

Just as Faust said, the road made traveling much easier for Rarity and Applejack—there were hills and valleys here and there, but for the most part, everything was grassy, loamy flatland and blue skies. The sun shone overhead, bright and warm during the day, and at night, the moon would rise and light their humble campsites as they set up. All in all, the trek had been going well.

So they walked for two days, practically in silence, only speaking when the matter of directions came up—in the hills, the roads tended to become meandering, though not labyrinthine like the mountains they'd come from. Whatever "other towns" Faust had been speaking of, none of them were visible throughout the trek, though it was possible that Rarity and Applejack were just underestimating the distance between them.

Coming to a fork, Applejack reached into her saddlebag and pulled out the map. Looking it over, she found this particular road was in one of the worn spots. She put a hoof to her forehead and sighed. "Dang it," she said, "the map's worn out here. Guess we're gonna have to just pick one of the paths and follow it."

Rarity rolled her eyes. "And Faust told us that the maps were reliable. We should have known better—they've been around for ages."

Applejack shrugged, stuffing the map back in her saddlebag. "I guess so," she said, "but he was nice enough to give us these saddlebags and the supplies. We owe him for that."

Rarity sighed. "I suppose," she said. "I'm sorry; I'm just frustrated."

Applejack nodded. "I'm frustrated too—we ain't seen a town in days, now. I'm startin' to wonder whether there's anything out here at all... Anyways, I think we ought to take the left fork."

Rarity thought a moment, looking between the two paths. Even with her gut telling her to go right, Rarity nodded. "You're probably right, Applejack," she said with a thin smile. "We'll go left. You haven't steered us wrong so far."

The road seemed to stretch forever into the forest, the low-hanging vines getting tangled in the pair's hair. The shadows here didn't seem inviting, either.

Rarity shivered, feeling like she was being oppressed by them. For every inviting sunspot shining through the canopy overhead, there was a sea of darkness, almost hungrily surrounding the light as if to swallow it. As they got deeper in, the foliage seemed to get thicker and thicker around them, with the road becoming more narrow and overgrown.

Applejack was feeling quite uncomfortable, too. She looked back and forth, trying to see through the tangled plants, but it was impossible—no matter which way she turned, a bush blocked her sight, or a patch of undergrowth threatened to trip her, as though forcing her to keep her eyes forward. She could barely tell what time of day it was in this gloom!

In spite of this, they pressed forward, helping each other clear out the bushes and pass through. Once the sunspots completely faded from the forest floor, the two ponies made camp by stamping down a few of the thickest spots and perching the supplies in a tree.

In a few minutes, the two mares had a fire burning in a clearing, both of them rubbing at bloodshot eyes. The journey was beginning to show on them—Rarity, in particular, looked worse for the wear: her hair was ruffled and her white coat was stained with grass and mud. There hadn't been a stream or a lake for what seemed like ages in the vast reaches of hilly grassland.

Applejack looked over at Rarity and raised an eyebrow. "You doing alright, Rarity?" she asked.

Rarity shook her head. "No, Applejack," she said. "We don't know where we are, there's barely enough light in here to read the map...and I look horrible, to top it all off. Wherever Twilight threw us to..." She sighed. "It's an awful place."

Applejack looked up at the impenetrable canopy, trying to catch the twinkle of stars, or at least glimpse the moon. "I know, Rarity," she said, "but think about it like this—a month or two of bad traveling is going to seem like nothing when we make it back to Ponyville and all our friends." She looked over at the white mare and smiled. "Trust me. I've gone through stuff like this before."

Rarity closed her eyes a moment and smiled. "Yes, Applejack, you're right. Thank you."

Applejack smirked. "Besides, you handled yourself pretty decently back in Derby, with Trixie being so nasty and all. Even if you needed a little *help* from me."

Rarity giggled in return. "Yes, I did, didn't I?" She leaned against a tree, rolling her neck to one side. She felt lightheaded. "Applejack?" she queried, feeling a hoof on her shoulder. "What *are* you doing?"

