

Strange Bedfellows, Chapter 1

The day had been busy—far too busy for Rarity’s tastes. Customers had been pouring through the door for hours, demanding that she craft them exquisite dresses and suits for what was said to be the greatest Grand Galloping Gala ever hosted in the history of Equestria! It had done wonders for Rarity’s sales. Despite that, she was stressed, her mane frazzled. On top of everything else, it was raining heavily.

Rarity’s sister, Sweetie Belle, had remained at her side all throughout the day, constantly offering her help and fetching items for her. While she *was* helping, her constant shouting got on Rarity’s nerves.

“Sis, sis!” she cried, trotting all around the inside of the boutique, “Do you need anything else? I can still go and get that silk from the back if you need it! I promise I won’t get it dirty like the last roll!” Rarity shook her head, her glowing horn bobbing as she manipulated a pin through the fabric.

“No, no, Sweetie,” she said, “that’s quite alright—I’m in control of the situation here, I assure you.” When the little unicorn pouted, her older sister sighed. “Sweetie, please, I do greatly appreciate your help, but if you stay around here when there’s nothing I need help with, then all you will do is bore yourself. Go home--mother and father are missing you by now, I’m sure.” When her little sister smiled and nodded, Rarity did as well, sending the foal on her way.

A few more uninterrupted minutes went by, and Rarity was nearly done with her latest creation when a knock came at the door. Irritated, the unicorn gently placed her needle back on her little table and trotted over, calling through the door.

“Who is it?” she called. She was surprised to hear Applejack’s voice.

“It’s me, AJ!” she said. “Can you let me in, Rarity? It’s wetter than Winona’s nose out here!” Complying, the designer opened the door, allowing Applejack to trot past her, hooves muddy from the wet ground outside. Rarity bit her lip in distress, looking at the mess.

“Applejack,” she said, “please wipe your hooves off before you come in.” The earth pony glanced down at her hooves, cringed, and walked back over to the welcome mat, wiping off the wet dirt.

“Sorry ‘bout that, Rarity,” she said when she was finished. “Guess I was a little more concerned about getting dry than about being clean.”

The unicorn shook her head, the snipe lost on her. “It’s no problem, darling,” she said, nodding towards her mannequins, “it’s just that my clients have been in and out all day, and I need the shop to look its best. Ponies won’t want to buy from me if they see mud on

the ground.”

The orange pony nodded, raising an eyebrow. “Why’re you so busy, anyways?”

Rarity smiled, raising a hoof to showcase her many new clothing items. “They’re all being made for ponies attending the upcoming Gala!”

The orange earth pony chuckled, shaking her head. “I don’t know what in the hay all that is supposed to mean, Rarity, but I am glad you’re getting so much business. Sweet Apple Acres has been gettin’ ready for the Gala, too. We’re churning out more pies, fritters, and bushels of apples than I think I’ve ever seen!”

Rarity nodded, smiling. “Well, I am ever so glad to hear that things are going swimmingly for you, dear Applejack. But, if you will excuse me, I must return to working on my outfits. There’s plenty of time, but, as you know, I am never comfortable unless I’m working or being pampered.” She gave an airy laugh.

“But that’s just the thing, sugarcube,” Applejack said, nodding towards the door. “I came to grab ya for Twilight’s sleepover. Don’t ya remember when we planned it out? It was three weeks ago!”

The unicorn gasped. “Oh my! How could I have forgotten Twilight was having her sleepover today? Oh, how silly of me!” Rarity began hurriedly putting things away, stopping only for a moment to open the curtains of a window. The evening sun, orange and fading fast, peeked over the horizon at the pair of ponies. “Oh, it’s nearly dark! How upset she must be with me!”

Applejack rolled her eyes, trotting over to assist Rarity with her clean-up. “Don’t get your hair all in a twist, Rarity,” she said. “Twi’s sleepover don’t begin for another hour or so; I just wanted to make sure you didn’t forget, that’s all.” The white pony breathed a sigh of relief, her pacing slowing down a little.

Rarity sighed. “I wish you’d have told me sooner, saved me this panic.” She moved her hair out of her eyes. “That is alright, I suppose,” she said when she was finished, “I’ll have plenty of time to get ready now. Thank you for the heads-up, Applejack.”

