

In the deep darkness of the forest, Applejack's hooves made little sound—the thick foliage under her muted her steps. She'd lost Rarity some time ago in the dense murk; she'd turned around at some point to find that her friend was just *gone*, like the unicorn was sneakily swallowed up by the forest.

Applejack wanted to look for her, but the darkness around her seemed to prevent her from backtracking, like chains attached to her hooves and neck that restricted what she could do. The forest was beckoning her, forcing her forward and deeper into its belly with no way back. She'd taken a deep breath and moved on, trying to ignore the way her hair stood on end.

No matter which way Applejack turned as she walked, the darkness would close the gaps, cutting off her sight. In the distance, Applejack could hear what sounded like some kind of unholy machinery, like materials unknown to ponykind rubbing against each other in a horrific facsimile of moving parts.

She tried to stop, to force her hooves into the earth and stop herself, but no matter how much she tried, Applejack couldn't stop herself from moving forward—her legs were no longer under her control. When she tried to stop, the muscles in her thighs and flanks burned terribly, like somepony was reaching into her and twisting them into knots. It made tears spring to her eyes.

Thus her inexorable walk continued—she couldn't see anything around her with the darkness closing in, and now when she tried to close her eyes, the ugly fingers of the darkness jammed themselves into her eyes, prying the lids open. As she kept walking, the sound grew louder, filling her up and leaving room for nothing else.

It was impossible to place what the noise reminded her of. She would have compared it to Flim and Flam's terrible, ugly cider-making machine, but it was guttural, thick and hoarse, feral even. The very thought of what it might be made her heart race and her mouth go dry.

When the darkness finally cleared, Applejack breathed deeply and closed her eyes, stretching out every part of her body—she wanted the penetrating darkness out of her body. She was grateful to be rid of the blackness, but now the machinery was so loud that it drilled into her ears, seeping into her brain like the terrible darkness. She turned to look at where the sound was emanating from, but stopped dead upon seeing it.

Her mind couldn't comprehend what she was seeing and blanked immediately, followed by her vision going white and her body locking up in fits. The pain rushing through her fevered body was like turning inside out. She screamed into the open air, but received no answer aside from Rarity, whose screaming drowned hers out.

Applejack felt like she was melting and exploding at the same time—her heart was in her throat, beating up a storm and threatening to burst right out of her. Her legs and back

were twisting in ways that shouldn't have been possible, and her eyes were filling up with fire, her white vision licked at the edges by flame.

Around her, shadowy figures oozed from the undergrowth like living blood, crawling across the ground to her, snatching up pieces of her greedily, yanking on them as though trying to claim her for themselves.

Limbs like fleshy tendrils wrapped around her hooves and neck while claws raked at her skin, leaving wide marks in their wake. The entire forest seemed to be laughing at her as tears filled her vision, leaving her unable to see. The appendages around her started to yank in different directions, and she screamed, feeling like she was going to be pulled apart at the seams.

---

Applejack's eyes shot open in the darkness, rousing her from her nightmare. She rubbed her eyes and looked around, her vision blurry. The earth pony chuckled quietly, shaking her head. It was silly to even bother checking to make sure her nightmare hadn't crossed over into the real world; after all, tiny shadows didn't exist. But that didn't change the way her body shook at the thought, or how heavily she was panting.

"Land sakes," she whispered.

Applejack looked up through the broken spots in the canopy of trees, noticing stars twinkling against the black background of the sky. Her heart was still pounding, but now that she was awake it had a chance to slow down. She leaned back on her hooves and closed her eyes, listening to the blood pounding in her ears, steadying her breathing. Above all else, she kept telling herself that it was just a nightmare.

A breeze rolled through and made Applejack's hair wave back and forth. She'd had nightmares like that before, of course, but never so lucid or vivid. She looked over at her sleeping companion; she wanted to hold her, ask her to explain *why* she had these dreams, tell her they weren't real, but that notion passed quickly. There was no way Rarity would be able to figure out why she'd had such an awful dream, much less why she always got them when she was in situations like this.

Any time she'd gotten stressed to the breaking point throughout her life, these dreams cropped up. When Big Mac's usual quietness had changed because of the Poison Joke, she had dreams about him emotionally abusing her. When she'd tried to harvest Sweet Apple Acres alone, she had dreams about being buried by apples.

It was easy to write them off as stress dreams, but somehow she felt that it was all connected to something deeper and more important than just a little stress—and with this dream being both the most horrifying and the most vivid, she couldn't help but feel a deeper connection was present.

