

Chapter 12

Barrel took a deep breath. Closing his eyes, he pulled on the rope as hard as he could, and the wall came up.

Rebuilding was always the busiest part of life. Out over the sea, there were two floating bodies - there was the Stormcloud, a collective of pegasi led by General Storm (vicious bitch), and the Monarch's Fortress, which was a floating city ruled by General Monarch (smug bastard). The ponies of Earthquake Island, led by General Quake (fucking asshole), couldn't do much other than sit and wait for one of the two groups to attack. When an attack came, there was no way to guarantee that one's house would be safe. Just about everypony on the island had lost their home at one point or another, and when that happened they had to try to rebuild and get a livelihood back. Some of them couldn't, and just ended up as bums on the street.

Tap and Barrel had lost their home several times throughout their lives. Sometimes the tavern burned down, sometimes it got demolished by an explosion, sometimes a pegasus tornado blew it away, sometimes it just couldn't hold under an earthquake. When an attack came, they'd hide in the cellar, and often they'd come out to find that the tavern around them had been flattened. The next day, they'd have to rebuild the whole thing by themselves. It wasn't a particularly difficult job, as earth ponies were always fast builders.

Barrel could remember the first time that their home had been destroyed. It was when he was a tiny colt, hadn't even gotten his cutie mark yet...

"Tap," said his mother, "I want you and your brother to stay down in the cellar."

"But mom..." said Tap.

"No buts," said their father, "you stay down there, and you don't come out until all of the cannons and guns have stopped."

"But..." said Barrel, "What are you gonna do?"

"We're going to help the neighbors," said their father, "we'll be back in the morning."

"Barrel?" asked Tap, "Is something wrong?"

"Huh?" asked Barrel, jolted from his memory. "Oh, no. Just thinking..."

“Well, we can’t just live in walls. Need to get the roof on.”

That had been the last time he’d seen his parents. When they came out the next morning, they were nowhere to be found. Tap never said what had happened to them, but when Barrel was older he understood that they must have been killed. That had been a rude awakening to a lot of things about life on Earthquake Island. Barrel realized that nopony was going to help them - it was just him and his sister, out on their own. Tap adjusted to it well, though. At least, Barrel thought she did. She was smarter than he was, at any rate.

They stood in the middle of the room - four walls, but there was no furniture and no ceiling. And after they got a roof on they’d need to get the other rooms up. Then they’d be able to go back to their tavern business, assuming they could scrape together enough to buy booze to sell. Until then, however, Barrel was not optimistic.

Barrel heard hoofsteps on the blackened floor. Turning around, he saw two stallions whom he recognized as carpenters and builders.

“Ey,” said one of them, “we saw your house’d burned down.”

“I noticed,” said Tap, not paying them any attention.

“Well,” said the other stallion, “we thought we might be able to help.”

This caught Tap’s attention. “Help?”

“Yeah,” said the first stallion, walking up to her, “I mean, you want your house built, and we can build houses.”

“We’d be happy to,” said the second stallion, following his partner, “if we could have a little exchange.”

“Exchange,” said Tap in a flat tone of voice.

“Yeah, y’know,” said the first stallion, “not in money, but like one of them... bartender economies?”

“Well,” said Tap, “I think Barrel and I would appreciate the help. We can probably work something out.”

“That’d be great. We could even throw in some money, too,” said the second stallion, “if you offer us enough in exchange.”

Barrel had about enough of this. “I know what you’re talking about,” he huffed, turning away. “I don’t think you need my help.”

“Barrel, wait...” said Tap, but Barrel was already out the doorway. He wasn’t grumbling, or fuming, or really letting anything on at all. He just had to get out, without his sister or the stallions who bought her or the missionaries or the general or his soldiers or anything. He just wanted to be alone.