Applejack broke out into a wide smile. "I just wanted to let you know, Rarity, since I haven't yet, that I'm glad it's you I'm stuck out here with. You've been a bigger help than I figured you'd be. That and you ain't as fussy as I thought."

Rarity nodded gratefully, her head movements slow. "Thank you very much, Applejack," she said, "you have been quite a boon yourself. And you're much more fun to be around than I'd thought, as well."

Applejack chuckled. "Funny how it takes something like this to make two ponies like us get to know each other better, ain't it?"

But Rarity didn't respond, already asleep—her cheek rested against Applejack's hoof.

The earth pony smirked. “Can’t hang, can ya Rarity?” she whispered, gently extricating her hoof from its position.

Applejack lay down on the ground and looked up at the sky, her eyes blurring slightly as they readjusted. She scooped up a few clods of dirt and absently dumped them on the fire, trying to ignore the shock Rarity had sent through her hoof.

She started to question why she was really happy to be out with Rarity. She was resourceful and quick-witted, mostly, but...Applejack couldn’t help but feel there another, gnawing reason.

It was with that thought in mind that Applejack finally faded out of consciousness.

---

The next morning, Rarity’s eyes fluttered open quickly, not having much trouble adjusting to the darkness surrounding them.

With Applejack still asleep, Rarity busied herself making breakfast out of some of their remaining supplies—she restarted the fire and made haycakes, oatcakes, and coated them both in thick maple syrup. She was nibbling on one when Applejack stirred next to her, yawning and stretching out.

“Land sakes,” Applejack said, shaking her head back and forth to wake herself up, “how long was I asleep?”

Rarity smiled. “Not much longer than me. I wouldn’t worry about it much anyway—it’s impossible to tell what time of the day it is.” She offered an oatcake, which Applejack accepted gratefully.

“These are great, Rarity!” she said, taking a bite. “I didn’t know you knew how to cook!”

Rarity smiled. “I don’t, Applejack. Cakes like these aren’t particularly hard to make—I’m just lucky I didn’t burn them.” She giggled and took a bite of hers. “Call it beginner’s luck. I much prefer your cooking, but I was up first today, and since you’ve been doing so much, I wanted to pay you back.”

“I’m mighty thankful, but I ain’t that good either,” Applejack responded. “I just cook the desserts. It’s usually Big Mac or Granny Smith that does all the cooking in my house.”

Their meal finished, the two ponies rose and packed everything up, killing the fire.

“Where to now?” Rarity asked, looking over her map. “Are we going to try and work our way out of here?”

Applejack sighed. “That’s about the only thing we *can* do. As thick as this brush is, it

might be tough, but if we keep going, we're sure to make it outta here."

The going was slow with all the brush that had to be cleared/cut away, and the hanging foliage greedily grabbed at the pair, catching in their hair and scratching both of them up. The air grew hotter and more humid as they progressed—each step felt like a journey and their coats were so matted and wet that it was like wearing a lead suit.

In spite of that, however, they pressed on, trying to make good time and get out of the area as quickly as they could. Applejack turned to Rarity, breaking the thick silence.

"So, Rarity," she asked, "what's the first thing you're going to do when you get back?"

The white pony huffed. "Well, first of all, I'm going to head back to the spa and get my hair and tail in order! I can't be walking through Ponyville looking like I just finished playing in the mud with you!" She paused. "Er, no offense."

Applejack chuckled. "None taken. Me, I'm probably gonna give the family a big hug, and Apple Bloom's gonna tell me, 'Applejack, cut it out! You're gonna embarrass me in front of all my friends!'" She raised her voice a pitch to imitate her little sister.

Rarity covered her mouth with a hoof as she giggled. "Oh, I'd love to see that! Sweetie Belle always gets upset with me when I bring her Mother's cupcakes—she ices them with a smiling face in the middle—because she's 'too old to be eating mom's cupcakes anymore.' They can be such silly fillies, I swear."

