

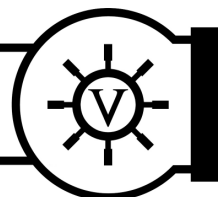
A Cup of Joe

The Descendant

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PONY FICTION VAULT



He awoke, as he always had, before the alarm even began to go off.

He sat up in bed, looked out the darkened window. As Joe let his head wobble from side to side he felt the weariness wash over him. Soon the morning's amnesia-like forgetfulness departed and he began to remember all that he was to do that day.

It wasn't much... it was what it had always been.

Well, not always.

He waited, there, in the dark, as the clock slowly worked its way towards four in the morning. He watched it slowly tick away, saw the luminescent hands drive almost imperceptibly towards that unforgiving hour.

It was a good alarm clock, and he didn't want it to feel that it was unappreciated. So, he waited... and soon enough it began to ring.

He gently depressed the big stopper and the clock went back to cheerfully ticking, almost as though it were proud of a job well done. Joe stretched himself, dropped out of the bed, and soon enough went across the cold floors of his apartment to his bathroom.

As he completed his routine he found himself staring into the mirror. He examined the pony standing there... saw that there were beginning to be some wrinkles as he smirked at himself, lines alongside his green eyes...

"To the Well with that..." he said, his voice floating out over the few small dark rooms. As the magical lamps reacted to his presence he prepared for his day, taking a few moments to stare at some photographs... a family of unicorns...

... one now broken irreparably.

Within a half of an hour Joe was outside, his hooves making their way down the cobbled streets of the capital to where his doughnut shop stood silently, awaiting his arrival.

In his mind Joe knew Canterlot to be a beautiful city, he knew that its shop lined streets that glowed in the lamplight gave way to high towers crowned with domes that glinted in the sun. He knew these things for fact, knew that he had seen them, knew that the capital was indeed the jewel in the crown of the Equestrian cities.

But as he made his way through the silent streets all that met his eyes were the outlines of buildings shimmering in the lamplight and the distant voices of stallions like himself who made their living in these times before dawn broke.

He turned past the guideway, out from the side alleys and onto the High Street that led past the palace gates. With one more turn he arrived in front of the familiar building. With a waft of his magic the door came unlocked, and as he walked within his doughnut shop Joe's magic began to play out around him and the unicorn once more set the building to its purpose... the construction of the baked goods that had given him his mark and his purpose.

After a cursory check of the dining room and the counter he walked into the kitchen and with his magic he began to open up the packages that he had left behind the noon before, began going through the rhythm that he had long ago developed to make his goods as quickly and proficiently as possible.

Joe hummed quietly to himself as he looked the chalkboard over. As he did the flavors and styles of doughnuts he was to make today played out before him. He smiled to himself at the choices he had made.

At least he could count on this choice not to backfire on him.

The predictable patterns began to come together, and his practiced expertise began to bear fruit as the mixer came to life beside him and the cold milk poured itself as he went past.

Joe crossed over to the metal cabinet, pulled it open with his hoof to make sure his magic would go uninterrupted. It came open with a wobbly effect, the thin metal of the cabinet shaking as it was pulled loose from its stops.

From within he pulled a starched white apron, the fabric hanging rigidly across his chest as he risked expending a little magic to tie the knot. From the shelf above came a crisp white hat, the next one to come out of the long thin paper box where a small army of the foldables awaited their use.

Joe looked into the little mirror that stood inside the door of the cabinet, once again looking into the sunken eyes of an older pony, one he was not sure he recognized entirely. Smirking to himself again he adjusted his hat and ran his hoof off across the front of the apron and straightened his bowtie.

Turning slightly he looked back over the kitchen. The first bowl in the mixer came to a sudden stop... just as predicted and on schedule.

With an ignition of his magic it moved from the mixer to the doughnut machine, and as that device came to life the rings of dough began to fall from it into the boiling oil.

Joe looked on as his magic worked its way across the cleverly designed machines, some even older than himself and all working perfectly according to their purpose and function. Apart from the noise made by the operations of the machines themselves the doughnut shop was still and quiet, just as it ever was at this time before he opened, just as it always was when he was alone.

Joe felt his head bow a little bit, and wiping his hooves up and across his eyes he found himself staring back into the cabinet, just past that stallion staring back in the mirror. He slowly closed it once again using his hoof. Yet, as he did he could not help but stare at the other door, the one not so frequently opened.

He stared at it for a second before pulling it open. As he looked within a smile swam across his face.

The bright lights of the kitchen caused a glint to fly across the armor, and as Joe looked upon his uniform memories came back over him, ones he was not certain that he wished to indulge, yet memories they were...

There was a knock on the door. Joe jumped slightly, quickly closed the cabinet, hiding the armor once again. He looked up to the clock and knew whom it must be. He trotted earnestly across the kitchen to the back door where the delivery platform stood. As he turned the corner past the freezer he looked into the familiar eyes of the milk pony, Sweet Cream, as he and his bottles stood beneath the light that hung over the door.

He smiled and nodded to the pony that returned the gestures as the door came open.

"Good morning Joe," said Sweet Cream, "just the usual today?"

"Yeah, yeah... not doing anything too special today, middle of the week, I think that the usual 2% will do," said Joe, opening the door wide so that the dolly cart could enter within.

Joe slipped back inside to open the freezer door as Sweet Cream slid forward, rocking the dolly cart back so that Joe could slide past, the two working ponies dancing the same dance that they had danced for thousands of mornings before as each went about their

honest work. Soon Sweet Cream had dropped the bottles within and as he crossed out of the freezer the old bottles went with him, ready to return to the creamery.

"Have a good day Joe," said the pony once more, pulling his cart through the streets.

"You too," called Joe, watching him go. Within a few minutes the sounds of the cart receded, and Joe was left standing there quietly as the tendrils of the far-off dawn began to creep into the sky.

A short while later he was standing over a fresh tray of doughnuts, coating each with glaze or frosting. As he did he looked back up to the chalkboard as each tray settled before him, matching his predictions as to what his regulars would be wanting that day.

His regulars... he thought of the familiar faces that would soon be slowly cantering within. The slow cycles of "hello's" and "good morning's" that had brought some familiarity... that had become part of the background of his life.

As he slowly walked out into the café his hooves made sharp sounds across the tiles. He stopped, paused. As he did he looked up into the altar above the mirror behind the counter with a pained expression.

"Morning Beanie... morning gents..."

The trays slid into the display cases, the warm doughnuts slowly cooling, the drip of their coatings solidifying into lumps of sugar and long thin lines of frosting.

As he did so the sun burst into the sky, and he bowed his head in reverence to the sovereign whom he had once served... one whom he still served in his own way.

As he opened his eyes movement on the other side of the distant window revealed the figure of Artificer Call, the older stallion dancing a bit in the morning chill. Joe looked upon him and his newspaper, shaking his head as he turned to face the clock. It was still five minutes to five... why did Call always show up early if he knew that Joe didn't open the door until the appointed hour?

Joe stopped, looked down into his own blurry reflection in the spotless countertop. Of course he knew why... because it's what Call had always done. No different, he realized, than how he moved through his day... by instinct, tradition...

... by tired, weary routine.

If that's what it took to keep the memory at bay, so be it.

Joe sighed and looked up to the calendar beneath the altars. As he studied it he looked for different events that his customers might be talking about, something to chat about with the regulars.

The annual Dawn Tattoo was coming up next week... that would be important. He looked back up to the altar, saw all the familiar faces staring down at him from beneath their armor, remembered standing with them as the bugle sounded...

At once a familiar twinge moved through the stallion, and he looked at the clock instinctually. The hour had arrived, and as the carillons began to chime along the High Street he took one last look to make sure all was in place and moved to the door.

"Morning Call," he said, lifting the lock and opening the door with his magic.

"Morning!" answered the stallion, moving briskly past Joe and making for the same stool before the counter where he had sat for all these years.

"What can I get ya'?" asked Joe, watching the pony take his seat, saw how the stallion had quickly possessed it, as though claiming his territory.

"You know what I prefer," answered the pony, unfolding the paper.

Joe smirked, held the door open just a minute longer as even more familiar, if nameless, faces began appearing on the High Street.

Joe quickly filled these orders, poured the coffee that this first wave of customers was seeking. He had begun, over the years, to see the firm pattern of the customers... first came the working ponies, usually earth ponies with a smattering of unicorns, who actually made the city work. Construction, fabrication, custodians... these were the ones to whom his hot java was as important as mother's milk, these who had a long, demanding day ahead of them.

Artificer Call seemed out of place in that atmosphere. As the burly ponies greeted each other he sat alone on his stool sipping his tea and reading his paper, nibbling on his double-chocolate doughnuts.

Call had done something meaningful and cultured in the dim and distant past, and had essentially been living on the royalties from it for decades.

Damn fine life, thought Joe, as the next wave began. He greeted more familiar faces as the white-collar ponies began to arrive. The clerical workers, the officers of the parliament, the very living face of the bureaucracy stood before him ordering maple glazed and custard filled doughnuts by the bagful. The unicorns thanked him and then went out into the street... trying to walk while balancing these and cups of hot coffee whose vapor wafted around them in the brisk morning air.

At just after seven the next wave began... university folks mostly. Some of them were administrators, a few professors (some of whom talked with Call on occasion), but it was the foals Joe liked to see the most.

Foals, he knew, was a stretch. These university students, on the very edge of their adult lives, came to him to escape the blasé cafeteria food. The unappetizing contents of the silver trays were no competition for the solid feel of a warm cider doughnut on a cold morning.

He had seen some of these for years, decades. To these he remarked upon how "grown up" they looked with their backpacks over their shoulders, heading up the hill to the Old Main beyond.

One, in fact, had in her time at the university become as regular as any of his most familiar faces. Twilight Sparkle had been waiting outside during her years here with books already open, reading, studying even in the pale light of a distant dawn through the illumination of her horn. Joe recalled her little dragon Spike slumbering on the pile of texts as they waited outside as the door came open.

It drove Call mad to be second.

