiding place,” said White, noticing Barrel’s attention. “Even if it’s... very unpleasant.”

“We’ll check in there,” said Scroll. “First let’s check the cellar, then if he’s not there the bathroom, and then the upstairs.”

“What if he’s not here at all?” asked Barrel.

White stopped sweeping. “Well,” he said. “I have no ideas.”

“There are hiding places,” said Barrel, and White resumed sweeping. “Some of the foals hide there instead of with their families. I remember after our parents died, Tap would get me to hide with the other foals in some tunnels. Well...” His voice wistfully drifted off. “Until they told me to get out because I was a fatass and was blocking the way.”

“If he’s not here...” Scroll peeked into the bathroom. “He’s probably hiding somewhere else. If we can’t find him, we just have to get back to the library and help Carpenter before he, well...” He didn’t finish that sentence. Buzz did not answer their whispers, showing he did not take White’s idea to hide in the toilet.

“Not here,” said Scroll, turning around.

By this point White had managed to get most of the broken glass into a corner of the room, leaving most of the floor clear. The others still kept a light step on the floor however, due to the dim light from the lantern White raised over their heads.

“Having more unicorns around might actually be pretty nice,” said Barrel. A volley of gunfire sounded from outside. “Well, friendly unicorns.” He smiled at Brother White.

“Well, thank you.” White nodded with a friendly smile of his own.

Scroll pushed the door to the cellar open and poked his head down. As was expected, the cellar was pitch-black. “White,” Scroll whispered back, “bring the lantern here.” White did as Scroll told, shining the light down the stairs. Unfortunately, the light only reached so far, but the pair descended regardless.

“Buzz?” asked Scroll in the dark.

“You here?” White asked. He held the lantern before him, peering into the room. The kegs had not been stirred from their massive racks, though he noticed that a couple of the racks themselves had tipped slightly. Soon he saw a scurrying shape off in a corner. “Buzz?”

The little shape stirred. Buzz was cowering in a corner as the muted sounds of cannons thudded outside. As the light from the lantern fell on him, he lifted his face.

“What?” he asked.

“C’mon,” said White. “Your father’s worried sick.”

“And it might not be safe here,” said Scroll.

“It’s safe out there?” Buzz asked, slightly credulous.

“Well...” Scroll mumbled. “There’s no... *perfect* solution. But we should get moving, before—”

Suddenly, light came flooding in from the doorway above.

“Hey!” shouted a voice. The door slammed, cutting off the light from outside.

“What’s going on?” asked Scroll.

“Soldiers?” asked White. “What do you think, Barrel?” No answer. “Uhh... Barrel?”

They looked around, and Barrel was nowhere to be seen. They realized; he hadn’t followed them into the cellar. Now he’d shut the door on them.

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“We don’t have a bathroom,” Tap realized. “I actually got tricked by my brother.”

“Good going,” grunted Carpenter.

“Oh, shut up,” said Tap.

“Think he went to help?” asked Clip.

“I think that’s exactly what he did.”

Carpenter laughed bitterly. He had been propped up onto a row of chairs that served as a sort of makeshift bench and wrapped in whatever pieces of cloth they had lying around to work as similarly makeshift bandages. “Maybe he really just did go to take a shit and was too stupid to—”

“I said *shut up*,” snapped Tap. “Fuck... He did something dumb, and now...”

She looked over at the desk. Carpenter had brought his gun with him: a rough pistol in a foreleg holster, which was now lying at the edge of the library’s front desk.

“He did something stupid,” Tap said, approaching it. “Guess I have to follow and do something stupid too.”

Carpenter sat up, his eyes narrowed suspiciously on Tap. “The hell does that mean?” he asked.

“It means I’m going to borrow your gun,” said Tap placing a hoof on it. “I left mine back at the tavern,” she mumbled. “Just to make sure that your kid gets back here safe and sound.” She wrapped the holster around her foreleg. “You owe me.”

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“Well well,” said the voice on the other side of the door. “What do we have here?”

There was a brief sound of scuffing on wood.

“Nothin’,” said Barrel’s voice.

“Barrel,” Scroll whispered. He was at the top of the stairs, his head pressed next to the door out of the cellar. “What are you doing?”

“You hiding someone?” asked the other voice.

“We don’t have time for this,” said another voice.

“We have *plenty* of time,” said the first voice. “Now then...”

“Please leave,” said Barrel. “This is my home.”

“Nice job keeping it clean,” said the first voice. A few low chuckles accompanied it. “What are you hiding there?” the voice asked. “Friends? Family? I think I’d like to meet them. Move aside.”

“No.”

White stood behind Scroll, both of them holding their breath.

“Come on,” said the other voice. “We’ll have some fun...”

“T-this building is neutral property,” Barrel sputtered. “You aren’t allowed to be here. You being here with your guns and attacking the place...”

“Who said anything about *attacking*?” asked the voice.

“What’s gonna happen if we *do*?” asked another. “Princess gonna get us?”

“Why don’t we find out?” asked a third voice.

“Open the door,” said the first one. His voice was soft, but low, as he toyed with Barrel.

“Scroll, what do we do?” asked White.

Scroll pushed on the door, but Barrel was propped up against it so that he practically just *weighed* it shut.