“Right,” Applejack said. “Well, it looks like you’re about finished here, so I’m gonna head on over to Twilight’s. She’ll be happy if we arrive early, knowing her. I’ll see you there.” With that, she turned and left, the door swinging shut behind her.

“Right, right,” Rarity said, watching Applejack go. When she was gone, Rarity huffed and trotted over to a mirror. Applejack could be so *rude* sometimes! Barging in unexpectedly, not mentioning the time of Twilight’s sleepover until after Rarity had panicked; that pony rubbed her the wrong way.

For as long as they had been friends, there had been no small amount of vitriol between the two—Rarity was always too clean, well-kept, and prissy for Applejack, and Applejack had always been far too willing to lay down and roll around in the dirt, too willing to get her hooves dirty, for Rarity’s taste. Not to mention the awful way she spoke!

But even with all of their differences, Rarity and Applejack managed to coexist happily enough; they mostly stayed out of each others’ way, preferring the company of other ponies to each other. Rarity would have her spa days with Fluttershy, Applejack would get into little pow-wows and—in Rarity’s opinion—childish competitions with Rainbow Dash, and they’d continued to pretend that Twilight’s first sleepover had cured them of their distaste for each other.

Which, of course, it hadn’t. The two ponies still fought nearly every time they saw each other—today had been tame in comparison to past scrapes they had gotten into. Rarity shuddered at the thought of Applejack smearing mud in her hair again. But things were happy; the sun was going down on Ponyville, and soon, the stars would illuminate a night of fun for all over at Twilight’s house—even with Applejack there, Rarity was greatly looking forward to it.

When finally her hair was coiffed to her sky-high standards of perfection, Rarity smiled, grabbing a scarf; even with the sun out, it was still winter, after all, and one had to keep warm and fashionable until it was time for the annual Winter Wrap-Up which she loved so much.

“Oh, Rarity!” she crowed, admiring herself. “You always did have an eye for fashion, you lovely mare!” She giggled and, horn lighting up, swung the door open. Bracing herself against a shiver, Rarity stepped out into the chilly night air, the door closing with a click behind her.

As much fun as she tended to have at these things, the amount of tension between herself and Applejack made them quite stressful as well. Applejack always wanted to participate in something uncouth, like a pillow fight or—ugh—‘wrasslin’’, as she liked to call it; the white unicorn wanted no part of such things. She never could understand the pony’s brutish ways, and she didn’t much care to, either.

Tonight, however, promised to be extra fun—or so Rarity could dimly recall Twilight saying. The purple mare had said that she wanted Applejack and Rarity to help her practice a few spells she was trying to learn. It was an unusual request—normally Twilight was the sort of pony who preferred to practice her spells on her own. Why she would need the help of two other ponies was beyond Rarity, but because she asked, Rarity was of course willing to lend a hoof.

Rarity, lost in her thoughts, soon found herself at the entrance of the library. A cold breeze blew through her mane, and she shivered, quickly giving the door a few raps. A

few moments passed in silence, but soon she heard muffled voices from within, and the door locks clicked, allowing the wooden slab to swing open, revealing Twilight's smiling face.

"Rarity!" she said, stepping aside to usher the white unicorn in. "You made it! And you're early, even!" Rarity tucked an errant bit of her mane back over her shoulder, smiling as she walked past Twilight.

"While there is such a thing as being fashionably late for parties, I would have felt just awful if I would've shown up late, darling." Spying Applejack, who had obviously only arrived a few minutes ago—she was still hanging up her hat and getting settled in—Rarity waved. "Applejack, so good to see you again!"

The orange pony looked up from where she was arranging pillows and grinned, sitting down on one. "Rarity! Nice seeing you again, too! I wondered where you were."

Twilight raised an eyebrow, looking back and forth between the two ponies. "I think I'm lost," she said. "Did you two meet up before you came over here?"

Rarity nodded. "Applejack was kind enough to stop by my boutique and remind me of the sleepover; I've been very busy making dresses for the Gala—and not only for us this time—and I'm afraid I simply lost track of time, not to mention forgetting about your party. I'm terribly sorry, Twilight." The purple unicorn shook her head, smiling.

