

## Strange Bedfellows, Chapter 5

Applejack was the first to wake, squinting as sunlight filtered in through windows and onto her face. She felt warm, though her whole body ached and she could barely move. Her eyes fluttered as she looked around, spotting Rarity next to her, in a fluffy down bed. The white unicorn's head was wrapped in bandages, with just her horn, bits of her mane, and her eyes sticking out from between the folds. Her chest rose and fell slowly—she was still unconscious. Applejack reached up and felt around her head despite the pain in her foreleg—no bandages at all. She looked around, trying to get her bearings.

The room that they were in was nondescript, to say the least. The floors and walls were made of dense wood, and shined spotlessly. The windows were hung with thick, tan-colored drapes which snuffed any possibility of looking at the outside world. Applejack tried to move, tried to get up and move those curtains aside, but her body screamed in protest any time she tried to.

Applejack craned her neck down as best she could, trying to shift her body to move the covers up. She managed at least this much, and got a look at her own body. It seemed that whereas Rarity's head had been damaged, Applejack's body had suffered the brunt of her injuries. Her stomach and back legs were swathed in bandages along with her forearms—likely she'd gotten terribly bruised in the fall. Applejack's head began to swim—clearly she hadn't been meant to wake up just yet. She tried to keep it together and stay awake, but her bruises ached so badly, and all she wanted to do was take a nap and let the pain ebb away...

Neither pony woke for several more days, and mysterious figures slipped in and out of the room, watching over the injured ponies carefully, always making sure to take special care of them. The two friends slept soundly, their injuries healing under the attentions of their enigmatic caretakers.

After nearly a week, Applejack's eyes finally opened again, and movement came much easier to her. The bandages had been removed from her stomach and back legs, leaving only the foreleg bandaging as evidence of her injuries. As her eyes adjusted, Applejack got out of the bed, taking a few cautious steps towards the window. She pulled the curtains back, foreleg throbbing dully, and took a look outside.

Wherever they were, it was definitely a step up from the cold, barren mountain. The sun cut through awnings, casting multicolored murals over the ground thick green grass of a marketplace. Ponies walked back and forth in the crowded center, jostling for position as they bought groceries. Mixed in with the ponies were several zebras, each bearing a heavy load strapped to their backs. All present smiled, waved at their friends, and chatted animatedly with strangers.

"Rarity," Applejack said softly, turning from the window, "Rarity, wake up—we gotta get out there and figure out what's going on!" Rarity stirred with a dainty yawn, rolling over. Her purple mane fell down around her face. She reached up and moved it aside with a hoof, smiling.

“Oh, Applejack!” she said happily, “I had the most wonderful dream! I was—”

“Rarity,” Applejack interrupted, “you can tell me all about that later. Right now, we gotta find out where the heck we are! Did you black out when we hit the ground too?”

Rarity nodded, grimacing. “How could I not?” She asked, “It was such a terribly long fall—I was afraid we were both going to die!”

Applejack nodded. “Same,” she said, “but it looks like somepony musta picked us up and carried us here to fix us up. Good thing too—I woke up a couple days ago and doubt we’d have made it far in the state we were in.”

Rarity’s eyes widened and she reached up to touch her face, making sure everything was okay. “Thankfully, it doesn’t look like we’re worse for the wear,” she said, smiling.

Applejack was about to nod in agreement and suggest they get moving when the door swung open, revealing several ponies with medical caps on. Behind them was a large griffon whose golden eyes swept along the two ponies discerningly. He was dressed in what could only be described as medical regalia—atop his head was a cap with a red cross emblazoned on it, and on his body was a thick white medical coat, with the name Faust embroidered along the breast. Rarity and Applejack were awestruck by his countenance.

The ponies filed in, quickly making room for Faust. He walked up to the pair, looking both of them over intently. “You two,” he said, voice deep and striking, “what are you doing out of bed? Your injuries were far too extensive for you to be up.”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Uh, beg your pardon, doc, and we really appreciate your help and all, but we feel fine, don’t we Rarity?”