But for the moment, there wasn't much time to think about such things. Applejack pulled herself to her hooves and shook her hair out. She didn't want to wake Rarity this early, but she couldn't get back to sleep. Instead, she trotted off softly, letting Rarity stay soundly asleep.

Although Applejack was used to getting up early and seeing sunrises, she liked the night and the blanket of stars almost as much. Sitting down next to the water where she'd washed off, Applejack looked up at the canopy of trees.

She'd spent the last few days trying to figure the location out. Thick foliage, dense layer of trees overhead, bogs, and yet the whole place didn't quite fit the image of a bayou or a swamp. She wanted to say it was probably just an abnormal place, but that was too easy—if they knew where they were geographically, they could plan out their next move according to that.

But, much like they'd been throughout this entire experience, they were lost with little indication to where they were. The map didn't give this place a name, no pony was around, and the trees never seemed to let up. Briefly, visions flashed through Applejack's mind of being forced to settle down here and live like a pair of forest hermits. It was simultaneously humorous and terrifying.

Hours passed like minutes while thoughts spun around in Applejack's head, buzzing like angry hornets. The moon dipped down, the stars faded out of the sky, and birdsong started to drift through the area, soft tunes carried by the wind.

When the sun eventually rose, Applejack still didn't have anything figured out. Defeated, she trotted back over to where Rarity was and sat down with her back against a tree, trying not to stare at her. She focused her gaze elsewhere—at the colors of the sunrise, on the trees, and along the curve of the water's edge.

When Rarity stirred next to her, gentle sunspots lighting the ground around them and making the water sparkle, Applejack smiled.

"Doing alright, sugarcube?" she asked. "I woke up a couple hours ago, but I figured I'd let you sleep. I needed a little relaxing time anyway." Rarity stifled a yawn and shook her head to clear the fog from her mind.

"Are *you* alright, dear?" Her voice was slow with sleep, but concerned. "It's not exactly normal to wake up so early, you know."

Applejack waved a hoof dismissively. "Ain't nothing for a pony like me," she said. "I'm used to getting up early." A yawn slipped out, betraying her. "I think we've got some leftover food in the saddlebags if you're hungry, but we gotta get going soon." Her eyes narrowed imperceptibly. "I get the feeling we need to get outta here soon."

Rarity stared at Applejack for a moment, but didn't say anything. Odd as her statement may have sounded, Rarity wanted to be done with the forest just as much—the way the trees covered everything and how dead it sounded compared to other places made her hair stand on end.

The two ponies ate in silence—the only sounds in the clearing were the water moving through the dirt and the birds singing in the trees. Once breakfast was finished, and as they began walking, Rarity tried to broach the subject of Applejack's anxiety.

“Dear,” she started, “why are you so on edge? I am rather mistrustful of this forest as well, but...you seem almost afraid.”

Applejack's jaw clenched. “I ain't afraid of no forest,” she said, “just don't wanna spend too much time in here is all.”

“But Applejack, if you were up ‘for a few hours’ before me...that's very, very early, even for a working pony like yourself.” She smiled gently, invitingly. “Please, darling, we're good friends, aren't we? You know that you can tell me anything.”

Applejack opened her mouth to rebut Rarity, but stopped. Would it really be so bad to admit that she was scared? That she just hated being here with every fiber of her being and wanted to be shut of the place as soon as possible? When she'd had so much trouble harvesting Sweet Apple Acres, she turned to her friends and they all had fun together—not to mention how much easier it made the work. She knew she could rely on her friends, and that it was usually easier to accept help from them. She mulled the thought over in her head, trying not to show Rarity how much she was struggling with the decision.

Finally, she nodded.

“Yeah, I guess I can,” she said. “I, uh, I had sort of a nightmare. I was here in the forest, ‘cept you weren't around. Dunno where you went.” She licked her lips nervously. “All around me, everything was dark, and when I tried to stop walking, I kept getting pushed forward by some kinda force I can't describe.

“Finally, I came to this little clearing, heard some loud noise, and when I turned to look where it came from, I blacked out and these *things* started pulling me apart.” She clenched her teeth and sighed. “That's why I woke up early, and that's why I wanna get the heck out of here. I've just got a bad feeling in my gut.”

Rarity touched Applejack's shoulder. “Oh, dear,” she said, “that sounds terrible!” She furrowed her brow. “Truth be told, I haven't liked this place since we entered, either. I keep hearing noises when I'm trying to sleep, and everything is disgusting and dirty...” She chuckled, a brittle sound. “I may not mind it so much anymore, but I'm getting tired

of looking at shades of brown and dark green.”