“I’m trying to think!” Scroll squeaked in a hoarse whisper. His mind was racing, trying to go through everything they had with them. On one side of the door, there were three unicorn soldiers and Barrel holding the door shut. On the other side were Scroll, White, and Buzz, in the cellar and unable to do anything. There were a lot of liquor racks, not to mention the water machine and the assorted barrels. Maybe they could hide if the soldiers wanted to do anything bad...

“I said *open the door*,” said the first voice.

“I-I won’t,” said Barrel. “I won’t let you hurt my friends. You want them, you gotta go through me first.”

“Barrel,” Scroll started to whisper, “let them in, we can—”

“Works for me.”

And then there was a deafening bang.

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Carpenter should have been getting his rest. Unfortunately, Clip proved to be too distracting, with his climbing amongst the rafters after setting a pillow up on the desk where his gun at been.

Tap had taken the gun. Now if a unicorn stormed in he’d be completely defenseless, unless Clip...

*Star Horse to the rescue!*

That had been the most embarrassing day of his life. And now two faggots, a useless fatass, and a whore were going to walk into a bar... There should have been a punchline.

“She took my gun,” he mumbled. “She took my gun, my son is missing, and I’m patched up with...” He looked over the garments that the missionaries had used in place of bandages. Some useless articles he didn’t know about. Probably something they played dress-up with.

He had only rarely set hoof in Tap’s tavern. To tell the truth, he resented the place. It was a much better establishment than his own, and Tap got better business than he did. For him, business was best if his house wasn’t destroyed in an attack. Then ponies would come to him for their needs, replacing the wooden furniture that couldn’t be salvaged. Otherwise, he had to get his own house rebuilt like anyone else, putting his livelihood aside. At times he envied the building ponies. But

most of all he resented Tap. Her business always thrived, and she always got whatever she needed, all because she was the general's whore.

And now she'd taken his damn gun, and he was stuck on a bench with a bright pink colt hopping around the rafters. And on an island with a bright pink colt who lives with two pantywaist stallions, it was *his* kid who turned out to be gay. Maybe the princesses *were* real and had powerful magic. And they were fucking with him.

"Hey mister?" asked Clip.

Carpenter looked up at the colt peering down at him from the rafter above. Something about that kid made him feel uncomfortable. Maybe it was the way he was always up on a perch, sort of halfway between being an earth pony and a winger. Those ghastly scars on his back weren't exactly pleasant to look at, nor were the burns on his flank. For a fleeting moment, he paused to consider that it was ponies in his town that did that to a little pegasus kid. "What?" he grunted.

"What happened to Buzz's mom?"

"She died," he said.

"Oh," said Clip. "Sorry."

"Sorry about what?" Carpenter lay back his head and stared up at the ceiling. "She died in an attack like this one. And then everything just moved on the same as always." And he knew that if he died, or if Buzz died, it'd be no different. This didn't affect him as much as he felt it should have.

"I know what you mean," said Clip. "I mean, the pegasi. They thought I was gonna die, and they didn't care."

Carpenter quizzically tilted his head, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Not even your parents?"

"Well, dad might've," grumbled clip. "Not mother, though. Mother never liked me." He raised a hoof and looked at it. "I think it was because I'm pink."

*Enough to embarrass any parent,* Carpenter thought.

"But I'm glad it happened," said Clip, placing his hoof back on the rafter. "They wanted me to learn how to fight and hurt ponies, and I never wanted to do that. And now I have new parents.



Well... maybe not yet. But they'll get married and then I'll have two dads!"

"Hopefully far away from here," mumbled Carpenter.

Carpenter didn't know how long ago Tap had left. Just that the missionaries had been gone for longer, and there was no sign of them coming back.

"Mister Carpenter?" asked Clip.

"What?"

Clip took a deep breath and puffed his chest out. "I forgive you."

Carpenter blinked. "What?"

"For trying to hang White."

It took all of Carpenter's energy not to groan and curse the little pink colt, and the faggy missionary, and the other faggy missionary, and the whore, and the whore's worthless fatass brother.

The sound of hoofsteps on stone reached Carpenter's ears. Finally, they were coming back. Against the advice he had been given, he laboriously pulled himself up so he could sit and watch the door. The door opened. Carpenter froze.

There were three unicorn soldiers, armed with rifles.

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"BARREL!"

Scroll could barely process Tap's presence. The scream had come immediately after the gunshot. More shots rang out. In a flash of panic, Scroll tried to shove the door open, but Barrel's heavy body blocked it shut.

"White!" Scroll cried. "Help me!"

White ran up to the door and pushed along with Scroll. Barrel had slumped against the door. A moaning sound came as they pushed; Barrel was still alive.

“Barrel!” squeaked Scroll.

“No...” Barrel moaned.

A volley of shots rang out, unmuffled by the door. The missionaries had managed to push the door open a little, and through the crack they could see one unicorn soldier dead on the floor. Tap popped out from behind an overturned table and made a shot at her enemies before ducking down behind again, as the other two unicorns, out of the missionaries’ sight, returned fire.

“Sorry!” jeered one of their voices. “Is this your house?”

A bottle flew out from behind Tap’s table, a high crashing noise indicating its shattering.

“Fuck you!” Tap shouted back.

“Why don’t you come along to our house?” the other voice jeered. “It’s a pretty castle. Don’t pretty fillies like pretty castles?”

“You fucking cowards!” Tap screamed back. The ground shook again, seeming to magnify her furious voice. “He *didn’t even have a gun!*”

“Well, too bad for—*urk!*” The other voice ceased.

“Shit!” called the other one. “They’re opening the door!”

