

Chapter 22

White slouched behind his desk, staring blankly at the door. Everything was set up for a perfect mission day – the chairs were in neat little rows, the floor was clean, and the desk was neatly organized. However, the problem with friendship was that it required multiple ponies for anything to work, and White was alone.

There had, at one point, been a clock in the mission house, but it broke some time ago. Without the constant rhythmic ticking, the air was filled with faint, buzzy silence. White could stand the lack of noise, but with no way to tell the time, it was as though he were stuck at one point, frozen and stretched out indefinitely.

He had before him a list of the Fraternity's membership on the island. It was not a very encouraging list. The first two names were obvious:

Brother Pearly White
Brother Scroll Page

Barrel's name was also listed, as was Bottle Top, the local drunken bum. After that, however, were other names that White wasn't sure were legitimate.

Salty Streams
Brown Mound
And so on.

White looked back up to the door. *Any minute now, Scroll will be back*, he thought. *He'll be back with something from the Fraternity.*

And, sure enough, the door opened. His blue companion entered, but White noticed that Scroll's eyes were downcast. There was an opened letter in his mouth, and it didn't take a whole lot of thinking for White to connect the two.

"What happened?" White asked, sitting up in his seat.

Scroll trudged up to the desk, laying the letter on it. "It's... not good."

"How can it not be good?" asked White, lifting the letter. "Da da da..." he mumbled, "*Dear Brothers White and Scroll, we regret to inform you that, due to your mission's performance, we are not able to fill your request at this time...*" His eyes scanned the rest of the letter, but none of

that changed anything. He looked back at Scroll. “So no stoves?” he asked.

“Afraid not...” said Scroll. “I was afraid this might happen...”

White looked down at the list of names. “Are you *sure* that Salty Streams isn’t a real pony?”

“Tap seems pretty sure,” said Scroll. “Uh...”

White looked at the kitchen door. “Any chance we could... just make stoves? I mean, they’d have to run on wood and not magic, but...”

“We *could* do that,” said Scroll. “Use firewood rations... but that’s kind of counterproductive. I mean, the ponies get wood from the forest, but they need the water to grow the forest and with the shortage, well...” He fidgeted with his glasses. “It’s kind of a dilemma there...”

“You know, I ran out of shampoo this morning,” said White. His eyes had glazed over, as though he had withdrawn into some other world of his own choosing.

“I’m sorry?”

“Ran out. All gone. Unless I write mom and dad for more.” White blinked. “And I haven’t had a manecut in months, either.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with long hair...”

“I need a bubble bath,” said White, getting up from his seat.

“Huh?” Scroll asked, still weighing the advantages and disadvantages of building a wood-burning stove. Snapped from his planning, he saw that White was heading for the kitchen, where the water barrels were kept. White’s face was drawn into a half-delirious, broken half-smile.

“Just a nice, calm, relaxing...”

“White, no!” Scroll said, following him. “We can’t waste that. And you already showered this morning.”

White, however, continued. “But I *need* it...”

“No!” Scroll shouted. White tried to break into a run for the door, but Scroll leapt onto his back, knocking him to the floor. “White, get a hold of yourself!”

White hadn’t taken his eyes off of the door, and he struggled to push himself up with his hooves and drag himself closer to the door. Scroll did his best to hold him back – being an earth pony, he was a great deal stronger than his companion, but it was still a struggle. He put his forelegs around White’s belly and planted his hind hooves into the floor, pulling White back as the unicorn continued to try to advance towards the precious water supply.

“Just one bubble bath!”

“NO!”

“I’ll do it cold!”

“White!”

Scroll and White continued struggling, with Scroll on top trying to keep him under control. The blue pony looked around, his eyes frantically searching for some way to calm him down. His eyes fell on the door of the bunkroom, where Clip, presumably roused by the noise, was staring at them wide-eyed.

“Clip!” Scroll shouted. “Get me a brush! Quickly!”

Clip disappeared back into the bunkroom.

“I need my bubbles...” White moaned.

The colt reappeared in the doorway, brush in mouth.

“Quickly, give it to me!” Scroll called. Clip tossed the brush over and Scroll caught it in his mouth. While White continued babbling about how much he needed his bubble bath, Scroll lowered his head and ran the brush over the unicorn’s brown mane.

“I... I...” White breathed as he felt his companion draw the brush through his hair. He let out a few more breaths and lowered himself back down. “Ahh...”

He lowered his head to the floor, closing his eyes as his companion gently, gently brushed his mane. It was perhaps the best feeling he could have after running out of shampoo that morning.

Scroll continued brushing his partner's mane and began massaging his back and shoulders. White let out a soft moan as his muscles relaxed, dissipating all tension and taking on the consistency of a big floppy pillow.

"Mmm..." he hummed to himself.

"Feel better?" Scroll asked.

"Mm-hmmmm..." said White, raising his head. "Ahh... you're good at this. Slower... just a little slower..."

Tap looked at the bottle and shot glass in front of her. Curiously, she raised the glass in front of her eyes, examining the whiskey. Lifting the glass to her mouth, she downed the liquid.

"Wow," she said, looking at the empty glass with an impressed expression. "Good stuff."

"No shit," said the general. "It's my special stash." He peered unctuously at her. "You can have a bottle to take home if you like. Fuck, take two."

Tap looked around the tent – it was arranged with Quake's usual necessities. There was his bunk, a large mattress with covers that hadn't been re-arranged in a month. There was a map of the island. There was a list of ponies that annoyed him: the other generals, the brothers, the idiot lieutenant who dropped his gun in the lake, some privates who wouldn't shut up...

"This the part where you tell me what you want for it?"

Quake gave a snort of laughter. "Nothing different from usual."

"You're in a good mood today," she said. "What, did you just drop somepony down a hole?"

"Fucker deserved it."

"Right."

"I told him, 'one more crack about the size of my dick...'"

