

Information

The rain drummed gently on my hat as I walked down the street, the waterproof spell on it keeping everything dry while my overcoat did the same for the rest of my body. I needed knowledge, and I knew just where to get it. Copper Button was the dirtiest cop in the city. The catch being that he had dirt on everyone else. Information flowed in and out of him like muck through the sewers. Working with him was like walking around a brightly lit room where everyone had a gun. Ironically enough, despite his contempt for appropriate procedure, the high strung arrangement did more to prevent crime in the city than an army of legal ponies.

I could see the shop at the next bend, surrounded by yellow tape. Five ponies were carefully documenting the scene, picking up all the pieces and filing them away on the off chance they became useful. I spotted the colt I was looking for. As usual, he was doing some long range supervising, carefully monitoring a good looking pegasus mare who was taking pictures of the corpse from every conceivable angle. No doubt watching her carefully to ensure a lack of mistakes, and absolutely nothing else.

“Copper, I need a word with you,” my voice sounded over the gentle hum of the rain on the concrete.

He glanced over his shoulder at me, a wicked smile breaking out across his face, “Ah, Keen Eye, haven't seen you in a while, eh?” he said through a mouthful of cheap cigar, not lit mind you, he just chewed them down to cold nubs. I was immediately thankful for the rain that dampened the stench of his breath.

I stopped at the yellow line, which he promptly drew up for me to pass under, “I can't have an old friend like you stand out in the rain, can I?” He chuckled hoarsely.

I simply stared at him while I stepped under the tape and into the shop, my nose assaulted by the smell of blood and cigar infused breath.

Copper shifted the cigar around in his mouth, “What brings you out here today, eh? Office too cramped for ya?”

“I need information, Copper,” I pronounced the capital letter. He didn't like being called ‘copper’, and I needed him in a good mood.

He tucked his hoof up under his chin thoughtfully, “I dunno Keen, that might imply that I just hand it out to everyone,” Because that is exactly what he did mind you, but he wanted to trade. That's how he knew everything, he traded in words and information while the police department sent him a check every other week.

I raised an eyebrow at him while my ear twitched. He didn't notice, either because he was thick or because he was looking past me at the mare photographer that had finished and was heading out of the scene. In retrospect, these were basically the same thing.

The other three ponies in the room headed out, the last one mumbled something about how the site was clear. Point was that they were done here and were leaving for the warm, dry forensics lab.

“Care to explain what ya want to know, or am I gonna have'ta guess at this?” the cigar shifted around wildly as he said this, revealing his excitement.

“I'm looking for somepony,” I had decided to only reveal one of the names to him, the less info he got from me the better I would feel.

“Business or pleasure?” I could practically hear his mind taking notes as I spoke.

“Business.”

“What's the name?” His eyes gleamed in anticipation, hanging on every word that passed my lips, the cigar in his mouth twitching rapidly with each gnaw on the end.

“Pinky Pie.” Random name, one I didn't have information on, which I'll admit was a double edged sword. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

His eyes lit up with recognition the moment the name passed my lips. So he knew who she was, which meant she was in the city, or at least had been for some period of time.

“Ohohohoho,” his manic guffaw made my ear twitch again, “You're lookin' for Pie?” In the city, definitely in the city, and by the looks of his face, dangerous.

“Well don't stop, keep goin'!” he almost yelled he was so enthralled by what I had to say. I started to suppress a smirk, this is what Rarity must feel like all the time. Fortunately that thought suppressed the smirk for me, I did not need or want to think about her right now.

“Your turn, Copper.”

He frowned, his furious chewing, which had become audible, slowed to a more reasonable pace and he huffed out a breath of rancid air, “Well, she's in the the city, that's for sure, but, uh,” he leaned in close to me the smell of cigar emanating from his pores and into my unfortunate nostrils. My first reaction was to recoil, but I ignored it, maintaining my impassive expression. After a moment he spoke again, “She's the kind that finds you, not the other way around, if you catch my drift.”

“Dangerous?” I asked. I already knew the answer, but the more he talked, the more I would know. His eyes glinted evilly as he drew back from me.

“That's one way to put it, for sure.” His chewing began to speed up again, “so who're ya doin' this for?”

