The Silver Standard

by PatchworkPoltergeist

Summary

Once upon a time, Silver Spoon's life made sense. She had the right friends, the right house, and the right school for a young lady coming up in the world. Once upon a time, Silver Spoon lived amongst proud towers in a vibrant, bustling city that never slept.

Now she lives in Ponyville. Not so terrible once one gets used it it. Silver's learned to appreciate some ponies, harbor grudges for others, and tolerate the rest. But sometimes, she wonders if one pony in particular is as popular as she thought.
“Look,” Mother said. “We’re almost there.”

Silver Spoon yawned, struggling to keep her balance as she sat up. She squinted at the vague, splotchy shapes and shadows around her as she felt around for her glasses. They nearly slipped from her hooves as the carriage wheel hit a gopher hole and she banged her head against the seat.

“What, already?” Silver Spoon didn’t even remember closing her eyes. The last thing she remembered was the twinkling lights in the distance as they passed Baltimare—about nine hours ago, judging from the sun. The sky was silver. It wasn’t the beautiful, glittering silver of teapots or money or her mane. It was dull and flat, as if somepony had forgotten to polish it. Ugly, though appropriate, all things considered. Blue skies would add insult to injury.

A part of her wondered if she could turn over and go back to sleep. Maybe if she slept long enough the world would stop being terrible and correct itself to the way it was supposed to be. But Silver Spoon didn’t think she’d be that lucky. Besides, Mother and Father would never allow it. A young lady couldn’t just sleep the day away when there were so many things to be done, no matter how much she’d rather not do them.

Silver Spoon’s teeth rattled as the carriage clipped another gopher hole. *Ugh. Not that anypony could sleep through such a rotten ride.* Their old carriage never bumped like this. She rubbed her stiff neck and sore legs. Their old carriage was bigger and comfier too.

As they crested the hill, the filly stretched her neck out the window. High above and far away, the proud purple mountains of Canterlot, city of nobility and class, soaked in the sun of a new day. In Canterlot’s shadow stretched green acres of land dotted with thatched roofs, full of nobodies and absolutely nothing to do.

None of those dinky buildings looked taller than an oak tree. Silver Spoon saw no penthouses, no roller coasters, no century-old brownstones or museums, no grand opera houses, no zoos or waterparks or *anything.* It didn’t even have a train station. Probably because nopony wanted to go there. She was bored just looking at it. Silver Spoon groaned and pulled her head back inside.

Her mother, Pitch Perfect, watched the window as well. Sitting on the opposite side of the carriage, the morning shadows made her lilac coat look as grey as Father’s. She smiled gently at the sight, though Silver Spoon didn’t think she meant it.

“There it is,” she said. The breeze ruffled through her dress. “Ponyville.”

Silver Laurel, Silver Spoon’s father, looked up from his book. “Hm. Cute little place.” He didn’t smile at all, but his ears tilted forward, the way they always did when he was thinking. Not that Ponyville had anything worth thinking about. “It looks quiet.”

Silver Spoon wrinkled her nose. “I hate it.”

Father closed his book and adjusted his monocle. “Now, Brightness, how can you hate a place you’ve never even seen?”

“I can see it just fine from here and I hate it.” Silver Spoon turned away from the window and scooted over so she wouldn’t have to look at it anymore. “It’s tiny and boring and nopony interesting lives there.”
“And how do you know that?”

The filly slumped in her seat. “Because all of *those* ponies are back home.” Her real home, where everything was grand, bustling, and normal. None of her friends would be caught dead in this podunk town.

Silver Spoon’s ears drooped. School would have started a few minutes ago. Everypony knew she was moving (there’d been a little get-together in the courtyard for goodbyes and well-wishes) but she’d only told Wondermint and Fair Weather where she was going. Brights Brightly probably knew too, but was too polite to say anything.

But at Wisteria Academy, secrets never stayed secret for long. Even the scholarship students knew by now. Palanquin would make sure of that. Toplofty was probably laughing herself sick. Between the two of them, Silver Spoon’s reputation was in shreds with no way to ever, ever fix it.

Silver slouched lower and hid her face in her hooves. Three years building and preserving and perfecting her good name. Three years meeting all the right fillies, attending all the right parties, and saying all the right things at the right time to the right ponies. Three years of work, a third of her life, gone down the drain.

She squeezed her eyes shut and groaned. Her stomach hurt.

Mother frowned. “Posture, Silver Spoon.”

Her back was straight in an instant. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And stop making that face. Ladies do not sulk.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Silver gulped down the lump in her throat. Mother was right; she’d been careless. Right now, it was just her and the family in their carriage, but soon they’d be in public. Better to push Palanquin and her big fat mouth out of her mind and try to think of something else.

She sighed again and wished it was tea time. It would at least give her hooves and her head something constructive to do. A nice mint blend to calm her nerves. Or black tea, for focus.

In the distance, a mass of white fluff poured down a hill and into a valley. It looked like soap suds in a bathtub.

“What is that?” asked Silver Spoon.

“Sheep, I expect.” Father had gone back to his book, hardly glancing up.

“Oh.”

As they pulled closer, Ponyville’s details came into focus: clusters of trees (orchards, maybe?), yellow fields of wheat and vegetables, tall silos, and bright red barns. Somewhere in the distance, a rooster crowed.

The filly paled. “We… we’re not gonna be farmers are we?”

Mother threw back her head and laughed, short and sharp.

Father blinked up from his book. “You’ve seen pictures of the new house, Brightness. It’s nowhere near a farm, remember?”