Tap let out a snort of laughter.

“You don’t laugh when it’s in you.” Quake smirked. He sat down opposite her, pouring out himself a glass. “Horners are planning something,” he muttered. “King horner wants the cum-colored faggot to go with him and suck his cock. Just like the last one.”

“Oh, the last one...” said Tap. “He was kinda an asshole. Actually, they both were.”

“Wouldn’t bang?”

“Wouldn’t bang.”

“Should’ve thrown both of them off the moment they arrived,” said Quake. “Gotten rid of a huge headache.”

“Hey,” said Tap, “can’t argue with free food.”

“The only fucking thing they’re good for...” Quake said.

Tap poured herself another glass of whiskey and leaned back. “Y’know, I’m not sure whether I should drink this whiskey or sell it. Hard choice.”

“It’s fucking hard liquor,” Quake said.

“Might sell it,” said Tap. “If I can get some good money out of it I’ll be able to go awhile without whoring.”

Quake leaned forward. “What, you don’t enjoy it as much as I do?”

“Well, I don’t enjoy my brother’s pained expression every time a stallion walks up the stairs.”

“Maybe he should eat less if he doesn’t like it so much,” Quake grunted.

Tap swirled her drink around a little, thinking. Quake got up from the table and walked over to the tent entrance, shutting the flap. She downed the glass and put the stopper back on top of the bottle.

“Thanks,” she said, “I needed that.”

Her eyes fell on the bunk – she hesitated to call it a “bed.” Dirty, smelly, unwashed, un-made.

Due to the water shortage, a pony could very rarely be expected to wash their sheets. Really, it came down to the decision between drinking and cleanliness, and thirst always won. Still, Quake's bedclothes, while dirty and unkempt, had at least been drawn over the bunk in an effort to appear tidy. She smirked at that.

She looked back at Quake. His eyes were filled with lust and he lumbered towards her. The mare stood up, meeting him.

"Remember our first time?" he asked. "You were scared?"

"Well, you're a scary guy."

"Yes I am," he said. "Pretty young mare, how long ago was it?"

"Six years."

"Six years..." Quake smiled. "I remember the first time I saw you, trying to get that inn off the ground. I stepped into your tavern not paying any mind. Your kid brother damn near pissed himself when he saw me walk in. You didn't."

"I was still scared."

"Didn't show it, though." He lifted a hoof, stroking her chin. "I liked that. How long'd you been whoring?"

"Not very long," she said. "Only been maybe... four stallions? Five?"

"Didn't like any of them, did you?"

"No," said Tap, "but I pretended to. I was always good at pretending."

"Pretended not to be scared of me." Quake smiled, leaned in and kissed her. "Big scary general," he said when he drew back.

"A fight had broken out," Tap continued, walking towards the bed. "The tavern was a riot zone, ponies beating each other up, bottles flying, tables upturned, chairs broken." She sat. "I couldn't handle it. Barrel was nearly crying. Then you came in and everyone stopped. You said you'd wreck them all if they didn't knock it off and they all left. Then you saw me."

“I saw you standing there,” he said, sitting down next to her. “I asked for a drink. Asked who you were.”

“Just a girl,” she said. “Trying to get by.”

“And I thought it must be awful difficult,” he said. “Being on your own, looking after a kid brother.”

“It still is.”

“And I asked you how you managed. You got really uncomfortable. You looked at the floor...”

“I do... things,” said Tap. “I do other things on the side.”

“And that got me interested,” said Quake. He leaned in closer to her, close enough to feel her body heat, close enough for her to feel his breath on her neck. Slowly, she lay down on her back, looking up at the smiling general.

“You were terrified. You’d seen what I could do. The way I fucked up the ponies who got in my way, the way I made the island shake. You thought I was gonna snap you in half.” He lowered his head to her ear and whispered. “Because you know I could do that. But it was also exciting, wasn’t it?”

“Yes...” she breathed in his ear.

“And you liked it,” said Quake. “I was the first one you liked...” He hoisted himself over her, and slowly lowered down. “You’re more beautiful now than you were then...”

A loud bang from outside resounded, wrenching Quake out of his monologue.

“Oh **FUCK YOU!**” he roared, pulling himself off of the bed.

“Shoulda done it at my place,” Tap muttered.

Quake stormed out of the tent, rippling the flap open. “Who did that?” he snarled, looking around. “Who shot their fucking gun?”

The general’s eyes fell on two hapless shmucks who feebly attempted to hide their rifles behind their backs.

“Who shot?” asked the general. The soldiers promptly pointed at each other. “Better, actually,” Quake reasoned. “I can beat the shit out of *both* of you.”

“He started it!” protested one soldier, pointing away from them all. Quake’s gaze followed and saw nothing but a seagull perched atop the wall of the encampment. He looked back at them with a tired, incredulous expression.

“Fucking really?”

“He was making fun of us!” the other soldier complained, at which point the seagull stuck out its tongue and blew a raspberry at both of them.

“Oh, fucking piece of...” Quake grumbled. “You know what? Fuck it, you’ll both probably die in the next attack...” Something in the corner of his eye caught his attention – it was a small wooden crate. “The fuck is this?” He asked, tapping it with his hoof.

“It’s the, uh, the supplies from the Fraternity...”

Quake kicked the lid of the crate open. Inside was a paltry assortment of goods: milk, eggs, a brightly-colored blanket dotted with smiling faces that the general wouldn’t be caught dead sleeping in...

“This is it?” he asked, picking up a package of crackers.

“No, we let them keep a loaf of bread.” The soldier shrugged.

“What’s the holdup?” asked Tap who, not hearing any beatings, ventured out of the tent. “I kinda got other stuff to do today.”

“This is bullshit, they get more than this,” Quake muttered.

“Apparently not...” said the soldier through his teeth.

