

Chapter 6

There was a dull *clink* as the empty bottle went into the garbage can.

“Right, then!” said Brother White, straightening his mane, “Doors again today?”

Scroll shrugged.

“Doors it is, then!” declared Brother White, “Set up the wheelbarrow and let’s go!”

“Nothing ever gets you down, does it?” asked Brother Scroll, piling a few less books into the wheelbarrow than they had the last time they tried, on the grounds that they were unlikely to part with too many of them and it’d be a lighter load.

“Nope,” said Brother White, beaming as always, “can’t let it. We’ve had setbacks, but that’s no reason to give up. We can’t let everypony down.”

“I wish I could do what you can,” said Brother Scroll, pulling the wheelbarrow.

“Why wish?” asked Brother White, “You’re perfectly capable.”

Scroll walked up to the door and found something funny - there was a bit of paper stuffed through one of the bullet holes. “Hey, what’s this?” he asked, pulling it out. It was an envelope. He opened it and out fell two small pieces of paper.

“What are they?” asked Brother White, levitating them in front of his face, “Ration coupons?”

Scroll read over his shoulder. “That’s what happens when you’re in a war with a water shortage, I guess.”

As they went out on the town again, Brother White didn’t have the usual spring in his step, but more of a “forward march” attitude. Brother Scroll followed behind with the wheelbarrow. It began as usual - disdainful looks or outright ignoring from passers-by, who had their own business to attend to. White trotted up to the first door, and knocked.

It opened slowly to reveal a young colt who seemed unusually cranky.

“Hello,” said the unicorn, “my name is Brother White. I was just admiring your door, the, the uh, sound when you,” he knocked on it again, “knock on it. Would you like a free book?”

“How many pages?” asked the colt.

“Umm... how many pages is it, Brother Scroll?” White asked, as the blue earth pony took one of the books and started flipping towards the back.

“No thank you,” said the colt, “too short. Won’t burn long enough.”

The door shut. “Should I try the next one?” asked Brother Scroll.

“Sure,” shrugged Brother White. This was probably a mistake, given that the next house over had a very threatening dog chained to a post outside. It growled at them, causing Scroll to back up.

“Easy, now, the dog can’t get ya,” encouraged Brother White. Taking a gulp, Scroll walked up to the front door and knocked. The door opened.

“Hello, my name is...” started Brother Scroll. There was some kind of crunching noise that Brother White didn’t recognize, and Scroll backed away, terrified. White saw that it was a gun. “I’m so sorry!” shouted Scroll, hiding behind the wheelbarrow, “I won’t intrude again, just please put the shotgun down!”

The door closed.

“Shotgun?” asked Brother White, “As opposed to a gun that doesn’t shoot?”

“Well, there are different kinds of guns,” said Brother Scroll, “shotguns, rifles, revolvers...”

“How do you know all this?”

“I told you, I read.”

“Yeah...” said Brother White, “but *what* do you read that has... guns and alcohol and swearing and stuff?”

“Well...” said Brother Scroll uneasily, “Comic books...”

Brother White didn’t respond. This was going absolutely nowhere, and Scroll’s confidence had been shrinking by the minute. Brother White didn’t wait for anything, he just marched straight

up to the next house.

He angrily hammered on the door, and then stood, impatiently pawing the ground, until a very bored-looking mare opened the door.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Hi,” said Brother White, his characteristic smile gone, “I’m going to tell you something that you already know but don’t want to acknowledge: *your life sucks.*”

Brother Scroll sat at the wheelbarrow, shocked.

“I’ve seen what you ponies go through, and it’s abysmal,” continued White, “but we’re here to help. If you listen to us, we can change your life for the better.” He hovered the book in front of her, and his tone went from harsh to pleading. “Please,” he said, “just take our book. Read it. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Eh,” said the mare, taking the book and then shutting the door. White lowered his head. Even though she’d taken the book, what was the chance she’d read it? Or actually join?

Brother White sighed, time to go to the next house. And the next. And the next. No successes whatsoever. If they weren’t met by bored indifference, they were met with hostility.

As they passed through the town they saw the gallows, where the corpse of a unicorn could be seen hanging from the scaffold. Apparently he had been a spy, and the Brothers had arrived too late to even fail to save him.