“Business,” he knew I wouldn't answer the question. I did not answer that question even if I was finding the best bread price for a client. It was not a question one of my profession answered, at least, not truthfully.

His chewing had entered into its prior audible crescendo, “Of course, of course...” His mind began to twist into a new shape, he would want something else this time and I was running out of bartering chips. However, I had his curiosity, and that was quite a bit of leverage on my end. He wanted to know

more about what I was up to, and he needed a question I would answer, “how much?” His chewing maintained itself at a high speed.

I stared at him, my eyes boring into him, not that there was much of a point at this juncture. I knew him inside and out and he knew it. Unfortunately, he knew me better than I would have liked, but that was the price to pay with Copper. “A large sum.” I held my voice steady, and his chewing gently slowed to a more favorable pace.

“That’s all you gonna tell me Keen?” I despised him using my first name. Every time he used it it smelled like his breath for a week. He sighed, “Well that ain’t much but I supposed it gonna have ta do. She’s very, very dangerous, little goes on that she doesn’t know about.” He said as his eyes stopped glowing with curiosity. He gave me a solemn stare that was a new look on his face to me.

“That just means she knows you.” I pointed out. Everypony in the city who mattered knew him, and as such everypony could know what was going on because he knew everything that went on, because everyone told him what was going on so he would tell them what was going on. It wasn’t complicated so long as you didn’t think too hard about it.

“Yeah, but I don’t know ‘er.” Oh. Well that was...disquieting.

There was a moment of silence in the room, the only sounds were that of his rhythmic chewing and the rain drumming against the window. My nostrils kicked in again, sensing that they were important once more and informed me that the place still smelled horrible. I left the room, leaving the bile inducing smell of blood and cigar behind. I ducked under the tape and started back to my apartment, Clover would have locked up at this point, so there was no reason to go there, and besides, I had my notebook with me.

Fifteen minutes had passed since I left the murder scene and Copper Buttons behind, and I stepped under the outcropping of cloth that adorned the entrance to the apartment building. I opened the door and started up the stairs without so much as a nod to the colt at the front desk. I quickly climbed to the fifth floor, unlocking the door to my apartment.

The apartment had four rooms: a largely unused kitchenette, a bathroom, a sitting room in much the same position as the kitchenette that was bare except for a few largely empty bookshelves that were built into the wall, and a bedroom with a bed in it. It was the place I slept, not the place I lived. I tore off the soaking overcoat that had kept me dry on my rounds in the city and levitated it onto a hook in the wall to dry and sat down at the desk, pulling out my notebook, replaying the exchange with Copper in my mind.

After a minute or two, I had compiled what Copper had told me into a mentally presentable format. Pinky Pie was in the city. She was powerful. By my best judgement, she would know I was looking for her within two days, tops, and in all likely hood, she would want to find me. I could work my way back to her from there. I leaned back in my chair, feeling pleased with myself. After all, somepony else would soon be looking for me and once they found me, I would know where they were. From them I could learn where Pinky was, and then I would get the credit for it. Placing my notebook and hat on the table, I took off my harness and flung myself into the bed, letting the night pass as it will.

I flipped through a recently bought copy of *Magical Equestrian* that floated in front of my face on my way into the office, scanning the pages for familiar names. Twilight Sparkle was the prized student of princess Celestia, and as such would be involved in some magical projects, no pony with those kinds of connections could avoid it. I kept flipping through the pages and my momentum took me past a face I hadn't seen in years. I flipped back to it and read the article.

This reporter was given an exclusive interview with Smoke N' Mirrors, one of the major players in the recent 'communications stone' project:

Rep: "Many of us have heard about the project, but very few press reports have been forthcoming, is there any particular reason for this?"

SM: "Ah yes, I must apologize for that slight mishap, I can assure you that we had no intention whatsoever of attempting to misinform the public as to the goings on of the project, however until recently the pony in charge of public communications was, shall we say, inept at their task. But I can assure you that I have no intention of repeating these mistakes."

So that was how you spelled his name. The interview went on for the rest of the page, but I had what I wanted and continued absentmindedly flipping through the magazine. It was good to know that Smoke still had that silver tongue in his head. When I had last seen him, I had been mildly concerned that he wouldn't next time I saw him.