Tap looked down into the crate. Quake was right; this didn’t make sense. The first time the Fraternity had sent supplies, Quake had taken more than this and left the Fraternity with plenty to go around, including a rainbow in a box. Now it seemed like little more than a lazy grocery list. Something was wrong.

“So...” said White. “Bake sales don’t work.”

“Can’t really do a bake sale if we can’t bake anything to sell...” said Scroll.

“I get that, Scroll,” said White. The ‘How-Can-We-Get-Ponies-To-Join’ list floated in front of the unicorn’s face, trailing down to the floor. Sadly for the missionaries, many, many items had been crossed out.

“Can’t do bake sales,” said White, “not even going to *try* the water balloon toss.” He shook his head. “They send us a package of the things two weeks ago, but *now* they cut us off.”

“No, no, nothing like a party game is going to help,” Scroll muttered. “That’s been the case from day one.”

“Need to solve the water crisis...” said White. “Solve the water crisis, we get more members. But we need more members in order to solve the water crisis...”

“Maybe...” said Scroll. “Maybe if we *tell* them that we need them to sign up in order to solve the water shortage...”

White lay his head down on the desk. “It’s not fair. We were *this* close. If we’d got this figured out like, three weeks ago we’d’ve got it.”

Knock knock.

The missionaries stared at the door.

“Oh no...” said White.

“It’s gotta be the general,” said Scroll. “He’s gonna ask why we didn’t get more stuff, and he’s gonna be mad.” He took a breath. “Okay,” he said, removing his glasses. “I’ll take the hit.”

“The hit?”

“Well he’s probably gonna hit somepony...” Scroll cleared his throat. “Ahem. Come in!”

The door slowly opened as Tap stood in the doorway.

“Hey,” she said. “I heard about the... supply shortage? What’s going on?”

“Well, I was half right...” Scroll mumbled.

“The *Fraternity* isn’t happy,” said Brother White, blowing a lock of his mane out of his face. “We haven’t been doing so well, so they’ve cut back on the supplies we get.”

“And that means no more pie for a while.”

Tap sauntered over to the desk where they kept the membership list. “Y’know, I told you that ‘Brown Mound’ isn’t an actual pony.”

“We know,” the brothers moaned in unison.

“Just checking...” said Tap.

“Well, in any case...” Scroll sighed, putting his glasses back on. “White and I will go out knocking on doors... can’t think of anything better to do...”

Tap looked up from the list. “I actually wanted to ask about that.”

“What?” asked Barrel. “No!”

“Thank you for your concern, Barrel,” said Tap in a tone so dry that one could swear the drought got a little worse.

The various patrons in the bar couldn’t help but watch the scene – Barrel, his mouth hanging open in horror; Tap, her eyes narrowed and wishing for this awkward conversation to be over already.

“I don’t get it,” said Barrel.

“Look, I’m going to go out with him while he’s doing his door-knocking thing,” said Tap. “It isn’t complicated.”

“But why? Tap, you can’t...” Then the realization hit him. He leaned in, and asked, in a low, accusing voice, “did you sleep with him?”

“Barrel...”

“Did you *sleep* with him?”

Tap paused. The dull murmur of the bar patrons, the occasional thud of a stein hitting the table, punctuated by Barrel’s accusing stare, filled her silence with a sense of guilt and dread.

“Yes,” said Tap. “I did.”

Barrel let out an outraged sputter.

“It was their first day on the island. They’d had it pretty bad, found out that this wasn’t a nice place. They stopped by here one night. I gave them some drinks, I saw that Scroll liked me... I thought I’d give him his first lay.”

“And now he wants more, huh?” Barrel asked bitterly.

“Barrel, you’re overreacting.”

“You two *both* go behind my back like this and *I’m* overreacting?”

“Barrel, stop...”

“No, *you* stop!” shouted Barrel. The a swift hush fell over the tavern. Barrel looked around and he felt suddenly self-conscious, almost ashamed. He looked down.

“I sleep with tons of guys,” said Tap, “why is *this*—”

“Stop treating me like I’m retarded...” he said in a soft voice.

Tap looked down at the ground, sighing. She then looked back up at Barrel, who was making a conscious effort not to look her in the face. “Brother White will be over here in a bit. He’ll help you with the customers.” She leaned over the counter. “And be patient with him. He’s under a lot of stress.”

“Fine.”

“Barrel,” said Tap, “he’s a nice guy. You know him.”

Barrel didn’t respond. The door swung open.

“Heh-loooooo!” called Brother White. “I, uh...” He looked around and blinked. “I have absolutely no idea what I’m supposed to be doing here.”

Tap smiled and beckoned him over to the counter. “It’s very simple,” she explained. “I’ve got everything organized so you can find it.”

“No labels?”

“No,” said Tap, “that’d be stupid. Besides, it’s the middle of the day, so nopony’ll want anything fancier than a beer or a whiskey. But I made a little list, just in case.”

White floated the slip of paper in front of him. “Okay,” he said, his eyes flicking across it. “I think I can handle it.” He made his way behind the counter. “Sure. Got it. Totally got it.” He turned around, comparing the bottles on the shelf to his list. “Okay...”

“Anything I should know?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing much,” White said with a shrug. “Scroll should be able to give you the basics. Just be polite, knock, smile, and always wish them a nice day. Y’know?”

“I think so.”

Tap gave one last look at Barrel, who was still sulking at the counter next to the oblivious unicorn. She sighed before turning to walk out the door. The streets were busy as the various ponies went about their work, save for one pony who had been waiting by the door. His tie had been ironed, his nametag polished, and his mane neatly combed.

“Certainly got yourself prettied up for this, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Eheheh...” Scroll giggled, fidgeting with his glasses.

“This makes good on that promise for a date I made back in Hearth’s Warming.” She looked around. “So, you’re gonna take me for a walk through old brown town?”

Scroll gave a smile and nodded. “Something like that.”