She did. A white brick place, wider than it was tall, with a cute yellow fence running around it. The
garden in back had a gazebo perfect for tea parties. It was the only decent part of the move.

It still wasn’t as nice as their old penthouse.

Silver Spoon’s ears drooped again. “I miss Manehattan.”

Mother blinked slowly. “What did I just tell you about sulking?”

“I wasn’t sulking, I was just…” She shuffled her hooves on the upholstery. “Thinking out loud. I just… why can’t we move to Canterlot? That’s where your appraisal job is, right?” She looked to Silver Laurel, waiting for him to say something. Her father turned a page and said nothing.

Silver Spoon looked to Mother. “And wouldn’t it be better to have vocal lessons in a city that actually has an opera house?”

Pitch Perfect twitched her ears. The frown deepened.

Silver straightened her back and looked at the floor.

But all her mother said was, “The country air will be good for us.”

The filly nodded and said nothing more. She listened to the clip-clop of Brass Tacks’ hooves pulling their carriage along and could just barely see the swish of his white tail. Tacks was the only one left. The other servants left months ago, one after another.

“Unneeded help and a waste of money,” Mother had said.

Silver Spoon considered all the things they hadn’t packed: their ebony dining room set, much of Father’s art collection, and Mother’s old dresses and jewelry. Even some of Silver’s toys. “Toys or tea sets,” they’d said. Silver opted for the tea, of course. Toys were just toys, after all. She was a big filly and she’d outgrown most of them. She’d live.

“It’s easier to move when you’re not weighed down,” Father had said.

Everypony knew it was always better to donate things, not sell them. It was charitable, and charity did wonders for appearances. The Silvers had sold everything at auction.

“Mother?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Before we left, I…” Silver Spoon adjusted her glasses and flicked her tail. “I heard Toplofty talking to Fair Weather. She said Taffeta’s mom told her mom that we didn’t have money anymore.”

Pitch Perfect blinked. She pulled her lace shawl around her shoulders and adjusted her sapphire headband. The emerald one went better with her orange mane, but it was sold two weeks ago.

“What a beastly thing to say.” Mother’s voice was small and distant, even though she was just a few feet away.

Silver Spoon’s throat got tight again. She’d never seen Mother like this before. She looked so different—smaller... scared, even. Mothers weren’t supposed to get scared.

“Silver.” Father spoke gently and smoothly. “Sometimes things… change. Things nopony can help.”

Mother nodded and lifted her chin. “And when that happens, it’s up to us to make the best of our
circumstances. All of us.” Her bracelets jingled as she gestured towards the window. “Just because there’s a change in our surroundings, it does not mean a change in ourselves. Decorum is important. Now more than ever.”

The marketplace slowly rolled past the window. Ponies paused in their morning routine to watch the large carriage as it passed. A few waved at them. A pink mare with a fluffy tail waved especially hard.

New ponies that knew nothing of the Silvers. New opportunities to make the right maneuvers and the right connections.

“Do you understand me, Silver Spoon?”

Silver Spoon took one last look behind her, then turned to the road ahead. “Yes, ma’am.” This was no time for slouching, sulking, or slacking. It didn’t matter how she felt. Like it or not, Ponyville was her home now and she had a reputation to build.

The schoolhouse smelled like chalk and hickory wood. The paint looked new, but the floorboards creaked underhoof. Silver Spoon guessed it could be worse. Not for the first time, she peered out the classroom door, wondering where the rest of the school was. The whole building couldn’t be any bigger than Granddad’s study. She understood it was a small school—it was a small town with fewer foals to teach—but only one room? Not even a music room or gym or cafeteria?

Silver glanced at the rows of foals chatting amongst themselves. A few looked in her direction. On one hoof, fewer kids to remember and keep track of meant the waters would be simpler to navigate. A pond of peers instead of an ocean.

Two colts in the back shared a long, hearty laugh. Silver Spoon twitched an ear. On the other hoof, that meant the few ponies here knew each other well. They’d probably talked to each other from the moment they learned how. Harder to carve a niche. If she messed up, she couldn’t just slip into the background and wait for it to blow over. Everypony would be watching. Everypony.

Silver Spoon took a deep breath that traveled from deep in her chest to her wobbly knees. She couldn’t stop adjusting her glasses. Were her braids still straight? No split ends in her tail? She remembered to clean her hooves, right? What if—

A gentle hoof patted her shoulder. Miss Cheerilee smiled down at her. Silver remembered to inhale and smiled back. At least the teacher was nicer. Much nicer than Mister Martingale. She didn’t think he’d ever smiled a day in his life.

“Alright, my little ponies.” Cheerilee barely needed to raise her voice. The classroom chatter died down to just a few whispers. “Before we begin, we have a new student joining us today!”

Four rows of foals blinked curiously at the new grey filly. A few smiled. So far, so good. Good thing she’d opted for the buttercup yellow dress. It was pretty but not too showy and the pleats were too short to step on accidentally.

“This is Silver Spoon. She’s come a long way and I want you all to make her feel welcome.”

Those colts in back are laughing again. At me? Did I already make a mistake? Did... No. No, keep
calm. Young ladies are calm. Silver lifted her head and straightened her back. Decorum, Silver Spoon. A filly gets only one first impression.

Cheerilee turned to her again. “Silver Spoon, would you like to tell the class a little something about yourself?”

Don’t waste it.

“Of course. Thank you, Miss Cheerilee.” Silver stepped forward, curtseying as she flashed her best dinner party smile. “Good morning, Ponyville. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m Sterling Silver Spoon, of the Manehattan Silvers. I just turned nine last September.”

