

Bad News Apple
By: Gabriel LaVedier

Out in the wilds of Equestria, amid the dusty badlands and monotonous prairies, these sat the frontier pony town of Appleloosa, built beside a river and connected to the outside world by, among other things, the great pony railway. It was a decent town, of cheery western folk, quite peaceful thanks to the resolution of conflict with their neighbors, the buffalo. Nothing much happened, and they liked it that way.

One unassuming day, a one-horse shay thundered into town out of the dusty distance, pulled along by an eager red pony with speckles all over his face and a paintbrush mark on his flank. Sitting in the shay itself was a very unassuming-looking pony with a light caramel coat, slick-looking black mane and tail, wearing a ruffled shirt with French cuffs and apple-shaped cufflinks, a black waistcoat, an open black coat, and black lace at his throat holding the shirt top closed. On his flank was a cut apple, red on the outside, with a mix of swirled, sickly greens on the inside.

The younger pony skidded to a halt, panting heavily as the shay reached the center of town. He turned around to shoot a sharp, confident look at the passenger in the shay. "Ha! I told ya, mister. Ah made it all the way here and never had to stop once. And fast! Hows about that?"

The dapper stallion gracefully stepped down from the shay, smiling a supremely confident smile that was smothered beneath a humble expression, while also retrieving and securing a set of saddlebags onto his back. "I've gotta admit, kid, you were right. You said you could get to Appleloosa and you were right. I guess you can head back home and brag to all your friends about how you showed up the slick river-rider. Good work."

"That's right! Sorry to do it to ya, mister, but I gots me a reputation to protect. Ah'll go tell 'em all rahght now!" With an excited stomp of his hooves, the young pony dashed off in the direction he had come.

The stallion watched the young colt run off, the confident smile spreading back over his snout. "You've got a ways to go before you're a match for me, kid." That said, he looked around the town and located the Salt Block, their local gathering place and entertainment hall.

The inside of the place was exactly what could be expected from an Equestrian establishment: the distressed wood was smoothed and polished to a splinter-less consistency; it was less bright than the exterior yet all the shadows were lighter than to be expected in a truly enclosed environment; the floor was clean and well-kept, with only a scattering of dust; and in general, there was no air of menace, desperation, dejection or misery.

The new arrival clopped up to the bar, past serious, mustachioed stallions slouching around tables and working on small blocks of pressed, common salt. At the bar, he tapped a hoof on the wooden surface and called, "Sea salt, extra grainy. There ought to still be barnacles on it."

While the bartender went to fill the order, a familiar figure clopped up behind the new arrival. "Never seen yew in town before, stranger. Got some fancy duds on yew. Rahght fancy. Looks like the type them riverboat men wear. Don't suppose that means anythin'. Do it?" All eyes went to the speaker, a few heads leaning close to whisper. It was Sheriff Silverstar, his badge on prominent display, his moustache looking extra-shiny.

The stranger at the bar never looked back. He just watched as a plate was set before him, set with crystals of salt flecked with dark particles; presumably, bits of seaweed. "Why Sheriff... That's a rather... Vague accusation. I mean, I've been up and down the river a time or two. A few rivers, actually." The stranger leaned down and took a long, slow lick of the salt, then reached around behind and extracted a small bag from one saddlebag, which jingled when it hit the bar top. "Over the ocean, and down a few roads. Dunno what my clothes have to do with anything like that. Just what ARE you saying, sheriff?"

"Now, ah ain't sayin' much of anythin', stranger. But ah AM sayin' this. This is a decent town. We're decent folk here in Appleloosa. Hard workin', honest, earthy-type folk. We don't need folk comin' 'round and disruptin' our good ways with all kinds of wrong thinkin'." The sheriff narrowed his eyes at the back of the stranger's head, leaning forward a bit. "But ah find it curious. Yew didn't look back, but yew knew ah was the sheriff. Jes who are yew and what're yew doin' in Appleloosa?"

"You folks seem mighty unfriendly in town, if you cross-examine your visitors like this. But I'm not the type to make too much of that. In fact, sheriff, I'm here to see a relative. I'm sure he'll find me sooner or..."

"Wha? Is that yew, cousin Bad..." Braeburn, who had just entered the Salt Block, noticed

Silverstar there only a second after starting to call out. "...Inage. Cousin Badinage? Jes wut are yew doin' out this way?"