"It's no problem, Rarity," she said, levitating a book onto the stack of pillows Applejack had laid out for her. "What matters is that you're here now, and we can get started on our fun! I put Spike to bed an hour or so ago, so we should be ready." Rarity had to giggle at her friend; even after several sleepovers, the purple mare wasn't accustomed to having guests over. She was a lot better about it now than she had been, but the naivety was still very much there.

"I been looking forward to this, actually," came Applejack's voice. "Sweet Apple Acres has been real hard at work making apple treats for the Gala. It's gonna be nice to just relax with y'all for a bit." Twilight wasn't the only one who had changed; Applejack had, just as Rarity had, realized that work wasn't everything, and that your friends were always there to take the edge off when you needed them.

And Applejack was not lying when she said the Apple family had been hard at work. For the last few weeks, Granny Smith had constantly been in the kitchen, baking trademark Sweet Apple Pies and Apple Crumbles for the Gala. Big Mac had been out in the fields with Applejack every day, helping her buck the trees in anticipation of the treats they would be used to make. Even Apple Bloom had been helping out—no doubt because she thought it would help earn her cutie mark—by bringing lemonade out to the applebuckers and helping Granny Smith with her cooking.

Or at least, that's what Rarity had heard from the earth pony. In fact, it seemed everypony she knew was terribly busy preparing for the Gala. Pinkie had been busily planning how "the best party in Equestria" would play out this year, and apparently hoping it would really be more like a party this time. Rainbow Dash had been practicing a routine for the Wonderbolts, and Fluttershy would be providing the music this year, so she and her animal chorus were quite occupied as well.

"So, Twilight." Applejack's voice broke Rarity from her thoughts. "What's all this about you needin' Rarity and me to help you practice a spell? What kinda spell is it?" The purple unicorn smiled.

"I was wondering when you might ask me that!" she said, magically flipping through the books he had set down earlier. "It's actually something I discovered in this book." When both ponies cocked an eyebrow, Twilight elaborated. "It's a teleportation spell. Should be pretty useful for getting myself and you guys around town when we need to get somewhere fast."

"Uh, Twilight?" interrupted Applejack. "Beg pardon, but can't you already teleport around? You were doin' it when I was having trouble with the apples that first year you came to town."

Twilight nodded. "Yes, Applejack, but that spell only works over a very short distance. This spell is a lot more powerful by comparison, and I think my magic has developed enough to handle it." Seemingly satisfied, Applejack sat back.

"Twilight, I don't mean to sound, err...mistrustful of your abilities," Rarity said, peering at what she could see of the book, "but I have heard that such spells are incredibly difficult to even attempt, let alone use correctly. There are...stories about what can happen when a spell like this is cast incorrectly."

Twilight shook her head. "Rarity, I've been tirelessly practicing my magic under Princess Celestia's guidance. If I wasn't able to do this spell, she would have told me so in the last response I got from her." When Rarity gave her a confused look, she continued. "I already cleared this with her. She's totally confident in me. All it'll take is concentration on my part--and yours."

Rarity still wasn't comfortable with the whole thing, but she nodded. "Very well, Twilight. If the Princess herself trusts in your magical abilities, then so do I. Just tell us what to do." Applejack nodded in agreement, standing next to Rarity.

"I just need you two to stay right there while I charge the spell," Twilight said, placing a hoof on the book as her horn began to glow steadily. Rarity bit her lip, turning to whisper to Applejack.

"Applejack," she said, "are you sure this a good idea? I mean, I don't want to sound like a

wet blanket, or a bad friend, but if something goes wrong..." She gulped.

Applejack smiled reassuringly. "Rarity, there ain't nothing to be afraid of. Twilight's Princess Celestia's number-one student and, like she said, the Princess told her she could pull it off. I'm bettin' everything's gonna be just fine. Don't be fussy about it."

"I suppose you're right, Applejack," Rarity said, relaxing for a moment, allowing the first waves of relaxation to hit her since she'd woken up this morning. She watched Twilight's horn glow, and was comforted by how in control the mare looked.

And that was when Twilight's horn let off a spark and a very unsettling crackle.