Rarity nodded. “Yes sir,” she said, smiling, “in fact, I feel much better than I have in days! We thank you very much for your assistance, but we have to be going now—we’re homeward bound, you see, and just don’t have any time to stay anywhere. I’m sure our friends miss us very much.” She took a few steps forward, but Faust’s wings shot out, and he gave the unicorn a hard stare.

“The way your friends feel is of no concern to me, little pony,” he said, “get back in bed and rest up—I will personally clear you to leave when I feel you’re ready.”

Applejack snorted, annoyed. “Now listen here, big guy,” she said, stepping forward, “you can see as well as anypony that we ain’t hurt anymore.” To illustrate her point, she wiggled all of her limbs and jumped up and down. “See? I’m moving just fine! Now make way—we gotta get back to Ponyville.”

Faust’s hard look changed to one of bewilderment. “Ponyville?” he said, blinking, “You ponies are from Ponyville, that little village down by the royal city of Canterlot?”

Applejack nodded, glaring. “That’s right,” she said, “I’m a Ponyville native—Applejack’s the name. I help run Sweet Apple Acres, y’know.”

Rarity smiled. “Yes, and I am Rarity, the proprietor of the Carousel Boutique! You may have heard of it; it’s only Equestria’s hottest fashion store! I’ve sold to such famous ponies as Hoity Toity and Sapphire Sh—”

“Enough,” Faust said, cutting Rarity off, “that’s all we needed to hear.” He turned to his assistants, waving a claw at them dismissively. They quickly left the room. Faust turned back to the two ponies. “Seeing that you are indeed physically healthy, I give you clearance to leave. Do not cause any trouble while you’re here, or I will be the one to dispense justice as the Elder’s enforcer.”

Rarity frowned. “But, Mr. Faust, if you don’t mind me asking, where exactly is here? And who is this Elder you’re talking about?”

Faust raised a claw to indicate the window, finally letting a small smile pass. “Welcome to Derby, a humble village in the southern reaches of Equestria, located directly across from the Hydrian Range.” He chuckled. “Though I’m certain you’re both acquainted with its namesake—those peaks are infested with hydras. No one has been up there in some time.”

Applejack snorted. “Wish we could’ve known that to begin with,” she said, “never woulda gone up there if we’d have known.”

Faust nodded. “The mountains are a nightmarish network of tunnels which house dozens of hydras. The fact that you two escaped with severe bruises and nothing more is a miracle. That you took a Greater Hydra with you when you fell is something else altogether. In any case, I’m Faust, chief physician and Elder’s enforcer, and I offer you a warm welcome.”

Applejack smiled. “Good to meet you, Faust,” she said, “but something’s been bugging me: Why’d we get excused anyway? Just a couple of seconds before, you were blocking our way out and saying we had to stay.”

Faust chuckled. “I can see that you are physically healthy—no trouble walking or anything of the sort. In truth, I’m only that severe around my assistants to keep them in line—the rules of the village are somewhat carefree, and it’s unlikely we’d get any work done if they had free reign. I apologize if I worried either of you.” Faust paused. “And, well, the Elder may not like Ponyville ponies much, but they do plenty for Equestria, so I’m happy to overlook that fact.” The griffon looked around. “Just don’t mention it. Walls, sensitive ears and all that.”

Rarity shook her head. “No trouble at all, Faust,” she said, “I’m just glad we’re getting out of here after all.” She cocked her head. “But why would the Elder not like Ponyville ponies?”

Faust shook his head. “No telling. There are rumors she was greatly wronged by a group of

ponies from Ponyville a few years ago, but those have no credence. Come on, let's get you out of here. I'll show you around." The griffon turned to leave, and the two ponies followed.

"Wronged by a group of Ponyville ponies?" Rarity whispered to Applejack, "That doesn't make any sense; what pony has been to Ponyville who could've been wronged?"