Those colts in back were still whispering to each other. It was very rude. Silver mentally crossed them off the list of possible associates.

“I previously attended the Wisteria Academy For Young Fillies, named last year as the second most esteemed school for foals in all of Equestria.”

A unicorn and a pegasus traded looks in the second row. The magenta filly behind them looked a little impressed. Good.

Silver Spoon’s voice lifted with her confidence. “Last year, the upperclassmare’s tennis team went to nationals. As did the debate team, lacrosse team, swim team, the fencing club, and the chess club. Our orchestra plays for Princess Celestia in Canterlot once a year.” She wondered what counted as an orchestra for this school. A couple recorders and a triangle?

A yellow filly with a tacky bow yawned and put her head in her hooves. Another foal looked out the window.

Step it up. “Ninety-seven percent of graduates go on to university. Seventy percent of those graduates then become the best of the best in their fields.” As opposed to shopkeeps and farmers.

A chubby grey foal stared at the clock.

“I left Wisteria with a 3.9 grade point average and I was vice president of the Junior Debutante Club. I personally suggested the decorations and entertainment for the dance last year.” Silver’s smile twitched. She tried not to remember the fact that she would have made president this year if she hadn’t moved. “My hobbies include——”

“Um. Well, that’s very impressive, Silver Spoon,” broke in Miss Cheerilee. Her smile was kind, but the lines around it said wrap it up.

Silver’s hooves fidgeted. Ponyfeathers.

She should have known there’d be a time limit. She should have thought of that when she wrote down her introduction. Or when she practiced it in front of her fish tank. Maybe she could just skip to the ending? No, the ending made no sense without the genealogy parts in the middle.

Silver Spoon frowned as she stared out at the rows of classmates. Did she say enough? It didn’t matter now, she’d run out of time. It had to be enough.

“Thank you for your time.” She curtsied again for good measure and looked over the desks. They weren’t labeled and she’d never received a seating chart. “Excuse me, Miss Cheerilee? Which desk is mine?”
The teacher shrugged with a little chuckle. “Oh, just choose any seat you like.”

“Hmm.” The room had sixteen seats and fourteen students, counting herself. So that was three—no, wait, somepony was absent today—four seats to choose from.

The seat in back was not an option. She couldn’t be seen back there and it was next to those colts who kept whispering through her introduction.

The free desk in the top right corner had great location, but it was in front of the chubby foal that kept looking at the clock and a filly with scuffed hooves and mud in her feathers. So probably not.

But maybe the seat right in the middle, next to the redhead? She wasn’t dirty and she’d listened to Silver’s introduction all the way through. Plus, they both wore glasses, so there was something they had in common, right?

Silver approached her with a little smile.

The filly smiled back. “Hiya!” She wiped her nose with her fetlock and sniffed wetly. “Welcome to our clath Thilver Thpoon!”

“Ehh... Hi.” Or maybe not.

That left just the last desk in the second row, right next to the window. It was behind a blonde unicorn with split ends and in front of the kid with the tacky bow. The desk next to it was empty. Silver Spoon eyed it as she took the window seat, looking for some sign of who the owner could be, but found none. She frowned. The absent foal was an unknown, a wildcard. Silver never liked wildcards.

Whatever. It was too soon to worry about. Neighboring the empty desk was nice in the meantime and if worse came to worse, she could always change seats. Silver adjusted her glasses and turned toward the front, notebook in hoof and fountain pen in her teeth.

While Silver Spoon was busy finding a seat, Miss Cheerilee had sketched out a forest diagram on the blackboard. Everything was labeled and lightly colored, from the green trees to the orange fox eyeing some white rabbits. A dragon flew over the trees, breathing a little red flame.

Cheerilee brushed green chalk dust off her muzzle and turned towards the class.

“Okay!” She always seemed to have the same keen tone of voice, like whatever she was talking about was the most exciting thing in the world. “Now, last week we left talking about biomes and...?”

“Ecosystems!” the class chorused.

Silver grinned around her pen. The ecology unit had finished a few months ago at Wisteria. She and Wondermint had made dioramas for extra credit.

“Let’s recap: what’s the difference between a biome and an ecosystem?”

Six little hooves rose into the air. The silver one was up first.

“Yes, Silver Spoon?”

“An ecosystem is a place where lots of organisms interact and survive, like plants and animals and prey and predators and scavengers and funguses. It all works together like a big web,” the new filly
recited. Her diction was crisp and precise. “But a biome is much bigger, like a bunch of ecosystems
tied together, and shaped by environmental surroundings.”

Cheerilee nodded. “Yes, very good.”

A pair of orange earth fillies exchanged looks. Silver lifted her head and smirked. A pink unicorn
quirked an eyebrow. Somepony whispered.

“Last time we talked about the Everfree Forest as an example of an ecosystem right here near
Ponyville.” Cheerilee took a metal pointer and skimmed it over the little green trees and the dragon.
“But can anypony give me an example of a biom—Silver Spoon?”

“A desert.” Silver tucked her fountain pen behind her ear. There was no real need to take notes.
“Which aren’t always hot, they can be cold, too.”

“That’s one ex—”

“Or a tundra. Or a forest—like a rainforest or a temperate forest—or a grassland or a swamp.” She
paused a moment. “Oh, and also aquatic biomes like coral reefs and lakes.”

The whispers doubled. Silver Spoon spared a glance over her shoulder. She thought she’d heard her
name. The pair of orange earth ponies pretended they weren’t looking. A scrawny kid with big eyes
quickly glanced away when he saw her turn, as did a white unicorn. The filly with the tacky bow
blINKed and the tatty-feathered pegasus frowned. The chubby colt twitched his ears.