White was always the one up early, and the first thing he did, even before breakfast, was freshen up in the bathroom. Now that the water was back on, White could comb his mane properly. As he did so, he realized for the first time that he hadn’t gotten a manecut in two months. It had completely slipped his mind up until this point. Placing the comb down, he looked at himself. He wondered whether he’d keep his mane long. He decided he’d ask Scroll what he thought. Moving on with his morning routine, he placed the comb down and put on his shiny nametag. He smiled as he adjusted it. Now all he needed to do was put on his tie...

There he was. The three P’s: prim, proper, and professional - the ideal missionary.

“White?” called Scroll’s voice, “Is today toast day or pancakes day?”

“Why don’t we forget both of them and have waffles instead?” asked White.

“Waffles and pancakes are kinda the same thing!”

White shrugged, straightened his tie, and walked into the main room. “Well, whatever we have, let’s have a big breakfast. Big new day, and a whole lot of new doors to knock on!”

He marched up to the door, threw it open, walked out, and found he had to swat a noose out of his face.

He stopped. Something wasn’t right here. He looked at his hoof, which was holding the loop of rope. As the realization dawned on him, he dropped it like a hot potato and backed up.

When he calmed down, he heard a foal laughing. Venturing to step further outside, he turned around and saw a brown colt sitting on the roof of the mission house, holding one end of the

rope. He looked vaguely familiar to White. He could've sworn that he'd seen that colt out and about while doing missionary rounds, sometimes jeering or throwing garbage at him.

"Your idea of a practical joke?" White asked.

"Not joking," said the colt. "You're fucking dead, horner."

White was alerted to the depressing reality that death threats had ceased to unnerve him. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Buzz," answered the colt, who had a circular saw as his cutie mark.

"Well, Buzz," said White, "do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"No!" said Buzz. "'Cause I'm not GAY."

White was not going to dignify that with a response. "Y'know, you really should get down from there," he said. "It's not safe. You could fall, and trust me, it hurts."

"Fuck you!" Buzz shouted. He glared down at White.

White sighed. He got the distinct impression that this kid would be sticking around, and he wouldn't be as nice as Clip. It was bad enough when the adult ponies picked on him, but now there was a colt who must've had a great deal of spare time.

"White?" called Scroll's voice from inside. The door opened. "It turns out that it actually is pancakes day and LYNCH MOB!" He jumped back, seeing the noose.

Barrel sat completely still on the docks, watching the seagull. If he just sat completely still, it wouldn't be afraid of him. He held his breath, watching as the bird walked closer (well, not so much walking closer as not being afraid to go in his general direction).

Barrel smiled. He always liked to just sit on the docks and watch the seabirds as they did the things seabirds did. It was just something simple and calming, completely detached from the harsh realities of Earthquake Island.

Barrel's smile dropped as the bird suddenly flew away.

“Hey, kid,” said a voice behind him, “mind moving outta the way?”

Barrel looked behind him and saw a pony carrying a large box. “Sorry...” he said, quickly getting up and moving out of the pony’s way.

Barrel sighed. Now that there were sailors doing stuff, the gulls wouldn’t be on the docks, leaving Barrel just standing there like an idiot with nothing to do. He felt guilty about storming out on his sister like that. He decided he’d have to swallow what little pride he had and trudge on back home to the tavern, and hope that Tap wouldn’t be upset with him.

He returned to the tavern to find that the two construction workers had not started on building a roof, but were hard at work building a second floor.

“Uhh, sis?” Barrel asked nervously.

“Yes?” Tap asked.

“I thought we were gonna just have a one-floor house this time...”

“Figured I’d get as much as I could,” said Tap. “Barrel, are you alright?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“Listen, Barrel,” Tap said, gesturing for Barrel to sit down on a stool, “I know that what I do upsets you.”

Barrel nodded sadly. “I’m sorry I stormed off like that...”

“It’s okay, Barrel,” Tap said, smiling, trying to cheer him up. “C’mon. Let’s get to work. If we hurry, we can get open business again tomorrow.”

“Alright.”

There was a knock on a door, and an old stallion answered the door, to find a smiling white unicorn in a red tie standing on his porch.

“Gooooood morning!” said Brother White.

“The fuck is good about it?” the old stallion asked, groaning inwardly.