"Ahhh, dear cousin Braeburn. Just the pony I wanted to see." The alleged Badinage turned and smiled to the cream stallion, nodding his head. "Please, come join me at the bar. Sorry, sheriff, but I must talk with my cousin. Family business, you understand?"

Silverstar looked hard at Braeburn as he clopped down to the bar. "So... I take it this... Stranger is kin o' yers, Braeburn? Never heard a mention of no cousin Badinage."

"He ain't around often. World traveler, y'know? Probly jes got back from somewhere excitin' and wants to share some talk. Ain't that right cousin?" Braeburn smiled, with a strained look, to his relative, who was mildly licking his salt.

"Nah. Nothing to tell, cousin. This is very personal." The dapper Badinage shot a look to Silverstar that was quite stunning in its force. "Very private. As I said, this is family business. Strictly between kinfolk. But I guess kin means nothing in your... Good, earthy, honest town."

Silverstar snorted sharply and glared daggers down at Badinage. But after a moment more of posturing, the mustachioed pony turned slowly around and started clopping away. "Don't let me catch yew doin' anything questionable in this town."

"Don't worry, sheriff, you won't catch me doing anything in this town."

Once the sheriff was out of the establishment, the smile dropped from Braeburn's face, replaced with a look of utter disbelief. "Cousin Bad Apple jes wut are yew doin' here? If he'd a knowed who you was..."

Bad Apple shook his head while he licked again at his fancy salt. "Impossible. I never usually come out in this direction. And anypony who'd know of me here wouldn't be talking to the sheriff. And the ponies they might talk to would steer well clear of a town with law and order. Stop worrying so much, cousin. I've got news."

"Jes wut sorta news would bring yew all the out here? 'Family business' yew say. But wut sorta family business? I already seen cousin Applejack. She was fine. Little high strung but fine. She didn't say nuthin' 'bout no family matters."

"It's a bit of a brand new wrinkle. You might want to get yourself a plate of salt for this one, cousin."

"If yew say so." Braeburn called out, "I'll have what he's havin'!"

"What? No! Do I look like I'm made of bits? I can't keep buying salt like this."

Braeburn sighed, as though internally considering something, before he motioned his head toward a table of gruff ponies. "They've got a poker game ready to go anytime."

"Give me a moment, then." Braeburn was left at the bar, looking down at one hoof while Bad Apple walked to the table with the alleged card players. A little more than a few minutes later, he returned with a bag of bits which he tossed onto the bar. "He'll have what I'm having."

"What kept yew, cousin?"

"They didn't want to accept my good word in lieu of bits. I wore them down."

The bartender deposited another plate of fancy salt in front of Braeburn, who now looked concerned over at Bad Apple. "So, what is this new family news? Yew got me curious."

Bad Apple licked at his salt a little more, gathering his thoughts and avoiding looking at Braeburn. "Well, I just thought I'd be the one to tell you before the news filtered up though more official channels, if it ever did. I wanted to... I suppose congratulate you. You've joined a very rare group."

"And jes wut group is that?" Braeburn had no clue what his cousin meant. He seldom did. He just mildly licked his salt, somewhat impressed by the surprising amount of flavor in it.

"Why my good cousin... Granny Smith has moved you onto the Apple family wall of shame."

Braeburn left his tongue on the salt while his head pulled up, wide eyes staring disbelievingly at Bad Apple. "Wuuuuut?"

"That's what I have been told. It is a very rarified atmosphere. As far as I have been told, prior to this I had been the sole occupant. It's so wonderful to no longer be alone in that. Though, I am quite sorry for what extremes it took to render me not so alone."

"Ah... Ah don't even... How did this happen? And how do yew even know? Granny Smith would skin yew alive if she caught you anywheres NEAR Ponyville."

"There are advantages to being a favorite uncle. I may be in Granny's ill favor, but Applejack is

very much allowed to be there. And she sends me letters, that filter their way to me, to inform me of the things that go on. And now, she has told me of your new status.”

“But... But WHY?”

“Cousin... You may be living out here and you may put on the trappings and the affectation of a western naïf, but you are not, in any sense, stupid. You know our dear and beloved Hun of an arch-Matriarch. I’m certain you know quite well why you are now equus non grata.”

Braeburn bit his lower lip, eyes casting downwards as he quivered for a short moment. “Little Strongheart...” He whispered, through a thick, rough throat.