Twilight Sparkle... he'd heard that the filly was the Royal Designate in Ponyville now. He was hardly surprised. Smart cookie, that one was. She would always talk to him as he poured her some more coffee... though she actually preferred tea and hot chocolate if it wasn't exam time. In his mind he kept her usual order lined up with all of his regulars, though it was doubtful she'd ever come back.

Too bad, he'd like to see how big Spike had grown.

Joe shook his head, looked back to the clock. Seven-thirty... good. He looked on as the last of the college foals began to dissipate. The tapping sound of Call beating a rhythm with his mug reached him, a little sound of polite anxiety. He picked up the coffee carafe and moved along the counter filling the cups of those who were lingering.

Having filled Call's mug of tea he grabbed the coffee carafe and went into the café and saw to anyone who looked like they were going to need the extra boost that only the dark mix could provide to get through the day.

Seven forty-five.

He placed the coffee carafe back under the brewer, then looked to the door.

Exactly as expected two big pegasi appeared, the deep grey of their coats contrasting sharply with their golden armor that gleamed in the new morning sun.

"Citizen!" announced one as they entered, a younger one with a stiff countenance, "We are to inform you that Their Very Majesties, The Princesses Celestia and Luna, have designated you to provide your wares upon the morrow for their table. You have been selected for this honor due..."

"New colt?" interrupted Joe, looking to the other pegasus.

"Yup," answered the older guardspony, removing his helmet. "I'll have my usual, Joe. Yeah, the princesses will have their usual tomorrow too, you know the routine."

As the younger Royal Guardspony began to deflate, a stunned look across his eyes, Joe looked up to see more large stallions entering, all tired...

"You going to order, private?" asked another pegasus, sliding behind the crestfallen guardspony. The younger pegasus turned, shocked that somepony would speak to him in such a manner.

It was only when the private looked at the brown pegasus that he recognized his first sergeant. Looking back at Joe he quietly mouthed, "Two Hofston Crèmes, and a chocolate milk... please."

It was a good bet that if you arrived at Joe's Doughnuts after about eight in the morning that most of the larger stallions (and even, on occasion, some of the more fit looking mares) of each race you saw there were, in fact, Royal Guardsponies.

They too had lives outside of the garrison. Many of them, especially the older ones, wished to be home to see their families off to their days, or were on their way up to the palace to begin their watches.

In the beards, manes, and eyebrows you could catch sight of the white paint of Celestia, or the dark grey of Luna, depending upon whom they were answering to that day... whichever of the Sister Sovereigns their regiments were symbolically serving on the rotation.

So it was that though the noted colors were nowhere to be seen, and the famed armor almost entirely absent, that the atmosphere of the shop became more... familiar.

"So," said Joe, leaning on the counter into the midst of the serviceponies, "I see that the Dawn Tattoo is coming up..."

"Yeah, what a pain in the flank," answered the first sergeant with a disapproving chuckle, the grey paint smearing across the mug from where it still lay hidden in his beard.

"They got you practicing for that already?" asked Joe, wiping the counter with a damp cloth, the flecks of crumbs being gathered up in his magic.

"Whattcha mean 'already', Joe?" asked the first sergeant, Cold Winds, arching an eyebrow.

Joe himself looked puzzled, had almost begun to ask, "What do you mean by 'Whattcha mean'?" when the door came open and the entire assemblage of guardsponies within the shop stood at attention. The young private, who Joe had noticed had been eying him warily, looked around in surprise before bolting to his hooves.

"Dammit lads, for the love of the morning!" laughed a large earth pony, "How often must I repeat that you need not salute me in here?"

"Until we're sure it won't result in K.P. if we don't!" called out an anonymous voice. Amid the laughter the group settled, and the large earth pony and another beside him cantered up to the counter.

"Colonel, first lieutenant," nodded Joe to each, smiling, "The usual?"

"Indeed, and for The Sister's sake, Joe, it's Bright Nights... for the thousandth time!" laughed the jovial stallion.

Joe looked down to the display case and prepared the order of the officers. As he did he couldn't help but notice that the private was looking at him again, this time with a tepid look that startled Joe with its latent apathy.

Later, after the crowd had begun to slow down, Joe began to restock. Checking one last time to see that his regulars were all happy he slipped off into the kitchen. As he did he heard of the voice of the private as he communicated his doubt to the ponies gathered there.

"So," he said, haltingly, "Joe... the pony with the doughnut as his mark, Joe, right? Yeah, he... he was one of us?"

"Is," answered the voice of Cold Winds sternly, "he is one of us... he's one of us, you never leave The Guard, even if you do."

Joe stopped above the sink in the kitchen.

"Look up there," Joe heard another familiar voice call, another private he knew, Broken Feather. "Look up there over the mirror... those are all ponies Joe served with in The Guard. I served with them too... most of them have moved on to civilian lives... they've got their pensions, or were honorably discharged for some other reason."

"Oh Celestia, Oh Luna," said the private. "Those two have mourning bands around their pictures... did, were they..."

On the opposite side of the wall Joe hovered over the sink. It was as though he could feel the young private's eyes coasting down the line of pictures... over the line of friends and comrades.

"Duty," said Cold Winds. "You never leave The Guard... especially when you leave it that way."

There was quiet in the café. Joe looked down at the sink, stared into it as he realized whose picture the pegasus would soon be gazing upon.

"Hey, look," called the private, "Those are Regular Army down at that end... yeah, that's definitely steel grey armor..."

"Joe came up through the Regular Army like the rest of us... like all of us..." spoke Broken Feather. "He earned his way in too."

"Really?" answered the voice of the private, his voice ringing out over the other voices that filled the café.

"Hey... hey, that one at the end, the big picture, the one with the flowers under it... it has a mourning band around it too... who, who is that? Do, do either of you know?" asked the private in a distressingly calm tone.

Joe lowered his head into the sink.

There was a long, agonizing pause.

"Yes, yes, we know," answered Cold Winds slowly, quietly. "It's Joe's baby brother, Coffee Bean."

Another pause, this one unbearable.

"Oh Celestia," said the private, drawing a sharp breath. "Oh Luna."

Joe placed his head fully into the sink, let the little hat become crumpled and damp in the spots of water that lay there. He felt the pinch begin behind his eyes, and he took a series of deep breaths.

It was too late. Already the image of his little brother manifested in his memory, standing before him proudly in his new uniform, smiling at him from beside the mixer.

Smiling at him...

"Oh Beanie," Joe whispered, the precious name echoing around him in the metal confines of the sink, "oh Beanie. Beanie, I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry..."

He closed his eyes, let the cold of the metal and splatter of water reach up into him, draw out the tears before they could form.

As the sounds of the café reached him from beyond the wall Joe lay there as single drips from the faucet fell across his face and the morning moved on and on and on.

After a while Joe returned to the café, the last tray of doughnuts hovering before him. He filled Call's last complimentary cup of tea as the older pony reached the end of the paper.

"So, uhhh... Joe," called Cold Winds, searching for a topic, motioning to his mug. "Your father is a big importer of coffee, huh?"

"Yup, biggest in Central Equestria," said Joe, filling the mug and motioning to the other guardsponies nearby, each shaking their head to signify that they too were finishing up.

"You have to go up to Manehattan to find anypony bigger... of course, Java runs the business now, Dad and Mom went off to Foalida a few years back..."

"Java?" came the questioning voice of the private.

"Yeah," said Joe, moving the damp rag across the counter once more. "We all were named after the stuff... my big brother Java, my little sis Mocha, myself of course... baby brother..."

Silence.

"Joe?" asked Broken Feather.

Joe looked back up to him with a painted smile, realized that the private was gazing at him with an expression of detached judgement.

"I... I'm surprised that you were in grey today," Joe said, recovering, motioning to the pegasus, "I thought your regiment was supposed to be in Celestia's white this week?"

"Oh, originally we were," answered Broken Feather, "but what with the schedule moving around with the extra Autumnal Equinox Day we've added..."

Joe turned, lifted the calendar. That was right... Princess Celestia had deemed an extra day to be added to the equinox holiday, what with Princess Luna back and all...

Joe scratched his chin, wondered how that was going to mess things up. He wondered how many of his regulars would be in on the extra holiday. Autumn equinox, seemed like a good day to begin the cider instead of apple juice... definitely get more cider doughnuts in.

He half thought to ask some of them if they'd be in, but as he turned he saw that his regulars were now talking among themselves, and the new customers were finishing up.

So, once more, he pushed the washcloth along the counter.

Silence once more consumed the café, and as the customers begin to filter out the day dragged towards noon.

There was coughing, Call's nearest equivalent to "goodbye". He nodded to Joe as he exited... first in, last out.

So, once more, Joe was left alone in his café.

Cleaning up was always pretty easy. With a dose of his magic the dishes began washing, the trash was wrapped up, and the mops danced across the floor. Despite the monumental amount of coffee his customers drank, not to mention tea, hot chocolate, and all three types of milk, his bathroom was always pretty neat... thank goodness, so, that was that.

As all became spic-and-span he began to lay out the ingredients for tomorrow. With that he threw the crumpled hat in the garbage and placed the apron in the hamper. It wasn't nearly full, so, no need to bring it home to wash...

As he began to leave he took one last glance around the café, and up to the altar.

"Beanie, gentlecolts... afternoon..."

As he passed through the door into the kitchen he stopped before the metal cabinet. He stared at the door for a second... thought of the armor within...

He quickly shut the thought out of his mind and went to clear the sink.

With that he checked everything over, made sure that the front door was locked, and exited through the back door, checking it twice.

With that his day ended, and he took a deep breath and contemplated another few bits honestly earned.

He opened his eyes. It wasn't even one in the afternoon.

Joe made his way through the market, the place being thankfully essentially empty in these early afternoon hours. This at least was the one advantage of his work, that the afternoon hours were his.

As he looked over the fish at one monger's stand he heard a voice reaching out, one that he knew. It benefits a shopkeeper to know his customers, to greet them. Besides, he doubted, nobody would know him outside of his shop without his hat, bowtie, and apron if he didn't point himself out...

He turned the corner nearest to where he had heard the voice... and instantly turned back to look over a stall which appeared to be selling an astounding assortment of oven mitts.

