

## Chapter 21

“White?” asked Scroll, rapping his hoof against the bathroom door. “Are you gonna be done soon?”

“No!” called White. “I need to brush my teeth. Then I need to brush my mane. And my coat.”

“Well, I could help with—”

“No, just go ahead without me, I’ll catch up.”

Scroll paused at the door before walking into the kitchen, where he had a large contraption built on the stove. There was a metal cauldron on top of the stove, and the cauldron was sealed off with a large tube that went into a barrel.

Clip was busy examining it. “So, what’s it do?”

“Well,” said Scroll, adjusting his glasses, “we put the sea water in the cauldron here. Then we turn on the stove, which will heat up the water and make it evaporate. The steam will then travel...” He followed the length of pipe with his hoof to the barrel. “...into here, where we can cool it. If it works, then we’ve got fresh, drinkable water.”

“Cooooool,” said Clip.

“Yeah, it is,” said Scroll, smiling.

Scroll walked back into the main room and looked at the dent in the floor. The sun was streaming through the hole in the ceiling left by the cannonball. Scroll wondered what they’d do about it. They only really had to worry about rain during a pegasus attack, but it was still unsightly. Still, there were bigger concerns at the moment.

“Whiiiiite?” Scroll called.

“I’m busy!” White called back.

“Alright,” Scroll sighed. “Clip, tell White that I headed for Tap’s. If I’ve left there by the time he gets out, I’ll tell her and she can tell him.” Scroll stopped and blinked, considering whether or not that sentence made any sense.

Scroll trotted out the door. Just like after the last attack, the ponies of Earthquake Island were clearing their dead and rebuilding their homes. They seemed to carry this out wordlessly.

Scroll first made his way to what had been Tap and Barrel's tavern. He was surprised, however, to find that Tap was lounging in a seat with a bottle in her mouth, watching as several soldiers had set to work rebuilding it.

"And I want a balcony this time," called Tap.

"Hi," said Scroll.

"Hey," said Tap.

"Well, I was gonna come ask if you needed any help, buuuut..."

"Yeah," said Tap. "Soldiers didn't come at me with 'in case I die' sex, but now that the fight's over they want 'glad I'm alive' sex. Well, I mean to get my body's worth."

Scroll stood there, processing what he just heard. "Uhh..."

Tap looked at him. "Hey, where's White? Shouldn't he be with you?"

"Well, he's in the bathroom," said Scroll. "Been in there for a while. Says he needs to do his mane. And coat. And stuff."

"Uh-huh," said Tap. "Yeah. When a guy spends that long in the bathroom he's either sick, gay, crying, or masturbating."

"Umm..."

Tap turned her head and looked at him. His face had turned red again.

"So, whaddya want?" she asked.

"Well, uh..." Scroll hemmed and hawed, "I was gonna ask if you needed help rebuilding your tavern, but you seem to be all set there... where's Barrel?"

"Down by the docks," said Tap. "He's there for another shipment of supplies. Good timing. Also something about your books."

“My... my books?” Scroll asked.

“Yeah,” said Tap.

Scroll hopped up and down on the ground, much to the barely-concealed confusion of Tap.

“Oh! If White comes here, tell him I went for the docks and then back to the mission house!” called Scroll, galloping as fast as he could for the docks.

Tap sat up in her seat, looking after him. She looked back at the soldiers. “Remember, *balcony!*” she called, before getting up to go after Scroll.

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“I swear, Scroll,” said Tap as she and Scroll pushed the crate through the doors of the mission house, “I’ve never seen you this excited.”

Scroll slowly cracked open the lid of the crate. He peered inside, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

“Ahhhh...” he said. “My books.”

“You really, really *like* those books, huh?” said Tap.

“I’m so excited!” Scroll said, hoofing through the volumes. “This library project is the best idea I’ve ever had.” He picked up one book, titled *The Steadfast*. “I love these books. Now I get to share them with everypony. We can build some bookshelves and put all our books there, and then maybe we can write back to the Fraternity and they’ll send more books.”

“You really are into this idea, aren’t you?” She looked around the room while Scroll indulged himself in his foalhood literature. She noticed one book tucked away in the corner of the room, sloppily hidden. She gently nudged it out of its hiding place, opened it, and began to read...

