

Author's note: Please read and review! Reviews and comments are nice. I would really like to know where I'm failing or succeeding. Thank you!

CHAPTER SE7EN

Investigation, Day Two (cont.)

The sun had completely slipped behind the hills by the time we finally made our way to Applejack's ranch. As the light from it faded into the darkness and the moon took over, I walked along the fence, my head perpetually facing the field of apple trees. They were so perfectly planted, I thought. Row upon row of the great deciduous fruit bearing plants that were so straight, so even. It was not difficult to see how easily it would be to systematically go through each, and there was a lovely little path that ran twixt each row. This was an organized farm, to be sure. I briefly recalled that it was Applejack herself who ran the farm. I mused about what she must be like from this. She was clearly a very methodical pony.

As we were about to round the main house and head for the barn, the front door flew open and Applejack appeared on the porch, smiling. The timing seemed so perfect that I wouldn't be surprised if she had been waiting for us to return. She walked over to the side railing of her porch and called down to us as we walked by.

"Looks like I just caught ya right as you were 'bout to go on back to the barn!" She called, putting her forelegs up on the railing and leaning over the edge.

"Yes," I replied. "Our work for today is over and we were just about to head back for the night."

She looked over at the hills in the distance. "The sun's only just set now. It's not all that late. Why not come in for a bit of supper?" She motioned towards the door with a toss of her head.

I was about to politely refuse her offer and simply head back to the barn so I could get to writing once Blaise fell asleep, but Blaise's stomach had other plans. It growled audibly just at the mention of food and I looked down at him. He shrugged sheepishly back. I realized at that point that the both of us hadn't eaten since lunch, which had been hours before. Looking back up at Applejack, I decided that it was time we finally took her up on that generous attitude of hospitality she had. I had declined two of her meals thus far, and admittedly I was getting rather hungry. So with a smile and a nod, the two of us followed her inside.

As I stepped inside, my nose was immediately overwhelmed by the scent of apples. It was only natural, I supposed, that as an apple farmer her day-to-day meals would consist of such. Nothing like not having to pay for food, right? Applejack led us inside to a sideroom that housed a large dining table. Through the other side, I could see a small homely kitchen, from

which these lovely smells were wafting. She ducked quickly into the kitchen, only to return with a tray laden with food balanced on her back.

"I hope you're alright with some simpler foods than they've got in Canterlot," she said, sliding the tray onto the table and moving back into the kitchen.

"Oh, I'm sure it's fine." I looked down at the trays. It looked quite nice. A small salad that already had its dressing for each of us.

She returned once more with bowls of soup, and went back to the kitchen a last time, returning finally with a home-baked apple pie. My mouth watered. True, as she may have thought, food in Canterlot was wonderful. Such a lavishly built city was bound to have all sorts of wonderful places to eat. But at the same time, a home-cooked meal is difficult to beat. And as simple as this one was, I also hadn't eaten much today. My own stomach protested slightly at the smells, calling out for food.

Applejack chuckled softly. "Looks like you're mighty hungry as well." She motioned for us to sit down and then sat herself down across from us.

We each took a portion for ourselves and tucked in. As the smells betrayed, the food was excellent. The salad had its own apple-based dressing, the soup was of a vegetable base but was well spiced, and the pie...oh, the pie was absolutely delicious. We ate in silence, the two of us ravenously filling the holes our stomachs had become since midday. Applejack herself sat quietly across from us, not looking up. In between mouthfuls I looked across at the table, trying to discern her thoughts. She certainly was in thought, that was for sure. The typical country-dwelling earth pony meal was bound to be full of talking. For them, food was often the time to socialize, something that brought families together. And not to mention the fact that we were guests from a city she had only visited once or twice in her life. Surely she may have had questions, possible lines of conversation? Yet here she was, looking down and eating silently. Something weighed heavily on her.