"... but I can't imagine leaving The Guard," said the pegasus private, the very one who had been eating in the café a few hours ago. With his paint and armor off he was revealed to be a very brazen yellow color, his mark a cascade of morning light reaching over a cloud, "I would have done anything to get into The Guard. Hey, the Well knows I did do everything..."

A strikingly beautiful pegasus filly turned the corner after him, her melodious voice reaching deep within Joe as he tried his best to make it seem as though he weren't looking at the perfect pair as they made their way among the stalls.

"You didn't think that when I came to you in the hospital," she laughed, rolling her blue eyes, "All you were worried about then was if I'd still love you if they had taken the wing off..."

Joe stood stock still as they passed directly behind him, the colt lifting his forehoof to gather up hers, the sound of their small kiss evident to him even over the sound of the market. Joe pushed ahead a little bit more, gazing deep over the selection of oven mitts to hide his presence, turning his body to attempt to disguise his mark.

Of course, he realized, the colt had probably been injured in the regular service, just like he had... it had to have been important too, if he'd been selected for The Guard.

Like he had... like he had a long time ago.

"Yes, you are right, but this doughnut stallion, Joe, he just didn't seem like... the right stuff..."

Joe closed his eyes and sighed silently. He opened them and pretended to be intensely interested in the oven mitts before him as the words of the pair of pegasi continued to float on top of the other sounds of the market.

"Don't be mean!" she implored, her tone rising almost in cadence with Joe's respect for the filly.

"I'm... I'm sorry, I wasn't being mean... just observing. He, he seemed so out of it, like... distant. Every time I looked at him he was so... out of it. I think it was because of his brother, the dead one," said the private as he led her off.

"That's so sad... take me there one morning, when your shift changes," she spoke, nuzzling beside him.

"Sure, babe," said the young private, kissing her once more as they trotted away.

Joe barely heard it. Inside his head a single thought rolled around and around, driving at him, consuming him...

"His brother, the dead one."

"Brother... dead."

"Dead brother."

Joe had walked out of the market and out into the High Street before he realized that he had even left. He looked down into his own outstretched foreleg to see that all he had bought to eat that night was a tiny spinach quiche and an oven mitt.

He hoped that he had actually remembered to pay for them.

He returned to his loft, the quiet apartment. As the early afternoon slid into the late he walked about the space, picking up objects, pondering them, putting them down again inches from where his magic had first lifted them.

He looked at photos for long minutes before remembering the names of those within, stared at them for long moments before the names of places shown there had meaning.

At five o'clock PM he sat down to his dinner of warmed over spinach quiche and partially warmed oven mitt. The later had been an error, once more, and he felt very sorry for it.

He felt very sorry indeed... about a lot of things.

"I'm so sorry, Beanie... I'm so sorry I got you killed..."

He stared at his dinner as the day began to cool, the autumn day stealing away the heat around his porch and out of his meal. He looked upon the quiche until he could stomach it no more and then tossed it over the railing of the porch into the street below.

He then placed the oven mitt in a drawer and went to the bathroom to prepare for bed.

Seven is early for most ponies to go to bed, but for Joe it was typical... if he had to be up at four it was in fact necessary.

That, however, didn't mean that he had to like it.

In summer it was horrible, going to sleep when the sun was still out, while ponies out in the street talked and whispered romantic utterances that drifted on the still air into his bedroom.

Now, as autumn was firmly setting in and Celestia and Luna changed their patterns to match the nature of the world beyond Equestria's borders, finally the night was showing itself. Finally he was going to bed in darkness... even if it meant waking in the same.

He set his alarm clock once more, though he of course anticipated awakening before it even began to ring, as he always had. Then, with a whisper of an Invoke he settled in to his rest...

But rest would not find him.

In the first dream the infant cried as Mocha bounced it around, as the tiny legs kicked at her and it spun around in the blankets.

"Help!" she called out, "Joe, help!"

"Sis," he said, bounding across the room on his gangly colt legs, "You're doin' it wrong, don't hold 'em by his belly..."

With that Joe lifted the tiny suckling around in his magic, rocking the baby back and forth until it settled into his forelegs.

The baby calmed. Soon it began to make small sounds of content, much to the relief of the siblings. At once it opened its eyes, and after a moment they settled on Joe.

"Mom!" called Mocha, "Coffee Bean's eyes are open!"

"I said not to wake him," called the concerned dam, trotting into the room, "And I especially said not to lift him... from the cradle..."

Her expression softened as she looked down at Joe. She watched him as he rocked his baby brother back and forth, humming softly. The flickering eyes of the infant looked up to him as the soft sounds wafted around the room.

Mocha leaned against Joe, looking up at her brothers happily.

"Coffee Bean really likes you, huh Joe?"

"Yeah," said the colt as his mother leaned her head across his shoulder and nuzzled her second-son. "Yeah."

Joe awoke from the dream. Beyond the tightly drawn shade the purple colors told him that time had indeed passed, that outside night had indeed fallen. He looked back to the ceiling, and before long he was pulled back down into the Land of Nod.

"Well, lads, what is this?" asked an older pony in a crumpled hat as the second dream began.

"Would you like a doughnut, sir? Or some coffee? We made them ourselves!" called Joe, looking up to the stallion.

The warm streets of Canterlot played out before the brothers as a few ponies came and went in the early summer's day.

"Every colt and filly in Canterlot is going to have a lemonade stand... here, let's try something different," Java had said as he helped them to paint their stand the day before. Now, as the three brothers rushed to fill the order they looked upon their first customer eagerly.

In moments Joe had handed the earth pony the doughnut, in reality more of a misshapen lump than anything identifiable as breakfast. Coffee Bean concentrated hard, the little colt sticking his tongue out the side of his head as his new and uncertain magic worked the carafe into pouring the black, steaming drink into the disposable mug.

"Ahem," whispered Java to his younger brothers. "That will be three bits!" called back Joe and Coffee Bean in unison.

"That's a fair price! A fair price indeed," said the older stallion, the earth pony dropping the coins onto the makeshift counter before him from a little pouch he produced from his saddlebags.

The three siblings looked on as the stallion bit into the doughnut. "Well, howdy!" he said, a smile growing across his face. With that he sipped at the coffee, gingerly at first and then with more enthusiasm.

"Colt howdy! That is a fine doughnut! That is a cup of Joe! Well done, lads! You should go into the business!"

At once Java and the older stallion heard a sound like falling stars sliding across frozen lakes, and witnessed expressions go across the faces of Joe and Coffee Bean that seemed as though they thought someone has spilled quicksilver down their flanks.

The two looked around in more than subtle surprise.

"Guys!" said Java, motioning to them, "Your marks!"

The two brothers looked at their flanks, then at each other's. At once Joe had gathered up his little brother, and as the two danced around in great wide twirls they laughed and cheered.

At once Joe and Coffee Bean gathered Java up in a hug, their older brother looking down on them happily. They then ignored all of the good and practical information that their parents had imparted to them about interaction with strangers and gave the old stallion hugs as well. He smiled with a hint of embarrassment as he tried to balance his coffee before they returned to embrace Java, and each other, once more.

Joe awoke again. He ran his hoof through his mane, then across his flank. The doughnut was not visible there in the night, yet the feel of its color in his coat was evident... the odd way that everypony knew their own mark to be different from any other bit of their body. The Seal of the Sisters upon him... a promise made to all Ponies.

"Please," he whispered to the nothingness. "I need just a few hours of sleep, to get through the day..."

The dreams though were remorseless, and after he had fallen off to sleep once more Joe found himself awakening inside the dream itself.

The tall trees stood over the camp as he awoke. He rolled out of his tent and slid into the armor. The grey steel of the Regular Army uniform offered little protection against the cold, but what little it offered was appreciated.

He went silently, knowing he was the first to awake, as he always had been, and made his way to the remains of a campfire. Here he piled more wood upon the charcoal, taking deep breaths and blowing into it to fuel it as it rose. As the fire came up it revealed a face looking at him from beyond the growing flames, and he raised his head.

"At ease, Corporal Joe. First up again?"

"Yes, Captain Summer, sir. Didn't... didn't you get any sleep again last night, sir?" he asked, placing himself against the fire, trying to draw in its warmth.

"No," answered the captain, huddling beneath a dirty brown blanket, "I never sleep much on campaign. I get too nervous, at times. Every little thing becomes an omen... like this morning. Every other morning we've heard birds... where are they today? I get crazy with this stuff, it seems, seeing omens everywhere."

"Yessir," said Joe, smirking to himself at the superstitions that seemed to haunt the officer. Raising himself up he brushed off the ashes and saluted.

"Excuse me... I have to relieve myself, I'll bring back some more wood, sir."

"Thank you, corporal."

Joe went deep into the woods that surrounded the Hemlock Army Corps, out far beyond his own division, long past the tents of his own brigade, his own regiment.

Finding a secluded spot he stopped and removed his helmet, lest it fall into the stream of his water like that first time... an embarrassing situation that he wished not to repeat.

He looked into his corps badge, the hemlock leaf. As his water flowed he pondered the regimental horn and the number within, the 145th Light Infantry, "The Falling Leaves Regiment". He was proud to be out here, serving, protecting... doing his part...

The fact that he hadn't had to do any real fighting, and had even been promoted to corporal, made it that much better.

As he finished up he put the helmet back on his head he looked down into what he had thought was a latrine pit and realized that all of that good fortune was about to come to a sudden and immediate end.

It was in fact not a latrine, but a foxhole, and not the type inhabited by foxes. He instead realized that he was looking down into the incensed faces of a group of Scrofa soldiers.

Since the rumors of a belligerent tribe of Scrofa snooping at Equestria's borders was the very reason that the Hemlock Corps were out here in the Everfree, he realized, this was not going to be a pleasant way to begin the morning.

The second thing he realized was that the foxhole he had just weeded all over was just one of what was, after a millisecond of observation, many dozens of such scrapes and hidden emplacements. And all of these, it seemed, were filled with unhappy looking porcine faces, each tusked and with hard black eyes.