It failed to leave Brother White shocked. He suspected that even Scroll was becoming jaded. Everywhere they went, they were met with one bleak disappointment after another. The high point of the day was White managing to avoid the payload of a chamber pot.

Maybe that old stallion had been right. Maybe it was time to just give up. Pack up and go home. The ponies here didn’t *want* help. They didn’t want friendship, they were just fine with going through their miserable existence with no hope of reprieve.

Scroll had all the fight taken out of him, as well. *Poor guy*, thought Brother White, *he doesn’t deserve this*. He couldn’t imagine how scared Scroll was - the other night when the general nearly killed him. That had to have shaken him considerably.

White decided - it was over. Time to give up. Time to pack up the mission and go home. There was nothing else they could do but sink lower and lower into despair.

“Scroll,” he said, “I think we’ve had enough.”

“Huh?” asked Scroll.

“We’re going back to the mission house,” White explained, walking back.

“But... aren’t we gonna...?”

“They don’t want our book,” said White, “they don’t want our message, and they don’t want our help. And they all hate our guts. At first I thought it was just me they hated, but no, it’s both of us.”

Scroll nodded. White looked at him. He was right - Scroll’s morale was completely shot.

“Come on, buddy,” said White, walking back to the mission house, “we’ll seek out worthier pastures. Just let these guys... just let them do what they’ve been doing.”

He continued talking as they walked back, explaining every bad thing that had happened to them.

“And they shoot up our nice door,” said White, sneering at the holes, “the general’s right. It’s an eyesore.” He opened the door, “First thing I’m doing when I get back, I’m going to...”

He stopped. There, sitting in one of the seats, still wearing that bizarre harness, was the pink colt from yesterday.

“Dental school...” White finished, quietly.

The colt turned and looked at them.

“You’re leaving?” he asked, confused. White relented.

“Well...” he said, “it’s just that we don’t see how much good we can do.”

“We’re just not cut out for it...” sighed Brother Scroll.

“Oh...” said the colt. He seemed disappointed. “I guess I’ll just go back out collecting garbage.”

“N-n-no, you don’t have to go just now!” said Brother Scroll, “I mean, are you hungry? Would you like some lunch or something?”

“I guess,” said Clip, “can I take this harness off?”

“Sure, go right ahead,” said Brother White, going into the kitchen. Pancakes, he thought. He could do with some pancakes. Maybe that’d make everypony feel better. He looked at the box, checking the...

“Oh, no...” he said out loud. He looked at the other boxes in the cabinet, and in the fridge. Everything they had was well past the expiration date.

“Oh Celestia...” he heard Brother Scroll say, “Oh, no, no no no no...”

This snapped Brother White out of his woozy stupor. “What?” he called.

“Come out here...”

“It, well...” he heard Clip say.

Brother White stepped out of the kitchen and looked at the colt. It took a few seconds for it to sink in, and then he gasped.

On the colt’s back there were two garish scars, like gashes, and on each of his flanks there was a burn mark.

“Oh no...” repeated Brother Scroll, “Oh no no no no no...”

“What...” asked Brother White, “What happened?”

“He’s a pegasus pony, and they, and they...” Brother Scroll stammered. Murders were one thing, but this... this was too much for him to comprehend.

“I was never a strong flier,” said Clip sadly, “up in the clouds, they test you. They throw you off and if you can fly, you get to come back up, but if you can’t, then... most drown. I washed up here, and they...”

“This... this is horrible!” exclaimed Scroll. “How can they *do* that?”

“They have me pick up garbage in the streets,” finished Clip, “that’s what I do. I need to fill the bags or else the boss gets mad...”

“I... I...” Brother Scroll stammered. He looked at Brother White. He hadn’t moved. His expression was blank. But in this, this moment of the worst horror that they’d seen yet... he realized something.

White slowly walked up to the colt, before kneeling down.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Clip, “I didn’t mean to bother you.”

“It’s all right,” said White, “Clip, I want you to know something.”

Clip’s ears pricked up.

“You don’t have to go back,” said White, “you don’t have to go pick up garbage anymore. You can stay here with us, in our mission.”

“But, but if I don’t...” stammered Clip.