“Scroll!” White threw his hooves around Scroll and yanked him away from the door as bullets burst through the wood and embedded themselves in the wall.

A few more shots sounded before it all fell silent.

“Bastards...” Tap hissed, before the sounds of her hoofsteps shuffled over the floor. “Barrel...”

White moved back to the door and tried to push it the rest of the way open. Barrel’s body was still blocking it, but Tap pulled him away, allowing White to push it open. Barrel’s breathing was shallow, and the floor was sticky with his blood, which covered his belly. The missionaries looked into the room – the three unicorn soldiers lay dead around a table they had used as cover, and on the other side of the room, the smoking gun that Tap had been using lay smoking on the floor. Tap paid no heed to the downed soldiers; she was staring down at her brother, her eyes wide with an expression that neither Scroll nor White had ever seen on her face before: abject

terror.

She looked at them, before noticing the bag on Scroll's back. "The bandages!" she exclaimed.

"The—" Scroll stammered.

"Don't just stand there!" she said. "Save him!"

Scroll awkwardly bumbled to Barrel's side, setting down the lamp. In his bag there he had bandages. In front of him, a wounded pony. And he had no medical knowledge or training.

They had disinfectant and bandages. But what about the bullet? Would they need to get that out? How?

*"Do something!"*

Scroll snapped out of his frightened stupor. "White!" he shouted.

"What?" asked White, who was as panicked as Scroll.

"I'm gonna..." he racked his brains for whatever knowledge he'd gleaned from other sources. "Apply pressure," he said, putting his hooves to Barrel's chest. "I'm gonna apply pressure. You need to get some disinfectant on the cotton and clean the wound, and then bandage it."

White looked at the wound, his expression betraying a certain amount of queasiness. However, he swallowed the bile and, removing a white bottle and a ball of cotton from the bag, he peered at the wound, his horn glowing in concentration. The cap on the bottle unscrewed, and he dripped the liquid onto the cotton ball before putting it to the wound.

"Agh!" Barrel moaned. "Owowow..." Then, it seemed like a wave of renewed vigor had come over him, and his eyes shot open. "I'm shot!" he yelled. "Oh no I'm gonna die!"

White reared back in alarm, his horn's light vanishing as he dropped the magic. Barrel's chest heaved as he tried to breathe.

"What's the matter?" asked Tap.

"Barrel," said Scroll, putting an arm around Barrel's neck, "I need you to stay calm." Barrel nodded silently, before Scroll turned to White. "White, that book I gave you..."

“What about it?”

“*Relaxing giggles.*”

White stood there for a second before a smile dawned across his face. “Ohh. *Right.*”

He lowered his head and the horn lit up again. This time, however, Barrel’s labored breathing eased, and a smile crept across his face.

“Wow...” he said. “That’s a lot of blood. Is it because I’m fat?”

“Good, good,” said Scroll as White returned to cleaning the wound. “Tap,” he continued, “you need to get the room lit. Once the fighting stops we need to get a doctor.” He looked at Buzz, who had been standing in the doorway, silent the whole time. “You go upstairs and get some pillows and blankets. White, you help me get the bandages on him. I gotta keep the pressure on his chest.”

White looked off at the rest of the room, at the three dead unicorn soldiers. He opened his mouth to speak, but Tap saw him and cut him off.

“Fuck them.”

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“Well, what do we have here?” asked the unicorn soldier, smirking over the infirm earth pony.

Carpenter had always hated the unicorns. This one was just like Brother White: smarmy, too *clean* for a pony out here, wearing a cock-eating grin... this one’s coat was a shade of aquamarine, sneering at him through green eyes. He even had a fucking braid in his mane.

“Somepony who’d kick your ass a couple hours ago,” growled Carpenter. “But I have to get my rest or something. Come back later and I’ll show you.”

“Sounds fun,” said the soldier, while his friend peered around the library. “Unfortunately I’m on a tight schedule, so I can’t spare the time. You, however...” He laughed, putting the butt of his rifle on the floor. “Hope you’ve got a big opening, cause you’re coming with me.”

“What?”

“Oh, it’s a standard prisoner run,” said the soldier. “Just hope you’ve been making lots of babies. I don’t think you’d be missed, as you’re...” He gave a soft chuckle. “A little past your prime.”

Carpenter’s eyes narrowed. “And if I refuse?”

The soldier snickered. “With what faculties?”

Carpenter looked at himself, covered in makeshift bandages and completely unarmed, as opposed to two unicorns who *were* armed and not wounded.

The other soldier checked by the door. “What’s this place doing out here?” he asked.

“Good question,” said the first soldier.

“Those two missionaries,” grunted Carpenter. “Wanted to build a library here...”

The first soldier chuckled. “Oh dear, we’re on *neutral territory*,” he mocked. “Come on, let’s go.” He took a step forward. Carpenter lurched out of his seat, stepping back on his hooves. He could still hold himself up, but he was weak. The second soldier turned his attention to him, though the first one kept his smug expression. “Well, maybe we could be persuaded to let you go,” he said. “If you find somepony else...”

Carpenter instantly looked up at Clip. The colt had remained tentatively perched on the rafter, as though unsure of what to do.

“Him!” Carpenter yelled. Both of the soldiers looked up. Clip tried to jump from the rafter, but one of the unicorns grabbed him in his magic reach before he even hit the floor. Clip floated in front of the second soldier, wide-eyed and kicking the air.