Silver waggled her eyebrows and grinned at them. It wasn’t ladylike to grin that way, but it was hard
to help. Not even lunchtime and she’d caught the eye of half the class.

“…in places like grasslands?”

Wait. What about grasslands? She hadn’t been listening. Silver’s hoof skimmed her monogrammed
notebook cover. Maybe she should just try answering anyway. But if she got it wrong, that would
ruin her streak. Then again, so would not raising her hoof at all.

She raised it halfway. Effort made, but not too noticeable.

Cheerilee nodded to the redhead with the snifflY nose. “Yes, Twist?”

The filly pushed her glasses on the bridge of her muzzle. “Um… hyenath are a kind of thcavengers.”

Silver Spoon’s hoof shot into the air and caught her opportunity. “Actually, that’s a myth. Hyenas
are really good hunters and don’t scavenge all that much.” She flipped her braid over her shoulder
and steepled her hooves. Good save.

Twist’s ears drooped.

That’s why you don’t answer questions you don’t know, kid. Silver Spoon quirked an eyebrow. The
tatty pegasus was glaring at her. Another pony frowned. What was their problem?

“True, Silver Spoon.” Cheerilee wrote “hyena” in red chalk under a column for predators and
another for scavengers. “But next time, please wait until I call on you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” After a moment of thought, Silver raised her hoof again.

The teacher blinked slowly. “Yes?”
“A better example of a grassland scavenger would be a vulture. Or a jackal, though they hunt too.”

As Miss Cheerilee wrote down the examples and dove into her lecture, Silver took the pen from behind her ear and scribbled notes. She didn’t really need them, but it looked good and extra notes never hurt a pony. She kept her ears pricked and eyes focused. No way she was going to miss another question.

Besides, she didn’t need to look to know the eyes of the classroom were upon her. It kept her back straight, her hoof in the air, and her voice confident. The ball was in her court and this was no time to drop it.

“There are actually some plants that are carnivorous, too. Who can name one?”

A little silver hoof waved in the air.

In the back, somepony groaned.

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The scene before her was bizarre. Chaotic. Distressing. In the shade of a flowering dogwood, Silver Spoon poured herself a cup of tea and watched.

Two unicorn colts—the blue one who ate too much and the yellow one who ate too little—darted across the playground. The blue one jumped a bed of posies, swerving to miss the fillies playing hopscotch. His yellow friend was right behind him, panting as he barreled through the sandbox.

But the thing was, they didn’t seem to be running anywhere in particular. The path zig-zagged, double-backed, tumbled, tangled, and corkscrewed in random directions. There were no patterns and there was no coordination. No order to it at all!

At first, Silver worried they were running from a mean dog or something. Or they were running to catch crickets or frogs (that was a thing colts did, right?). But there were no frogs or dogs or anything. They were just running for no reason, all sweaty and loud.

The blue colt pivoted on his front hooves and swung right. Too fast for the yellow colt. His gangly spindle legs scrambled to make the turn, but he couldn’t get traction. The grass was still wet from last night’s rainstorm. His shadow loomed over the wide, shiny mud puddle just behind him and he wasn’t looking where he was going and—

Silver Spoon gripped the edge of her table and squeezed her eyes shut. It was too horrible to watch. She shuddered at the squelch of mud underhoof. Her ears flattened against the wet, sticky splat of impact.

She creaked one eye open. A jolt of revulsion rippled through her pristine coat. The poor colt dripped from flank to gaskin. Mud freckled his shoulders and neck, to say nothing of the total disaster of his tail. It would take hours to wash all of it out.

He didn’t look hurt, save for his coat and his pride, but that was more than enough. Silver plopped a sugar cube in her cup. She kept an eye on her tea as she stirred, shaking her head with a little “tsk”.

Guffaws wheezed and rasped like a rusty gate. If the class didn’t notice his fall before, then they certainly did now.
Silver shrugged her shoulders. Well, that’s what you get for being careless. She felt bad for the kid—really, she did—but there was no changing the fact that it was his own fault. The filly took a little sip and glanced over her cup. Maybe the next time he’ll… wait.

She wiped the steam from her glasses and looked again, just to make sure she wasn’t seeing things.

A small crowd gathered around the scene, but the only pony laughing was the gangly, muddy colt. In fact, he laughed so hard he was gasping. The yellow colt looked up, grinning as his stout friend came trotting back. “Hey, Snips!”

The blue colt chuckled with him. “You okay, Snails?”

Snails hopped up and shook himself. Mud splattered in all directions, though nopony seemed to care. “Heh, never better!” He squinted and frowned. “Except…”

Snips stepped closer. “What?”

“C’mere.” Snails looked over his shoulder and waved his friend over. In a conspiratorial whisper that wasn’t a whisper at all, he hissed, “It’s a secret.”

Snips pricked his ears and leaned in. A couple of spectators leaned in, too. “Yeah?”

“Oh, Snips. I need ya to listen reeeeeeal carefully. Snips? You’re…”

More foals gathered around them, craning their necks to see and flicking their ears.

“You’re… IT!” The gangly colt smacked Snails with both muddy hooves and sprang away laughing. The little crowd screamed and fanned out like Snips was suddenly diseased.

Silver Spoon put down her tea and stared at all of it, completely lost. Wondering if the lemon tea was too strong, she glanced at the cup in her hooves. Another pony’s shadow fell over the lace tablecloth. Silver looked up to find a unicorn filly watching her. She blinked.

The filly blinked back, smiling. “Hi!” Sweeping curls bobbed on her shoulders as she waved her white hoof. “I’m Sweetie Belle.”