I suppose some explanation is necessary, Smoke n' Mirrors picked me up after I got out of the clicker, and put me on the straight and narrow. Or at least a wide, curvy path that included the straight and narrow at some point. The reason was simple, he was a traveling entertainer who needed some muscle, and at that point in my life I looked like I could eat a pony twice my size. We had traveled together, benefiting from, and at times, enjoying each other's company. About twelve years back, I had mellowed out and decided to set up shop here in Fillydelphia. He had decided to continue traveling, and had apparently ended up at Canterlot on some advance magical project. Impressive for a pony who went to school for about three weeks in his entire life.

In my haze of nostalgia, I realized that I had flipped through the rest of the magazine without actually reading any of the words and was now staring at the back of it as if it contained something that wasn't an advertisement for the latest generation of quills. Swearing softly, I flipped back to the article that included the interview with my old employer/friend/acquaintance thing. In the process of looking over the article, I came across another name that was familiar, but for an entirely different reason.

Twilight Sparkle, Celestia's personal student, is the head of the project. Unfortunately she was unable to be interviewed. If nothing else, this shows the seriousness with which this project is taken by the royalty...

So Twilight Sparkle was in Canterlot, and by the looks of it, I knew her through one layer of Smoke. I made a mental note to set up some travel time, then scolded myself for the pun. It was like thinking about him allowed him to influence my thoughts.

Fortunately, while I was paying no attention to where I was going, my hooves had taken matters onto

themselves and carried me to my office door, which I now realized was sitting in front of me. I opened the unlocked door. Because of Clover's impeccable schedule, I wasn't even sure I had a key to my own office anymore.

I folded up the magazine as I walked into my office, or rather Clover's office, which separated my office from the hallway. I grunted a greeting to my secretary in accordance with years of precedent.

"Good morning Mr. Eye," She smiled at me with a sickening sweetness that made me narrow my eyes at her immediately.

"What did you do?" My accusation hurled through the air without the slightest moment of hesitation.

She put on a look of mock hurt, "Me? Your one trusted and loyal secretary? How could you suggest such a thing?"

Oh she had done something. My eyes stayed narrowed. My only regret is that I can't raise an eyebrow and squint at the same time.

"Ms. Rarity called this morning. The moment I sat down even, she is very punctual." She smile at me again in an attempt to be disarming.

Oh Luna no...

"She wanted to apologize for yesterday, she had forgotten something." Lucky Clover still had her Cheshire smile glued to her face as she spoke.

Please, Celestia help me...

"She says that she seems to have forgotten to give you her down payment, and would be more than glad to give it to you, and" she kept barreling onward to stave off my inevitable outburst, "she would like you to come over for dinner tomorrow night since you were so polite during the meeting so as to not ask about it."

My teeth clenched together in an unfathomable rage.

I stomped into my office, grating my teeth together furiously. That scheming witch. As if it wasn't bad enough that she had bent me over backwards when we had first met and managed to befriend my secretary in a matter of two conversations, she had the gall, the unprecedented malice, the utter and complete nerve to call me and offer me my money! And, as if to put a cherry on the whole deal, offered me dinner! Dinner! I bet she called it supper too. I stopped my endless pacing and looked at my office door. I didn't know where, or for that matter when, she wanted to meet me, but there was no way I was going back out there.

Of course that could only last for so long, and the end of the day Rarity was paying my bills for the time being which meant that she had the upper hoof in the matter. Eventually I would have to ask Clover where and when the dinner was, but that didn't mean that I had to ask her now, while she was still basking in the white heat of my impotent rage.

I rolled a cigarette, the normally unconscious action now requiring my full attention and started to smoke. The ritual calmed my nerves somewhat as I took the first drag off the tube. For the time being I could get back to work. First I would have to find something to do. Going down the list of things to do, I determined that I needed to make some calls first, and second I would need to go more thoroughly through the magazine. Which meant I would have to ask Clover.

Taking a deep breath of smoke filled air, I pressed the button for the intercom, "Clover? I need you to make a few calls to Canterlot..."