Out of the corner of my eye I observed Blaise. He dug away at his food without care for anything else around him. I considered him for a moment; if he was troubled about anything he certainly didn't show it. And on that note, I reminded myself to hide my own. I resumed eating, pushing thoughts of profiling and cases aside. Back into that second box, I commanded. The meal itself provided a passable enough diversion; Applejack was a wonderful cook.

After a time, we all finished our respective meals. Blaise excused himself to sleep with a large yawn. I thought to follow him for a moment, but decided against it. I did want to get straight to writing, but perhaps it was best to let him get to sleep first. Instead I stayed behind and helped Applejack carry our spent dishes to the kitchen and wash them.

"Oh, y'all don't have to do that," she said with a tired smile, seeing me gather them up.

"I insist," I replied. She had cooked for us, after all. It was only right.

I followed her into the kitchen, balancing a tray on my back and a stack of dishes with my horn. We set to washing in the sink side by side wordlessly. The loud running water in the sink wasn't able to wash away the sound of a few sighs I heard from Applejack. I glanced at her edgewise and saw that she was frowning very slightly. These recent murders must have hit her hard, I thought. I recalled that she was one of the Ponies of Harmony. That must have meant that Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie had been close to her. Spike as well. And miss Rarity also, I reminded myself.

We finished the dishes up quite fast between the two of us. As Applejack put them out on the drying rack, she spoke up to me for the first time in many minutes.

"Now I know it's a mite late, but your dragon friend is probably still settlin' down to sleep."

"Hmm?" I turned to her.

"Would you like to join me for a drink? Just sit a while out in the main room for a bit. Least I can do."

One one hand, the prospect sounded lovely. A small drink, then bed. On the other hand, I knew I had to get to writing. Yet, I chided myself, I had a case to work. And part of that case was judging how much the other Ponies of Harmony knew. Not to mention that I should probably interview them about the case anyway as standard procedure. On that thought, I nodded.

"You're too kind, miss Applejack."

A small laugh. Mirthless, but a laugh nonetheless. "Least I could do," she repeated.

I followed her out of the kitchen and past the dining table, to a room that was rather large. In the center stood a grand fireplace, beside which a few cushions for ponies to sit upon. The fireplace was stoked high against the cold night air. Applejack popped the cork on a bottle of what looked to be apple cider and poured two glasses, setting them down by the cushions. She settled into one and I pulled up the other to sit across from her. Sipping the drink she had poured for me, I discovered that it was indeed apple based. And not too bad, either. We passed a few moments in silence before Applejack spoke up again.

"I never really got to thank you for comin' down, Agent...uh..." she trailed off.

"Six," I reminded her. "Agent Six."

She cocked an eyebrow, sipping her drink. "Six, right. That your name, or just a Agency thing?"

Ah, the name question. I got that a lot. "I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to divulge my full name, miss Applejack." If we were to have small talk, that was fine. I would steer the conversation lightly to see what I could make of her. But letting her ask questions was part of seeing how she thought, after all.

"There a reason for that?" Applejack frowned. "I'm guessin' it's the same reason for the..." she motioned at her mane with a forehoof and then patted the three shining apples that graced her flank.

"Ah, the patch and the er... the mane style." I nodded. "Agency policy. My identity is known by few. For your protection, of course. The less you know about me the better, apparently." This was true, to a certain degree. I was involved with all sorts of higher up legislation and policies that most members of even the Canterlot Royal Castle and Guard knew about. This was a standard answer that we were told to give, however. I scoffed inwardly. How easy it was for the Agency to order their workers how to talk. Another reason I was growing weary of it all.

"I'm not sure I get it, but okay." She bent down to drink again, licking her lips. "Just seems a little weird to me, is all."

She was being polite about it, though she was still very blunt. Here was yet another pony of business, I decided. Straightforward and to the point always. I thought back to my conversation with Princess Luna, and remembered that this pony embodied the element of Honesty. At least she adhered to it. I made a mental note to ask Blaise to have the Agency send me everything they had on the Ponies of Harmony.

"Let me assure you, it wasn't my choice. To be honest, it wasn't my choice to come here either. Not that," I added, "I wouldn't have come here anyway to help, but the Agency assigns us all our cases."