“Traitor!” he yelled at Carpenter. “You traitoring traitor!”

“I was never on your side, shit-wing,” Carpenter snarled. He started to walk, but the first soldier hit him with the butt of the rifle, breaking the skin of his cheek and knocking him to the floor.

“I was being facetious,” he said. “Not that I expect you dirt ponies to know what that means.”

“I have a son...” Carpenter moaned.

““Shit-wing...?”” asked the second soldier, upon inspecting Clip closer... “Woah... Aq, you gotta

see this.”

The soldier named Aq turned and looked at him. He, too, noticed Clip’s scars. “Is that…” He looked at Carpenter, clearly amused. “Is that a pegasus colt?”

“Let me go!” said Clip. “Or my dads will…”

“Quiet!” snarled the second soldier.

“This is great,” said Aq. “The other guys will get a kick out of this. As for you…” He turned back to Carpenter, who was still on the ground.

Carpenter looked up at the smug bastard of a horner. He had a diamond medallion around his neck, which began to glow. Carpenter felt himself slipping from consciousness, and as the light filled his eyes and Clip’s shrill voice drowned out his ears, all he could think about was the horrifying thought that he might never see his son again.

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By now the battle had ended. Cannons ceased, and gunshots remained only to signal the executions of stragglers. Now it would be the usual time for rebuilding, burying the dead, and moving back to the usual swing of things.

Brother White was unsure how lucky to count himself. For once, the tavern hadn’t been destroyed. Barrel, however, had been shot. Thanks to Brother Scroll’s thinking, however, he seemed safe for now.

Barrel lay in the corner on a little makeshift bed. They hadn’t dared move him, so they simply had him lying in the corner of the main room, which had been lit with the lanterns. He had gone to sleep, but the worst seemed to be over. They’d bandaged him up, but that was all they knew how to do. Still, White was proud of his mission brother.

They had found Buzz at the mission house, sure enough, but with Barrel’s emergency they’d postponed their return to Carpenter. That nagged at the back of his mind – they would have to return and make sure that Carpenter and Clip were alright.

Tap stood by Barrel’s side as if in a trance. Something had come over her that White had never seen, yet he wasn’t surprised. Barrel was the only family she had. If he lost *any* of his family, he didn’t know what he’d do. If he lost Scroll…

Scroll stepped forward. “He should be okay,” he said. “Just as long as he gets his—”

“Get out,” said Tap. She didn’t move or turn to face them. “Get out of my home. Out of my life.”

Scroll took a step back and sputtered, “I...”

Tap turned around. Her eyes were red from tears. “None of this would’ve happened if you hadn’t come here. My brother just got shot because of you two. Because of *that* little shitwad...” She threw a furious glare at Buzz, who had been sitting in the corner. The colt was uncharacteristically mortified and seemed to be making every effort he could to appear as small as possible.

She glared at Scroll. “If *you* hadn’t told *him* he was welcome here, *without* my permission, he wouldn’t have been here tonight. Then you wouldn’t have come here, and Barrel wouldn’t be here, and he wouldn’t have gotten shot. And it happened because of what? *What!*” She sneered at Buzz. “Because of this little shit and his asshole dad.”

White looked at Buzz; the little colt was choked up, biting back the tears. Tap wasn’t being fair to him, he thought. He looked back at Tap, and spoke up. “He needed—”

“He didn’t need a *damn thing*,” said Tap. “You owed him nothing. Buzz would’ve been just as fine if you’d just stayed behind and he hid.”

“We couldn’t know that,” said Scroll.

“*Oh!*” Tap yelled. “What an *amazing* twist of events, our boys from Equestria *don’t know everything!*”

Scroll backed up to Brother White, both of them looking at her. But she wasn’t finished.

“I especially love the way you treat ponies who are scum. *Oh, Buzz, come over to my place,*” she mocked. “*Have a fucking present while you’re at it! Oh, General Quake, let’s be best friends! Oh, Carpenter, I totally think you’re okay even though you tried to murder me. General Monarch, how about a great big fucking hug!*”

White watched her hysterics. She left little room for them to say anything in their own support, though White wasn’t going to be broken by this. He stood there, his expression uncharacteristically stoic.

“We’ve been here for months,” White said in a soft voice. “You haven’t learned anything?”

“*Haven’t you?!*” Tap stormed up to him, her eyes wide-open with rage. White’s attempts at rock-hard cool-headedness faltered as he backed away from the advancing mare. “No, no no no, *you* never have to learn a *damn* thing, *you’re* the ones who have all the answers. And it’s just *great* for you, White, because if there’s one thing you love more than dressing up as a princess, it’s listening to yourself talk!”

Scroll opened his mouth.

“Don’t even say anything, Scroll,” said Tap, not even dignifying him with a glare. “I don’t even know why the fuck I did *anything* with you. Except maybe for pity. It sure as hell wasn’t for being good in bed. Thing about you, Scroll, is you’re really just a spineless pussy. Take your buddy here away from you and what are you good for?” She gave a low, bitter chortle.

“Cooking?”

Scroll backed down. Neither he nor White had anything to say. On the other side of the room, Barrel moaned softly and turned on his side. Tap’s head snapped to watch him, as did Buzz and the missionaries. She scurried to the side of his bed to see. When it was clear that Barrel was just continuing with his sleep, Tap turned back to the missionaries.