Bad Apple was back to casually licking at his salt, looking almost disturbingly blasé and unconcerned. “That’s right. Our warm, caring and nurturing over-lady has made you a pariah in our clan because of your love.”

Braeburn was quiet, for a long, long while, wavering eyes shining. He was on the verge of tears, one hoof tapping irregularly on the ground in frustration. “Ah cain’t... Ah cain’t believe she’d dew this ta me. Ah’m a good pony. Ah work hard, ah dew all the good ah can in this town. Applejack was happy with me. She... It must be wrong...”

Bad Apple chuckled softly, looking over at his cousin. “Wrong, indeed. It’s as wrong as anything can be. But it is not incorrect. Applejack wouldn’t lie to me. Not about this. I know it doesn’t seem like it... But I am sorry. I’m very sorry. You don’t deserve this. Not over this. You’re not wrong. I admire you. Being honest about feelings. In my life, I find that can be a... Distinct disadvantage. But you, you can wear your heart on your hoof. And Granny Smith has no right to punish you like this.”

Braeburn was silent a while longer. Tears slowly started to fall from his eyes, in defiance of his strong, Western look, splattering over his plate of salt. “No. She ain’t rahght. Ah don’t deserve this kinda disrespectin’ from that woman. Ah cain’t help how ah feel. Ah love Little Strongheart. She loves me. We’re gettin’ hitched and that’s the end of it. Ah don’t care what Granny Smith thinks of it. But... If she don’t lahk me, the whole Apple clan don’t lahk me. Gonna be a powerful small weddin’.”

“Hey, you’ll have me, if possible. Applejack will be here, in spirit, most likely. She probably won’t be able to tell her friends. But look on the bright side.” Bad Apple motioned his head, indicating the general surroundings. “You have all of these supposedly fine and upstanding ponies in this allegedly friendly little town. They’ll be there. To say nothing of her family. No, don’t despair, cousin. You’ll be fine.”

It took Braeburn a bit of time, but he finally bent down to lick at his salt again, lapping up his own tears along with the imported product. “You know, cousin... This jes tastes odd. Is that what the ocean is like? Ah don’t think its worth all them bits.”

“That’s sort of the scam, isn’t it? It’s an acquired taste. I suppose I’m used to it after a time or two on the sea. But its been said to be the best. So never mind personal preference, you’ve gotta pay full price. At times, I suppose, I envy marketing geniuses that came up with a way to steal bits legally.”

“Best be quiet with that kinda talk...”

“It was just an observ...” Bad Apple looked over at the group of poker players he had fleeced, who were talking amongst themselves and looking over the deck that had been used. “Well, time to be off. Cousin, it was good to see you, and I’ll be in touch. Applejack should be sending you a letter soon, be sure to hide it from our kin.” With that, Bad Apple was up and out, prior to a loud clamoring from the taken group.

Despite the fact that there was only one exit from the place, and most of the stallions were keeping an eye on him, Bad Apple managed to simply melt away into the surroundings and slip off to parts unknown.

It didn’t take very long for Sheriff Silverstar to arrive, having heard stirrings of the ruckus almost the instant it began. He strode through the Salt Block with grand purpose, eyes focused very directly on Braeburn from the moment he entered. “Well... There seems to be a bit of a fracas going on in here. And your kin seems to have left. There wouldn’t happen to be some connection in that, would here Braeburn?”

“Ah cain’t rightly say, sheriff. Ah jes needed a talk with mah kin. Very important. Found out about a change to mah guest list. Sorry ah cain’t help ya.” Braeburn licked at his plate of salt, briefly pondering what he could do with Bad Apple’s own share of pricey product. “After all, he told ya. Yew wouldn’t catch him doing anythin’ in this town.”

Silverstar regarded Braeburn with a suspicious, downward glance, head tilting up slowly as he

considered lowering the boom on his townsman. “Nothing tew be done ‘bout it, I s’pose. A rogue like that’ll be long gone and won’t be fool enough to come back.” The sheriff turned to walk away, but paused, and looked back at Braeburn. “Ah’d ask ‘bout your strange kinfolk, but ah spect ah’d jes be askin’ ‘bout the wrong kin.”

“Ah spect yew’re rahght, sheriff.” Braeburn smiled just a touch, and licked animatedly at his salt, in a slightly better mood.

“Good day tew yew, Braeburn. Oh, and congratulations on yer comin’ nuptials. Ah looks forward to officiatin’ yer happy union.”