"Still mighty fine of the government to help out a little town like ours." She finished her drink and carefully poured herself another, balancing the bottle in her mouth.

"A case like this..." I hesitated to give details, not for fear of leaking information, but simply for fear of distressing her. I didn't know how much she knew of her friend's deaths. "A case like this can't be passed up by anypony. It's far too important."

I watched as she set the bottle down, staring at her reflection in the bubbly liquid. She didn't move to answer what I had said, simply sitting in silence. I figured she was probably thinking about her friends.

"Miss Applejack?" I snapped her from her reverie and she looked up at me. "May I ask you a few questions pertaining to the case?" It was a good enough segue, I thought. A bit forward, I will admit, but being roundabout might have annoyed her.

"I don't know what I could tell you," she answered. Then she gave a half-hearted joke. "Unless I'm a suspect."

I gave her a jokingly half-lidded stare. "Standard procedure, miss. I have to ask everypony these questions. Though don't think," I added with a light smirk, "that I haven't got my eyes on you."

She laughed then, a clear sound akin to that of ringing bells. It was the first true laugh I had heard from her, and it was followed by the first true smile. "I dunno what I could possibly tell you, but I swear I ain't done nothin' wrong, officer!"

"Just a few questions, miss Applejack, then I'll cease my pestering." It was my turn to laugh. "How much do you know about the ponies who have died?"

Though the mood was lightened, Applejack's smile still faded. I was sad to see it go. "Dash was one-a my closest friends, y'hear? Rarity too, but we argued a lot sometimes. Actually, so did Dash and me. Pinkie was... well, she was Pinkie. She was hard to understand sometimes, but she had a big heart. An' her laugh always made ya smile. Spike was a nice little feller, always tagged along with Twi everywhere. An Cheerilee? I dunno her very well. But my sister's in her class at school an' I always heard nice things about her." She leaned forward. "Can I ask... can I ask if..." She trailed off once more.

"Yes, miss Applejack?"

"The Police haven't told me anything about how they died," she said.

Ah, good, I thought. They'd been keeping it under wraps, presumably out of respect for family and friends. That made my job a lot easier.

"An' I was just wondering..." Applejack continued, hoofing at the floor absently. "I don't really know how they were found, but could you just tell me, was it really bad? My friends, I mean. Did it...hurt?" She choked out that last word.

Of course I couldn't give her any details. I tried to be as gentle as I could. "Those memories you have of them, are they wonderful?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Then," I continued, "hold on to those. They are all that should matter."

We talked for some time, I asked her some questions but she knew very little, thankfully. We chatted a bit of small talk about the farm, and she told me of all the work she put into it. It was really quite impressive, actually, how much time out of her life she had dedicated to it. In fact, one might go as far to say that the farm was her life. She had taken over the business entirely when her grandmother had lost full use of her aging hips.

When our conversation had wound down and we had finished our drinks, she excused herself to bed, listing slightly to the side. She had had a bit more to drink than I, yet another sign of her distress. Saying my goodnights, I left the house and began to walk around it towards the barn. On my way, I slowed my pace and took out my notebook, finishing up my profile of Applejack by writing down a few notes. I will copy them to you here:

Subject: Applejack (side note: Pony of Harmony; represents element of "Honesty")

Age: (on file)

Occupation: (on file)

General Impressions: Applejack adheres to her element. She is straightforward and direct, though polite. She is hard working and meticulous, having helped to build and maintain a farm since she was very little. She seems friendly enough, and has many acquaintances both in pleasure and business around town. She seems very modest, though not reserved. I believe one might call her a true "country mare." She is devastated by the loss of her friends, evidenced by slightly excessive drinking (not to an extreme, however), a difficulty referring to the death of the current victims (her friends), and a transient mood and thought process. I observed her lost in thought and frowning on several occasions.