“You should never have come to this island. You should’ve just stayed home and kept me and Barrel out of your *bullshit*. But...” She laughed bitterly. “Guess it’s my fault, too, y’know. And you know the worst part? The worst part of all of this is... it’s that I actually believed you for a while there. I *believed* it. That stuff about friendship.” The smile vanished from her face as she looked back at her sleeping brother. “And that’s what it’s gotten me. You two are... you’re completely clueless. You come here with all your fun and games and shit, and now *this* happens. I... I’ve had to deal with some shit. I lost my parents like a lot of ponies. I’ve lost my home several times. And, of course, I’m surrounded by scum. But of all the ponies who... who’ve lied to me, robbed me, beaten me, raped me... you’ve hurt me more than any of them.”

“You know... you know what you two will do if you have half a brain between you?” she asked. She paused, trying to regain her breath putting a hoof to her temple, which was damp with sweat. Taking another breath, she drew herself up and continued, her voice a little quieter. “You’ll get right on the next boat out of here and go home. That way you’ll be with all those nice ponies you can have those parties with and not fuck everything up by being so, so *stupid*.” She shot a narrow-eyed, almost deadpan expression at Scroll. “I mean, pies. Really? I’m just amazed Quake hasn’t killed you himself after all the...” She sighed and shook her head. “I don’t care. Just get out. Get out of my home. Leave me to run my business and take care of my brother.”



Then, in one swift motion, she raised a hoof to her neck and tore the locket from it, before casting it at Scroll's hooves.

And then for an instant, a look of horror came across her face as she looked at Scroll's. She took a step back. "I..." she sputtered, her voice broken. "I can't take it. Just go." She turned her back to them, leaving Scroll to stare down at the locket on the floor.

White turned to him. Scroll just stood there, his legs nearly trembling and his mouth hanging open. He raised a hoof to his shoulder.

"Scroll?" he asked. Scroll looked up at him suddenly, his eyes wide like a desperate, lost foal. "Let's go."

The missionaries left the tavern, with Buzz trailing timidly behind them. The battle had stopped by now. The moon was low; dawn would come in a few hours. The missionaries, in the excitement of the night, had not even been tired, though now the strain of Tap's rejection had worn them down a little. Scroll especially seemed rattled. As he walked he just stared down at the locket in his hoof, completely silent.

"She's just a bit rattled and scared," White reasoned. "She nearly lost her brother. I'm sure she'll probably let us back in by noon." He stopped for a second. "Gee, I hope *Barrel* isn't mad."

As they walked back to the library, White noticed a marked contrast with the dirty, rubble-ridden streets of the town and the clean, smooth sand of the beach. Looking back at the town he felt an odd sense of disconnect.

Soon enough they came upon the library, still and safe as they'd left it, save for the fact that the door had been left open.

*Hmm, thought White. Tap isn't really the pony to be that careless...*

He stepped through the door, expecting to hear Clip let out an excited yelp. Instead, there was nothing.

"Dad?" asked Buzz, tentatively stepping into the room.

"Clip?" asked White. "Carpenter?"

Scroll raised the lantern to light the room. It didn't fill the whole building, but one thing was clear. Carpenter and Clip were gone.

---

"Monarch's lucky he's good at running away," grunted General Quake. He and a small group of soldiers were marching down the beach. "Him and Storm. That's how they attack. They get a few hits in and then they turn tail. Just one of these fucking days they'll slip up, and I'll get my hooves on them, and I'll..." He smashed a large rock with a stomp of his hoof, making the ground around him shake. The soldiers stumbled, though one clever pony hopped to avoid it.

"You swear something fell off?" he continued.

"We're sure we saw it," said Trigger Mark.

"I shot it myself," said Gunner. "So do I get a promotion?"

"Fuck you," Quake grunted.

Gunner chewed and nodded his head. "Fair enough..."

Quake, however, slowed to a walk as they approached the library.

"What is *that*?" he asked. "I don't remember anything out here."

"That's the mission boys' library," said one of the soldiers. "We built it like a week ago."

Quake turned around, his mouth open in disbelief. "'We'?" He looked around at the soldiers. "*You* helped build this? Are you fucking shitting me?" He looked back at it. "Where's the debris?"

"Probably out past it, sir," said Trigger Mark.

The company continued up the beach and up the rock on which the library sat. Quake glared at it out of the corner of his eye, but otherwise ignored it. That is, however, until the door burst open.

"*Where are they?*" White shrieked hysterically.

"What is it?" asked Trigger Mark.

White stumbled out of the doorway. “Clip and Carpenter,” said White. “They’re gone. We don’t know where they went, and—”

“Oh...” said Gunner. “Shit.”

“What?” asked White. “What is it? Where are they?”

“There were a number of disappearances,” said Trigger Mark. “They might’ve been captured?”

“What?” asked White.

“Horners are lazy shits,” said Quake, “So they come and grab us if they can to do whatever-the-fuck up in their castle.” He stepped over to the edge of the rock.

“Then...” said White. “We need to rescue them!”

Quake turned around, snorting in irritation. “If I get one more fucking word out of you about what we ‘need,’ I swear I’ll knock you so high in the air you’ll land faggy-ass-first on the peak of the mountain! They’re gone. Now shut the fuck up.”

“Carpenter has a kid...” White began to protest.