Applejack shrugged. "Hard tellin'" she said, "it could be anypony—probably somepony from before our time, though, so I don't think we got anything to worry about, really."

Rarity bit her lip, looking around at the town as they exited the clinic. "I'm not sure," she said, "what if it's not even a pony? I can think of one particular griffon who we've personally 'wronged' before..."

Applejack's eyes widened. "You don't think it could be...Gilda?" She asked, grimacing. "If it is her, I suspect we're in more danger here than we were with the hydra..."

Rarity smiled nervously. "I don't think so," she said, trying to disperse the heavy feeling in the air even as ponies and zebras greeted them left and right, "I mean, Gilda would make a dreadful leader! I don't know anypony insane enough to let her be in charge of anything!"

Applejack sighed. "I hope you're right," she said, "and hopefully it ain't anypony we've run afoul of in the past..."

Faust's wings twitched and he turned around, eyebrow raised. "I'm sorry; did either of you say anything?"

Rarity shook her head. "Er, yes, we were just discussing the, uh...multiculturalism your town seems to display! I've never seen quite so many species all in one place."

Faust smiled. "Yes, here in Derby, it takes all kinds to get our work done. Many of our pegasi do weather patrols—griffons mostly handle jobs that require both muscle and wings, as well as village-defense. Earth ponies grow crops on the outskirts of town, and unicorns handle various other tasks, depending on their magical abilities." The doctor swept a claw through the air. "Really, we're quite well-organized for so recently gaining a new Elder."

Applejack cocked her head. "Recently? How recently, exactly?"

Faust tapped his chin in thought. "Not sure, actually," he said, "I arrived fairly recently myself—the new Elder was already in place when I showed up. I've been living here about a year now."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "You've only been livin' here a year now and you're already in the second-most powerful position this village has to offer? Well, forgive me askin', but don't you figure that the pony in charge would promote somepony a little, well...closer to home or somethin'?"

Faust shrugged. “I thought the same thing, but making a habit out of questioning the Elder isn’t good, so I kept quiet about it. I migrated here from further south, in the next kingdom over—I’m sure you’ve heard of us. Avania?”

“Hmm,” Rarity said, “I think they taught us about Avania in one of our school lessons.” She smiled sheepishly. “Though I can’t say I paid much attention in school, myself—I was more concerned with my fashions than anything else.”

Applejack chuckled. “Same here, only I was too focused on work to get any proper schooling at all, y’see. But I get by well enough.”

Faust blinked. “Yes, well...in any case, I moved from there to escape political conflicts. On my way, I found Derby, was treated very well by the Elder and, before I knew it, she was asking me to be her chief medical officer and enforcer.” He smiled. “Well, I’d fallen in love in little Derby in that time, so I agreed wholeheartedly.”

Rarity looked around. “To be honest, Faust,” she said, “this really doesn’t seem like the kind of place that needs medicine or enforcers. What do you do when those things aren’t needed?”

Faust sighed. “Truthfully, no, neither service is especially necessary—I’ve had to go high-order on citizens only twice so far, and you ponies are the first with actual injuries—the rest have been colds and bellyaches.” He nodded towards a large, multi-windowed building. “In the large amounts of downtime I have, I visit Dog Ear, our resident historian and librarian. He’s rather eccentric, but he’s a good pony at heart—been here since the creation of Derby. You two should pop over and visit him while you’re here—I’m sure he won’t bite.”

Applejack shook her head. “Honestly Faust, we really appreciate everything y’all have done for us, but we’d just like to give our thanks to your Elder and be on our way. I feel more than rested enough to make my way back to Ponyville.”

Rarity nodded. “So do I. Thanks for all your help Faust, but we have friends and families to get back to.”

Faust looked the pair over, unsure. “Are you sure? After all, you both just got here! Why not stay a while, talk to the citizens, maybe talk to Dog Ear? It just seems odd for you both to leave so soon.”