The third thing he realized, in those tiny moments, was that they must be excellent soldiers. This he gathered because they (despite the obvious burning, seething hatred that was radiating from them, as anyone who had just been urinated upon would naturally have for their defiler) did not move to attack him until one of their officers hissed quietly, "Kill him."

At once four large Scrofa warriors erupted from the foxhole, their tusks flailing at him, their spears missing him only by inches.

Joe wheeled over, catching a glancing blow with a spear across his armor, using his magic and the momentum of the soldier to carry the boar high and wide and against a nearby tree.

As the creature smashed against the tree with a sickening crack Joe turned and ran, pelting at the earth, using his magic to cast up rocks, sticks, trunks of fallen trees.

In a quick glance over his shoulder he saw the entire assemblage of the Scrofa ranks rise out of the earth, begin gathering into columns. It was a full-fledged attack, timed to the dawn. Overhead, Joe noted as some arrows fell near him, that there were no birds... these were omens, signs. The captain had been right.

The captain...

Joe concentrated his magic, let it leap ahead of him and far down into the camp.

There he found the fire. Joe flung his consciousness forward, moved through his magic as the boars leapt at him.

He felt the fire around him, grateful for the heat. A deep and powerful magic spun out of his body as he dodged the pursuers once more, as they grunted and squealed at him, called to each other as they jabbed at him.

At once he flung himself through the magic. The fire rose up, and he looked down at Captain Summer who, though surprised, immediately understood what was happening.

"Sir," Joe called through the magic that rose through the fire, "Scrofa. Southeast of camp. Five hundred yards. At least a division. I'm about to be killed. Goodbye."

The last thing Joe saw as the magic dissipated was Summer saluting him and then running off yelling at the top of his lungs...

That's when the first spear hit him. He felt it pierce all the way through his withers, finding the one gap along the top of the armor. He felt it draw him down to the earth with a crackling thud. As the blinding pain began he rolled to his back as the boar tried to gore him with its tusks, rolled again as it lunged upon him.

He somehow rose to his hooves as it screamed at him in the high-pitched squeal. He yelled back at it with a wild bray, pulled the spear through himself with his magic and straight into the throat of the Scrofa, returning it with pleasure to its former owner.

There was movement behind him, and he unsheathed his hindleg spurs just in time to slice one more boar across the leg, dismembering the limb and sending its former owner tumbling with squeals of pain before he began pelting off again.

The pain in his withers was inescapable, and he screamed to himself as he ran. Yet, at once he leapt forward with his magic again, sent his power floating deep down into the camp beyond.

There the few ponies in who were awake saw it and wondered at it. In camps of his own regiment, in other regiments, in any place he could find he searched for pots, pans, the act draining him even as he felt the presence of more boars around him.

At once he began clanging these cooking implements together, the powerful spell ripping the energy from him, letting his pursuers catch up to him... yet, giving the Hemlock Corps warning, time...

He beat the pans together, felt them out with the magic, beat them against rocks, trees... against the heads of ponies who dared try to go back to sleep over the ringing cacophony.

That is when the second spear bit at him, once more hobbling him. Just as he turned to deal with it an arrow too found a space inside him, sending him rolling around in the old leaves and twigs at the bottom of the hollow into which he had fallen with screams of pain.

The spear he quickly pulled out, a great arc of blood erupting from his shoulder as he did so. *Well*, he thought, laying the spear across the ground, *that's an artery... I'm dead.*

He did the same with the arrow, crying out horrifically as he wrenched it out of his stifle. This immediately he launched at the first boar to appear at the top of the hollow, catching it through one of the soulless black eyes.

As the boar ran off screaming into the woods more appeared at the top of the ridge. Joe looked up them with a sneer, daring them to come on.

One leapt, and Joe's magic lifted the spear to catch it as it did so. It ripped into the Scrofa just at the heart, the boar going limp instantly, blood gushing from it as it wheeled over Joe's head like a macabre pole-vaulter.

Drenched now in his own blood and the blood of his enemies he unsheathed his spurs and looked up at them. They gathered there, looking down on him with something approaching interest as the blood pooled around him.

After a moment, one spoke.

"Honorable," it said, nodding to him, "Honorable foe."

Joe nodded, backing up slightly, his spurs still raised. He wobbled. Joe felt his vision beginning to recede, felt the blackness creeping in. Beyond the group he could hear the thud-thud-thud-thud of thousands of porcine hooves, their army closing in on the unsuspecting camp of the Hemlock Corps.

"Yes," added another, "Much honor in killing this one."

With that a few advanced on him, and as he sank down into the mire of blood, sticks, and leaves he felt his body begin to collapse around him.

As he thudded to the ground he heard the wild yells of pegasi, the elite skirmishers and scouts of the corps, racing in with wild abandon.

He was lifted on gentle hooves as the sounds of Equestrians of all three races colliding in battle with the Scrofa followed him down into the darkness.

Joe awoke again. At first he feared that he had befouled himself, as the sheets were slick with moisture. No, he realized, it was sweat... it was just sweat. He lay down again in his own wetness, the awful smell of his own body odor enveloping him.

"Please, I just want some sleep... please..." he called to the nothingness.

The next dream started with him staring into his own big green eyes.

As the attendants came to him they wiped the white paint along his flanks, through his mane. It was cool, and the touch of their hooves brought with it the feeling of being swept away on a sheet of ice.

As the lovely mares lowered the armor upon him they spoke, "Gold, the color of worth. You have proven yours beyond any doubt."

As the beautiful mares lowered the plumed helmet upon his head they spoke again, "Blue, the color of loyalty, as you have shown to Equestria in your actions, commitment, and sacrifice."

With that they took Joe's hoof, turning him towards the gathered assembly. Before him stood the Minister of War, ready to give the oath once more. To Joe's side there stood ranks of other newly minted guardsponies... some wounded in the same battle as himself, all having made a sacrifice above and beyond what was asked for.

As the Muses of the House of Unicorn stood beside him he looked out into the assembly, found his parents there... Mocha, Java and Coffee Bean as well. He tried to smile, but he was afraid the paint would chip.

Finally, after agonizing minutes, the Minister approached.

"Brevet Sergeant Pony Joe of Canterlot," he said, reading from the prepared notes, "in light of your bravery and selfless actions at the Fifth Battle of The Tall Pines, which perhaps saved the Hemlock Corps from destruction, you have been offered the paint, armor, and helm of the sovereign. Will you wear them?"

"I will."

"Will you rise to protect her from any foes, as you have protected the ponies who are dear to her?"

"I will."

"Will you protect those she loves? Those who call her 'Aunt'? Those who serve her?"

"I will."

"Then, sergeant... in her name, I ask you to take your place in the ranks."

With that he cantered down the length of the podium, a smattering of applause reaching up to him, and found his place before a squad of ponies in the Light Infantry Regiment of Her Majesty's Brigade of the Household.

He was a Royal Guardspony. Who in the Well would ever have thought it?

The dream wrapped around itself, moved forward in time. He was out of the armor, back home... his real home, not the apartment. The home where he had been raised... the place where he had been surrounded by love and comfort, where he could offer the same.

"It's gonna suck for Mocha with you not here," said Coffee Bean, squeezing into the uniform.

"It's generally discouraged for the fierce, elite fighting ponies of the Guard to live with their parents," said Joe with a roll of his eyes.

Beanie snorted, fought harder to slide into the Regular Army uniform.

"Damn," replied Joe, "is it too tight?"

"Naw," replied Beanie, "I was just in hurry to get into it."

With that he undid the straps. As he did the uniform began to clang and ring out, the plates falling into position. Soon enough, with Joe's help, it sat perfectly upon the smaller unicorn's body.

"Looks good on ya," said Joe, looking past his brother, catching his eyes in the mirror.

Beanie lowered his head, looked at the corps badge. It was a linden leaf. Inside the bow beneath it sat the number twenty-eight.

"I wish I had been assigned the same corps as you, the same regiment as you," he said with a sigh.

"Nothing wrong with being an archer, most important job on the field at times. Besides, the 28th Archer Regiment is a famous one, 'The Sunspot Archers', nice and low numbered... dates back to the War of the Witches," Joe said earnestly.

Beanie said nothing. After a moment he caught his brother's eye in the mirror.

"How long do you think it will take for me to make The Guards?"

Joe shuddered.

"Do you think we'll be in the same regiment when I get to The Guards?"

Joe trotted forward, leaned his head against his little brother's.

"Beanie," he said, his voice cracking, "I don't want you to think about trying to make The Guards, okay? That's not what it's supposed to be about. It... I went through the Well, out there... at Fifth Pines. I... I almost didn't come back, Beanie."

Joe suddenly wished he had told Beanie more about what it was like... maybe, maybe he would have chosen differently. Maybe, maybe they would have started that café together, like they had talked about...

No, no point worrying about that now. Not when Beanie was standing there in his grey steel armor and beaming with pride, the quiver of arrows leaning against the doorframe.

"Be... follow orders. Don't take risks. All I did was try to take a piss and it nearly killed me, Beanie. Do your best, but be practical, okay?"

"Sure," answered the younger unicorn, "sure."

Joe looked at Beanie for a great long while. Soon he had lowered his head again, was wiping it across his brother's head, neck, withers.

"In Celestia's name, Joe, jeez..." said the startled unicorn.

"I love you Beanie, be safe, okay?" said Joe as his voice broke.

Beanie turned up into his brother's embrace. His voice became weaker as he spoke as well, the two swaying slightly as they laid their heads across one another.

"Yeah, yeah... I will. I will. I love you too, bro, I love you too..."

As they stood there, sniffing, the light fell through the windows that lined the door. It enveloped the brothers in visible shafts as outside birds chirped and the sounds of carts went up the cobblestone streets beyond the walls of their home.

"Please," called Joe to the nothingness, "please... please don't make me..."

Joe leapt from his bed. His head waved back and forth on currents of drowsiness and uncertainty. He stumbled out into his hallway, looked around himself, called down the empty hallway, "Leave me alone!"

He strode into his tiny living room, berated his bookcase, "I just want to sleep!"

His cries echoed through the little apartment, the unicorn raging at nothing, angrily denouncing the invisible.