“Oh *my*,” said Tap.

“Huh?” Scroll asked, looking at her.

“Scroll, I had no idea...” Tap smirked, looking at Scroll, whose face had flushed red.

“Y-you...”

“Gotta say, didn’t expect it,” Tap laughed. “My, my...”

“O-oh...” Scroll stammered. “Please promise you won’t tell White.”

“Hmm...” said Tap, pretending to think about it as Scroll squirmed. “Oh, don’t be silly, Scroll, your little secret’s safe with me.” Scroll let out a relieved sigh. “That is...”

“That is what?” Scroll asked, tensing up again.

Tap closed the book. “I think I’d like to borrow it. I think that’d keep ol’ White from finding it.” She chuckled. “Consider me your library’s first customer.”

“Umm...”

Tap took the book in her mouth and walked towards the door, humming to herself. As she passed Scroll, she flicked her tail up against his chest and smirked as his face turned red.

Brother White stepped out of the bathroom to find a red-faced Scroll sitting down and looking bashfully at the mare merrily trotting out of the mission house.

“Okay...” sighed Brother White. His face wasn’t decorated with his customary grin, and despite all the time he had spent in the bathroom his mane was still a mess. “So we...”

“We got the books,” said Scroll. “And I think we can test my water thing. I need a name for it.”

“Uh-huh...” said White, heading into the room. “Right, so we got more books...”

“White?”

“What?” White asked. He looked at Scroll, who was eyeing him with an uneasy look.

“Are you okay?” Scroll asked. “You seem kinda...”

“I’m fine!” said White. “Look, why don’t you just, go and...”

“I can...” said Scroll, thinking. “I can go get some seawater.”

“Right,” said Scroll. He grabbed a bucket by the wall and headed for the door. Before he walked out, however, he looked at White. He was worried about his friend, but he wasn’t sure what to do. Sighing, the bespectacled pony trotted out the door for the peer.

White was left alone in the mission house, save for Clip, who was still munching on something in the kitchen. He looked over in the corner of the room where yet another thing haunted him: Monarch’s teleporter.

He slowly walked over to it and picked it up. It was a small device – smooth, clean, elegant, just like what a unicorn would make. It looked like it was made of a polished white stone.

White thought about the choice he had. He could just use it and teleport straight to Monarch’s castle. He wasn’t doing any good on Earthquake Island – nopony came to their meetings, nopony stopped by for help or advice, and worst of all they all hated him. Maybe, just maybe, he’d be better off with the unicorns. Maybe he could get help there.

*But what about Scroll?* he thought. He sat there, staring at the device. It began to fill him with the same sort of loathing that the disc launcher had.

His thoughts returned to that. He’d made the choice to throw that thing away, and what was the result? A tornado that ruined so many homes. What if Quake was right? What if he could have helped the ponies here by using that thing? But then he would have been hurting other ponies. He’d seen the body parts raining over the city. He couldn’t live with himself if he were ever a part of anything like that.

Since he had been a tiny colt, he had never dreamed of hurting anypony. It wasn’t who he was – he was a happy little pony, and he always wanted to do the right thing. One time, when he was young, he stole a cookie from the cookie jar and blamed his brother. For a long time, White struggled with that guilt, struggled to forgive himself. He wanted other ponies to be happy and for them to like him. But the ponies here weren’t happy. They didn’t like him. They called him names: Horner. Chucklefuck. Fag. Dickhead. Cocksucker. Ass-muncher. He didn’t understand why they did this. A foal had lied, accused him of molesting him with the intention of getting a lynch mob to kill him, and why? Purely out of spite.

Why? Why couldn’t they just let him be their friend? He had so much he wanted to share, and they wouldn’t take it. Back in Equestria things were so different. He had a family who loved him. He had a tight-knit group of friends with which he did plays and musicals. And then there was the Fraternity, filled to the brim with the nicest and brightest friends he’d ever known.

“White?” asked a voice.

White jumped, startled. He turned around and saw Clip standing in the middle of the room.

“Yes?”

“Is it okay if I go see Tap?” Clip asked.

“Uh, yes,” said White.