Rarity smiled. “Derby seems like a lovely village, Faust, and you’ve all been very accommodating to us, but with all due respect, we’ve been here a week as it is, correct?” Faust nodded. “Well, I think that’s more than enough time spent resting, even if we were unconscious. If we don’t get back out on the road, we may never make it back!”

Faust paused, looking between Rarity and Applejack, before looking down and sighing. “Very well,” he said, “you know, it’s not often we get visitors, and when we do, they never stay long. I

apologize if my insistence annoyed either of you.”

Rarity shook her head. “It’s no trouble at all Faust, we assure you. We understand perfectly well.” Applejack nodded in agreement.

The griffon gave the ponies a gracious bow. “Please allow me to pack both of your saddlebags with some supplies—Ponyville lies far to the north, you see, and the road gets rough in spots.” He gave a beaky smile. “But, honestly, now that you’re both out of the mountains, the going will be much easier—there are actual roads to follow.” He turned to leave, but stopped, looking over his shoulder. “Go have a chat with Dog Ear while I pack. I’ll also arrange an audience with the Elder before you depart.”

Rarity called out, halting Faust’s exit. “Wait, Faust! Before you go, can you tell us a little about the Elder? What’s she like?”

Faust thought a moment, then nodded. “She’s hard to describe. She’s very arrogant on the outside, but on the inside one can tell she cares very much for the inhabitants of this village. I don’t know how she found her way here, or why she stands by this village—after all, from what I’ve heard, she used to be a famous performer—but she does a good job of it. She’d never admit it, but if you ask me, she’s a big softy on the inside, despite her abrasiveness. There were rumors that she wanted to be named something silly instead of the traditional title of Elder; something along the lines of The Mystic and Wonderful or something like that. Couldn’t tell you exactly what off the top of my head.”

Rarity and Applejack exchanged worried glances. “What does she look like?” Applejack piped up.

“She’s blue with big purple eyes and silver hair,” Faust said, “rather striking in that royal purple cloak of hers.”

Rarity’s eyes widened. “Did she happen to have a matching hat, Faust? It might be important...”

“Hmm...no, no hat. Just the cloak. But she cuts a very memorable figure in it.”

With that, Faust walked off, leaving Rarity and Applejack to exchange worried whispers. “Rarity,” the latter said, “if the village Elder is Trixie, well...dang, I totally forgot about her! She hates us!”

Rarity bit her lip. “I know what you mean, AJ,” she said, “with Trixie in charge of everything, we may never be allowed to leave!”

Applejack shook her head. “Maybe she’s changed,” she said, “I mean, there ain’t no statues around here or anything—maybe she ain’t as arrogant anymore.”

Rarity pouted. “Or maybe she just didn’t want everypony to realize how crazy she was in her egotism,” she said sullenly. “Sorry if I’m being pessimistic, Applejack, but I don’t have much faith in Trixie.”

Applejack sighed. “Can’t blame you for that,” she said, “Trixie’s a sidewinder if I ever saw one—I wouldn’t be surprised if we had to run outta here with a bunch of angry villagers tailing us.” She looked over at the old building which housed Dog Ear. “Might as well go talk to that pony,” she said, “Faust didn’t sound he’d be done packing for a while.” Both ponies walked over, pushing the door open with a creak.

Dust motes wafted through the stale air inside, the light filtering in through the windows dulled, making everything within look gloomy and dark. Old books, the spines long broken and the pages ragged, lined the dozens of shelves. As Rarity and Applejack stepped inside, dust rose from the carpet underhoof, and Rarity recoiled, her snout wrinkling in disgust.

“Ugh,” she cried, “didn’t Faust say this was someplace he liked to visit in his spare time? How could anypony possibly enjoy coming to a disgusting, dusty place like this? It’s simply hideous!”

Across the room, behind all the shelves, an old pony’s ears pricked up at the sound, and he placed his hooves on the desk, shoving away from it to stand. Blowing a few locks of grey hair from his eyes, he turned around, glaring at Rarity as he approached the front.