Applejack nodded. “Truth be told, Rarity, this place scares the heck outta me. Bog in a forest? Weird sounds? No thank you.” She snorted. “It’s like the place is trying to mess with us.” Her volume dropped considerably. “With *me*.”

Rarity nosed her friend. “Well then, all the better that we get out of here soon, right?” She smiled. “Besides, we have friends and a home to get back to! There’s plenty of walking yet to be done, so we ought to go now, right?”

Applejack sighed and smiled weakly. “Yeah, I guess. Wondering if we’re *ever* going to get outta here, honestly.” She shook her head. “It’s like every time we make progress, there just turns out to be more of this forest. And my dreams keep getting worse and worse—I dunno whether it means something or not.”

Rarity was skeptical. “Darling, I’m sure you’re just stressed out. Perhaps there’s some connection, but even if there is, we’re not going to be able to avoid it—especially if it’s as powerful and, frankly, dreadful as you made it sound.” She trotted over to the water and dunked her head in, starting to mess with her hair. “Now, I’ve got to get my hair looking halfway decent before we get going.”

Applejack wasn’t going to get much more out of her, so she sat down and tipped her head back, closing her eyes and relaxing for a few moments. The two ponies hadn’t gotten much respite since they’d began the journey, so it was nice to just take a little time to sit in the (admittedly meager) sun and feel the grass.

A wet hug snapped Applejack back to attention.

“I’m sorry,” Rarity said. “I’m sure that your dream scared you very badly, Applejack.” She drew back and smiled widely. “If it makes you feel any better, you know I’m scared, too. But we can’t lose hope.” Her hair, soaked, hung around her neck, down to her haunches. Her blue eyes were full of gentle light.

Applejack grinned back and nodded. “Got that right,” she said. “I’ve got no plans to spend the rest of my life in this dang forest. And I’ll be darned if I never taste one of Pinkie’s cupcakes again.” She chuckled. “Thanks, Rarity. This dang place is getting to me more than I thought.”

Rarity shook her head. “It’s nothing, Applejack. You would do the same thing for me, were I in your position. Come on, let’s eat and get moving.” With renewed determination, the pair ate and set out—the road hadn’t let up yet.

The road did indeed continue on for some time—it was winding and meandering, but always seemed to stay on flat, solid ground. Rarity and Applejack made small talk as best they could, despite how scared the two of them were.

The bushes around them swayed every now and again, as though something was moving through the thick scrub. Branches creaked in the breeze, followed by the sounds of animals chirruping and slinking out of the way. Applejack knew what that meant—the animals and birds were being disturbed, somehow.

And of course, that meant they were being followed.

Without much to do but keep walking—there was no way they'd track down the myriad sounds around them—the pair of ponies soldiered on, their pace increasing with every wayward sound. Accompanying the rustling now was a soft squeaking.

“Applejack,” Rarity hissed, “what *is* that noise? Is it anything you've heard before?” The squeaking made her hair stand on end.

Applejack shook her head. “Can't say I have, sugarcube.” She kept her voice low. “All I know is it can't be good. Keep your guard up.”

The game continued for some time—bushes would rustle, the followers would squeak, all would fall silent, and the cycle would start again. Whatever was following them, it knew it was scaring them.

Applejack and Rarity, after what seemed like an eternity, came to a large, wide-open clearing in the trees, seemingly emptied of foliage specifically to herd ponies into it. Applejack bit her lip as she realized that the road led right into a trap.

She didn't have time to think much else as a small figure zipped out from the brush, wrapping its strong limbs around her neck. Rarity got much the same treatment.

The two ponies fell to the dirt and began to writhe and squirm as the figures clung to their necks, steadily choking them into unconsciousness—there wasn't much they could do, unfortunately, as several other little figures emerged from the undergrowth, wielding large, blunt instruments.

Applejack kicked out in front of her with her strong back hooves, catching one attacker solidly in the chest. The figure squeaked and flew back, crashing into a tree. She fought hard, smashing the shadow on her back into the ground over and over, lashing with her hooves. Figures went down all around her, but eventually she was overwhelmed, her body pinned under myriad assailants.

Rarity, for her part, tried to concentrate and utilize the magic she'd learned from Twilight. Her horn crackled and loosed a bolt into a shadow's face—it reeled back with a screech and dropped to the forest floor. Another tried to grab at her horn, but found its appendage torn by the sharp end. A blow caught her in the temple and her eyes crossed.

The last thing the two of them saw was a thick bark club swinging into their vision.