With some hesitation he crawled back into the bed, ignoring the sheets which had come undone from the corners, the way half the blankets now lay nearer to the floor on one side than the other.

"Please, please, leave me alone..."

But the dreams would not. The part of his mind he tried to keep silent and still opened up once more, awakened by the casual utterances of two ponies in the market a few hours before.

He flashed in the dream down into his armor, the white paint covering him.

It was raining outside, and there was a general hurry about the palace. Bad news had reached the city... a defeat, a rare thing, had befallen the Regular Army. In the mountains beyond the Everfree Forest the Gold Army Group had been cut up badly. Three whole corps had been nearly halved... Chestnut, Cherry, and Ash Corps if he remembered his dispatches correctly.

As he walked beside Princess Celestia (his eyes vigilantly checking for whatever in the world thought it could successfully attack a seemingly immortal and apparently divine alicorn) he breathed a small Invoke. His heart went out to the families... to the wounded.

He was grateful that Beanie's Linden Corps wasn't involved. He shuddered at the thought.

He listened in as a group of ministers, parliamentarians, and army officers followed behind, each making entreaties upon the alicorn for action.

He rolled his eyes at the sycophants... it was only when General Black Hat of Sycamore Corps spoke that anything resembling sense was made, and when another general, a brigadier named Wander, joined them things of worth began being accomplished.

He watched as the princess pulled out Wander's old brigadier rank board with her magic, slipped a new major's one into its place. As she did Joe suddenly felt better about the situation.

He followed once more, keeping even the most trusted of the advisers under his watch as his file partner did the same. "You are relieved, Sergeant," came a voice, and as a new pony took a watch he bowed to the princess and departed, walking in cadence with his file partner down to the barracks.

As they rounded a corner they stepped aside to let the Minister of War pass, the frantic look on the face of the graying unicorn one that denoted just how horribly the day was going... just how bad the situation truly was.

The Minister of War nodded to them before continuing on, barely lifting his head from a mountain of scrolls... but at once stopped.

"Minister?" his file partner, Winding Stream, asked. "Is everything alright, sir?"

The minister turned back to them slowly, looking first to Stream and then to Joe.

"Sergeant? It's Sergeant Pony Joe, of Canterlot? Correct?"

Joe looked first to Stream, and then back to the minister.

"Yes, sir. How can I be of service?"

The minister rummaged through the scrolls, pulled out a small one, ran it up and down. At once he stopped and looked up to Joe.

"You... are aware, of course of the... defeat," said the minister, choking on the word, "the defeat of Gold Army Group, yesterday, correct?"

"Yes sir."

"Are... are you aware of what units made up the Gold Group?" asked the minister, walking slowly towards them.

"Not too deep into the individual units, sir, but it was my understanding that Gold was made up of Chestnut, Cherry, and Ash Corps."

The minister looked out a nearby window. The rain began to slow as pegasi began breaking up the clouds. It was to be a nice day after all... far too nice.

"It was... when dispatched, but an unexplained flood at the foot of the Everfree Forest caused Ash Corps to be delayed..."

"Yes sir," answered Joe, looking down into the face of the minister, wondering why the pony seemed to be supplicating himself before him, "Nasty place the Everfree, sir, weather's all unpredictable in there... why, when I was in regular service we..."

"Do, do you know which corps we had to replace it with?" interrupted the Minister of War, lifting one scroll with his magic.

"No, sir," answered Joe, softly.

"Linden Corps... we had to move up Linden Corps."

Joe suddenly felt as though he had been slapped across the face with an apple cart.

"I... I received a letter from General Verdant, of Linden Corps Third Division. He, he was commending ponies... ponies who had fought bravely... in the defeat..."

A great pool of water began moving inside Joe's mind, and as it began to slosh about he wavered, and the waters began to form a whirlpool that threatened to drag him down.

"His... his first brigade, under Brigadier Gleaming Orb, caught the worst of it... you see, but held out bravely... 163rd Light Infantry, 61st Heavy Infantry, 49th Cavalry... twenty... 28th Archer... 28th Archer, Sergeant..."

Joe began to shake, stumble, Stream literally moving to catch him.

"Sergeant, Sergeant... I, I don't know how..." said the minister, going pale.

"Read it to me, minister, please."

The Minister of War placed his foreleg over his mouth.

"Please..."

The minister unrolled the scroll.

"Principal in the defense," began the letter, "was the brigade of Orb, who was killed leading said brigade valiantly. Among that brigade, the first of the third division, fell so many great ponies, each one more loyal and dutiful than could ever be asked..."

Suddenly Joe remembered looking down into the eyes of a little foal he had held in his forelegs as it gurgled and cooed at him. The image dug a burning knife into the spot just below his ribcage, twisting into him unforgivingly as his world began to shatter around the words.

The minister skipped ahead.

"It was the 28th Archer Regiment that most bore the brunt of the final assault of the Chrey. With the entirety of the brigade's regular infantry units shredded this unlikely unit, though storied, was most responsible for allowing the majority of the division to escape entrapment. My mind's eye clearly sees one individual in particular, a private, whom must receive mention..."

The images of dancing around with Beanie as the warm summer air revealed to them their marks for the first time beat at him. The remembrance of his baby brother's laughter belabored Joe like a club across his head, hammering at him mercilessly.

"With all the regular and non-commissioned officers dead or deathly injured it was Private Coffee Bean, Brother of Joe, Hero of Fifth Pines, who bore up his fellow ponies. Multiple sources here state that he was seen rallying them not three but four times until he, though already terribly wounded and given every chance to escape..."

"Terribly wounded."

"Every chance to escape."

These two lines bit at Joe as his face began to twist in agony, as he looked back into his memory and heard his baby brother say, "How long do you think it will take for me to make The Guards?"

Make the guards... baby brother.

"... ultimately was killed..."

The water, the massive whirlpool sloshing around in Joe's heard roared up at him, knocked him over. At once the Minister of War grabbed at him, Stream trying to catch him too as his body came crashing down to the floor.

Beanie was dead. Trying to make The Guards... be like his brother. Hero of Fifth Pines. Baby Beanie is dead... little baby brother Beanie. Gone. Dead. Beanie is dead.

Joe fell out of their forelegs as horrible sounds began to come from deep within him, first low moans of anguish that grew into high, resonant shrieks of unnameable pain. He raised himself up, darted at nothing. He fell against a marbled column, his armor clanging against it, and then crashed past it into the wall beneath a tall spire of stained glass windows.

His helmet rolled off of him as he hit the floor, spinning.

"Oh, Ser... Joe, Joe I am so sorry... I'm so sorry," said the minister, placing one hoof on Joe's shoulders as the pony wailed, kicked uncontrollably and wildly.

"Oh Joe, Joe..." called Stream, trying to lift him from the floor, trying to wrap his forelegs around Joe's despondent form.

Yet, they could not, no force in Equestria could lift him, it seemed, as he lay there on the cold marble floor. The deep cries of anguish continued slipping out of him, filling the corridor with horrible sounds that brought ponies cantering and trotting up from all corners of the palace...

At once the image of the smiling face of his brother reached him, the new armor shining upon him. Two attendant mares laid his head across both of their laps as he called for his little brother in wild, wounded tones.

He called for his baby brother to rise up out of the Well of Souls... to come back up the long stairs and go with him once more down into the creeks that fed the vast waterfalls of Canterlot. He begged his little brother to go with him out into the crisp autumn as it fled into Nightmare Night, laughing as they gathered treats from the lit houses and watched candles flicker inside pumpkins.

A ringing grew in his ears, chiming in loud cadence to the throbbing behind his eyes as he called for his little brother, begged him to come back...

His voice called, pleaded, to his little brother to come back to him, to all of them... to once again fill the house with his soft presence... just for a day, an hour, even just a handful of minutes... just so that they could tell him how much they love him one last time... embrace him just once more, please... please just one more time...

"Beaaniiiiiiiiiee!" he brayed out loud, his armor biting into him along the folds.

"Beannniieeee!" he called again and again as the attendant mares stroked his mane and rocked him.

"Beannniieeee!" he screamed, his throat burning, a ringing behind his ears growing as the gathered ponies began to sob on their own accord, the knowledge of the cause of his misery somehow spreading among them.

The stately ponies, lords, ladies, barons... they looking down at him, their hearts growing in sympathy but unknowing how to help... looking on at the perfect tangible horror of his dejection.

At once more hooffalls were heard, and the as the sobbing assembly looked up to see who had joined them they parted for her.

The ringing grew louder... then stopped.

He felt a soft light fall over him, and the guardspony looked up to see himself encased in that light. He was floating in a pool of his own misery, yet it was not reaching him. It was as though he were within the perfect golden light of an egg yolk, and the horrors retreated from him, retreated just enough to allow him to breathe again...

"Joe," came the sound of a perfect voice, and the soft feeling of a muzzle placed along his face, "Give me your pain Joe, let it flow into me..."

At once he answered it, leapt at it for the comfort and solace it offered, and with that Procer Celestia Invictus enveloped him in her light all the way down to the very roots of his soul.

A new ringing reached him, and for the first time in his adult life Joe awoke to the sounds of his alarm clock. He had failed to awaken before it, as was his custom.

He had failed... just as badly as he had failed Beanie.

He opened the window, and with the force of his magic behind him, launched the still-ringing alarm clock out into the cold morning streets of the capital. Beneath it the streams still merged into the vast waterfalls as he let out a cry that filled the streets.

Sweet Cream was literally pounding on the door by the time that Joe had even realized that he had walked to the doughnut shop.

Joe looked around, realized he was in the kitchen. Nothing was moving, none of his equipment was on, no doughnuts were being made. He looked up to the clock through bleary eyes.

Oh Celestia, it was already half-past.

He trotted to the door, making it come open with a resounding clang.

"Morning Joe, how... Oh, Celestia! Oh Luna! Joe you look like you've been through the Well!"

Sweet Cream had literally recoiled upon looking at Joe, had seemed actually afraid of his customer. He leaned forward, inspecting Joe as he stood there, without apron or hat, almost as though he was seeing him for the first time.