“No buts,” said White. “If anypony comes for you, we’ll be right here. Clip...” he placed a hoof on the colt’s shoulder, giving a gentle smile, “you’re our brother. And we’re your family, Scroll and I. Brother Clip,” he said, standing up, “welcome to the Fraternity!”

“Could I just get a salt lick?”

Tap turned around and saw that Brother White was sitting at the counter. It was shortly after noon, so there was a small crowd present. Scroll was nowhere to be seen, as he was taking care of Clip back at the mission house. “Not covered in oranges and piss this time, are you?”

“I’ve learned to look up,” said Brother White.

“You want a whole block? Just for you?”

“Yeah,” said Brother White, nodding, “I wanted to talk to you.”

“You missionaries certainly like to talk, don’t you?”

“Well, we have a lot to say,” said White. “Scroll and I got drunk again last night...”

“I can only imagine how that went...”

“...And General Quake came over and threatened us. Again...” White sighed as Tap set down a block. “He can make the whole building shake just by stomping...”

“He can do more than that,” said Tap, “why do you think he’s called ‘Quake?’ Hell, the whole island, even?”

“Never thought of that...” said White, “Tap, what happened to the last two missionaries?”

“What?”

“Sky and Shine. Pegasus and unicorn. I’m sure they got met with a whole lot of racism,” said White, looking at the salt lick.

“I didn’t see them a whole lot,” said Tap, “I think they got scared and didn’t go too far from the mission house. They stopped by one time to offer me a book. I wasn’t interested, no offense.”

“Well, where are they now?” asked White.

“They left. One went with the wingers and one went with the horners.”

“You really shouldn’t be using those words,” reprimanded Brother White, “do you know what I saw today?” he took a lick. “I saw a colt.”

“Go on...” said Tap, leaning on the counter.

“He was a pegasus pony. His wings were torn off and he had burns where his cutie mark should be.”

Not the answer Tap expected to hear. “Surprised you haven’t given up yet.”

“But that’s it,” said White, tapping his hoof on the counter, “that’s *why* I can’t give up.”

“You really think you can stop a three-way war that’s been going on for as long as any of us can remember, and turn this place into a sugar-dream fantasy?”

“I’m certainly gonna try. At least I’m not going to stand by while foals get crippled and set to do demeaning labor when they should be in school and having fun and... and...” his voice was shaking with anger. He took a deep breath, calming down. “I almost gave up. I admit, it’s not easy. These books, we can’t even give them away.”

“Hey, bro!” said an approaching earth pony, “Thanks for the book. Real, uh, interesting read...”

It was the earth pony who’d gotten in a bar fight with White that other night. He slid the book right back to White.

“Case in point...” sighed Brother White, “But I’m not giving up. I’m not going to let down the Fraternity, or Scroll. I almost did, but I can’t let that happen. Sooner or later, somepony is gonna listen to us. It might not be the general, it might not be you, but it’ll happen.” He took another lick.

“I admire your persistence, kid, but you haven’t seen anything yet,” said Tap, tending to another customer who seemed so inebriated that he was close to falling off the seat. “Just wait until an attack comes. You think it’s bad now, it’s always worse when there’s an attack.”

“But you said,” said Brother White, “you said that the missionaries are with them. Together the four of us could stop-”

“If those two were capable of doing anything they’d have done it already.”

White didn’t say anything. “There has to be a way...” he said quietly.

Tap went along with her work as White just sat there with his salt lick. “I should go now,” he said after a pause, “I need to get back to the mission house. Make sure Scroll and Clip are alright. But first...” he slid the book towards her. “Please,” he said, “read our book. I don’t care if you laugh at me tomorrow for it, just read it. Please.”

“Well, all right...” she said, looking at the book. It was a simple book, with a brown cover. On it was a picture of a purple star, surrounded by five other small white stars, with the title “The Book of Friendship” above it. She looked up at the departing unicorn.

“About Scroll,” said Tap. White turned around. “Is he all right?” she asked, “Do you think that what I did was... wrong?”

“Well... I dunno,” said White, thinking about it.