The pair began their walk down the road, off to the side so as to avoid getting hit by a hurrying passer-by.

“Not polite to ask somepony who looks like they’re in a hurry,” said Scroll. “It just makes them resent you. Well...” He stopped, chewing over what he just said. “More than usual. In any case, the *important* thing is that they know you’re there. That’s what the ties and nametags are for.”

“Well, your friend already does that by himself,” Tap remarked. “I mean, the horn on his head in a town where ponies don’t have horns.”

“Well, yeah, for *here*,” said Scroll, fidgeting with his glasses again. “But in *general*, on other missions in places that, well...”

“Aren’t here,” said Tap. “What other sorts of places to missionaries get sent to?”

“Well, anywhere, really. There are lots of places in Equestria and out. Heh...” He chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. “Before I went on this mission I’d never been outside Equestria. Well, this mission had a *lot* of firsts for me.”

“One comes to mind.”

“Well, uh, that is...” Scroll shook his head and continued walking without finishing that sentence.

The two made their way through the marketplace. Scroll carefully waded through, trying to be as polite as possible. Tap, however, was more direct, cutting through the crowds like a knife, an art honed by years of practice rushing through the market to get to the best deal or to get home.

“Tap, wait up!” called Scroll.

Tap turned around and saw Scroll apologetically picking through the crowd. When he finally caught up with her, his breath was short as he was winded, and he let out a nervous chuckle.

“C’mon,” said Tap. “Teach me how to knock on doors.”

White, despite his slightly shaky condition, seemed to find himself fairly capable when it came to serving drinks. A customer would say:

“Hey, horner, give me a beer.”

White would consult the piece of paper Tap had given him, turn to the mess of bottles behind

him, and then procure the correct bottle. He would then turn back to the customer, who often looked at the magically floating bottle with suspicion, and give them the bottle and a smile.

Barrel continued at his job, almost wordlessly, still stewing about what had happened earlier. He wiped down the counter, his brow furrowed, occasionally muttering to himself.

“Barrel?” asked White. “You okay?”

“How is it you’re doing okay at this?” Barrel asked. “You don’t get confused or flustered with the orders or...”

“Well, I got a list,” said White, looking it over. “I mean, it spells everything out.”

Barrel grumbled some more. “I can’t believe it.”

“What do you mean?”

“How long have you known about this? About my sister and Scroll?”

White took a deep breath. “The whole time,” White said.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“It wasn’t my place to tell you.” White shrugged. Barrel resumed his grumbling. “Look, Barrel...”

“Everypony keeps saying ‘look, Barrel,’” Barrel mumbled.

“Listen, Barrel, I know exactly how you feel,” said White. “I have lots of brothers and sisters. And I’m very close to them, and back when I was in school, well, when we were all in school, they started dating. And, well, I got jealous. That’s just how life is.”

“Yeah,” said Barrel. “But you have a bunch of brothers and sisters. I only have one.”

“Well...” White grimaced.

“Well, lookit who’s in charge of the joint now,” said a voice that sent a chill down White’s spine. He turned and saw a familiar brown pony setting down next to the counter. Carpenter. “Bet you’re glad that your whorefriend got you out of that.”

“Very,” said White. “I’m also thankful to Scroll, Barrel, Clip, and the general. Now, anything I can get—”

“And to me,” said Carpenter, “because I don’t shoot you right now.”

White blinked. “Thank you?”

“Hey,” said Barrel. “Fuck off. He didn’t molest your shitstain of a kid.”

“Watch your mouth, fatass,” Carpenter snapped. “Your whore sister isn’t here.”

“*Are* you going to order a drink?” asked White, his high tenor voice cutting over theirs. “Or are you just going to insult me? Because really, I’ve been here for a few months. You keep calling me names I don’t get and then you try to murder me.”

“You’re a foal-fiddler.”

“See?” asked White. “Calling me names I don’t get.”

“Oh, look who’s being clever?”

“I’m not clever, really,” insisted White. “Just ask Scroll or Barrel or Tap. Tap’s clever, she’s got a whole lot of zingers. I mean, Scroll’s the *brains* of this—”

Carpenter cut Brother White off with a hoof across the face. The tavern went silent as all eyes were fixed on the earth pony and the unicorn, staring at each other. White raised a hoof to his cheek.

“What?” asked Carpenter. “Not gonna fight?”

“I reserve the right to refuse service to anypony, for any reasons,” said White. “Please leave.”

Carpenter looked around. “This isn’t over, horner.” He snorted and turned to leave.

“Finally, an insult I know the definition of,” muttered White, turning back to Barrel.

“Unfortunately it isn’t much of an insult.”

Barrel sighed. “I’m gonna go out back and take out the garbage, okay?”

“Okay,” said White, returning to count the bottles on the shelf.

Barrel grabbed a dustbin and made his way out of the back door. Part of him knew that he shouldn't be so grumpy. After all, if Tap was going to be in a relationship, Barrel could easily reason that one of the missionaries would be a lot nicer to her than one of her usual clients. Still, the fact that they'd done this behind his back...

“Psst!”

Barrel's ears pricked up.

“Psst!” it said again.

Barrel looked around the alleyway, searching for the source of the noise.

“Up here!” hissed the voice. Barrel looked up and saw a very familiar pink colt hanging from the roof above.

“Clip, what are you doing here?” asked Barrel.

“White said I should be working on my reading,” said Clip. “But this is more important!”

“Huh?”

“Scroll and Tap are going out!” exclaimed Clip. “They're out *walking* and stuff!”

“I know,” drolled Barrel, dumping the garbage into a larger bin.

“We have to stop them!” said Clip, his voice squeaking from his excitement. “They could... they could *kiss!*”

“Oh, that's all?” asked Barrel. “Look, I kinda got a job to do.”

“But this is *important!*” Clip whined. “Besides, White's in there. Can't he just do it?”