Clip trotted out the room, and White stared at the scars on his back. How could they do that, he wondered. How could they rip the wings off of a little kid? How could they *burn off* his cutie mark? And for that matter, how could the pegasus ponies throw a child off of the cloud like that?

And as he looked at the teleporter he thought about the unicorns. He thought about Monarch, how he had callously murdered the earth pony hostages, how he had gruesomely massacred the soldiers in Tap’s bar.

He thought about the whole situation, between Earthquake Island, the Stormcloud, and the Monarch’s Fortress. Finally, after thinking and thinking, one terrifying, horrible conclusion occurred to him, something that he never thought he’d dare think – something he didn’t think was possible in Equestria.

*These ponies are evil.*

Scroll returned with a bucket of seawater, the realization dawning on him that this task would take several trips. He saw White sitting in the corner and stopped.

“White?” he asked as he set down the bucket.

“Huh?” asked White, hiding the teleporter.

“Are you... *sure* you’re okay?” he asked. “Ever since the, well, the...”

“Since the what?”

“Well...” said Scroll, “I mean, since the, er...” He swallowed. “Since the attempted hanging, you’ve been a little, well... hard to put it.”

White stared back at him. “What?” he asked.

“White, I’m worried about you,” Scroll blurted out.

White looked down. “That bad, huh?”

“White?”

“You just work on your thing. I’m gonna go see if I can help around town.”

“No, I’ll come with you...”

“No, Scroll,” said White. “You just keep getting the water. I’ll be back in a bit and see you test it out.” He tried to give a reassuring smile, but Scroll’s expression didn’t lighten. White shook his head and marched out the door.

Scroll stood there for a moment before he returned to the kitchen and dumped the seawater into the machine before heading back outside to take another trip down to the docks. At least, that was his *plan*.

Unfortunately, right as he walked out the door he blundered right into General Quake.

“Well,” said the General, “how’s it hanging?”

Scroll looked up at him. The general, to his surprise was grinning down at him with an expression somewhere between smug satisfaction and sadistic glee. Scroll found himself thinking he almost preferred the abusive Quake to this one.

“How’s your butt-buddy the horner?” asked the general.

“Umm...”

“What’s the matter? Cock got your tongue?”

“W-w-well, he’s, uh...” Scroll stammered. “...I’m worried.”

“Aw, he not feeling too good?” Quake asked. “Why don’t you just suck his cock, that’ll make him feel better. Or does he suck yours? Or do you take turns?” He looked down at the bucket in Scroll’s mouth. “What’s that?” He sniffed. “That your cum bucket?”

“Seawater...” Scroll mumbled.

“Huh?”

“Seawater,” Scroll repeated. “I was getting more.”

“What the fuck for?”

Scroll smiled. “I think I have a solution for the water shortage.”

“You can’t drink salt water, dipshit. Or did you forget that after swallowing all that—”

“Well, no,” said Scroll. “I think I got a way to make it drinkable.”

Quake was silent for a moment. “Excuse me?”

“Well, I think I have a way to take seawater and make it drinkable. I was just gonna go get some more. Then once I get the thing filled up I can test it. You want to come see it?”

Quake narrowed his eyes. “I’ll be back in one hour.”

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“Gee, it’s awful nice of them to help you with your house,” said Clip as he watched the soldiers at work on Tap’s house.

“Yes...” said Tap, making sure to tuck Scroll’s private little book out of the colt’s sight. “Nice.”

“Are they your friends?”

“Not really,” she said. “They just like helping a pretty girl.”

“Eww...” said Clip.

“What?”

“Girls are icky.”

Tap cleared her throat.

“Well, most girls.” Clip sulked. “They’re mean.”

Tap was silent for a moment. “The general?”

“She’s mean,” Clip said. “So was Mom. All of them were, but Mom was *real* mean.”

“What did she do?” asked Tap.

Clip sulked. “She never did anything when the other foals were mean to me. She never read me bedtime stories or tucked me in or made me grilled cheese sandwiches. She only wanted me to be a soldier and she yelled at me when I cried. And then that made me cry more and she yelled more...” His voice trailed off.

Tap reached over and rubbed his mane with her hoof. “I can’t imagine anypony being mean to you.”

Clip lowered his head. “I don’t need a mom.”