“That’s never happened,” she said, “they just pay me and we do it. Not the nicest line of work, but you need every bit of money you can to keep the place running when most of the food is on ration - you either get your own stake in the forest or you find some way to scrounge enough money. And sometimes there’s some insecure dweeb that just wants to lose his virginity so he can brag to colts younger than they are or fail to impress older colts or whatever. Sometimes I’ve had them swear at me. But I’ve never seen one break down like that.”

“I think...” said Brother White, “that you had a difference in expectations.”

Brother White walked back to the mission house, licking the block as he went. The sun was starting to come down. He knew that it was Princess Luna taking her duties for the night, though he didn’t think that the rest of the town knew. Not like it mattered to them. They’d probably hate the princesses for being both unicorns *and* pegasus ponies. They didn’t even *know* about the princesses.

He made his way back to the front door and tried to open it. It wouldn’t budge.

“Scroll?” he called, “Something going on in there?”

He saw a brown eye appear in one of the holes. “Well, not in here, but there’s a bit of a problem.”

“Problem?” asked White.

“Problem,” said a voice behind him. White turned around and saw the green pony from the day before.

“I miss the matriarchy...” whimpered Scroll.

“You here to beat me up again?” asked White.

“That’s part of it,” said the green pony, “there’s also the part that you’ve stolen my employee.”

“Your...” White said. Then he got it. “Ohhhh, your *employee*. Right,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “you mean that kid you have collecting garbage?”

“It’s none of your concern,” said the green pony, “I-”

“Hey, Clip!” White called through the door, “you wanna go back with this guy?”

Scroll looked at the terrified colt, who sat there, shaking.

“I think he says ‘no,’” said Scroll.

“Well, that settles that, then,” said White, licking his salt block again, “you can just... go away now,” he made a shooing motion with the salt lick.

“I’m not leaving without my employee.”

“Sorry, you’ll have to,” said Brother White, “I’m not letting you abuse him. I saw what you did - ripped his wings off and burned his cutie mark.”

“Sanctimonious, aren’t ya?”

“I have my moments,” said White, not budging.

“I’ll tell you one more time,” growled the green pony through his teeth, “*get out of my way.*”

“No,” said White, “*you* get out of *my* way. We’ve got work to do, and you’re interfering. You want that colt, you’re going through me.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” said the green pony, moving to strike White. He wasn’t able to connect, however, as he was struck in the head by a flying object. White had used his telekinesis to swing the block around and strike his attacker in the head.

The green pony fell to the ground, dazed. “Ugh.”

White backed up, a little startled about what he’d just done. He looked around, and let out a nervous sigh. “Well...” he said, “if you want to learn about the magic of friendship, you’re free to come in. Clip, however, is staying right here.”

There was the scraping sound of moving furniture as Scroll hurriedly opened the door, letting White walk in. “And stay out!” Scroll shouted, before slamming the door.

That night, Clip had a dream.

Clip woke up in his bed, in a new home in Equestria. The four walls of his bedroom were made out of something different - one wall was a giant salt lick, one was made of gingerbread, one was made of hard candy, and the last was a giant hay bale.

He went out of his bedroom to breakfast, where White and Scroll, his two daddies, were preparing a huge stack of pancakes. They had a lot to eat because they got five ration coupons a week. White nuzzled Scroll. His daddies loved each other very much.

He had to go out for work for the day. Outside, everything was clean. Walking to work, he passed a mission house, where there were two smiling young ponies. Then he passed another mission house, and another, and another. Along the way, he got lost, and was stopped by a large, threatening stallion. It was the local general.

“Hey,” said the general. “Are you lost?”

“Yes, sir,” Clip responded.

“Then follow me,” said the general, guiding him to his place of work. “And have a lollipop.”

After he got to his place of work, he found his boss, smiling. His boss had just given him the day off. Heck, he’d given him the entire week off. As much time off as he wanted, really, he could just take it.

He could spend the day with all his friends - and he had real friends, friends who were earth ponies, pegasus ponies, and unicorns, in every color of the rainbow, and none of them judged him for being a pegasus pony or for not having wings or anything. They all played on a grassy hill (and the grass was very green, because the grass is always green in Equestria), and they got on a cloud zeppelin that wasn’t likely to get shot down, and they had fun.

And at the end of the day, when he was tired, he went back home. His daddies fixed him dinner, gave him a bath, read him a bedtime story, and tucked him into bed.