Barrel stopped and thought for a moment. Clip had a point – White seemed to be handling himself awfully fine in there...

“Okay, let’s do it. What’s the plan?”

“I have lots and lots of plans,” said Clip, grinning. “It’s time for *Operation: End Date*.”

Scroll trotted up to the door of one of the many houses on the road. “Okay, this house usually goes over okay. The guy who lives here is usually very friendly, always says hi. His wife, on the other hand...”

Tap knocked on the door and waited. “So,” she said, “why hasn’t he joined up? I mean, why do you keep knocking?”

“Just being neighborly,” said Scroll. “It’s part of being a good friend.” He chuckled. “And maybe sometime when his wife isn’t looking he can slip over to the mission house and sign our roster.”

The door opened and a mare peered out, glaring at the two.

“Oh, lovely. Where’s the other one?”

“He’s taking the day off from mission duty,” said Scroll. “Doing something less stressful.”

“Well, my husband ain’t home. And he ain’t goin’ with you,” said the mare, before slamming the door in his face.

“I don’t get why she doesn’t like us,” said Scroll as they made their way back down the pathway.

“Maybe she’s afraid you’ll seduce her husband,” suggested Tap.

Scroll looked at her. “Huh? Why would I do that?”

“Not saying you would,” said Tap. “Juuuuust saying.”

Scroll stopped and blinked, trying to figure out exactly *what* Tap was ‘juuuuust saying.’

“C’mon,” she said, tapping him on the shoulder. “Show me some more.” The two resumed their walk down the road. “Y’know, haven’t you visited pretty much *everypony* in town?”

“Probably,” said Scroll. “But every time there’s an attack and the houses change, it’s hard to keep track.” He nodded to a house with a large dog chained up in the yard. “That house we generally

avoid. The dog's very mean, and I think he might've been trained to attack unicorns on sight..."

"Unicorns *and* pegasi," said Tap, "most likely." She saw Scroll was smiling at her, and stopped. "What?"

"You didn't use racial slurs."

"What?" Tap laughed, resuming her walk. "Well, of course I wouldn't use them around *you*."

"You used to," said Scroll, following. "But now you don't."

"What's your point, exactly?"

"No point," said Scroll, smiling slyly. "Juuuuust saying."

Tap stopped and wheeled around to face him. "Oh," she said playfully, "is this your way of flirting?"

"Okay!" said Clip, checking the elasticity of the cables. They had hooked up a large slingshot between two posts. Barrel sat, drawing back the cradle with a water balloon. "I knew these would be great!"

"But..." said Barrel. "There's a water shortage. Isn't this wasteful?"

"But this is about *love!*" protested Clip. He wheeled around, setting his sights on the two earth ponies. Grinning, he rubbed his front hooves together. "This will ruin their date. They'll hate it so much that they'll break up, and then Scroll can be with White..."

"Seems like an awful lot of water in here..."

"Ready?"

"Huh?"

"Aimfire!" Clip squeaked, prompting Barrel to release the water balloon out of pure surprise. They both watched as the brightly-colored ball hurtled towards its destination, striking Scroll squarely in the head and exploding.

Scroll and Tap were both soaked, their manes drenched. Tap jumped back, while Scroll just stood there, a look of abject shock on his face.

“Quick! Before they see!” yelled Clip as he ducked behind a cart, leaving Barrel to clumsily try to not only get up, but scoop up the slingshot and get behind cover with Clip. However, Barrel’s size made it difficult. “No! No! You’re too fat!” protested Clip, forcing Barrel to hole up behind another cart.

“White spent something like ten minutes on my mane,” said Scroll. “I think he feels better when he’s focused on something like that.”

Tap laughed, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. “Well, at least that’s a bit of water that I won’t have to pay for.” She smiled and looked at Scroll. “Think I might like that manestyle better.”

“Huh?” asked Scroll. “Well, I, uh, thank you?” he stammered. “Yours looks really good, too?”

“Psst!” Clip called to Barrel from the other side of the street. “Are they mad?”

Barrel peered out from behind his cart. “No, they’re... no! She’s nuzzling him!” he whispered as loudly as he could.

“What?!” Clip squawked, poking his own head out.

“Hey, kid,” said one of many, many gruff voices on the island. Clip looked up and saw the proprietor of the fruit cart he was hiding behind. “Are you gonna buy something or just keep playing hide-and-seek?”

“Hiding,” said Clip.

White wondered just where on Earthquake Island Barrel had gone off to. As it was, White was left alone to handle the orders coming in. It was slightly easier than expected, as it seemed his presence behind the counter made the tavern a little less popular than it normally would have been. After all, not only was he a unicorn, but his unease around the liquor, as though he weren’t old enough to be in the place, was off-putting for many customers. Also, the patrons didn’t deem him as pretty as Tap.

As two other ponies made their way out of the tavern, the door flew open. The loud hoofsteps on the ground told White who it was before he even instinctively turned his head to see.

“Alright! Time to get drunk and laid!” called General Quake who, from the way his eyes wandered with disinterested abandon, may have well been drunk already. “Now,” he said, looking to the counter, “where’s my NO! No no no no no no *NO!* Fuck you! Fuck you, you fucking horner! Where the fuck is Tap?”

“She’s out with Scroll,” said White. “I’m in charge for today.”

“Why don’t you magic yourself into a contortionist, bend over, and fuck yourself up the ass with your horn!”

“Uhh...” said White, “my magic only works on mouths. I’m going to be a dentist, and... I don’t think I really like things up my butt. I mean, after what you did...”

Quake looked around at the patrons around him, all of them staring at him, wondering if they’d heard Brother White correctly.

“Look, Quake, that *hurt*. I don’t want any more of it.”

The pupils of Quake’s eyes went tiny. For once, he felt as though the eyes of everypony else in the bar were boring into him. And they were – the bar was completely silent, and nopony was sure whether or not it was safe to laugh or say anything, or even breathe. Quake was a mountain ready to explode.