“Yyyyyyyyyyyooooou getting a free pie!” said White, revealing an apple pie.

“Fuck your pie.”

“No, you *eat* it.”

The old stallion had enough of this and just shut the door.

“*Why doesn't anypony want my pie?*” Scroll moaned loudly.

“Don't worry, Scroll,” said White, “we just need to get one or two ponies to try them and then it'll spread through word of mouth. Then maybe they'll be interested in our book...”

“Hopefully...” said Scroll.

“C'mon,” said White, “you knock next time.”

They moved onto the next house. Scroll walked up to the door, book in mouth, and knocked. A young mare answered. Scroll took the book out of his mouth.

“Can I help you?” asked the mare.

“Hi!” said Scroll. “My name is Brother Scroll, and I'm with the Fraternity of the Joyous Friends of Princess Celestia, and I, uh...”

Scroll's voice trailed off as the mare's extraordinarily bored expression intimidated him.

“I have a book...”

“Aren't you with that horner?” asked the mare.

“Um...” Scroll said, looking back at White. “Listen, ma'am,” he said, turning back to her, “he isn't a ‘horner,’ he's a unicorn. You really shouldn't be using racial slurs. I mean, ‘horner’ sounds dirty, and Brother White is actually very clean.”

The mare shut the door.

“He showers every day!” Scroll called. When no answer came, he sighed and hanged his head.

“So...” said White, walking up to Scroll, “next door?”

“We need a better idea,” said Scroll. “Knocking on doors isn’t working, apple pie isn’t working, trivia night isn’t working, nopony seemed remotely interested in our beach party...”

“We’ll think of something, Scroll,” said White, “something...”

They resumed walking for a while - they skipped the next several houses, as they were all the sites of previous rejections. When they finally came to a house they didn’t recognize, White knocked on the door.

“Go away!” shouted a voice from inside. “I’ve told you three times I don’t want your damn book!”

“Oh, sorry!” White called. “New house?”

“Yes, now fuck off!”

White walked away from the door, shaking his head and muttering something about counting houses.

“So,” said Scroll, as they resumed walking, “lately I’ve been reading...”

“Oh yeah?” asked Brother White. “What?”

“Clydesdale Lewis,” said Scroll, “one of the great friendship apologists. He wrote something about laughter that I thought was very interesting.”

“Oh?” White asked, his curiosity piqued. “And what was that?”

“Well,” began Scroll, adjusting (not fidgeting with) his glasses, “basically, he divided laughter into four different categories: joy, fun, the joke proper, and flippancy. Laughter from Joy, Lewis argues, is the purest and greatest form of laughter. Fun is very similar on most levels. Jokes are slightly different - laughter from most jokes is good, but, say, you know those jerks from school? The ones who made wisecracks at the expenses of others all the time?”

“Yeah?”

“Not good laughter,” said Scroll. “Lastly, there’s flippancy, and that is not good laughter at all. I mean, it’s like a joke without the actual joke, treating something dismissively as though it’s just something worthy of derision, and, well... it’s just mean.”

“Huh,” said White, “that’s cool, Scroll.”

“Thanks,” said Scroll, smiling. He stood there and looked at his partner. “White?” he asked timidly.

“Yeah?”

“I was wondering...” Scroll said, fidgeting with his glasses, “If maybe... maybe we could have a day for just us?”

“Just us?”

“Yeah. No mission work, no Barrel, no Clip, just... us?” He looked at White, a nervous expression on his face, as though he was afraid he’d be rejected.

“You know,” said White, “I’d love to.”

“Any luck?” asked a mocking voice. The two ponies looked over and saw Buzz.

“Hello, Buzz,” said White, “any real reason you’re following us today?”

“Came to watch the freak show,” said Buzz.

“Freak show?” Scroll asked.

“Yeah,” said Buzz, “Brother Scroll, the amazing horn-sucking faggot.”

“Horn-sucking...” Scroll repeated, unaccustomed to the insult.

“Don’t you have something else you could be doing?” White asked. “Foals your own age you could be playing with, family you could be helping out with? School?”