“Disgusting?” he snorted incredulously, “Hideous?! How dare you call my collection of tomes and histories such awful names! Just who do you think you are, missy? Sure, you look a little more fashionable than our standard fare, but that doesn’t give you right to criticize us! You should be ashamed for your thoughtlessness!”

Rarity’s eyes widened—she hadn’t been expecting such a vehement reaction, and she stammered. “Uh, well, sir, I apologize if I have offended you, it’s just... doesn’t anypony dust in here? You have to admit that it’s dirty.”

Dog Ear shook his head, and a cloud of dust erupted from his head, settling on his cutie mark—a dust-covered book. “No time,” he said, tone impatient, “no time at all. I oversee the library alone, you see, and there’s much history to be recorded—each day much be accounted for in our records, and those records must be sorted on a daily basis. No time to clean.” The old pony smirked. “Besides, I like it better this way. It feels more authentic—like the legendary local history halls of bigger cities.”

Rarity stuck out her tongue. “I can’t imagine liking all this dust,” she said, “it’s just so...icky.”

Dog Ear shrugged. “Complain if you want,” he said, “my history, my decision how to manage it. In any case, I’m sure you two showed up here for a better reason than insulting the local history hall and being chastised for it. What is it you needed?”

Rarity fumed at the way Dog Ear was practically ignoring her, even making fun of her, and was about to rebuke him when Applejack clapped a hoof over her mouth, giving her a warning look before turning back to Dog Ear with a smile.

“Nothing in particular,” she said, “Faust said that we should pay you a visit while he packed some saddlebags for us and arranged a visit with the Elder.”

Dog Ear smiled. “Ah, yes; Madame Hortensia. Lovely griffon, you know—she’s this village’s sixth Elder, and I must say, she runs the place better than the last five. Always firm when it’s needed, and certainly intimidating to transgressors, but she has this quiet sort of intimidation—like a look she gives ponies that always—”

Applejack piped up, confused. “Uh, beg pardon for the interruption, Dog Ear,” she said, “but Faust told us that the Elder was a pony—a blue one with long silver hair.”

Dog Ear blinked, bewildered. “A pony?” he asked, turning to snatch a book from the shelves and hurriedly flip through it. “Pony...pony...ah, yes! How could I have forgotten?” He chuckled, shutting the book and replacing it. “Poor Hortensia was killed defending the village from a hydra, you know. She took the beast with her, Celestia bless her, but she went far before her time...”

Rarity stared and, when Dog Ear didn’t respond, she spoke up. “Um, sir,” she said, “if you don’t mind, just who is the new Elder anyway? What’s her name?”

Dog Ear smiled. “She is young, but very fierce and big-hearted. Lovely mare—she showed up from the north, you know, with a big, loud stage show.”

Applejack grimaced, seeing that the old pony’s “eccentricity” was really “senility”. “Dog Ear,” she asked, “please, what’s her name? How long’s she been here?”

Dog Ear started. “Sorry?” he asked, “Her name? Why didn’t you just say so in the first place?” he picked up the same book as before, flipping through it again. “Ah, yes, here she is. Madame Trixie, Great and Powerful The; originally of Hoofington, child of...well, there’s no record of her birth or her parents. She’s been Elder for three years now and, I must say, she’s done better than the last six, despite her arrogance.”

Rarity was becoming more and more irritated with Dog Ear by the second, and glared even as her stomach flipped over with the news. “But I thought you said she was big-hearted?”

Dog Ear chuckled, shaking his head. “Child, you need patience,” he said, “She is both arrogant and big-hearted. Madame Trixie is a mare of many traits, and few of them coincide, but I believe that, at heart, she truly cares about the ponies, zebras, and griffons of Derby. She rarely makes public appearances, not counting shows, and when she does, she tries to be cold and aloof—if you ask me, she’s not fooling anyone. Though, I can tell you that she’s far too ambitious. It always seemed to me like presiding over a village might not be enough for her.”