The two of them laughed for a little while, and when they quieted down, Applejack smiled. "Silly filly or not, I'm looking forward to seeing her again. She's always trying so hard to earn her cutie mark..." She smiled wistfully. "No matter how many times I tell her it's not worth worrying over, she still does. If you ask me, she's trying to grow up too fast."

Rarity nodded. "I know the feeling," she said. "When I was her age, all I could think about was my blank flank. Silly, looking back on it, but I did more than my share of foolish things trying to earn it."

Applejack raised an eyebrow with a smirk. "Yeah?" she asked. "Like what?"

Rarity blushed. "That... isn't important," she said. "Suffice it to say, I had my share of misadventures, just like our sisters."

"Oh no," Applejack said with a chuckle, "you can't go saying something like that without telling me a story. 'Sides, we ain't got much else to do."

Rarity stopped. "Applejack, do you see that? It looks like a bog."

The earth pony gently pushed Rarity's shoulder. "C'mon, now," she said, "you ain't gonna fool me with that old trick."

Rarity shook her head. "No, really Applejack. There's a huge pit of..." She shuddered. "Well, I have no idea what it is, but it looks disgusting."

Applejack turned to look and, sure enough, a massive lake of sludge and filth, formed by years of soil deposits sloughing into the water supply, lay before them. The surface was coated by decaying plant matter, and the rim was lined with thick saw grass. Beneath the surface, fish swam back and forth, some preying on others.

"Goodness," Rarity said. "I wonder how long this has been here?"

Applejack shrugged. "Hard telling, but we gotta get through it."

Rarity made a horrified face. "Applejack, no!" she cried. "What if there's something in there, like a hydra? We met our first hydra in a bog much like this one, after all!"

Applejack rubbed her chin with a hoof. "Good point," she said. "Hate to run into one of them things again. Twice is two times too many, if you ask me." She nodded. "Alright, we'll go around. Just watch out for that saw grass—it's got a reputation for cutting through just about anything. Follow my lead and we oughta be fine."

With the deep mire bubbling as though disappointed, the two began to inch their way around the perimeter, careful to avoid the sharp foliage. From behind them, they could hear curious and perturbed animals whose homes were being disturbed by their passage.

Once on the other side of the bog, with the road ahead of them, Rarity let out a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness," she said. "I was worried the entire time I was going to slip and fall in."

Applejack chuckled. "Still worried about getting your coat dirty?" she asked pointedly. "Not sure there's time for worrying about things like that."

Rarity huffed. "There is never a time when worrying about fabulousity isn't important, Applejack!" She turned to face the bog. "Aside from that, falling into there...ugh! I shudder to think about the horrible things lurking in there, not to mention the germs and the grime—it would take forever to get clean!"

An idea snuck its way into Applejack's head at the mention of that. "Oh yeah?" she asked, slowly sneaking towards Rarity, "about how long, you think?" She unhooked her saddlebag, and moved on to Rarity's.

Rarity shook her head. "There's no telling. With ages of waste in there... Applejack, what are you doing—Waaahh!" Rarity cried out as Applejack gave her a shove, plunging her

into the muck.

The earth pony broke out into fits of laughter, rolling around on the ground with tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Rarity,” she said between bursts of giggling, “I just had to, I’m sorry.”

Rarity arose from the murk livid, eyes practically blazing. Her coat was covered with bits of plant matter and soaked through with grime. Her hair hung limp around her neck in much the same condition—even her cutie mark was so dirty that it couldn’t be seen.

“Applejack...” she growled, “You’re going to pay for that!” She snatched out and grabbed a hoofful of Applejack’s tail, yanking her down into the grime with her.

The two of them fought beneath the surface for a while, surfacing only when they needed air. The sludge roiled and ripped with their movement.

Rarity dragged Applejack through the water by her tail, smushing her face into the rich soil with her free hoof. Applejack retaliated by grabbing a clod of dirt and rubbing it into Rarity’s hair, who let out a squeal of distaste and surfaced to get air before being pulled under once more. She twisted around and wrapped her hooves around Applejack’s arms, yanking on them.