“Oh, hello.” Clean coat and decent manners. She seemed alright. “I’m Silver Spoon. I just moved here.”

“I know. What are you doing?” Sweetie Belle poked the tablecloth laid across the splintery picnic table and peered at the porcelain tea cups and teapot. A stack of cucumber sandwiches sat on a little blue plate that matched Silver Spoon’s glasses. A tiny spoon twinkled in the little sugar bowl. “Are you having a tea party?”

“What? Of course not.” You couldn’t have a tea party with just one pony and besides, Silver’s dress was way too casual. “Just regular afternoon tea.”

“Why? It’s recess.”

“I know,” said Silver Spoon. She flicked her tail, irritated. She couldn’t hear the birds over her classmate’s shrieking laughter. “It’s also tea time.” What else would she be doing at recess?

“So, um.” The unicorn shuffled her hoof. “Do you like Ponyville?”

“The air is fresher here. I like the ponds and flowers.” It was the only polite response she could think of. After a second, she added, “And when we first came, somepony threw us a party… Pinkie Pie, I
think? That was nice, I guess.”

The party hadn’t lasted long. Mother didn’t appreciate unscheduled celebrations and Father hadn’t liked the confetti in his nice jacket. Neither of them liked how loud she was. Silver Spoon liked the balloons and cupcakes, though.

Sweetie Belle smiled. “Oh yeah, Pinkie’s really great! She threw me an awesome birthday party last year.”

“She said she knew it was hard moving to a new place.” Silver Spoon had liked that better than the party. The filly did not think about Manehattan and did not frown. There was company. “Father got a new job. He’s an appraiser for Canterlot Museum of Art and Antiquities.” She nudged the cucumber sandwiches forward.

“What’s an appraiser?” Sweetie sniffed the sandwich and ate it in a few bites.

“It’s when you know how much things are worth. He used to do a lot for the Manehattan Museum of Modern Art. He helped them get a Coltralock painting last year.” Silver took another sip of lemon tea and flicked an ear. It needed a bit more sugar. “What does your father do?”

“Oh, um…” The filly’s green eyes flicked about as she thought. “He’s a hoofball coach. For peewee hoofball teams, I think? I never really thought much about it. But my mom makes fishing lures.”

Silver quirked an eyebrow. “Makes what?”

“Fishing lures. You know, those things that go on fishing lines when you don’t want to dig up worms. She makes them look like flies and bugs so the fish will eat them and she’s really good at it!”

“Ew!” Worms and bugs were not polite conversation for young ladies. Especially not young ladies at tea. “Why would anypony need to go fishing? Ponies don’t even eat fish!”

“Cats do.” Sweetie Belle shrugged. “Somepony needs to feed them, right?”

“Hmm... I guess so,” said Silver Spoon. “My mother is Pitch Perfect. She’s an opera soprano. The last production she was in was Yeomare of the Guard; it got excellent reviews in all the papers. Even the Grazer Gazette.”

“I think my sister told me about opera once… it’s like a musical, right? Except ponies sing the whole thing instead of just a few songs.” Sweetie leaned over the table, rumpling the tablecloth. “Ooh! Did your mom ever sing on Bridleway?”

Her green eyes sparkled at the idea. “I always wanted to go see a Bridleway show but they’re all so far away and expensive. I’ve got all the big records: The Queens and Ewe, Lease, Mare of la Manecha…”

Silver smiled politely. “I don’t think so,” she chuckled. “Mother says musicals are just opera’s tacky half-wit cousin.”

Sweetie Belle wilted. “Oh.”

The new filly tilted her head. Why was she… Oh! Of course! In the midst of making conversation, Silver Spoon had forgotten her manners. No wonder the filly was upset; she never received her invitation.

“Would you like to join me for tea, Sweetie Belle?”
“No thanks,” Sweetie said. “I don’t really like tea.”

It was Silver’s turn to frown.

“Actually, I was kinda wondering if maybe you wanted to come play tag with us.” She nodded to the shrieking chaos ripping through the grass. “I saw you watching us.”

“It looks… loud.” The grey filly cradled her teacup close as she took another sip. She fidgeted in her chair as a pegasus tackled an earth pony. “What exactly is tag?”

Sweetie giggled. “It’s a game!”

“But where’s the ball? Or the nets? Where are the boundary lines?” She stretched her neck to see better. “I don’t see a referee and who’s keeping score, anyway? What are the teams?”

“You don’t need nets and stuff for tag, Silver Spoon. It’s just… tag.” The unicorn’s smile faded at Silver’s lost expression. “You know… tag? Somepony is It and then they chase other ponies until they tag them.”

“Then what?”

“Then they’re It and they chase evrypony instead. And that’s all.”

“How do you win?”

“You don’t really win tag,” said Sweetie. “I think you just play it.”

“Alright.” The teacup clinked upon the saucer. Silver adjusted her glasses and leaned forward with steepled hooves. “Let me get this straight: you just run all scattershot in a field full of bugs and there’s no rules, no referee, getting muddy and grass-stained while you smack each other with muddy grass-stained hooves. And nopony even wins.”

“Well…” The unicorn shuffled an uncertain hoof. “Yeah, but—”

“And you want me—me, in my brand new Prim Hemline dress—to stop in the middle of teatime to flail around in a gross, dirty, buggy field?” Silver Spoon flipped her braid over her shoulder and scoffed. “Yeah, thanks but no thanks.”

“Oh. Um… okay, then. Maybe next time.”

Silver wrinkled her nose. Fat chance.