I flipped furiously through my floating notebook by a light emanating from my horn as I walked down the street. I had made progress in leaps and bounds this morning. A whole page in my notebook had been filled with what information that I had gotten on Twilight Sparkle from the magazine. I had gotten nothing since then, plans for my departure from Fillydelphia were already in place, I would be leaving a few days for Canterlot. I had also managed to avoid the topic of rarity's dinner with Clover for the remainder of the morning. After the break from the magazine, I had found precisely bugger all on anything else and I was out of leads. So I wasn't exactly in a good mood.

I had aimlessly been wandering the streets of the city for some time now, a very bad habit that I had yet to break. The problem being that I only thought properly when I was walking, it kept the rest of me busy while I did my work.

After an unspecified amount of time, I flipped my notebook shut and tucked it underneath my harness, stopping to take an assessment of where I was. My ear twitched in annoyance as I realized my apartment was a good mile and a half away from where I was. As I walked, I noted that city held its perpetual buzz of life, muted only slightly by the night, something that never ceased to amaze me. Don't these ponies ever need to sleep?

My ears swiveled as I heard the sound of hoofbeats behind me. Somepony was following me. I wasn't paranoid, I just knew the sound of hoofbeats following you. My mind began to shuffle through way to shake my new tail, and I started to lead them in a completely different direction from my apartment or office. I couldn't let them have that little bit of information, at least not this easily.

Much sooner than I would have liked, a second pair of hoofbeats began to follow me. Now there were two ponies following me. I scratched a confrontation off my list of options. I could take one at this distance, after all the pistol on my side was not for show and sadly, at least for them, I knew how to use it.

Soon, I found myself heading towards the cemetery, a very bad or a very good place to try and lose somepony. Depends on the ponies involved, and fortunately for me I was in the latter category. The unlit field offered excellent cover to those who knew it well enough, and it was too easy to lose track of somepony in the darkness. Not to mention that some ponies feared the dead for some reason, but in my experience it's the living you have to watch. I would be there in five minutes, as long as the two ponies behind me were willing to wait that long, I would be fine.

Unfortunately, patience was not the primary virtue of the ponies following me. I heard the hoofbeats quicken and I shot off like a bullet. Over the sound of my own breathing, I could hear the rapid

hoofbeats of the ponies behind me, slowly gaining ground on me. I couldn't outrun them in a straight shot, I need some obstacles. I dove into the first ally I saw, using my magic to overturn trashcans behind me. I exploded out of the ally and made a slight right, crossing the deserted street. What I wouldn't do for some carriages right now.

The impromptu race jumps that I had left behind me had done little to slow down my pursuers. I would have sworn if I could do anything but gasp for air at that point, and once again I demanded to know why I thought smoking was a good idea. The exertion of running and magic were taking their toll, I need to lose these two now. I dove into a narrow ally, almost crashing headfirst into the metal gate that sat just a few yards in. Wonderful. A nice, safe, friendly, gated community, and I didn't have the key, so the first three adjectives didn't do me much good.

My mind caught up to me and I spun around, my pistol already halfway out of its holster by the time I had finished my 180. as soon as my eyes formed a straight image after the turn, I saw one of my pursuers barreling down on me in the confined space. Time slowed to a crawl and I struggled to get my pistol out of its holster. I got the gun out just as the other pony collided with me, making me fire the gun harmlessly into the ground, and slamming me into the gate, knocking what little wind was left in me out.

The combination of the noise and collision had stunned the pursuing earth pony and he stood there in a daze for a moment. Before I even was able to breathe again, I managed to drag myself past him and move as fast as I could toward the place I had just come in. As I got out, I managed to get a single breath, which was apparently set on fire, into my lungs and started to run again. Unfortunately, the other pursuer had been waiting to ambush me and hit me with the second hardest buck I had ever been on the receiving end of. The hardest had put me through a wall. It's hard to compete with that.

The buck ripped what little air I had managed to suck into my lungs right back out before I even had the chance to appreciate it. It also sent me sprawling an unspecified number of feet away from the pony who had kicked me. I could feel darkness closing in around my mind. My magic imploded as I instinctively attempted to grab my MIA pistol from its holster. Even before the aura around my horn finished imploding, I blacked out with a squeak.

There was a loud splash, and for a moment nothing. Then the cold hit me. Somepony had dumped a bucket of the coldest water I had ever felt directly on my head. My eyes shot open and I jumped, or rather attempted to. I was instantly restrained by the ropes that bound my hooves behind the chair I was sitting in, which made a little lurch.