Rarity's eyes widened a little, and she turned back to Applejack. "I'm sorry, I know I said I was okay earlier, but those sparks are beginning to scare me. I really don't think this is a good idea, Applejack."

The earth pony turned to Rarity, her eyes narrowed slightly. "Rarity, I told ya it's gonna be fine. Quit bein' so worrisome."

"But Applejack!" Rarity whispered, her tone urgent, "I've seen things like this before! Please, you have to listen to me!"

"Rarity, quit your fussin' and stop bein' so huffy, for Celestia's sake, and the sake of my ears!" Applejack shot back, clearly quite annoyed with the unicorn.

"I am not being huffy!" the designer hissed, "I am just worried about my own well-being! I realize that, being raised like an animal, your instincts for self-preservation might be stunted, but I am not going to--"

"Aw, shut it!" Applejack hissed back. "You're gonna upset Twilight if she hears you. And for your information, animals have better instincts than ponies do, so don't go shootin' your mouth off half-cocked." Rarity's eyes were ablaze with anger now, and she began to shout.

"Applejack, you are such an insufferable ingrate!" she cried, not noticing the magical glow around herself and her enemy. The earth pony was equally livid, and responded in kind.

"Well you're just a fuddy-duddy fussybritches!" she yelled, butting heads with the unicorn, careful to avoid the sharp horn.

The shouting match continued for a few minutes, and it was quickly wearing Twilight's nerves down--she could hardly concentrate with the two of them going at it! Her mind was scrambling, and she couldn't think of a place to send the two bickering mares, other than away from herself, wherever that may be. Her horn sparked unnaturally, as though it

were shorting out. This wasn't good.

The two ponies stopped shouting for a moment, merely growling at each other, heads squished together. Finally, they both spoke up at the same time. "Well, you're just an immature little--"

And then they were both gone, leaving only slight scorch marks on the ground.

"Oh no..." Twilight said, her voice small for a moment, "Oh no, no no no no no no! Spike, help! You've gotta help!"

The little dragon came down from the loft of the library, rubbing at his eyes groggily. "What happened, Twilight? Didja drop a book out the window or something?"

Twilight glared at her assistant. "Spike, this is no time for jokes! I just teleported Rarity and Applejack and I don't know where they went!" Spike's eyes went wide.

"*What?!*" he practically screamed, the last vestiges of sleepiness leaving him at the mention of Rarity being in danger. "We gotta do something! Rarity's in trouble!" When Twilight raised an eyebrow at him, Spike blushed and added. "Applejack too, of course. We gotta save them!"

Twilight shook her head. "Spike, we can't exactly save them if we have no idea where they went! Oh, this is terrible! Princess Celestia's going to be so disappointed, and Rarity and AJ will...who knows?! I could get banished for this!"

Spike was already on the book-ladder, rooting through the dusty old volumes. "Maybe there's, like, a 'return' spell or something in here we can use to bring them back!"

Twilight gasped, running over to the shelves to join the search. "You're right, Spike, that's a great idea! If we can locate a return spell, maybe I can bring them back!" So the two tossed book after book aside, Spike hoping to reclaim his love, Twilight hoping to reclaim her friends.

Meanwhile, in a distant land, far across the mountains of Equestria, beyond the muddy Foggy Bottom Bog, and even past the capital city of Canterlot, Applejack and Rarity were just realizing what had happened.

Neither one knew exactly where they were at. It looked like a massive, dusty expanse of desert, with the sun dimly cutting through the layers of sand in the air. There was almost nothing around for miles, save lonely cacti. The earth beneath the two ponies' hooves was cracked and worn by the lack of rain and constant sand blowing around. In the distance, mist-cloaked mountaintops peered down at the pair of ponies forbiddingly.

"Uh, Rarity?" Applejack asked, her voice abnormally meek. "You, uh...wouldn't happen

to know where we are, wouldja?"

Rarity was silent for a few minutes, but finally responded, "No. No idea at all, Applejack." Her mind felt as empty as the desert around them.

"I reckon this means you were right," she said, "'bout Twilight and all. Good call, I guess." Rarity's tone remained even as she responded.

"Thank you. I thought this might happen."

With that, everything around the pair settled into deathly silence, save the sound of the wind whistling through the air and the sand.