"Joe... are you alright?" asked the milkpony.

Joe looked up to him with bloodshot eyes.

"Yeah... yeah, I didn't sleep well."

Together they danced their usual morning dance, each moving around one another to get the dolly cart within the freezer. Joe moved slowly, awkwardly, making Sweet Cream act more cautiously, keep worrying.

Joe saw him to the landing once more, his eyes down.

"Joe, are you sure that you're okay... is there somepony you want me to get a hold of?"

Joe looked up to him, forced a smile. "No, no... I'll be alright."

"I'll... I'll be around today, after my shift... leave me a maple glazed, okay?"

"Sure... sure..."

With that Joe closed the door, leaving Sweet Cream to look upon his departing figure for the first time since he'd begun delivering milk to his shop, leaving the earth pony standing there next to his cart in the light that shone over the door.

It was four-forty before Joe had recovered enough to do anything useful. In ten minutes Call would be out there, inconceivably early as always, and he hadn't even turned on the lights yet... let alone started to make the doughnuts.

He trotted out into the dining room of the café, his little shop. He couldn't bring himself to look up to the altar above the glass... couldn't bring himself to do anything other than watch the ghosts that flit around the space.

The table in the middle of the room, nearest the door...

"How will you be paying the mortgage?" asked the realtor, inspecting her hoof as she did.

He had laid his first pension check on the table.

"Thank you for your service..." said the realtor, her eyes going wide as she saw the amount.

The scuffmark on the floor...

"Oh Celestia! Oh Luna!" called somepony as the guardsponies all stood, "It's the colonel!"

"Now, now... lads, no need to salute me in here, right?"

The same tired stool at the end of the counter...

"Morning sir! You're my first customer... ever!"

"I'll have a tea and two double-chocolate doughnuts, and do keep that in mind for tomorrow as well," Artificer Call had said, laying that first newspaper on the counter.

"Yes sir!" he had answered.

Joe walked through the dining room to the door. There he laid his head against it, feeling the small cool breeze that seeped in through the tiny crack.

Had it all been worth it? Had it mattered? What could he have done differently... what would have kept Beanie alive? What compromise had been presented him that didn't

result in the entirety of an Equestrian army corps having their throats slit in their bedrolls? Where had the tipping point been... what could he have said, done? Why... why had it come to this... why, why was this his life?

"Oh Celestia, Oh Luna, please... please give me some answer, please..."

A long moment passed as he sucked at the cool breeze, drawing the morning air into his lungs, letting the flush across his face fall down, let the weariness drift around him.

Another ghost tapped at the glass, and he lifted his head to see the figure of Twilight Sparkle standing outside the door... just as she had those long years ago.

"Excuse me, sir," said the ghost as he stepped back, watched himself open the door for her, "Is this a new shop? Are you open?"

"Yes it is miss, and yes I am!" he said as she had entered, as he looked up to see the irate figure of Call race in behind her, dart for his stool.

Her massive saddlebags dropped to the floor, the books and papers heaving, falling over onto the floor.

So it began, and to Joe's amazement he raced through a few meetings with Twilight Sparkle, watching her come in each morning, sharing some small talk each day. Two events leapt to him. The first time she had brought Spike with her... the dragon just the night before having finally come to live with her instead of in the nursery, their first morning together as a Designate and Summoner team.

He remembered how shy the whelp had seemed; hiding behind her like any foal would behind his mother when a stranger was near. A few doughnuts later, however, it was as if he and Spike had fought in The Wars together...

The second time was that first horrible anniversary.

Call had noticed, and so had Twilight Sparkle. By that time there were other regulars too, many of them his friends from The Guard. Yet, if any knew they were silent until his sniffing began.

"Joe?" lifted the soft voice of the filly as he poured her some more hot chocolate. "Joe, are you okay?"

"Oh, just a bumner kind of day is all..."

"Do, you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head, sought to change the topic.

"I've never asked you... what are you studying?" he said, forcing a smile.

"Oh," she had answered as the two had watched Spike inhaling a variety of frosted treats. "Magic, of course... I'm onto the advanced stuff already, believe it or not."

She had blushed when she said it, looked down into the swirl of the whipped cream in her cocoa. As she did something happened, it was as though the spiral were drawing him back.

Suddenly Joe was no longer simply remembering these things, letting the ghosts of the memories float around him. Suddenly he was back here in the shop those few years ago, a time when the wax on the counter wasn't as thick, a time before that one tile had gone missing from before the door, a time when the vinyl wasn't split on the second stool from the register...

... a time when he was slightly younger, a touch less... melancholy.

"But, Twilight Sparkle," he had said with a laugh, as though she hadn't understood his question, "What is it you're going to be? What are you studying to become?"

She had shrugged her shoulders, sipped at the hot cocoa as he looked on baffled. Surely a smart cookie like this one had some kind of plan...

"Whatever Princess Celestia needs me to be," she said, putting the cocoa down.

"I don't think I get it," he said, doubtfully.

"Well, the princess has been training me in magic now for years... and, I trust she's teaching me what she thinks I need to know, so that when the time comes, I'll be ready to do whatever it is... that, well, needs being done..."

"Doesn't sound like there's much money in it!" he intoned as Spike began yet another doughnut, "I mean, it's not exactly going to be easy to fill out a tax form..."

Twilight smiled, sipped at her hot chocolate. "Yes, but when I made the choice to pursue magic, to learn all about it... that was what I wanted, and... wherever it takes me, that's fine... that's where the choice takes me..."

"Yeah?" asked Joe, looking across the restaurant. "What if choices you make don't... don't always work out for the best? What... what if choices you make... end up getting, getting your baby brother killed..."

"I don't have a... oh, oh..." she said, standing, walking slowly across the floor. She stood beside him as he looked up to the altar, as the tears ran down his face.

"If I'd told him not to join... not to join the Regular Army, he would have listened... he would have listened, he was a good colt... Oh, Luna! Oh, Celestia!"

He tried to hide his face, knew that she was looking at him.

Joe didn't brag about having known Twilight Sparkle when she was "just a college kid". He didn't want it to be a big deal... even after she'd become a hero to all of Equestria he didn't tell the ponies enthusiastically speaking about her that they were sitting at the table where she had studied and eaten his doughnuts for years.

So, the way she had offered him a hug there in the café, beneath Beanie's altar... that remained a happy secret between him, her, Call (if he'd bothered to look up from his paper), Spike, and the napkin dispensers.

After a few moments she lifted her head from his and sighed. "Joe, do you use salt in your recipes?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Lemon juice?"

"Yes, in some..."

"How about cinnamon?"

"Yes, yes of course... why?"

"Would you recommend to your customers that they eat these things by themselves?" she asked as they crossed over to her table.

"Heh, no," he said, sniffing against the pain, letting the odd comment rattle around in his mind.

"But you use them? Why is that?" she had asked as they watched Spike dealing with the fallen custard that he'd inadvertently released from a Hoftson Crème.

"Because... because they're part of the recipe."

"Hmmm... so, when you put these in with, say, flour, milk, sugar... they become something more?"

"Well, yes," he agreed.

"And you have to fry them, correct? Have to send the doughnuts through a freakin' boiling lake of oil before they're ready, right?"

"That's part of it, yeah... yeah," he said beginning to understand.

She smiled up at him. "We are the sum of the choices we make, Joe, good ones... bad ones, ones we regret and wish we could take back, ones we love every day of our lives. But, in the end, they are us... make us who we are. If we accept that, then we can go forward... if we can't, well, we're trapped. Don't let the one thing you blame yourself for trip you up, Joe... keep living."

"More doughnuts!" called the little dragon, pounding at the table. They looked at him, then at each other with arched eyebrows.

The memory sped down, raced away from him. At once Joe was left standing alone in his partly lit shop. The place was empty, now even the ghosts of memories having left him.

He didn't know why Twilight's speech hadn't registered with him... maybe he'd been so busy that day that he hadn't internalized it. Maybe over the years his guilt, the feeling that he'd failed Beanie, had triumphed over her excellent intentions.

Yet, as he turned back to the kitchen, he found himself repeating her words. Damn, that kid was a smart cookie.

The metal door wobbled open, and rather than putting the disposable hat on his head he found himself staring at the uniform. He had opened the wrong door... or had he?

"We are the sum of the choices we make..."

A ringing began, and for a second he feared that he was having an episode, like the one he'd had in the palace. But, no... no it was coming from outside.

The carillons were playing. He looked up to the clock in alarm... no, no it was still ten before five.

He listened to them, listened as they played a familiar tune. "Fox in the Woods"... the fight song of the Brigade of the Household. Why would it be playing, he wondered to himself. It's only supposed to be played when the Royal Guardsponies are being summoned to the castle.

He went to the calendar. The only scheduled event that month was the Dawn Tattoo, and that was next week.

He listened as the carillon came alive again, playing the song once more.

Something... something was wrong. To his horror two guardsponies in full armor came pelting up the street, crossing in front of his shop at a full gallop.

He looked back and forth outside his door. It was five minutes before five, and the suspicious lack of Artificer Call made a cold sweat go down his back. Had something gone wrong? Had he not seen something as he blearily made his way through the street?

At once the chimes started again, and three more guardsponies went past up to the gates of the citadel, the loud clang of their hooves across the cobblestones evident even through the walls of the shop.

"Once a guardspony, always a guardspony."

"We are the sum of the choices we make..."

Inside of two minutes, Joe had squeezed into the armor.

He raced about, trying to fasten the straps, the maddening process taking long moments. At once a thought reached him, what color were the light infantry wearing this week? He tried to think, tried to remember seeing what the paint was in the beards and manes of the infantryponies as they had munched on his creations. He couldn't seem to remember, couldn't single one out.

He looked around the kitchen. There was no coat paint of course, but as he went he lifted two bags from their containers and laid them on the table as a bar of soap flew out into the dining room to write the word "Delayed" across the windows.

Powdered sugar, cocoa, powdered sugar, cocoa. Oh Celestia. Oh Luna. He knew it really wouldn't matter if the emergency was big enough... with a fifty-fifty chance he guessed that the powdered sugar would adhere better to his tan coat and brown mane.