“Then the kid can grow up,” said Quake, looking at the doorway. Buzz was standing there, his head hung low in dejection. “He’s old enough for a job. Why don’t you go do that?” he asked the colt. “Instead of standing around like a useless piece of shit. Run back into town and do... whatever it is your dad did. That’s an *order!*”

Without another word, Buzz scurried off down the beach.

“General!” said Gunner, standing at the edge of the rock. “There it is!”

Quake grunted and turned to follow. White, too, went to look.

Further down on the beach, there was what appeared to be the remains of a collapsed turret from the castle. Stones were scattered over the sand, and the turret itself had sunk in on itself, barely recognizable.

“Gunner shot it off,” Trigger Mark explained to White. “We’re here to see if it has anything useful.”

Gunner and another soldier were already off down the beach to see. Quake stepped down after them, slowly. The rest of the group followed and passed him, White included, to his great irritation. The soldiers climbed over the broken stones, examining the ruins.

“Holy shit...” said Gunner. “This one’s breathing!”

As Quake walked up, he saw a unicorn lying on the beach. His head was covered in blood, but he was still breathing.

“Not a soldier,” said Trigger Mark. “Not wearing a uniform.”

“Good,” said Quake. “That means he won’t put up a fight,” he looked at the nearest soldier. “Kill him.”

“What? No!” White exclaimed, running up to the downed unicorn and putting himself between them. “You can’t do this!”

“Yes I can,” said Quake. “Now get out of my way.”

White stood there. For a second he seemed uncertain as he looked at the soldiers around him, his face nearly pleading for support. Quake smirked at the sight of him squirming. But then White looked him straight in the eye, and said, “No.”

Then he noticed that the soldiers had not done as he’d told them. They were just standing there, as though they hadn’t heard the order. An *order*, which they proceeded to ignore, like they were waiting for a second opinion. That did not happen on Earthquake Island. That *never* happened on Earthquake Island. It was his island, and what he said went.

No, he remembered. There was the last attack, and he remembered what White had done there. He looked at Brother White, standing in front of him. He snorted in amusement at the idea that White seemed to act like he had more authority than him. That had happened *one* time. It would not happen again. Not to him. Not on his island.

“I warned you to stay out of my way,” he growled.

“I don’t care,” said White. “I’m not letting you do this.”

“*White?*” called a voice. Quake turned around and saw Scroll standing on the edge of the rock.

*“What’s happening?”*

Quake looked back at White, who looked back at Scroll in turn.

“I’m going to kill you,” said Quake. “If you don’t get out of the way.”

White looked back at him, his eyes wide. “I... I don’t care,” he said.

Quake tilted his head. “You know,” he said. “It’s fucking amazing, the shit I let you get away with. And it’s all because I didn’t want an ‘incident.’ But now that I think about it...” He paused, letting himself enjoy how much bigger than the unicorn he was. “The two dipshits before you? They hightail it out and nothing happens. I shove a book up your ass. Nothing happens. Monarch knocks down your place, nothing happens. So here I am, and I realize that if you die, nothing happens at all. No princess, no army.”

“Well...” White took a step back. “I don’t *plan* on dying.”

“This unicorn was with the fortress,” said Quake, advancing on him. “He’s with Monarch. He hates us as much as we hate him. He’s with the unicorns who took that little shitwing kid of yours.” He smirked. “Sounds good to me. They take your shitwing. I splatter his brains all over the rock. Then it’s even.”

White just stared at him in disbelief. “I’ll never understand you, Quake,” he said.

“The feeling is fucking mutual,” said Quake. “You come to my island and think you can run it better than me? If you and your fag-friend were in charge, in one week you’d be taken over by the horners or the wingers or both because you tried to make *friends* with them.” He smirked again. “I bet you hate me. You won’t admit it, but you do. But the thing is I’m the one keeping this island safe.”

White stared at him, his eyes narrowed.

“And you know what I keep it safe from?” he nodded at the unicorn, who had started to stir.

“Him. So, why don’t you just stand aside and let me do my job?”

White took a step forward. “Two reasons,” he said. “One, I kinda have a problem with murder, and two...”

There was a flash of light, and the other unicorn was gone. All turned to look at the spot, and

then the soldiers turned their attention back on White as he looked at Quake, that confident smile coming back into play.

“And two, because to do that I’d have to admit that you’re right. And if I do that, then the mission has failed. And I don’t mean to fail.”

Quake stood there, glaring at White. For a second there was dead silence, as the smile from White’s face melted away into a look of horror. The dumb dickhead knew what was coming. Quake raised a mighty hoof—

“*White!*” Scroll cried.

White’s horn lit up in an attempt at a magic spell. Quake grinned a little, finding it amusing. What could Brother White possibly use against him? The general knew that White’s magic was only really doing things with mouths. *What’s he gonna do?* thought Quake. *Give me a toothache?*

His hoof stayed there in the air as he just looked at White, and slowly he lowered it, his mouth opening into a grin.

“You... You’re...” he said, his mind trying to find the word. “*Funny...*”

White leaped to the side and shoved him. Now that was *really* funny, Quake thought. White was an utter weakling. There was no way he could do anything to him, physically. Quake just giggled at the silliness of it as he tipped over and landed in the sand with a soft *thud*. The soldiers stood around him, gaping dumbly.

He lay there for a while, pondering how silly it was that the faggy unicorn had stood up to him, humiliated him... beaten him...

Then he launched up in a rage, the soldiers backing away from him. The general looked around like a mad animal, his teeth barred. He looked to the library on the rock, but there was no sign of the missionaries.