“Uhh, Quake?” asked White. “You, uh, want a drink?”

“Listen, you little punk,” Quake snarled through his teeth, “*nothing* happened between us. You got that?”

“What?” asked White. “I just wanted to make you happy, and you...”

“*Shut up!*” Quake hissed. He slammed his hoof down, cracking the counter nearly in half. “Shut up you *idiot!* I’m already pissed off because your little gay fag club stopped sending supplies!”

White drew back against the shelf. “Listen, I-I-I-I can’t–”

“Write a fucking letter!”

“Listen, Quake, the Fraternity’s cut down on us because we aren’t doing very well!” White tried to explain, a hint of frantic desperation in his voice.

“Then *do better!*” Quake said. Forgetting that he wanted a drink, he turned to leave.

“Uhh, you broke the...”

“Fuck you.”

The tavern remained silent for a good minute after Quake left, after which the bar patrons resumed their business.

"Reminds me of my relationship with my wife," said one of them.

“Okay,” said Barrel, steadying the bucket. “As soon as they walk under, we dump it on them!”

“Yeah!” agreed Clip.

They sat on the roof, watching Scroll and Tap make their way down the street. In between the saboteurs was a bucket filled with sawdust. Barrel looked down at the ground – to him, the distance was dizzying.

“Oh dear...” he said. He looked around at the thatched wooden rooftops of the town, stretching out around here. “How’d I even get up here...?”

“It’s not *that* high.”

“Not for you, you’re a pegasus and you weigh like ten times less than me,” Barrel said, shifting his weight as the roof creaked beneath him.

Meanwhile on the street below, Tap and Scroll continued their walk. They had had no success with the door-knocking so far, and were on the way to another part of the town to try again.

“I’ve known the general for a long time,” said Tap. “Only things he likes are sex and violence.”

Scroll paused, his expression drawn into a quizzical scrunch. “Sooooo...” He thought. “Would he like us if we had sex with him?”

Tap’s mind then led to a colorful image...

“The reason I’m so angry,” said Quake. “It’s just that I’m so... so frustrated.”

“I understand,” said White, nodding understandingly.

“I just... I want to be honest about myself,” said Quake. “Can I? Can I be that with you?”

“You can be as honest as you like around me.”

“That is... the worst thing I have ever imagined,” said Tap. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Neither would I...” said Scroll, sticking his tongue out.

The two stopped and sat down on the side of the road. They watched as some ponies went by, doing whatever it was they were doing. Making deliveries. Going for walks. Whatever.

“It’s gotta get old,” said Tap. “Failing over and over again?”

“We at the Fraternity prefer to think of it as ‘delayed success.’”

“That only works if you succeed,” said Tap.

“Well,” said Scroll. “I’m not going to *admit* I’m a failure, am I?” He smiled, entreating her to laugh. She didn’t. “Well,” he said, “the door-knocking isn’t doing so well. I’ve been hoping that with our little water thingy we’d become a bit more popular...”

“Well, it *works*, at least,” she said.

“Yes.” Scroll nodded. “I mean, we can only get so much water, but if we can make enough to relieve just some of the drought...” He sighed. “Seriously, it’s exhausting hauling those barrels of sea water back and forth.”

Tap laughed. “And that library thing of yours?”

“Well, that’s been a bit on the back burner since we started with the water,” said Scroll. “I still

have the books all locked up in the trunk.”

“I look forward to seeing how you pull it off,” she said flatly.

“Yeah...” said Scroll. “So do I.” He shifted his weight and started to stand up. “But I hope for the best.” He grinned. “I’m excited about it.”

“Somehow I don’t think the ponies here love books the way you do,” said Tap.

“That’s a shame,” said Scroll. “I love reading. Ever since I learned my ABCs.”

Tap rolled her eyes. “I know a bunch of ponies who can’t even get that far. I’ve never found stories very useful.”

“Stories are everything to me,” said Scroll. He looked up at the sky (Barrel scurried back in a panic). “Stories are... well, they’re worlds. Huge, amazing different worlds, filled with all kinds of things – wonder, magic, horror...”

“I’ve got plenty enough of that here,” said Tap. “Sometimes I think I could do with a little less of the real stuff, never mind the made-up stuff.”

“But they take us places,” said Scroll. “Don’t they?”

“Gotta come back, though.”

Scroll looked back down. “Well, yes,” he conceded. “But maybe you can bring just a little bit with you. Anyway...” He adjusted his glasses. “That’s enough of a break, I think.” He got up. “Well, let’s go.”

“Might wanna wait...”

“Nonsense!” said Scroll, walking on. “There’s too few hours in the—” *Thud.*

Because he hadn’t taken Tap’s advice, Scroll had stumbled right into a burly, scowling stallion. “Erm...” Scroll looked up. “Sorry.”

The stallion didn’t change his expression. “Well maybe you should watch where you’re going next time.”

“Yes...” Scroll backed up. “Yes, I’ll do that from now...” He bumped into Tap and jumped. Tap was wearing that sort of pained expression that comes when someone is trying very hard not to laugh.

“Whatever,” said the stallion, resuming on his way. “Just get out of my—” Suddenly, a light brown cloud dropped right over his head. “*CAUGH!*” he coughed. Tap and Scroll just stared at him. “What the—” The stallion looked up, just in time to find a bucket hit him square in the face with a loud clang. The other two jumped in surprise.

“Umm...” said Scroll, looking up. He couldn’t see anypony, but he could swear he heard something that sounded like a muffled argument.

“You waited too long!” Clip hissed.

“I had to get it so they wouldn’t see me!”

“Well you missed!”

“I was aiming for Scroll!”

“What?” asked Clip. “No, you should’ve been aiming for her!”

“I’m not gonna dump sawdust on my sister!” He paused. “Does it even matter as long as they break up?”