Gulping down air like a fish, I looked in front of me and saw a mass of swirling colors and blurry shapes. Before I could see much else, a second wave of pain and aches hit my body, along with mild shock, causing me to slump back into my chair with a groan. My eyes slid shut once more.

“Good morning Mister!” A cheerful voice sounded from the other side of my eyelids. The already loud voice was amplified in my ears, causing a pulse of pain in my head, “Would you like a drink of water?” The same cheerful voice asked.

At this a second bucket of ice cold water was dumped on my head, causing my eyes to shoot open again. After a second round of pain and shock that was very quickly moving up in ranks, I determined to keep my eyes open, if only to keep the buckets of water away. After a moment of waiting, the swirling colors realigned into a coherent picture. What I saw next was the stuff of nightmares.

In front of me there was a table, metal, lit by a single lamp hanging from the ceiling. The bulb was, of course, bare. The scene was so utterly cliché that if I wasn't tied to a chair and gulping down air like I had forgotten to breathe, I might have laughed. Of course all of this was before I saw who sat opposite me. There was a pink pony sitting across from me. Her mane seemed to have a life of its own as it sat hopelessly tangled and knotted on top of her head. The mare's coat was of a lighter pink, contrasting her bright blue eyes. And the smile, oh by the stars and moon, the smile. I will never forget that smile. That bright, cheerful, manic smile that presented such a stark contrast to the rest of the room. She seemed unreal. And not in a good way.

Unknown to me, a part of my mind whose attention was not glued to the pink pony opposite me presented a diagnostic report of my position. My hat was gone. My harness was gone, and as a result so were my notebook and gun. I was beaten. There were no memories of how I got here. One eye was swollen shut, doubtlessly black, and the rest of my body ached. And I was wet. Cold wet. I slumped back into the uncomfortable chair I was tied to and continued to breathe heavily. After a long moment, I took an assessment of the room, noting that my harness and hat were on the table in front of me and my notebook was laying open in front of the pink pony. The small spark of outrage that I felt at this was enough to get my mind started again. But I didn't speak. Oh Celestia, the thought of speaking never crossed my mind. She was still terrifying.

"You are looking for me." She stated it. She did not ask, in the sudo cryptic way of many other powerful ponies I had met, something that she already knew. She said it. Part of me liked her for that, but it was far outvoted by the parts that were terrified, so I stayed silent.

She coked her head in the most innocent way imaginable, her mane bounced crazily at the slight movement. My eyes were still glued to her face looking for something, anything that revealed her intentions.

"Who sent you, Mr. Eye?"

My eyes, which had slowly been drawn to the mane, which had continued to bounce around with every slight movement on the pink pony's part, shot back to her face. She knew my name. I don't know why that scared me. It shouldn't have. I should have expected it at this point, after all she had tracked me down and looked through my notebook, so she must know who I was, where I slept, where I worked...

The implications of the last thought hit me like a train. I almost panicked, almost. After all I am a hard-boiled detective, I've been in and out of jail, and let me tell you that pony jail is in no way shape or form as gentle as the world outside it. I had fought and shot my way out of more nasty situations than I could count. I didn't panic. I swear I did not panic.

My eyes tried to shrink into the back of my head at the mare's happy stare as I panicked.

"It's funny really," she said flipping through the notebook, "you have something on almost all of us..."

My eyes, desperate for something to look at that was not her face trailed up to her mane. If at any point I thought I could not be more scared, when I saw her mane slowly start to deflate and straighten fear gripped my chest.

I lied, I clearly hadn't panicked before, and I only know this because you can't panic while you are panicked. I did not panic until I saw that. I did not know what it could mean, but I knew it was not good.

In less time than it took to blink, the pink pony was in front of me and standing on the table, her mane had straightened out completely and she almost seemed...darker, like somepony had turned off some of the color in her coat. Naturally this was ridiculous, at least the coat part. It must have been a trick of the light.

"Why are you looking for my friends?" She hissed into my face. My jaw trembled as I looked into her blue eyes. Her deep, terrifying blue eyes.

All that escaped my throat was a strangled cross between a sob and a groan. I could feel the blood rushing from my head in an attempt to get as far away from the pony as possible.