Applejack cocked an eyebrow. “You say she’s been here three years?” Dog Ear nodded. “Well, if she’s been here that long, what’s she done to help the village?”

Dog Ear grinned widely. “Madame Trixie,” he said, “had revitalized the economy of this village by opening trade routes with the neighboring towns. She is a shrewd negotiator, though she may not seem like it when you meet her; I swear it must be all the time she spent performing.”

Rarity opened her mouth to respond when the door creaked open and Faust walked in, smiling. On his back were two sets of saddlebags, each filled to the brim with supplies.

“Applejack, Rarity,” he said, “I trust Dog Ear hasn’t given you too hard of a time?” The griffon winked, and Dog Ear smiled.

“Oh, away with you, Faust,” he said, “you know I haven’t scared anypony away for many years now. In any case, I’ve simply been sharing the wonders of local Derbian history with them.” He grinned at the two ponies. “Did you know that this village is actually only sixty years old? Why, I’m older than this place is!”

Faust rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Oh, blow away you old windbag,” he said, dropping the bags. “You’ll bore them to death with all your stories.” The doctor nodded at the bags. “Thank you both for waiting; these bags are for you to take on your journey back to Ponyville. There is a map in each bag, as well as ample food. The Elder will be waiting for you in her cottage at the north end of the village, next to the main road’s entrance. Good luck to both of you.” With that, the griffon bowed and disappeared through the curtains.

Rarity turned back to Dog Ear, finally smiling—maybe this day wouldn’t turn out so badly after all! “Thank you for your time, Dog Ear,” she said, “and I’m terribly sorry about the things I said. You do a very good job for being only one pony.”

Dog Ear nodded graciously. “And thank you two for gracing me with your visit. I get far too few visitors these days; in fact, sometimes it seems like that whippersnapper Faust is the only one...” For a moment, the old pony looked sad, but it left as quickly as it came, and he grinned widely. “I wish you both luck on your journey. Don’t forget about us!”

Applejack beamed. “Wouldn’t dream of it!” she cried as she and Rarity left.

The walk down the road to Trixie’s cottage was fairly long, and left the duo plenty of time to think about everything that could go wrong. Trixie could rally the villagers against them, she could force them to stay in Derby forever...with power over this many ponies, there was no end to the things she could do them! But Faust and Dog Ear seemed to trust her, they figured, so maybe she really had changed after all. Hopefully that was the case.

Trixie’s cottage was a humble little thing—a simple wood-and-stone building built near the edge of the town, just as described. Rarity knocked on the front door tentatively.

“Enter,” came an all-too-familiar voice. Rarity placed a hoof on the door and swung it open, the old hinges creaking. Inside it was light, and at the other end of the cottage, sure enough, was Trixie, using her magic to fill out paperwork. She didn’t bother looking up as she spoke. “I am very busy at the moment,” she said, “what is it you require?”

Rarity cocked an eyebrow, noticing that Trixie had stopped using the third person. “Faust said he set up an appointment,” she said, “Applejack and I wanted to thank you for providing us care and safety after we fell down the mountain. We might not have survived without you.”

Trixie snorted, finally glancing up. A small pair of reading glasses sat perched on her nose, and Rarity finally noticed she wasn’t wearing her hat—it sat next to the desk. “Oh, it’s you two,” she sneered, voice dripping with venom, “come to gloat about what happened back in Ponyville, have you? I haven’t forgotten, you know.”

Rarity sighed. “Trixie, please, we’re not here to feud with you. We simply wanted to inform you of our gratitude.”

Trixie smirked. “A shame that Trixie, er, I want none of your thanks,” she said, and Rarity snorted. “I control an entire village now; your Twilight can’t claim that. I have allowed this village to prosper under my hoof; your Twilight, I imagine, is still just a little filly who pretends to be special because she is the Princess’ apprentice.”