“Huh...” Clip rubbed his chin. Barrel sat down on the roof, relieved that he could rest his entire weight straight down without worrying about falling off the edge.

“So next plan?” he asked.

“I dunno...” said Clip. “I thought it wouldn’t take this long.”

“You said you had *lots* of plans!”

“I have *one* more idea...”

Tap was unsurprised when Scroll failed to give a book to any of the ponies he approached. After

all, if the missionaries had failed a hundred times, there was no reason why attempt number one-hundred-one would be a success.

She had stood and watched as, every time, Scroll had been met with flat rejection, scorn and contempt, or outright suspicion. At every door she kept her eyes on his face – the nervous, wavering smile, the glasses he fidgeted with, the uncertain attempts at holding eye contact. All of it, showing he tried so, so hard, but never quite succeeding.

“Well, yeah, but what *are* we going to do?” asked Scroll. “Just stay in the mission house all day?”

“Well, yeah,” said Tap, “but I don’t see the point in going out when you’re only going to be met with failure.”

“I’m kinda used to it,” said Scroll. “Really, the thing that *really* bums me is that with less supplies we can’t have our free breakfasts.”

“I gotta admit,” said Tap, “I honestly think that the *Missionary House of Pancakes* was a pretty good idea.”

Scroll smiled. “Thanks.”

They continued on their way. Tap never found the town a nice place for walking. As far as she was concerned, if you saw one brown building then you’d seen them all, no matter how many times they were rebuilt. Barrel liked to go down to the docks or the beach for his seagulls, but she never understood the appeal of those dumb birds that didn’t seem to do anything but steal food.

But then, there were a lot of things Tap didn’t understand. As they came to the docks, she did have to admit that there was something pleasant about it: a sense of pleasant solitude, away from the dusty town. “You know,” she said, “you could probably sell the water.”

Scroll stopped. “Sell it?” he asked, a horrified expression crossing his face. “No. No no no. We’re not in this to make money.”

“So you just give it away,” said Tap. “And what does that get you?”

“What we ‘get’ isn’t what’s important,” said Scroll. “After all, it’s like the book says: you have to share, you–”

“You have to care,” droned Tap. “Yes, I did actually read your book – up to a point, anyway – but please, I’ve heard enough about the whole ‘how we do it in Equestria’ thing.” She turned around and looked at Scroll. Scroll had stopped stiff, unsure of what he should say. She sighed. “You know, I’m *still* not completely sure that Equestria really exists. A place where ponies *play* in the rain? Seriously, that’s impossible.”

“Well, we don’t use rain as a weapon,” said Scroll, shrugging. “Actually...” He paused, thinking. “Mom never let *me* play in the rain. Always worried I’d catch a cold...”

Tap shook her head and sat down on a crate.

“What’s that?” asked Clip in the darkness.

“I think she sat on us,” said Barrel. “Do I let out the spiders now?”

“Not yet.”

“Tap, I...” Scroll stopped.

“What?”

Scroll uneasily sat down next to her.

“Well, I was just thinking...” He said. “When our mission is over, White and I will be going back to Equestria. And we’ll be taking Clip back with us, and, well... I think you and your brother should come with us.”

Barrel froze, his hoof still on the lid of the jar of spiders.

“Excuse me?” asked Tap.

“Well...” said Scroll, fidgeting with his glasses. “Yeah.”

Tap stared at him. She stared at him for what must have been a good half of a minute before she

laughed. “This is dumb. What would I *do* there?”

“Well, what would you *like* to do?”

“You... what do you mean?”

“Well...” Scroll shrugged. “Think about it. What kind of life would you like to lead? If you could do anything other than what you’re doing now, what would it be?”

Tap looked away from him, out to sea, out to Equestria. She thought.

I own a restaurant. I run the tavern pretty well, so I could run a restaurant. Except this one would be nicer. The ponies there wouldn't be a bunch of rude drunks. Nothing too fancy, just a nice easy place to grab a bite to eat. Obviously, there are... unicorns and pegasi there, but I can get used to that. I mean, in Equestria they aren't trying to wreck my house. Both with the customers and employees. Yeah, I can actually have other ponies working for me. I've got a couple waiters. A guy at the front who talks in a stupid accent. Barrel still helps me, of course, but a little less than normal. He's got a little marefriend he's really shy around, but they're cute together...

She got up from the crate and walked over to the edge of the dock. Her body was tense, locked up and stiff from trying to keep herself from doing something stupid.

“Tap?” asked Scroll. “Are you okay?”

“Live in Equestria...” She muttered bitterly. “*Me*. Tap the whore.”

“Tap?”

Furiously, the mare whirled around. “How could I possibly live someplace like that? How could I even get used to it after living here my whole life?” She turned her head to the side. “How could I even deserve it? Deserve anything you’ve given me? And it gets worse...” Scroll leaned back on the crate as she returned her gaze to him, her eyes penetrating him. “You keep giving. You keep coming back to me, you and White keep making all these crazy efforts with the town and the island and probably with the other two if you get the chance, what with White’s *stupid* stunt with General Storm. And you can’t seem to get that maybe nopony here even *deserves* it.”

Scroll took a deep breath. “Does that really matter? Besides.” He smiled weakly. “I think you and your brother deserve it, if nopony else.”

She gave a sudden, snorty laugh. “That’s just because you don’t know me. There’s... there’s no way I could possibly live somewhere like that. Not me.” Her voice darkened, and she stared right at Scroll. “You know, on Hearth’s Warming Eve, when you gave me your mother’s locket, the absolute first thing I thought? I wondered how much money I could get if I sold it. And that same day when you and White were giving away toys, I saw Buzz. I hit him. Knocked him down, grilled him. I told him he was a little closet case and that he *wanted* White to do all those things he said he did. Made him run off and forget his present. Want to hear more?”