“Find him,” said Quake. “Find White. *Kill him.*”

---

Tap stood in the middle of the room of her tavern while the army doctor tended to Barrel. If nothing else, at least she hadn’t lost the tavern this time. She rather wished she had, instead of...

She shook her head. Barrel was going to be alright, no thanks to... actually, it was thanks to the missionaries, now that she thought of it. Still, it wouldn't even have been necessary if they hadn't...

"He should be fine," said the doctor. "Bullet didn't hit anywhere bad. I'd help get it out, but I got other, slightly more dead ponies to attend to."

"Sure," Tap mumbled as the doctor departed.

She groaned. She had to put it from her mind, somehow. Now was a good time for a drink. She'd head down to the cellar, grab a bottle, and get herself plastered. Sure, she'd lost a lot of booze due to the ground shaking and her wares smashing onto the floor and drinking more of her inventory wasn't prudent, but fuck it, she needed a drink and she could always make the money back by sucking some dicks.

Before she could swim in alcohol, however, the door burst open.

"No," she said. "Fuck no."

Scroll pinned himself against the door. "Please," he said, as White also propped himself against the door. "We don't have anywhere else to go."

"I know where you can go!" she said.

"Really?" the brothers asked in unison.

*"Somewhere else."*

"They took Clip!" protested White.

"And they're going to kill White!" said Scroll. "Uh, different 'they', that is?"

Tap blinked. Despite how she felt about Barrel, that was a different prospect entirely. "What?"

The door burst open, knocking them both to the floor. Trigger Mark and Gunner stood in the doorway.

"Now I *really* need a drink," said Tap.

White and Scroll looked up and backed away from the soldiers, who stared coldly at them.

“General Quake sent us after you,” said Trigger Mark.

“Gave us a job,” said Gunner. He puffed out his large chest and cleared his throat, before announcing, “I’m afraid we’ll have to execute you, White. Nothing personal.”

“Yeah,” said Trigger Mark. “Unless you can escape,” he said, in that slow, oily way one says when they imply something. “That’d be good.” He smiled at Gunner. “Right?”

“Huh?” Gunner asked, looking at Trigger Mark. He blinked, lost for a moment at his proposed idea, before his face lit up in the realization. “Oh, oh yeah.” He grinned. “That’s *much* better.”

Scroll and White looked at each other, hopeful, but a bit bewildered.

“I take it hiding in the basement is too obvious?” asked Tap.

“You could camp in the forest,” suggested Gunner. “We got the working and inspection schedules so you could avoid the crowds.”

“Or you could hide in the caves,” said Trigger Mark, bobbing his head as though chewing on the options.

“Somehow those sounds like the first two places Quake would look,” said Tap dubiously.

“Well...” said Trigger Mark. He pawed at the ground a little. Gunner glanced at the floor.

“Yeah,” said Gunner, “figures it’s the first two we thought of.”

Scroll stood there, like he was numb from shock. Tap knew that look – it came when one of two things happened: either Scroll was deeply shocked, or he’d gotten a big idea. And Tap wasn’t sure which it was.

“Dirty socks...” he said softly.

White looked at him. His eyebrow raised and he slowly opened his mouth. “Excuse me?”

Scroll burst off of the floor and ran up the stairs. And Tap still wasn’t sure which it was. Brother



White looked at her, smiling awkwardly.

“Sorry about bursting in like this,” he said. “Kind of an emergency. Just...”

“Whatever,” said Tap. “Just... just don’t get killed, okay?”

Scroll returned down the steps a few moments later, with something in his mouth. Every step he took was slow and shaky, as though he were wading through cold water. Tap could read him, however – he was afraid.

He approached White, who stood up, peering at him quizzically.

“Is that...” White asked.

Scroll set it down on the floor. It was a small, dark stone disc. He lifted his face to look back up at White. “It’s the teleporter Monarch sent,” he said. “With it, you can go to his fortress and escape Quake.”

White looked back down at the disc, lifting it with his magic. Scroll turned his own head away, not looking White in the eye. White examined it before returning his attention back to his mission partner.

“Scroll?” he asked. “Are you...”

“I’m afraid, okay?” Scroll squeaked. “This... this is the only thing I can think of.”

“Well, there’s still the forest and stuff,” suggested Gunner. “I mean, he’d probably comb it until he found you and then the moment he found you, well, um...”

Gunner’s facial expressions had always been obvious, Tap noted. His face underwent a wide-eyed grimace as he bit his lip. White paid him no mind; his attention was divided between the teleporter and Scroll.

“Trigger Mark,” said White, turning to the soldiers. “You said that the unicorns might’ve taken Clip and Carpenter?”

“Likely,” replied the soldier.

“If I go there I can find them,” White reasoned. “And I can find out what happened to Brother

Shine.”

Scroll, however, did not seem comforted by the possibilities. At the very least, his dejected, downturned face didn't betray any such positive feelings.

“Yeah,” he said, unable to sound hopeful. “You can find them, and I'll...” He looked up again. Tap saw tears starting to form in his eyes. “White... White, I don't *know* what to do.”

White looked at Scroll, his mouth in an open half-smile. “Don't... Scroll, you...” He forced a laugh. “What do you mean? Who's the one who always comes up with the ideas? Who thought up the library? Who gave everyone free water?”