“Fuck no,” said Buzz, trotting off. “Smell ya later!” he jeered, laughing at them disappearing around a corner.

“That,” said Scroll, “is laughter from flippancy.”

Barrel placed the last table in the center of the room. That was it. After one long day of work, deep in the evening, the tavern was rebuilt, just like new (or at least as “like new” as one could get with the available resources). It was a strange feeling - even though there was always something different, it was always comforting to know that they had their own roof and their own beds and their own fireplace. Tomorrow morning they’d open up for business.

Barrel was roused from his thoughts by a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“Just your friends!” called Brother White’s voice.

“Come in!” said Barrel.

The door opened, revealing a smiling but obviously tired Brother White. “Hello!” he said. “We saw you got the tavern rebuilt. Great to see.”

“Thanks,” said Barrel, sitting down at the counter.

“And you know something else?” said White. “When the Fraternity sent supplies, they sent in this!” He looked behind him. “Bring it in, Brother.”

White walked in, followed by Scroll, who pulled in the wheelbarrow. In the wheelbarrow was a small refrigerator.

“Ours is still working, so...” White said, shrugging.

“And we put all the booze that you’d put in our fridge into this one,” Scroll said, opening it to reveal a number of bottles.

“Wow,” said Barrel, a little dumbstruck, “thanks.”

“Oh, nah,” said White, “we didn’t even need it, and who better to give it to than our good friends Tap and Barrel? Say,” he looked around, “where is Tap, anyway?”

“She went out,” said Barrel, shrugging, “don’t know where. She never tells me.”

“My older sister was like that, too,” said White, reminiscing. “She never respected my privacy, though... always reading my diary...”

“Uhh...” said Barrel, walking over to the fridge and peering inside, “so, want something to drink?”

“Sure,” said White, “I think I’d like a ginger beer. That’s non-alcoholic, right?”

“Me too,” said Scroll.

“Alrighty,” said Barrel, fishing out two bottles, as White went to sit next to Scroll.

“Y’know,” said Scroll, “I think the problem with trivia night is that none of the ponies on this island really know anything about Equestrian popular culture. I mean, they don’t know who’s on the Wonderbolts or what musical won the Pony Awards or stuff.”

“Good thinking, Scroll,” said White, “need to work on a more local level.”

Barrel brought the bottles over to the counter, opening them with his teeth. “Oh the house,” he said, “just don’t tell Tap.”

As if on cue, the door swung open, and an exhausted-looking Tap walked in.

“Whiskey, we got whiskey?” she asked, flopping down in a chair. “Cause if we don’t, we need to get our priorities straight.”

“Something wrong?” asked White.

“Oh, nothin’,” said Tap, waving an unconcerned hoof. Scroll, however, noticed there was an unsightly bruise on her foreleg.

“Tap,” Scroll said, “are you...”

“What?” Tap said, quickly lowering her leg.

“You were out doin’ it again,” said Barrel, a sour expression on his face, “weren’t you? With those builders.”

“That was the agreement.”

“Then don’t agree to it!”

“And then what, Barrel?” Tap asked angrily. “Then we don’t have a *house*.”

“Guys, please...” said White feebly.

“Do you think it’s easy for me?” asked Barrel. “You think it’s easy for me to go through and have kids snicker at me?”

“You think it’s easy for *me*?” asked Tap. “I’m the one who has to support us.”

“Oh, yeah, and it’s not hard for me at all to see my sister going off with shady-looking stallions and coming back with bruises.”

“I’m doing this to keep food on the table!”

“THAT’S ***ENOUGH!***” roared White, exhibiting the experience he’d gained from being in over thirty musicals. “Look...” he said, calming down. “It’s been hard. There was an attack the other day, and we’re all a little tired...”

There was a tense silence in the room. No pony looked each other in the eye, except for White and Scroll. Then, Scroll’s face lit up, and-

“I know!” Scroll said. “I just got an idea!”

“An idea?” asked Barrel.