“About a year ago a young mare came up to me, wanted to pay me to make love to her. I laughed at her, called her an ugly dyke. I remember the look on her face, and I remember I thought it was *funny*. And then I’ve blackmailed ponies. Seduced them, made them sleep with me, then soaked them for all they were worth so I wouldn’t tell their wives. Sometimes I went ahead and told them anyway, once I got all I could out of it.

“And then there’s the general. The general goes around bullying you and your friend, and you know what? I’m with him. I’ve been with him in all kinds of terrible ways. And even if I got... *involved* with you I’d still be sleeping with him. Because that’s what I am. A whore. And he’s paying. And if your friend White paid me I’d sleep with him, too.

“And my brother, my brother, my kid brother. I’ve lied to him about us the whole time. I’ve always lied to him about what I do. He hates what I do for a living, and I keep doing it. I always say it’s because I need to do it to support us, but sometimes I wonder if... if there isn’t another way. And every time I sleep with someone I know he hates himself for it.”

She laughed, rubbing her temple with her hoof. “It’s funny. I could soak you, get you to spend all your money on me, maybe even get your parents’ money, and you’d do it even if you didn’t get sex out of it. That’s the kind of thing I do. I lie, cheat, steal, sleep my way through life. And you. You’re just sitting there like you don’t have any idea what to say. You act like you love me, and why? Because one night I *pretended* to love you?”

Scroll’s mouth hung open just a little, in the way one holds themselves when they’re trying hard to think of the right words. Tap snorted in disgust and turned around, sitting and looking back out over the water. There were no ships in the docks. They were barren and empty, as was the sea before them.

Slowly, Scroll rose and approached her. “I think,” he said, sitting down beside, “that you’re much kinder than you think you are.” When she didn’t respond, he continued. “I mean, I’ve done some bad things too...”

“Like what?”

“Well...” He sighed. “I lied to a child.” He looked down at the water. “I told an awful lie to a child.”

Clip paused his breathing.

“He asked me if I had a lot of friends back home,” he said. “And I said I did. The truth is I don’t. I never had any friends back home. Not until I met Brother White.”

Tap didn’t say anything. She just scowled.

“When it comes to friends I have more here than I did at home,” said Scroll. “I have White. Barrel. And you.” He looked at her. He searched for something else to say.

“What do you want from me?” she asked, almost despairingly. “*How* can you want me? You said it isn’t so you can sleep with me, so what is it? Please, explain it to me. I don’t understand...”

“I’d do anything for you, Tap,” said Scroll. “I care about you. Just like I’d do anything for White. You’re not ‘Tap the whore’ to me. You’re special. You’re smart, kind, funny... I want to make you happy. I...”

“I can’t even have foals,” she said abruptly, cutting Scroll off. “I should be more... more like family to Barrel than I am. ‘Cause he’s the only family I have. He’s the only family I’ll ever have...”

Scroll was silent for a minute. Satisfied that there was nothing Scroll could say, she got up and turned to walk back up the dock.

“I should get back to the tavern,” she said. “There’s no telling how much trouble those two are in.”

Scroll stood up and turned. “Tap, wait.”

Tap stopped. A seagull had perched on the crate, looking at the two with a look of amusement and vague puzzlement.

“All these things you’re saying about yourself,” said Scroll, “that you think make you worthless. They don’t matter.”

“Why? Because you like me?”

“No.” Scroll shook his head. “Because you’re *you*.” They were silent for a moment. “At least...” He approached her. “Let me walk you back to your inn? I can pick up White there.”

“Well...” Tap thought. “Could we stop by the mission house on the way?”

White had to work around the large, broken section of the counter. He couldn’t lay drinks on it, at any rate. Worse yet, it was getting late, and business was starting to pick up. All he could do was hope that Barrel got back soon. He was running out of beers and ales and the list had neglected to mention where more were located in the cellar. Presumably that would’ve been Barrel’s task.

Thankfully, Barrel burst in through the side door, out of breath. “*Huff*... Sorry.”

“Barrel?” asked White. “Where’ve you been? Oh, sorry...” He floated a mug over to an impatient customer.

“I... had... *huhh*... to go... to the bathroom.”

“The bathroom?” asked White. “You were gone for hours.”

Barrel stopped. “I...” He took a few deep breaths. “I had the trots.”

“Oh,” said White. “*Eww*.”

The front door opened and Tap and Scroll walked in.

“Helloowhat the fuck?” exclaimed Tap at the sight of the counter.

“The, uh...” said Brother White, rubbing the back of his neck. “The general came in and I think I annoyed him again. I’m not completely sure how... Aside from that I think almost everything went fine. Though a lot of the customers said something about ‘fagging up the place...’” He shook his head. “So yeah... sorry about the counter.”

“He’ll probably help me get a new one,” laughed Tap. “Thank you, Scroll.”

“Thank you,” he said, turning back to White. “Clip was already in bed when I got back. So, ready to go?”

“Sure thing,” said White, stepping out from behind the counter. “Serving drinks is certainly an interesting change of pace. It’s fascinating, watching as somepony in front of you gets progressively, well...”

Scroll giggled. “C’mon,” he said. “Let’s go. We’ve got more work tomorrow.” He looked back at Tap. “See you tomorrow?”

“See you tomorrow.” The two exchanged a smile before Scroll and White turned to leave. She watched as they exited the door, to return to the mission house and, Tap imagined, obliviously cuddle. Once the door shut she had a look at the counter, split in the middle where the general had struck it. “White needs to be more careful,” she said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that Barrel was just standing there. “Barrel?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

Barrel didn’t say anything. He just went up to his sister and hugged her.

Back in the mission house, the membership list read as follows:

Brother Pearly White

Brother Scroll Page

Barrel

Bottle Top

Salty Streams

Brown Mound

Cock-Sure

Sorebutt

Faggy McFagfag

Tap