“Yeah... I did, I guess,” said Scroll. “B-but I don't know if I *can* still do that,” he said. “Not without you. White, I, I, I...” He broke down, shivering as though he were about to fall to the floor in a panic. “White,” he hissed in a pained whisper, “I don't know if I'm *strong* enough.”

White put the teleporter down and smiled at his partner. “Scroll, do you remember what I told you when we first met at the Fraternity, when we were partnered up for this?”

Scroll sniffed. “What?”

“I told you were gonna do great. And you did.” White lifted a hoof to Scroll's face and wiped away a tear. “You *are* strong, Scroll. More than that. A *lot* more than that. You're *smart*. And you're *kind*. And you're the best friend I've ever had in my life. I've told you that before, but I've never meant it more than now.”

Scroll, finding some strength in himself, wiped away his tears as White continued.

“And I think I'm going to have it hard without you, too,” he confessed. “But I think I can do it if you can. But Scroll, I'm going to need you to be one more thing.”

Scroll paused. “And what's that?”

“I need you to be brave,” said White. “I need you to promise me that, Scroll. If I know you can be brave here, then I think I can be, too.”

The missionaries were silent for a moment, just looking at each other. A day ago Tap would've loved the sight, but now she found herself irritated at their inane chatter and pep-talks and just wanted all of them, soldiers included, out of her house. Before she could tell them to get out,

however, Scroll answered.

“I... I think so.”

“Good,” said White. “Thank you.” He turned to the soldiers. “Thank you to you, too.” Last, he turned to Tap. “And thank you.”

“Just get out, okay?” she answered.

“Look after Buzz, okay?” he asked Scroll. “Look after everyone. Stay to the mission.”

Scroll nodded, and with that, White lifted the disc. The Brothers took one last, long look at each other, before a brilliant white light enveloped White.

And then he was gone.

The door crashed open and the soldiers were thrown to the floor. Gunner groaned, but his voice was muffled as he fell face-first onto the wooden planks. General Quake stood in the door, heaving.

“*Where is he?!*” he snarled, more like a rabid animal than a pony. “*Where is that fucking faggot?*” His eyes fell on Scroll. “*You!*” He stomped up to him. Scroll backed away and fell into a chair, which tipped backwards and spilled him on the floor. “**WHERE IS HE?**”

“I-I-I-I,” Scroll stammered. His eyes already seemed large under his glasses, but now they seemed bigger than his mouth. Tap wondered for an instant, as he stared up at Quake’s furious face, if he would actually shit himself.

“He’s gone,” Tap said. Quake looked at her, and then to the soldiers.

“He just slipped away, sir,” said Trigger Mark.

“He used, uh,” Gunner grunted as he pulled himself too his hooves. “He used one of those horner transports. He’s with General Monarch now.”

Quake stood there, steaming in the realization, before turning his attention back to Tap.

“General,” said Tap, “I’ve had a lot of blood and guts in here tonight already. I don’t want to have to clean it *again*.”

The general stared down at Scroll, who seemed to have frozen on his back, hooves in the air. He snorted down at him, and Scroll flinched and let out a pained whimper. Then the general stepped away and turned, slowly lumbering over to the doorway. He left, and the soldiers followed him out. Scroll clumsily crawled over the chair and got back to his hooves. He looked at Tap.

“You... just... saved my life,” Scroll panted, winded from holding his breath under the general’s glare. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t want to clean another mess,” Tap replied coldly, turning away. “Now get out.”

She didn’t watch, but just listened for the hoofsteps. *Clup. Clup. Clup. Squeak. Latch.* And Scroll was gone, leaving Tap and Barrel alone in the tavern.

---

The night was ending, and the grey light that blanketed the island was soon to be pierced by the light of the dawn’s sun. Scroll stood at the edge of the rock by the library and looked out.

White was gone. Clip was gone. Barrel was wounded. Tap had thrown him out.

Scroll was completely alone in the world without a friend to guide him, or shelter, or share. He had been without friends before he’d joined the Fraternity, but now it seemed like the worst thing in Equestria to be without a friend. And, perhaps, the worst thing *out* of Equestria, to be without a friend.

Desperately, he tried to remember what White had told him about the sunrise those months ago.

*I think that if I can see the sunrise... I can know that everything I believe is true.*

Scroll was scared. If there was one thought more terrifying for him than the idea that the sun might not rise, it was the idea that it might rise, but be completely devoid of the things White had said.

A gull’s cry echoed through the still air. The birds were waking, but Barrel would not be here. Would they miss him, Scroll wondered.

Scroll would miss White. He knew that much. He tried to think of his comforting words.

*You are strong. You are smart. You are kind.*

He looked down at the ground. There, at his hooves, sat the Book of Friendship, the collection of letters and lessons that it was his mission to teach. Hard to teach about the magic of friendship when he didn't have any friends, though.

He sank to his knees and clenched his eyes shut. He was going to cry, but he didn't want to. It was as though he were being torn in two, between the fragile shell that was about to break, and the strong, firm pillar of confidence he wanted to be. He shook in the dull weak glow of the dawn, terrified of the uncertain future.

Then a gentle warmth touched his nose and he quietly opened his eyes. He saw the sun was beginning to rise, as the first beams of the morning clipped over the water. Slowly and shakily, he rose to his feet.

And so Brother Scroll Page, a missionary of the Fraternity of the Joyous Friends of Princess Celestia, stood up tall and faced the horizon and the sunrise, knowing what he had to do.

It was time to be brave.

End of Part 2