Sweetie Belle walked off, tail dragging behind her. A scruffy pegasus waited for her at the edge of the field. It was hard to tell the coat color under all the grime, but her purple mane spiked and curved over like a tidal wave. “Well?”

The unicorn shook her head. “Nope.”

“Yeah, what’d I tell you?” The scruffy filly looked in Silver Spoon’s direction and rolled her eyes before they both went back to the “game”.

Silver Spoon flipped her tail and straightened out the wrinkles in her tablecloth. “Hmph. Whatever.” If that was what counted as “fun” around here, Silver would rather just not have any. No, she’d have a proper recess right here under the dogwood tree and wait for decent company.

Surely one of her classmates would get tired of running around like late shoppers on Hearth’s
Warming Eve and come join her. And when that happened, she’d be ready and waiting with her teapot.

Silver wasn’t worried. She’d taken every precaution to guarantee a lasting first impression. Make the right impression and ponies will come to you.

She ate another cucumber sandwich while she waited. She waited until the bell rang to come back inside.

Silver paused to look at the second cup and saucer, clean and unused, before she packed it up. *It’s okay. There’s always tomorrow.*

On Tuesday, Cheerilee’s class played Guards and Robbers. Silver Spoon had jasmine tea.

On Wednesday, her classmates had a water balloon fight. Silver Spoon had earl grey.

On Thursday, there was a boys versus girls game of Mice and Manticores. Silver Spoon drank honeybush tea and reread *The Clandestine Commons*.

On Friday, Silver Spoon stayed indoors.

“Welcome home, young miss.”

“Hi, Brass Tacks.” Silver rolled off her saddlebag and let her butler’s magic take it. “Is Mother home?”

“Madame Perfect has not arrived just yet, no.”

“Good.” Mother had a sixth sense about failure and Silver Spoon wasn’t ready just yet to admit hers. She looked up as Brass unpacked her things for her. His coat was the color of sun tea and it contrasted nicely against the white suit. “Don’t bother with the porcelain cup, it’s not dirty.”

“Is that so?” The unicorn levitated the little cup in a soft pink aura. Pristine as the day it was bought. “Isn’t this from the tea set you brought on Monday? For your guests?”

Silver Spoon nodded.

Today was Friday. Brass frowned. “And you’ve not used it? At all?”

Silver rubbed her shoulder and shook her head.

Brass Tacks peeked under the lace tablecloth. The silver tea cup marked with the filly’s initials looked clean, too. As if she’d never taken it out. “I notice you’ve come home uncharacteristically early for the past few days, Miss Silver Spoon.”

The filly looked up at him. Her ears sagged.

“Hm. Emergency tea?”
It was a smooth blend of lavender, chamomile, milk, and honey. Brass served it from a simple white ceramic set, the same one Silver had used since she was four. Back then, it poured hot milk because Silver Laurel didn’t think she was old enough for tea.

Two corn muffins steamed in the center of a little table. Silver took one and gently blew on it. It was impolite, but Emergency Tea had different rules.

“I just don’t understand, Tacks.” She ran her hoof through her unbraided mane. “I answered every question right. I was polite, I wore my best casual dress—twice!—and I kept decorum. I did everything right.”

Silver took a bite of muffin and a long, long sip of tea. She closed her eyes and felt it steep in her system, warm and full. “I know I did everything right, but…” She breathed in the steam curling from the cup until her voice was steady and her chest didn’t feel tight anymore. “But I haven’t connected with anypony except Miss Cheerilee and I don’t think she counts. It’s her job to like foals.”

The filly glanced down at her folded hooves. “None of them want to come have teatime or talk to me. I don’t think they like me, Tacks.”

“You are a new filly, miss. It takes time to make friends and it’s only been a week.” Brass Tacks adjusted himself in the foal-sized seat and patted his muzzle with a napkin. “Have you approached them?”

Silver took another little bite of muffin and flattened her ears.

“Initiative is an admirable quality in a young lady,” Brass gently added.

“I know, but…these Ponyville foals are just so…” Silver Spoon banged her cup upon the saucer. “I don’t know what to say to them! We don’t have anything to talk about and I don’t like tag or water balloons or Guards and Robbers or that… that thing with the lines and you throw a ball around?”

“Four square?”

“Yeah, that. Why can’t they just have a tennis court like a normal school?” She finished her tea and glanced at her fish tank. The little betta fish’s indigo fins waved in the water like long silk scarves. Father had gotten him for her new room and his scales matched the wallpaper accents. Silver Spoon had named him Ferdinand.

Ferdinand was all alone, too. The pegasus who gave him away said he’d fight if there were other fish. Ferdinand didn’t seem to mind too much.

“Berry Pinch called me a snob today,” said Silver Spoon.

Brass Tacks poured her another cup. “How unkind. What do you think made her say that?”

The filly shrugged. “I didn’t do anything different than what I always do. I mean, it worked at Wisteria Academy just fine. I had three friends by the end of my second day there.”

Brass sipped his tea and declined to mention that two of those three fillies lived in the same building and their parents had grasped for the Silvers’ good favor for years. Instead, he said, “I’ll ask Miss Silver to recall this is not Manehattan.”
Silver Spoon blew a strand of mane from her face. “No kidding.”

“Consider this, then: As a different school in a different town, the rules of engagement are different as well. Perhaps the young miss should—”

“Change strategies,” Silver finished. She frowned and put a hoof to her mouth. “I need to adapt to the ecosystem.”

Brass Tacks smiled. “Precisely.”

“Within reason, of course.” No way she was setting hoof in the muck. Silver Spoon would drink generic-brand tea first.