Tap looked up and saw a familiar white unicorn approaching. “Well, they do say that Equestria’s a matriarchy.”

Clip looked up, smiling. “White!”

“Hey, Clip,” murmured White. He looked over the soldiers. “So...”

“They’re helping with the tavern,” said Clip.

“Uh-huh...” said White, looking at the work. “Seems you’ve got things under control.”

“I always do,” said Tap. “Just need to keep Barrel out of the tavern for the first night. Any chance he could stay at the mission house tonight?”

“Oh, sure, sure...” said White.

“Ooh! We can play games with *four* ponies!” piped Clip. White, however, did not seem particularly brightened at the prospect.

“I’ll just be going,” said White. “See what I can do.”

Unfortunately, it didn't seem that there was anything White *could* do. The earth ponies were already hard at work rebuilding, and none of them wanted any help from the "faggy horner." Maybe he should've offered Tap help, he thought. At least she would've accepted it.

The worst part of it was the bodies. Nothing he'd learned in the Fraternity had taught him about that. The fallen earth and pegasus ponies were piled into carts to be taken away and disposed of, either by burial or burning.

"Not crying this time," said Quake. White jumped back. "Shocking."

"This is awful..." said White, taking a breath.

"Well it's fucking war," said Quake. "Not like you faggy little Equestrians would know about that. All living your pampered little lives and sending your leftovers out to us."

"We're trying our best..."

"Well *boo fucking hoo*," said Quake. He cornered White against the cart. "I *gave* you two spineless little pansies a chance. I gave you a fucking *weapon*. Something you could've used to save a few lives here. Or at the very fucking least, if you hate me so much you'd at least try to use it on me."

"I don't hate you, Quake," said White.

There was a silence between the two. White stared into the general's hard, rough features, before finally getting the courage to speak again.

"Am I wrong, general?" he asked. "Am I wrong to want peace? To want a world where we don't have to be afraid of a cloud in the sky, where everyone can live safe, happy, and together?" He swallowed. "Am I wrong to think that life has worth?"

There was a groaning sound next to him. White turned his head and saw that one of the supposedly dead pegasus ponies was still stirring. Quake snorted.

"Life has worth?" he asked. He reached his hoof over and placed it on the pegasus soldier's head. "What's this cost me?" He pressed down, crushing the soldier's head like an egg. "Jack shit, White. Jack shit." The general turned and left, leaving White to sit there next to the piles of corpses.

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Quake tapped his hoof against the floor of the mission house, making the chairs rattle.

“The fuck is taking him so long?” he asked, looking around the house.

Scroll, however, returned, carrying a barrel on his back. “Sorry...” he said nervously. “Anyway, just follow me into the kitchen...”

He carried the barrel into the kitchen, leading Quake over to the machine. The main chamber was now filled to the brim with seawater, and Scroll set up the barrel at the other end of the pipe.

“Alright...” he said, looking at Quake nervously.

“It’s a fucking...” Quake paused, not sure what to call it. “*Thing*. Stop being a pussy and *turn it on!*”

Scroll nearly stumbled over himself heading to the front of the stove. Not wanting to get Quake to snap at him again, he turned the dial, igniting the stove and beginning the slow process of heating the water.

“And now we wait...”

Quake stood there, stiff as a rock, just watching as Scroll’s machine brought the water closer and closer to a boil. For Scroll, however, the wait was excruciating and seemed to crawl by at a snail’s pace. The wait was unbearable and he found himself pacing back and forth, his glance alternating between the machine and the general.

Scroll felt a miraculous wave of relief when he heard the door to the mission house open.

“Hey, anypony home?” called Barrel.

“We’re in here!” called Scroll.

Barrel entered the kitchen, carrying a sleeping Clip on his back.

“I think the little guy stayed up a bit too late with the attack last night,” he said. “Hey, what’s going on?”

“Your gay best friend thinks he found something smart,” said Quake.

“Oh, is this that water thing you were talking about?”

“Uh-huh...” said Scroll.

“It better fucking work,” said Quake. “I could be doing something else right now. Like fucking your sister.”

Barrel grimaced at the remark.

“I got a look at all the soldiers she has rebuilding her place,” said Quake. “Bet *you* wish you got that kinda action, huh Scroll?”