In a puff of white glucose he burst out into the street... the Hero of Fifth Pines racing to the aid of his comrades.

The climb up the hill was longer than he remembered, and the armor wasn't shifting the way it was designed to. It was stiff, rusted.

He was older... out of shape.

As he came panting to the top of the hill he saw torches gathering in the courtyard... inside the gates lines of forming regiments cast long shadows upon the tall walls of the palace.

Looking about himself he looked for an officer. One was waiting outside, Bright Nights, errr... Colonel Nights. Immediately he trotted up to him.

"Colonel... Colonel Nights, sir, Sergeant..."

"Joe?" answered the colonel with no small surprise, the first lieutenant turning to look upon him as well, their eyes going wide.

"Yessir, reporting, sir... where do you need me, sir... what's the emergency, sir, how can I help?" panted Joe, trying to compose himself.

Joe saw Colonel Nights turn to the first lieutenant. That pony covered his mouth with his hoof, and instantly Joe knew something was wrong.

"Joe... Joe, did you forget, about the Dawn Tattoo?" asked Colonel Nights, "It's today, Joe. This is the Tattoo."

Joe felt his vision recede... no, oh no, no.

"The calendar... the calendar says it's next... next week," he said, meekly, still fighting for breath.

"Did you adjust for the new second day of the Autumnal Equinox Celebration, Joe? It moved... it moved the Dawn Tattoo up..."

Joe felt the energy drain from him, felt fresh embarrassment overwhelm him.

"Is... is that powdered sugar?" asked the first lieutenant as Joe began to back away.

You idiot! he raged at himself, the words turning over and over inside his head. *You moron!*

Joe turned from the officers, began going back down the long stone road as guardsponies who had also forgotten that fact continued to gallop by.

"Joe... Joe?" called Colonel Nights after him, Joe barely noticing as his self-admonishment continued.

"Sergeant!" called the colonel in a loud, authoritative tone that was not to be ignored. It was not a friendly one... it was an order.

Joe felt himself go stock-still, his head up, the old soldier in him responding.

"Fall in on the first lieutenant! March!" called the colonel. At once Joe felt himself turning, and as he found his spot beside the first lieutenant he looked back into the colonel's eyes.

The colonel at first looked at him harshly, but as he looked down on him the earth pony's countenance became lighter, almost... concerned.

"You never leave The Guard, Joe. Come along now, Joe, come along..."

Before Joe had even realized what he was doing he was marching behind the colonel and the first lieutenant, crossing beneath the arches and gates and marching out into the vast parade ground.

"Halt," ordered the colonel. As soon as he did, he spun back to Joe, nodding at him. "Stay here, parade rest... that's an order. Do you understand me, sergeant?"

"Yessir," answered Joe, looking back at him in confusion.

"It's going to be fine Joe... just wait here."

As the colonel and the first lieutenant cantered off towards the general staff Joe looked around himself and wondered what in the Well the colonel had in store for him. Above him torches hovered in the air on visible currents of magic, and nearby the regimental

bands began forming up, their drum majors hefting their maces before them, each one readying himself to show his mettle.

Beyond them the regiments formed up... all five thousand fighting ponies in Their Majesty's Brigade of the Household, each with armor finely polished, each of the five regiments falling into company front, long lines of the soldiers ready for the yearly celebration.

Beside him a company of the brigade's heavy infantry regiment, all big strong earth ponies, came up. Their hooves shook the ground as they marched in cadence. As they halted their captain called "Mark... time!" and waited for their position behind their flag to come open. As their proud hooves tromped the ground over and over in a single place he felt their rhythm, felt the life that flowed from them...

"It's Joe..."

He heard his name, looked around, looked into the ranks of the company near him.

"Quiet in the ranks!" hissed a corporal next to him, "Pay no mind to... drag me out of the Well, it is Joe!"

Joe looked at him... fought to remember his name, but in the end could only think of the big colt as one of the few regulars at the shop who had liked his attempt at a coconut glaze, and who liked to have a cup of nice cold milk as he ate his doughnuts.

"Hi," breathed Joe, still standing at parade rest, the same position he had been left in by the colonel.

"Joe... Sergeant," said the corporal as other familiar eyes turned to face him, "What are you doing here?"

"I have no idea."

"Is that powdered sugar?"

"Yes."

"Awesome."

At once their captain called them to the march again, and as Joe watched him deftly wheel his company into the line of the regiment he saw more heads in adjoining

companies turn to him as news of his presence grew... news of the return of the Hero of Fifth Pines reaching even those who had never set hoof within his shop.

"Sergeant!" he heard Colonel Nights call. "Post!"

Joe turned on his left rearhoof, first clanging the boots together in recognition and salute, and then cantered up to the colonel. As he did he realized that he was being motioned to Brigadier General Gambit.

As he saluted the general spoke to him, the grey eyes looking surprisingly aware. "Brevet Color Sergeant Joe, at the recommendation of Colonel Nights, I ask that you bear my headquarters flag throughout the following action..."

"I'd... I'd be honored, sir," said Joe as the flag unfurled from its staff, as the general wafted it towards him. At once Joe reached out his right foreleg, gathering the banner into his shoulder. At once he turned, the flag above giving a single snap in reply.

"Is that powdered sugar, color sergeant?" asked the general with a smile.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well..."

Brevet Color Sergeant! Oh Celestia, oh Luna, he'd just been promoted! He wondered if it was merely symbolic or if his pension would actually go up a few bits. It would be nice to replace the tiles in the shop...

"If this stallion is assailed," called the first lieutenant as Joe struggled to remember his name, "who will aide him?"

It was a symbolic gesture. At least Joe hoped so... he doubted that any of the foreigners in the observation deck above were there with the intent of attacking the Tattoo.

Joe realized that he was talking to the honor guard, a company of pegasi skirmishers from the behind the general. They were all young colts, no ponies he knew... it would have been nice, he thought, to have some pony he had served with take up the symbolic position.

"Sir! Private Rush, sir, requesting the honor..."

As a private came up Joe looked down to nod at him. When he saw who it was he nearly swallowed the flag in surprise.

It was the same private who had lead the beautiful mare through the market the day before, who had stared at him accusingly in his shop.

Joe felt himself begin to sweat as the pegasus stood near, began to wonder if the large drops would leave tracks across the powdered sugar.

The attention of the assembly now focused on the lines of the regiments beyond, as the bands stepped forward, as the entirety of the Brigade of the Household, the Royal Guardsponies, moved into their final starting positions.

"I read up on you, last night," said the private, daring to speak. Joe felt his stomach tighten.

"I... my fiancée and I, read through some old magazines, journals," he said, his head turning to watch as the drum majors stepped before their bands.

"I... I had some pretty biased opinions about you, when we met in the shop. I mean, I... I love your doughnuts, but... forgive me, but to me you didn't look like what I thought a guardspony, even one who'd been out of active duty for a few years, should look like..."

Joe felt a pinch behind his eyes.

"But... I just want you to know, sir..."

Sir?

"Sir, if I'd been through what you'd been through... both, both with how badly you were wounded, and... and what it must have been like, losing your brother..."

Joe looked over to the private. As he turned he saw the colt hanging his head...

"If I'd gone through that, sergeant, I hope I'd be able to drag myself up to being half the stallion you are... fighting back, starting a shop. Amazing. I'm sorry, sir."

A long moment passed between them, and as the brigade's senior drum major stepped forward to lead the procession Joe replied in a single quiet, but firm, utterance.

"Thank you."

With that there was a long winding shrill noise, and at once dozens of bagpipes came to life. For the next half of an hour the brigade marched, countermarched, and wheeled as the bands played songs like "Broken Ground", "The Well is Dry", "The Old Roan Thistle", and dozens of other martial tunes, each one packed with meaning for the ponies that passed before the stand where the general reviewed his troops and where Joe stood with the flag.

As they did Joe caught sight of familiar faces among the ponies that stomped by in perfect cadence, a few even looking right at him... acknowledging him without breaking their concentration.

He realized then that he was a part of their story... and as the drum majors swung their maces, and as the bagpipes, drums, and pipes rang out across the parade ground he realized that if he had not made the choices he had made, had he done one thing differently... there might not be some of these ponies out here.

Not only those whose lives he had saved, but also those who had come to him for something resembling normalcy... that the hot coffee was more than just a pick-me-up... that the conversation was just as important... that his regulars, well... were his regulars.

"We are the sum of the choices we make," he whispered to himself.

If only he could just get past the one... not, not dwell on not talking Beanie out of..

He snapped back to awareness as the final notes of the regimental bands drifted up, out, over the crowd. As the ambassadors and dignitaries of all kinds of foreign powers applauded, and as dignified ponies, visitors to the capital, and those who just loved the spectacle cheered the Sister Sovereigns of Equestria strode out onto the ground to inspect their brigade.

Bands played slow lilting tunes as Princess Celestia and Princess Luna wove among the regiments, kissing their flags, receiving salutes and being bowed before.

As they approached the general the entirety of the assembly bowed, and as the general raised himself up he dropped his sword from his brow to his boots.

Joe looked on as the general spoke. As he did the sisters turned, and he snapped back to attention, the private doing so at the same time.

"Why," spoke the older sister, "I do believe that color bearer is our Joe..."

Oh Celestia... Princess Celestia had noticed him!

"Oh, do introduce me, Tia! Poor dear, I remember when you spoke of him. I have so enjoyed his doughnuts!"

Oh Luna... Princess Luna had noticed him!

Joe fought to contain his blushing as the Sister Sovereigns of Equestria strode across the stand and moved before him. As the elder sister's vibrant mane shifted around him he bowed deeply, lowering the flag, the armor pinching at him where he was not quite as trim as the last time he had worn it before an alicorn... when he had been thrashing about the halls of the palace in despondency.

"Do stand, Joe, I wish for you to meet my sister. It is wonderful to see you again..."

Joe raised himself up, tried to think of an appropriate response. The words formed quickly in his mind. He opened his mouth to reply to the sovereign's wish when she suddenly interrupted him.