Her eyes narrowed at me as the incoherent sound escaped my throat. She leaned back from me and sat on the table, eyes boring into me. It was mostly an intimidation tactic, I knew, and it worked. A lot works on a pony when they are tied to a chair.

"I was hired to." My mouth spoke almost of its own accord. Apparently the part of my brain that refused to divulge information was still functional. A miracle considering that my ability to speak had only recently returned.

She rolled her eyes at me, "I could figure that out," she jabbed a hoof into my chest causing me to flinch in pain. Some of my ribs were probably broken, glorious, "but I want to know who hired you," she pushed a cupcake towards me. I don't know where it came from, it just seemed to materialized out of the air, "there's a cupcake in it for you if you do."

Under literally any other circumstances I would have laughed. Under the current circumstances, I looked at the cupcake, then looked at her, then repeated the process two more times because I was slow, and she responded. "What?"

"The cupcake, you can have it if you tell me who hired you." I continued to stare at her, I could not believe what I was hearing.

She bared her teeth at me, "I made it myself." Oh no. Celestia help me. She had made it personal. My eyes were drawn to it in a desperate attempt to escape the blue eyed gaze that was bearing down on me like an ursa major.

After a moment of terrifying silence, she picked up the cupcake and took a thoughtful bite out of it. Some of the color returned to her after the first bite, and it seemed that she was letting down her prior crazed smile. The final effect was odd to say the least, but not nearly as creepy as the extremes.

“Although I do have another question, she said pulling up my notebook and looking through it again, “you seem to be missing somepony.” the last phase was said through a mouthful of cupcake that somehow she did not propel from her mouth, “why is that?”

“Because I wasn't hied to look for her.” Apparently my moth had decided to take matters into itself and was moving on its own. I took note of its betrayal, and of the fact that it revealed as little as possible. I still had it.

She cocked her head to the side as she continued to eat the cupcake, “Why not?” Her color had fully returned, but her mane was still straight as an arrow.

“Because my client already knew where she was.” I scolded myself. That was a statement, not a question. I knew why, and now she knew that I knew why, it was only a matter of time before she figured out what was going on. At this point, it occurred to me that I had refereed to Rarity as 'her,' then later as my client. I had said too much.

Her eyebrow raised dangerously high as she finished off the cupcake. I could hear the gears turning in her head, before her hair made a sound like a balloon popping in reverse and returned to its prior state of insanity. “Ohhhhhhhhhh...”

Her manic grin returned as she hopped up and down on the table next to where I sat, “I get it now, Rarity wants to throw a party!” at this revelation she stood on her hind legs and spread her arms wide, becoming imbalanced in the process. She fell backwards onto the table, all the while laughing gleefully, “and here I through you were trying to hurt us!” She was on her hooves in a blur, her face pressing into mine as she talked at an ever increasing rate, I wasn't able to catch much after that. Although she still kept her head pressed up against mine.

After what felt like hours of being on the receiving end of her torrent of words, my head was pounding in pain. I could no longer think at all. Then there was silence where my mind started up again. She looked at me intently, “I've got to get you all patched up Mr. Eye!” there was a slight pause as she thought for a moment, then gasped, afterwards smiling gleefully “and I know just the pony to do it!”

After her gasp, she pressed up against me a little harder, causing the chair to fall over backwards. For the second time in two days I had the same stomach churning feeling as I fell over backwards, landing on my front legs, which were still stuck behind the chair. I yelled in pain as the metal collided with my sore and numb limbs.

She giggle at me from on top of the table, “Oopsie,” she looked up into a part of the room I could not see, “Hey boys, we're taking Mr. Eye for another ride!”

“Where too boss?” the gruff voice of what I could only assume to be one of the pair that had ambushed me was a stark contrast to the bubbly voice of the pink pony.

“We're going to Fluttershy's!” She hopped down from the table as a big earth pony stood up the chair I was tied to and shoved a bag over my eyes. I felt another cloth covered in a sweet smelling oil shoved over the end of my shout. My mind began to enter a warm haze, much nicer than unconsciousness, which I was in no condition to fight. “Oh by the way,” the voice of the pony spoke into me ear as I fell

asleep, “I’m Pinky Pie!”