Scroll looked at him.

“I wouldn’t know cause I’m not a fag, but hey, my soldiers good-looking? They’re sure manly and shit, aren’t they? But with how you spend so much time around Tap, maybe you like ‘em a bit more girly.”

“Wait...” said Barrel.

“But hey, a dick’s a dick, isn’t it?”

Scroll returned his attention to the machine. “I think it should be near a boil now. Then in a few minutes we should have something going.”

He walked over to the other end, where there was a spigot to dispense the water, once it had condensed from steam, into the barrel.

“Just need a few more minutes.”

“What should I do with Clip? asked Barrel.

“Just put him in the bunk,” said Scroll.

Barrel nodded and trotted out of the kitchen. All the while, Quake was impatiently looking up and down the machine.

“Why the fuck does this thing take so long?” he asked.

“Well,” said Scroll, “first it needs to boil the water and turn it into steam, and then the steam needs to condense back into drinkable water.”

“What, so we’re right back where we started?”

“No no no!” said Scroll. “When it evaporates, it leaves the salt behind... I hope.”

Slowly, cautiously, Scroll reached up to the spigot and turned the valve. Instantly, water began flowing through the hole in the top of the barrel. He stepped back as the sound of flowing water filled his ears. It was as though it were salvation in a valve.

Quake stared at the barrel as though he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Like he couldn’t believe that something Scroll did was actually working. Once Scroll was satisfied that the barrel was full, he shut off the spigot and backed out of Quake’s way. The general yanked the lid of the barrel off and sneered at the clear water. Then, he lifted the entire barrel up and brought it to his mouth, gulping down the water.

Scroll watched, wringing his hooves as Quake downed the entire contents of the barrel. When he finished, he lowered it and wiped his mouth before slowly turning to Scroll. He stared down at the missionary, watching as he sat frozen in place, his face covered in sweat.

“You didn’t get all the salt out,” he grumbled at last, before turning to leave.

“T-t-the...” Scroll stammered before collapsing.

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When Scroll awoke, he found himself back in bed. He looked around and found Barrel sitting next to him.

“Hey, you okay?” asked Barrel. “I saw the general leave, then I went into the kitchen and found you passed out on the floor. What happened?”

“I just remember...” Scroll thought. “How long have I been out?”

“I dunno... few minutes?”

Scroll sat up. “I think I got it...” he said. “I think I finally got it!”

“The water?”

“Yes!” Scroll hopped out of bed. “I gotta find White! This is great!”

“Umm...” said Barrel. “He actually just got here...”

Scroll walked into the main room and found White slouched in one of the seats, dejected.

“White! How’d it go?”

“Chamber pots...” White mumbled. “Why are they still with the chamber pots?”

“Well, you’ll be happy to know that I think I got the water thing working. That means we can take longer baths and...” He stopped. “Are you okay?”

White sighed. “No, I’m not okay...”

Scroll approached him very slowly. “White, what is it?”

“I don’t know if we... if we can really do anything here...” said White. “What if we’re wrong?”

Scroll didn’t know what to say.

“The parties, the songs, the friendly smiles... what are they accomplishing? They aren’t feeding anypony, they aren’t stopping the war...” He paused.

“White...”

“And that disc launcher. What if throwing it off the pier was a dumb idea?”

“Well, I think we might’ve...”

“What if the general was right?”

Scroll and White were silent for a moment.

“That can’t be possible,” said Scroll. “Come on. Let’s get some water.” He lifted a bucket. “Take this.”

White looked at the bucket for a few seconds before sighing and taking it.

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The sun was sitting low as the three Brothers left the mission house, carrying small water barrels on their backs. White was still shaken from his earlier encounter with the general, but Scroll seemed excited about this new prospect.

Scroll passed by a couple of earth ponies who were hard at work putting up the walls of their house.

“Hello!” said Scroll. “I’m Brother Scroll, and I’m with the Fraternity of—”

“Dude, we’re down the street from you.”

“Sorry,” said Scroll. “Want some water?”

The other pony raised an eyebrow.