Applejack whirled around and whacked Rarity on the head, causing the white pony to let go. Neither of them was really aiming to do any damage—these were just pent-up emotions bubbling to the surface. Rarity swam back down and torpedoed into Applejack’s belly, shoving her up against the bank of the bog and rubbing her hair into the filth.

Applejack shoved Rarity off and swung her around by the hoof, coming up for air when she hit the mud. Her respite was brief, however, as Rarity emerged from the water like a shark, taking the earth pony down in her grasp, the two of them locked tightly against each other as they jockeyed for supremacy. Applejack gained a grip on Rarity’s front hooves just as she wrapped her back hooves around Applejack’s middle, the two of them squeezing.

The fish around them ran away in fear, the bubbles rising from both ponies’ mouths popping on the surface. Rarity reeled back and head-butted Applejack in the chest, who responded by hitting Rarity in the ribs with her own hooves. They rolled around in the water, exchanging positions, and ended up in a hoof-lock.

Rarity strained, as did Applejack, to force the other into the earth once more, the pair’s hearts thumping and minds exploding with fireworks. Eventually, Applejack started to gain ground, but Rarity broke the lock and whirled to the side, allowing Applejack’s momentum to carry her into the muck. She giggled and made for the surface, Applejack not far behind.

After a while of this, they both ran out of energy and dashed for the bank, splatting onto the soft grass a few feet away from the bog, panting and starting to sweat.

Applejack turned to Rarity with a smirk. “Good wrassle,” she said. “Didn’t know you had it in you.” She wiped some of the grime from her forehead.

Rarity chuckled. “Well, I had to get you back for that somehow. I’m quite fierce when you do things like that...”

The two of them lay there for some time, each trying to ignore the pervasive, tense feeling in the air, and ultimately rose, getting back onto the path without discussing it.

The walk continued for only a few more yards before the exertion caught up with the pair and they decided to make camp. Thankfully, with the bog nearby, Applejack knew there would have to be fresh water as well, and they got the chance to wash up.

As Rarity meticulously scrubbed the grime from her hair, she watched Applejack haphazardly knock chunks of sediment from her coat and hair. The white pony felt a heat in her belly at the sight of Applejack with her hair down, wet and carefree in the calming darkness. As the heat began to spread through her body, Rarity plunged below the surface and shocked herself back to reality, the cold water doing a perfect job of that.

Rarity’s mind was filled with images of Applejack’s toned back, her muscles gleaming, hair draped over her shoulder and resting on her chest; she knew it was wrong to think such things, but Rarity couldn’t help herself. Of course, it was probably just because she’d been out here with Applejack too long—with no stallions around, Rarity would of course have to turn to the only pony she was close to. She came back to the surface and resumed washing her hair, happy with the place her train of logic arrived at.

Applejack was just happy to get the chance to rest her tired muscles and get clean. As much as she liked playing around in the mud and other “uncouth” things, she liked the feeling of washing the dirt out almost as much. She turned and furtively looked at Rarity. She smiled at the sight of Rarity practically washing each strand of her hair; she’d always sort of admired how hard Rarity worked at keeping herself looking the way she did. Fashion and such didn’t matter much to Applejack, but she figured that, as pretty as Rarity looked, she took hours each day to look like that, not to mention her actual work.

And she sure did look pretty...

Applejack blinked, surprised that such a thought could even worm its way into her head. She shook her hair out, getting water everywhere.

“Oh! Applejack, please watch what you’re doing!” Rarity looked across the water at Applejack, her nose crinkled in annoyance and her blue eyes narrowed. Applejack tried

not to think about it, but she looked cute like that.

“Er, sorry, Rarity!” she called, breaking the spell. She concentrated on her washing until she was finished, berating herself for thinking such terrible thoughts. Wasn’t right, thinking things like that, especially not about her friend.

The two of them spent the rest of the night in relative silence, each battling with her own mind.