The Silver Family traditionally began the day at 6:45 sharp. Once upon a time, it was because they had to beat the Manehattan traffic and both the opera house and academy had little mercy for tardy ponies. Now it was done purely out of habit and punctuality, with the additional bonus of a longer breakfast.

Still, the walk to Ponyville Schoolhouse was only fifteen minutes (twenty if she went slowly) and thus, Silver Spoon was always in her seat half an hour before the bell rang. The extra time was nice to catch up on reading or go over her notes with Miss Cheerilee.

But on Monday morning, Silver arrived to discover somepony had beaten her there. A bag she’d never seen before rested on the desk next to hers. The owner was nowhere to be seen, though Silver Spoon could just barely hear Miss Cheerilee talking to somepony outside the classroom.

Most saddlebags in class were made of tweed or oilskin or denim. This one was made of ocean leather, buffed and embossed to a slick shine. The blue stitching popped against the eggshell white and the buckles had a pretty silver finish. It was hard to tell while it was closed, but Silver Spoon thought the lining was sateen, if not real satin. A blue G-clef keychain dangled from the strap.

Silver raised her eyebrows. The Bleu Rondo logo. Whoever owned this had excellent taste. Her ear pricked at approaching hoofsteps and turned.

Miss Cheerilee entered, followed by a pink filly carrying a folder full of papers.

“Good morning, Miss Cheerilee.”

“Morning, Silver Spoon.” Cheerilee smiled as she set down her things. “Are you feeling better today?”

“Much better, thank you.” Silver glanced back at the pink filly. The pink filly flicked her tail and returned the look. “Hello.”

“Hi.” She nodded to her bag. “You like it?” It was a question she obviously knew the answer to. She must have seen Silver looking at it through the window. Still, it was only polite to oblige.

“Yeah, the stitching is really good. I didn’t know Bleu Rondo made saddlebags.

“They just started last month. These are brand new. Daddy pre-ordered it, like, forever ago. I thought it’d never get here!” The filly opened the bag to show off the blue lining as she slid in the folder. “I
almost got the pink and yellow one, but this one goes better with my eyes.”

“And white goes with everything,” Silver added.

Silence settled into the room again. The filly fidgeted in her seat and waited for somepony to say something else. Nopony did. The wood creaked and Cheerilee’s chalk clacked on the blackboard.

Ponies only get one chance at a first impression. But sometimes, a lucky pony got two. It was time to take some initiative. Silver Spoon pointed to the folder. “So, um. What’s that? Make-up work?”

The filly rolled her blue eyes and groaned like somepony was pulling teeth. “Ughhhhh, don’t remind me.” She flipped the bag closed so she wouldn’t have to look at the folder anymore. “Like it’s not enough I get stuck in bed all week with the pony pox, now I gotta get punished for it with more work.”

“Oh. Well, if you want…” Silver opened her own velvet bag and pulled out her notebook. “I’ve been taking really good notes all week.”

A little smile crossed the pink filly’s face. “Thanks, kid. Are you new?”

“Mm-hmm. We got here last Sunday.” She adjusted her glasses and looked the filly over again. The coat was clean, her hooves polished to a shine. “I’m Silver Spoon.”

“Diamond Tiara.” The filly carried her head high and stood braced and tall, like she owned the world. And judging from the edge in her voice, she was ready to fight you for it. “You move in the white house on the corner across from Davenport’s? I saw some big, new carriage next to it.”

“That’s us.” Silver glanced at the bag again.

The filly obviously had money, but Silver Spoon didn’t think that money had been in her family very long. Nopony comfortable with their wealth stood like that. ‘New money runs, old money walks’, Granddad Silvertongue used to say. Silver wondered just how new that money was. One generation? Two?

“We’re from Manehattan. Mother teaches voice lessons in town.” Silver blinked at the shiny horseshoes under Diamond’s hooves. Probably two generations. This foal was too confident to be otherwise. “Father works in Canterlot, though.”

“My daddy owns Barnyard Bargains. It’s the biggest and most successful business in town.” She tossed her lavender and white curls over her shoulder and took her seat.

The other foals trickled into the classroom. Silver couldn’t help but notice they gave Diamond a wide berth. The pink filly shook her head sadly, then tilted her head towards Silver Spoon with a sigh and a smile. “So nice to finally have some real class in this class. Besides myself, of course.”

Silver giggled at that. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but…” She glanced at Scootaloo’s raggedy mane and Dinky’s hopping gait. Her hooves covered her mouth as she giggled again.

“Like, have you seen Apple Bloom’s bow?” Diamond Tiara leaned over and lowered her voice to a whisper. “You’d think somepony’d tell her not to wear the same thing every day.”

“I know, right? At first I thought maybe that bows were just her thing, like there was a bunch of bows in different colors, but no, same thing every day. It’s so boring!” Across the room, Apple Bloom opened her book and chewed on her pencil. Silver rolled her eyes. “Change it up, kid. Bedazzle it or something.”
Diamond grinned. “Bet she’s gonna wear it till she’s as old as Granny Smith.”

Silver Spoon didn’t know who Granny Smith was, but she laughed anyway. “I just don’t get some of these kids. It’s like you’re the only one who even speaks my language, you know?”

“Oh, I totally know what you mean.” The pink filly nodded sagely. “It can be so hard sometimes. You know what you need, Silver Spoon?”

“What?”

“You need a translator. Luckily for you, I can be that transla—wait! Oh. My. Gosh.” Diamond Tiara’s eyes popped wide, then wider still. “Ohmigosh, Silver Spoon!” She leaned so far over her desk, the fillies almost touched noses. “Silver Spoon!”