"Is that powdered sugar, Joe?" asked the ageless immortal with a small grin.

"Yes, Majesty," he said, his selected words fleeing him, blushing so hard that he feared that the sugar might caramelize at the heat of it.

"Is it now?" she said, tilting her head, looking at her sister mischievously.

With that, Procer Celestia Invictus, The Elder Sister Sovereign, The Firstborn Alicorn... leaned down and planted a lingering kiss on the side of Joe's face just beneath the helm.

His world had barely receded from the flashes of rainbows and morning light before she had licked the sugar from her lips and dropped her beautiful head once more to his again. With that she graced him with another kiss... a long one that swept another swath of sugar from him.

"Do share, Tia! Do share!" called Procer Luna Revenio, The Younger Sister Sovereign, The Nightbringer... and then she too proceeded to slowly draw her muzzle against the opposite side of his face, slowly kissing him over and over, the white of the powder evident against her darker coat.

As cascades of color and beauty shot through him Joe could not believe that he simply had not died and was not swimming through the most blessed part of the Well of Souls.

Out in the assembled ranks the few who knew what Joe had been covered in spread the word, passed an understanding of what was transpiring to their comrades. The knowledge grew and spread like the roots of a vast tree.

As the guardsponies watched those who knew him, loved him as a brother, whistled, cheered, or laughed... and those who did not know him simply wished to be him in that instant.

"And what is it, Joe," said the older sister, lifting her head, covering her mouth with her hoof as she licked away the sugar, "That brings your delicious self back into our presence?"

"I... I," he stammered, looking into the vast beautiful eyes of the alicorns. He took a breath, laughed at himself a little bit, and pressed on, "I had a bad night's sleep, Majesties, and... that made me forget about how the Tattoo had been moved... and then something your Designate Twilight Sparkle had told me kept coming back to me, over and over..."

"Twilight? Really?" spoke Celestia, brightening at the mention of the precious name.

"Yes, Majesty..." he said, his countenance falling again. "Something she said about... the choices we make..."

The two sisters looked at one another as he sighed, as he tried to straighten in their presence. Princess Celestia tilted her head again. A concerned look, one almost motherly in composition, slid over her. She once more placed her head to his, alongside where his tan coat had been revealed by their softly given affections.

"Will you show me, Joe? Will you let me help you, as I did then?"

He could not, would not, hide anything from her. As her light fell over him he opened up that still, soft, quiet place in his heart where the memory lay... where his blame still rolled around inside him...

Celestia lifted her head, looked down into his green eyes as he looked back up at her, longing for some solace.

"Joe," she said, her voice more motherly, just as it had been those years ago. "You are here because of your choices, and one is begging to be made, longing to be made... one that has possessed you..."

He looked back to her in understanding. As he nodded at her she smiled down at him and continued to level her advice upon him.

"You blame yourself, and though it was not your choice but his you cling to the belief that you were to blame... because it's the only way you allow yourself to understand his death."

He gasped slightly; was... was it true? Was he not coming to terms with Coffee Bean's death, was he afraid that if he stopped blaming himself that he... that he was afraid he'd forget Beanie... was he disallowing himself from moving on?

"Joe... I beg you, make one more decision," pleaded his sovereign. "Choose to live your life in honor of his, move out of the shadow of your blame... or I fear you will live entombed within it."

She once more nuzzled him, and with that he bowed. At once though his eyes were filled with visions of a cool night across a starlit meadow, and the sweet smells of a summer evening reached him...

... the Princess Luna had kissed him once more, drawing off one last long draw of the sugar.

"Do consider cocoa powder next time!" she giggled into his ear before turning off and following her sister.

As bands played the Sister Sovereigns of Equestria left him there, envied by all, loved by many... and knowing what he must do next.

The Tattoo had long ended, and as he had hoisted his armor across his back he had headed out into the streets of Canterlot.

He did not head directly back to his shop. Instead he came out through an alley where one of the many streams that fed into and along each other brought the cool water down from the sacred mountain.

It was a place where he and Beanie would come to play... a secret that they kept from Java and Mocha. It had been a place just for them.

He splashed forward under the arch, a great stone viaduct overhead gathering him into its shadow.

He looked up to see Beanie already there, smiling at him... the soft eyes of his kid brother looking to him earnestly and happily. There was no armor, no new uniform, it was just Beanie.

Baby brother Beanie.

"Hi, Joe. I'm glad you came, I'm so glad..." said Beanie.

"Yeah," replied Joe.

Joe dropped his armor at the side of the channel, dropped down into it further, washing the last of the powdered sugar from himself that his sovereigns had not already lapped away with their perfect tiny kisses.

As he emerged it was not Joe of the Guard in his armor, it was not Joe the Shopkeeper in his hat and apron that approached Beanie... it was just, Joe.

Big brother Joe.

"I... I'm moving on, Beanie, I.. I can't keep living in blame..." he said, crossing into the shadow beneath the viaduct, moving toward where Beanie stood.

"I never blamed you Joe, I swear it bro, I never have... you just keep blaming yourself," he said as he came forward. "It's horrible to watch... I kept trying to show you I was alright, I just kept smiling..."

"I know, I know... I thought I had to keep blaming myself..." he said, moving closer to the mental image, the ghost, the memory... whatever it was.

"Please don't any more."

"I won't, I'm done..."

The brothers looked at one another for a long time, their expressions growing softer, the tears forming at the corners of their eyes.

"I... I know it sounds kitschy, but... but I'm okay. I really am. Yeah, getting here stung a bit, but... the water here is fine, in the Well," spoke Beanie, moving forward, not disturbing the flow of the stream. "But don't you think of jumping in for a long, long time, Joe."

Joe laughed, one tear running down his cheek.

"Do me a favor?" asked Beanie as a tear of his own ran down his spectral face.

"Anything."

"Love them... try to love Mom and Dad, Java, Mocha... try to love them that much harder, for me, make up for what I can't physically give them anymore..."

"Of course..."

"And how about some nieces and nephews?"

"You sound like Mom," snorted Joe, sniffing back some tears.

"Pffftt..." spat Beanie, sticking the tongue out of the side of his head, drawing it back within as tears began flowing over it.

The brothers walked up to one another, laid their heads across their shoulders, necks, withers, drawing them up and down in long motions as they sniffed, sighed, gave single huffs of pent-up emotion.

"I'm always with you Joe, I'm never far from you bro," said Beanie as Joe began to bawl, as he ran his hoof across his brother's back. For long minutes they stood there, their tears dropping down into the slowly tumbling currents of the stream in which they had played as foals.

Soon Celestia's sun began to fill the space beneath the viaduct. As it did Joe lifted his head to look into his brother's eyes for the last time.

"I love you forever, Joe."

"I love you forever, Beanie, forever..."

"Later, big brother..."

"Later, baby brother... love you forever..."

As Celestia's light passed over them the image of Beanie was drawn down into a golden light. He smiled at Joe one last time as his memory reformed as luminous spheres that

wafted high into the sky, or passed through the water of the stream to the waterfalls far beyond.

"Forever..."

Joe blinked.

He splashed himself with the water from the stream. In that instant he baptized himself, forgave himself in the cold water, and then lifted his eyes to the sky.

Overhead birds chirped in hidden eaves, and pegasi wheeled overhead and called to one another in happy tones.

Joe smiled, took a deep breath, and smiled some more.

"Forever..."

With that Joe crossed out of the shadow beneath the viaduct, gathered his armor, and went out of the alley into the High Street.

His last tear was carried in the stream that bubbled on, once more left alone in its stone channels. The waters gushed forth, joining other streams as they became the wide river, the one that parted around the High Dais of Equestria. From there the waters went cascading down, down, down in a roar as they became the massive waterfall that evaporated into a haze of mist that drifted out across the land beyond.

As he approached his shop the clattering of cantering hooves met him, and he was surprised to see the frustrated and confused form of Artificer Call coming up to him.

"Oh, Joe!" said the older stallion. "We were so worried... none of the regular crowd knew anything about where you were or if the shop was going to open..."

"Yes," he said, nodding to Call, hefting his armor across his shoulders as they turned together and walked back down the cobblestone street. "I'm sorry, Call, I was needed at the Dawn Tattoo... I'd forgotten today was the day, you see..."

"Well, I suppose that's all right," said Call, straightening as Joe smirked at the stallion's need to somehow forgive him. "We've all had off days... I'm having a fairly awful few hours myself... was late getting here..."

"How's that?" asked Joe, stopping as Call did the same. As the older pony rummaged through his bags Joe smiled some more, noting that this was now the longest conversation he'd ever had with his oldest customer.

Joe was very surprised when a familiar looking alarm clock was produced from the older pony's bag.

"Last night I was on my way home when I was assaulted by a spinach quiche! And now this morning I was taking my constitutional before patronizing your shop when this alarm clock dropped from the sky and pelted me about the head!" said a very wounded and embarrassed Artificer Call.

Joe nodded in sympathy, looked at the clock.

"May I have that?" he asked, nodding at Call, "I think it's a good little clock, it just doesn't want to be ignored... somepony was unpleasant to it, is all."

"Oh," replied the older stallion, rubbing his head. "Yes... yes, please do..."

Call placed the alarm clock among Joe's armor and then looked at him once more.

"We were very worried, Joe," said the stallion in a low tone, "your regular customers, when you weren't present this morning."

"All of you?"

Call nodded.

Joe smiled back at him.

"Well, we still have a couple of hours left, wanna learn how to make doughnuts?" he asked, popping open the lock on the front door with his magic, heading out across the café, smiling at the missing tile, and entering the kitchen beyond.

"I... I never have," said Call, entering Joe's kitchen for the first time, looking around in startled confusion.

"Nothin' to it," replied Joe, heaving his armor into the wobbly metal cabinet and opening the other side in one motion, "you just gotta make the right choices with your recipes and selections."

"Hey," he added, tossing Call a disposable hat, "did I ever tell you about my kid brother Coffee Bean?"

Call shook his head and then tried once more to adjust the little paper hat.

"Great kid, really," smiled Joe as the machines whirred to life, looking through the door to nod at patient customers who were already arriving. "There was this one time..."