Applejack wanted to rebuke Trixie, but she tried to stay calm. “And just how’d you end up here anyway, Trixie?”

The magician snorted. “I travelled south after you and your gang kicked me out,” she said, “I could not stand to be in your company any longer. There’s no need to go into much deeper detail than that—I simply travelled south. When I arrived in Derby for a show, the Elder, a griffon named Hortensia, had to deal with a hydra incursion.” She smirked, removing her glasses. “I, being brave as well as Great and Powerful, accompanied her. While I dazzled the monster with my awesome magical abilities, Hortensia attempted to strike it down. Frankly, she was sloppy about it, and the beast, as it died, fatally wounded her. With her dying breath, Hortensia named me her successor for my bravery in the face of impossible odds.”

Though Applejack knew that was a load of horseapples, she didn’t bother calling Trixie out on it. “Interestin’,” she said, trying not to sound sarcastic, “Never woulda thought you to be much of a leader, honestly.”

Trixie shook her head, clucking her tongue. “My natural talent may be performing,” she said, “but I’m not stupid, you know. I’ve negotiated all sorts of trade contracts with neighboring villages.”

Rarity smiled, unable to resist a jibe. “But settling down, Trixie?” she asked, pretending to be shocked. “I never would’ve thought you’d stay in one place.”

Trixie scoffed. "Your attempts to rile The Great and—I mean, me up are in vain, little one," she said, "I am perfectly capable of running this town, and it's certainly better than having to deal with foolish ponies in every town I come across. Those here are still foolish, and certainly stupid, but they listen to me, and that is all one could ask for."

Rarity sneered in return, opening her mouth to say something, but Applejack's hoof clamped over it. "Well, I'm sorry to see you ain't changed much, Trixie. But if you got any information for us, we'd be much obliged."

Trixie sighed. "Information? What sort of information are you looking for? Can't you see Trixie..." she paused. "I have too much paperwork as it is?"

Applejack nodded. "Well of course we can. But it's gonna be a long road back to Ponyville, and we'd appreciate it if you could fill us in on what we might see between here and there."

Trixie shook her head. "It's a road, you two. I assume you're accustomed to following them? Ponyville has roads, if I remember right."

Applejack's patience was beginning to wear thin, but she kept her composure. "But what about forks? What about forests or things like that? All I'm asking is for you to give us a little info on how to get there."

Trixie's eyes narrowed. "And all I'm asking you is to leave me in peace, because I'm very busy and expecting other visitors. Are you deaf?"

Applejack took a deep breath. "Trixie, please. I'm really asking for your help, here."

Trixie ran a hoof through her hair and sighed dramatically. "Very well. The road from here to Ponyville is relatively untouched, very hilly and long, but for most part, you shouldn't have any problems." She glared. "There, is that enough information for you? Now please, Trixie is extremely busy."

Applejack felt Rarity straining against her and finished up quickly. "Well, we appreciate the information, Trixie, and thanks for your hospitality."

Trixie smirked. "Well, Trixie, er, I was happy to provide, I assume you." She pointed to the door. "I have plenty of work to be doing, so if we're quite finished, you may leave the village as you please. I'm sure the maps Faust provided will be of use."

As the blue unicorn spoke, Rarity caught something odd-looking in what she was writing--it looked like a series of arrows leading to a certain point. She'd seem something like that before, she knew, and leaned in a little closer to look.

Trixie looked up from her work with a cocked eyebrow. "Did you misunderstand me?" She

shook a hoof at them. "Shoo."

Rarity and Applejack hurried out, closing the door behind them. The earth pony gave Rarity a look.

"That was close, Rarity. I mean it--things could've gotten sour quick."

Rarity apologized, both for her staring and her near-slip of the tongue, and the two continued on.

Before them, everything was awash in orange light—the sun was setting, and the dust in the air glimmered like airborne pearls; it seemed that the road ahead would be brighter and more promising than ever.

Behind them, everything was awash in dank shadow—it seemed gloomier and deader than ever.