“For what?” asked Tap.

“For how we can reach out to the ponies!” said Scroll. “We build a library!”

“Huh?” Tap asked dubiously. “A library? How?”

“I brought a bunch of books along with me. And, I can, I can also send a letter home!” he looked at White. “Ask mom and dad to send over all my other books! We’ll be able to do that, right?”

“I think so...” said White, thinking about it, “the general can’t be *that* paranoid.”

“Great!” said Scroll. “We can stock it with our copies of the Book of Friendship, my comics, those plays you showed me, those books I’ve got by GK Chestnut and Clydesdale Lewis...”

“What makes you think it’ll work?” asked Tap. “I mean, first there was the door-to-door with the books, then there was that play, then there was that party you never threw, then it was the short-lived ‘showtune night’ here, then the potluck, then that pet show...”

“Well...” started White, but Tap continued to list things.

“...Mane styling tips for the mares, that *very* poorly thought-out kissing booth, those sorry attempts at starting flash mobs, the campfire sing-along, your repeated attempts to get ponies to attend your friendship talks with offers of free food...”

“And improv night,” said Barrel.

“Please don’t talk about that...” said Scroll, cringing.

“And the ‘Missionary House of Pancakes,’” Tap finished. “I just don’t know how you expect a library will go over any better.”

“Well...” said Scroll, “I mean, literacy is something good. I go around and I see the kids are out around, being delinquent and stuff. I mean, if they just spent sometime inside reading-”

“And drawing dongs on your superheroes?”

Scroll shrugged. “It couldn’t hurt.” He stood up. “I’m gonna go back to the mission house - get started and see if Clip’s okay.”

“Okay,” said White, “I’m just gonna finish this.”

“Sure thing,” said Scroll, leaving.

White sat there, drinking his ginger beer, as Tap walked up to the array of bottles and took a bottle of whiskey, sighing in relief. “Barrel,” she said, “you should get to bed.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re opening in the morning and you need sleep.”

“Why aren’t you going to bed?”

“Because I need a drink,” said Tap, “now please go.”

“Fine...” grumbled Barrel, heading up the stairs.

White looked at Tap as she took out a shot glass, took the bottle in her mouth, and poured out a shot of whiskey.

“You shouldn’t be rough with him like that,” said White, “I’m sure he’s just concerned about you.”

“I know...” said Tap, sighing, “I just, well... Barrel’s the only family I have. I want to take care of him, but there’s only so much we can make off of the tavern...”

“Listen, Tap, really, we can help-”

“How?” asked Tap, downing the shot of whiskey. “You’re always on about how you want to help, but you don’t know *how* to help.”

White didn’t say anything. She was right.

“I mean, really, I know you mean well, but nothing’s working,” she said.

“I figured that ponies would at least appreciate food and bedding,” said White, “we got some blankets...”

Tap poured out another shot.

“I think Scroll might be on to something with the library,” said White, “I mean, missionaries in other places have had a whole lot of success with education programs, and it just *seems* like something worthwhile.”

“Well, when you do end the war with a big musical number I’ll be first in line to kiss your ass,” said Tap, downing the shot. “Y’know, I’ve been wondering something...”

“What?”

She turned to look at him. “I think you’re just about the only colt on this island who hasn’t hit on me. Why is that?”

“Uhh...” said White, “Well, I, uh, I, uh, I, y’know, uh...”

Tap almost smirked, watching White fumble.

“I didn’t think it’d be polite,” said White, finally getting something coherent out.

“Polite?” asked Tap, amused but not very surprised.

“Yeah, I mean, lots of stallions... do that, and it just seems kinda inappropriate...” said White. “I mean, you are very, very pretty. I get why all the stallions like you.”

She laughed. “I think I should go to bed. I’ll get drunk and then say something stupid that offends your virgin ears.”

“Good night,” said White, getting up.

“Thanks for the fridge,” said Tap.

“Don’t thank me,” said White, opening the door, “we just thought you could use it.”

With that, White shut the door, leaving Tap to get a little bit more drunk.