Suspect status: very low. It is highly unlikely that she even could begin to suspect who the killer is. The emotions she displays at the death of her friends is not remorse, but a sense of genuine loss. Her schedule as a farmer consists of daily work lasting almost the entire day. There is little time for her to get away from her job, and furthermore I can see no motive. My professional opinion is to ignore her as a suspect.

Other notes: Victim "Cheerilee" is the teacher of her sister's class. Must investigate this further and talk to the sister.

I cracked open the giant doors to the barn softly and peeked in. With the aid of the small sliver of moonlight that filtered through the crack, I could see Blaise lying down in the soft

bedding, his chest slowly rising and falling in a slow rhythm. I tip-hoofed in as quietly as I could. I was about to climb up to the loft above to begin my writing when I saw Blaise's bag off to the side. It was rather inviting, how open it was. I realized that I could rummage through his notebooks at that very moment.

I also realized how silly it would look if he awoke while I was doing so.

Yet.... it beckoned....

In the end the bag won. I edged quietly over to it, not taking my eyes off of Blaise. When I had sidled up next to it, I bent low and lifted it open with a hoof. Keeping both ears tuned to his rhythmic breathing to hear if it stopped, I quickly memorized the positions of everything in the bag so that I could put everything back the way it was. It was pretty standard; a wallet, a small box of pens, assorted personal items. I immediately located his notebook and pulled it out riffling through it in the pale moonlight. It was filled with notes about our current case, copies of evidence, and the like. His job was to familiarize himself best with the case, after all. Small wonder that he was always able to answer my questions! He must have been working hard to memorize it.

As I came to the end of the notes about the case, which was about halfway through the notebook itself, I came to a new page that was headed with my name. I raised my eyebrows at this. What was he writing about me? The quizzical look turned to one of amusement as I saw that it was the beginnings of a crude Profile. I was right after all, I thought. He was analyzing me. No doubt once he finished this it would be sent straight to the Princess. I began to read it over, making sure there was nothing terribly incriminating.

Blaise snorted in his sleep. It made me jump and I quickly whipped my head around to look at him. He hadn't woken yet; he merely rolled over on to his side, facing away from me. A perfect opportunity. With his face away from me, I lit up my horn slightly to throw some light on to the notebook and looked back at his writing.

It wasn't too bad; just a small Profile. Something about me having heavy narcissism and an infatuation with the bizarre cases. He'd completely misread me, just as I'd hoped. There was nothing in the report to suggest untoward emotions directed at the Agency, and nothing about suspicious writings. If anything, I was a bit miffed at the narcissism comment. The next time I get a better look at it, perhaps I'll copy it down in here.

There was something distressing, though. As I flipped past the few pages written about me, I came to a place in the book that showed signs of pages having been torn out. There was a small few millimeters of the book that showed space when I closed it, and the pages above and below this space folded at opposing angles. When I opened the book to these pages, it was clear that they had been torn out; I could see bits of paper left behind in the binding. Upon closer inspection, however, I discovered that it was not tearing that had freed them from the

journal. The little bits of paper left in the binding were slightly charred, and the edges around this charring were tinged green. Dragon magic, I realized. He had written something, and then burned them away with his fire and sent them somewhere.

I pondered what they could be. It certainly wasn't anything on me, unless the Profile he had written on me was a decoy meant to misdirect me if I ever tried to read what he had been writing. I let this train of thought run for a few seconds before killing it. Not to belittle his intelligence, but I didn't think that was something he was capable of coming up with. No, these had to be something else. But what, though? It was definitely something he hadn't told me about. Usually I had him rip things from his notebook for me to look over before having him send them. And I didn't remember this. Letters, perhaps?

It was clear to me that I wasn't going to be able to figure it out just yet. Closing the journal, I set it back into his bag, quickly making sure that all the items in the bag were in the same position as they had been when I opened it. Satisfied that he wouldn't be able to tell I had messed about with it, I closed it back up and climbed up to my loft to begin writing today's entry.

And with that, dear reader, I shall finish for tonight. It has grown late as my eyes have grown heavy. I must be well rested for tomorrow.

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