“I got water,” said Scroll. “It’s not from the reservoir.” He turned, showing a spigot to the other pony. Scroll reached into his saddlebag and produced a bowl and gave it to the earth pony. The earth pony held it to the spigot and filled it with water. Scroll was silent as the pony took a long drink from the bowl, hoping that he’d gotten it right.

After the pony had drained the contents of the bowl, he gave it back to Scroll. “Thanks,” he said.

Scroll’s face lit up. “You’re very welcome!” He took the bowl back and happily trotted off. “Sfee?” he asked White.

“Yeah...” said White.

“So...” said Barrel. “If you have this thing working, does that mean the water shortage is over?”

“Well, not quite,” said Scroll. “It takes time to evaporate and condense the water, and we can only get so much. But maybe if we can get more stoves we can produce more...”

“That’ll make a letter,” said White. “Dear Fraternity, could you send five or six stoves our way? In case ours breaks.”

“We could break the stove and make them send replacements,” Barrel suggested. White shook

his head.

He watched as he saw another cart of bodies passing through the street. He walked up to them, staring at the pile of the dead. So many earth ponies, he wondered if some of them wouldn't be dead if he had simply used Quake's weapon when the tornado came. Could he have saved one of their lives? But then, wouldn't that have meant killing the pegasus soldiers?

He shook his head. He couldn't get them out of his head: Quake, the disc launcher, the tornado, all the dead bodies, and every other ugly thing on this island. Then he heard a dull chuckle. Scroll turned and saw that one of the bodies was still alive: a steel grey pegasus who was missing half of a wing.

"Oh Celestia..." he said.

"Too tough for my own good..." Captain Tempest wheezed.

White fumbled, unfastening his water barrel and setting it on the ground. He hastily filled the bowl with water before setting it in front of the dying captain.

"What's this?"

"Water," said White. The captain peered at him with that scarred eye that looked like it was always asking a question. He must have decided the water couldn't possibly make his lot any worse, because he began to drink from it. When he was finished he looked back up at White.

"Can't say I expected this from a horner," he said.

"You needed it," said White. "Hold on."

"White, what is it?" asked Scroll.

"There's a pegasus over here!" White called.

"Oh Celestia..." Scroll scrambled over to the cart and gasped at the sight of the pegasus.

"That bad, huh?" asked Tempest. He watched Scroll as the earth pony set his barrel on the ground and started to fill another bowl. White meanwhile had refilled his and placed it in front of the dying captain. "A horner and a dirt giving water to a winger. I must be delirious."

“We’re with the Fraternity,” said Scroll.

“Ohh, one of Brother Sky’s pals?”

The Brothers paused. “Kinda acquainted...” said Scroll.

“Sky...” Tempest muttered. “Waste of feathers. Didn’t do a *thing* for the ponies under me. But I guess nopony on the Stormcloud did. Only sent ‘em to me to die. Watched a lot of my ponies die...”

“The fuck are you faggots *doing?*” growled the general. The Brothers turned and faced him (Barrel had made himself scarce). “What...” He looked down at the water barrels, and then back up to the missionaries. Scroll always seemed to shrink whenever Quake looked at him, but White remained nearly unfazed. Quake stared him the face and snorted. He grinned a little, before raising his hoof. White’s expression changed to alarm.

“Wait! No!” he pleaded.

With a smirk, Quake brought his hoof down on the water barrel, splintering it with a crunch and bleeding water all over the ground.

“*WHY?!*” cried White.

“Y’see that winger you’re watering?” Quake asked. “He’s one of the wingers they got on the tornados.”

“Was...” mumbled Tempest. “Can’t do that... anymore.” He rested his head on the floor of the cart. “Thanks for the water...” He said, before finally expiring.

Quake approached White. “You keep trying to play nice with both sides, well that doesn’t work. You have to make a choice. Can you do that, or is that too much to ask?”

“I-I-I-I-I...” White stammered. Then he broke. He turned away. He couldn’t face it. He didn’t care about the barrel of water on his back, he just had to get out. He ran.

“White, wait!” cried Scroll.

“I hurt your ass, faggot?” Quake jeered after him. “I knew you couldn’t take it. I knew from the moment you looked at that disc launcher that would wouldn’t have the fucking balls!” He

laughed to himself before walking onwards.

Barrel emerged afterwards. “Dude...”

“Can you carry both of them?” asked Scroll.

“Huh?”

“I gotta go!” Scroll yelled, before running off.

Barrel looked at the remaining water barrel, blinking and wondering how he was going to do this.

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Brother White sat on a rock at the beach, watching as the sun finally dipped down over the horizon. The light was going out. He stared out at the sea, sulking and completely forlorn.

Scroll followed him down the beach at a brisk trot, carrying a book in his mouth. He slowed as he approached White, unsure if his companion was even aware he had been following.

“White...?” Scroll asked.

“What do I do, Scroll?” asked White, his gaze not shifting from the horizon. “What do I do? I try to do what I think is right, but... it’s not working...”

Scroll slowly approached and sat down next to him.

“I wanted to stay out of the violence. That thing... that horrible, horrible *thing*, I just couldn’t use it. I couldn’t use it to hurt other ponies. But then when I didn’t use it, other ponies got hurt. It’s like... whether I did anything or not...”

“It’s not your fault, White,” said Scroll. White didn’t say anything. “White? There’s...” Scroll got up and walked to the trunk of books. “There’s something I want to read to you.”

“Hmm?” White looked up and saw Scroll walking back up to him with a book in his mouth. Scroll sat down again and set down the book.

“This is that book I was talking about the day we went on the picnic: *The Steadfast*,” he said, turning the pages. “There’s one part I really want you to know.” Scroll took a breath. “*And on all*

*sides I am besieged, slandered, and shamed, because I would not give in to evil,*” he read.

“Who *talks* like that?” mumbled White.

“White, please...”

“Scroll, I don’t know what I’m doing,” White sighed. “I’ve never known what I’m doing. All my life I’ve gotten by by just... just winging it, and now it isn’t working.”

“Using that weapon wouldn’t have helped anything,” said Scroll. “You’d just be doing what the general does.” White didn’t respond. “White, that pegasus soldier. If you had used that thing, you would’ve been the one killing him. And I know you don’t want that. *I* don’t want that. I can’t imagine anypony... I can’t imagine anypony like us wanting that.”

“I know, and I *don’t* want that,” said White. “I don’t want any of this... But what if it’s the only way?”

“It isn’t,” said Scroll. “They’ve been doing it that way for years, and it hasn’t worked. And when I looked at that soldier, well... I know he might’ve done some bad things. But I think he seemed like a good pony.”

“Maybe...” said White.

“White,” said Scroll. “The books came today.”

White looked down at the book Scroll had with him, and then back up at Scroll.

“The library,” said Scroll. “It can happen. It can really happen. And my water machine. It *works*. We can do it, White. We’ve been here for two months. We still have this mission for the rest of two years. We’ve invested too much and we still have too far to go for us to give up.”

“Maybe, but, but...” White shuddered. “Scroll, I’m scared!” He cried.

Scroll nodded. “So am I. I’m terrified, and I’ve *been* terrified since the day we arrived. And I still get scared every time one of the ponies here growls at me, or I hear a gun go off, or I see the sky darken or the general coming or when I look at the scars on Clip’s back or the burns on his flanks. But...” He put his hoof on White’s. “Whenever I look at you, and I see you smile... It’s like all of that’s just temporary, just an ugly thing that exists now and will be over.”

White looked at him. He opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn't think of anything.

"White, I know you're scared," he continued. "And I am, too. But I can be here for you." He nuzzled the side of White's neck. "I'm always here for you. Just hold on to me."

All of a sudden, White threw his hooves around Scroll, who returned the embrace as though he were expecting it.

"Scroll..."

"Hold on to me, White," said Scroll. "Don't let go."

White took a deep breath and broke off. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Scroll said, nuzzling him. "I'm your friend, White."

White nodded. "Scroll, I want you to know..."

"I do," said Scroll. "You mean so much to me. Before I met you I thought I'd never have a friend. But you're a lot more than that, White." He rested his head under White's neck, nuzzling it.

"Thanks..." said White. "But... I'm still scared. The sun doesn't seem to shine the same as it did two months ago."

"So am I," said Scroll. "But whatever happens, we have each other." He closed his eyes. "I want us to always have each other."

"So do I, Scroll..." said White, lowering his head.