Silver pulled back her head a bit. “Um… yeah?”

“I just had the. Best. Idea. In the history of great ideas. We should be friends. No!” Diamond’s grin got so wide it was almost touching her ears. “No... We should be best friends!”

Silver Spoon frowned. “But the route is perfect!”

Diamond Tiara had elected to forgo Silver’s usual way home in favor of the scenic route: a winding meander that snaked through all of Ponyville’s major landmarks, popular hangouts, and best kept secrets. ‘The Newbie Route’, Diamond called it, and it was four times the length of Silver Spoon’s usual route. The old way home, as it turned out, was Problem One.

“It’s quick, precise, and efficient,” Silver continued. “A straight shot so I’m never lost or late.” She paused again to consider the narrow, reliable path, but didn’t have time to look long.

A few yards ahead, Diamond Tiara kept her ears up and her eyes focused. The filly who’d slouched and doodled her way through class today evaporated in the afternoon sun, and the real Diamond Tiara hit the ground running. Raw ambition and poise wrapped in a plush pink coat, she knew exactly where she was going and how to get there, and she had no time for stragglers. If Silver Spoon wanted to keep up, there was no time to wax nostalgic on old routes and old ways.

Diamond glanced back as Silver met her shoulder. “Okay, first, school is over, and you don’t have any after-school lessons, right? Nopony told you to be back early?”

“Well, no…”

“Then you can’t be late because you don’t have anywhere to be. Second, if you know The Newbie Route, you pretty much know Ponyville, so you can’t get lost.” Diamond watched Silver take in the surroundings and borders. “Trust me, getting lost in Ponyville’s like, totally impossible. Dad told me most of the roads end up leading to town hall and you know where that is, right?”

Silver mulled it over as they passed a boutique. She wondered if they’d entered the shopping district. “I think so?”

“No, you know so. Your place is near Davenport’s, and you can see Town Hall from Davenport’s, no problem. So you don’t need to be worried about getting lost.” Diamond nodded at Silver’s brimming smile.

They approached a house a little bigger than Silver Spoon’s. Diamond’s, Silver Spoon guessed. Strangely, it had a thatched roof like the other cottages, not tile or brick. In fact, save for the iron gate and the size, it looked no different than any other cottage. Same design and everything. How odd.

Diamond waved to the old, well-dressed cob watering the massive zoysia lawn. “And third—Hi, Randolph—third, just think for a second: how do you expect ponies to appreciate you if they can never see you? Like, if you got a brand new dress, are you gonna keep it in your closet where nopony’s gonna see it?”

Silver Spoon had to concede that logic. “There’s no point getting a new dress if you never wear it.” She nodded to herself. More to herself than Diamond, she said, “Ponies can’t like somepony they don’t know.”

The walk from school to the market took less than ten minutes, and Silver Spoon’s error became clearer with every step. Ponyville was not an impersonal sprawl of brick and stone. She no longer had the luxury of singling out who mattered and who didn’t.

For each quaint boutique, tiny specialty shop, and cottage they’d passed, there was a pony. Silver
had been watching them. The salesponies in the windows, the casual strollers on the path, the housewives watering their gardens, the foals playing ball, even the weatherponies in the clouds all knew Diamond Tiara and Diamond knew them.

It was the same when they entered the marketplace; even without exchanging words, smiles, or bits, they moved around each other with a certain familiarity. They didn’t need to look to know who was there, they just knew.

Not so for Silver Spoon. A weathermare hoof deep in cumulus looked twice before she passed them. The mailmare tilted her head and watched her for a while. A distracted lyrist fumbled a chord. They didn’t know each other. Yes, Silver understood now. One didn’t make tea by just dunking a teabag in and out of the cup. No, the only way to get full flavor—or any flavor—was to let it steep.

Diamond’s pace slowed in the thicket of sales stands. She scanned the area and zeroed in on a flower seller.

“Hi, Diamond Tiara.” The pink florist smiled down at them. Her mane rolled against her shoulder in full, green billows. “Who’s your friend?”

Silver opened her mouth, then closed it. What were you supposed to say to ponies on the street? In Manehattan, you weren’t supposed to talk to strangers. But nopony was a stranger in Ponyville, it seemed.

Diamond swooped in before the silence had a chance to grow awkward. “This is Silver Spoon. She just got here from Manehattan.” She fluttered her eyelashes. “Right?”

Silver took the hint and nodded with a polite smile. “Hello, ma’am.”

The florist’s twinkly laugh broke what was left of the ice. “Oh, I don’t think I’m a ma’am quite yet. ‘Daisy’ is fine, thanks.” She swept her hoof over the sweet-smelling inventory. “So, what’ll it be, girls? The usual?”

Diamond rubbed her chin. “Hmm.”

Silver perused the sprays and bouquets carefully. The lily leaves gleamed with health, and the orchids bounced with the breeze. Limp daffodils leaned against some bruised roses and a little spray of pale gardenias. The bluebells and snowdrops looked wonderful, but somepony cleared most of them out, leaving just single blooms; not worth it. She couldn’t really tell what most of them smelled like, for the mountain laurel’s grape-candy scent overpowered everything around it.

“Yeah, the usual.” Diamond nodded. “I’ll get the daffodils and—“

Silver leaned in. “Wait, no.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” Diamond’s face soured. “I always get daffodils.”

“Yeah…” Silver flicked her eyes up at Daisy and lowered her voice. “Maybe so, but those daffodils are limp. And look at the leaves, they’re browning. Go for the laurel instead, or the orchids.”

Diamond Tiara gave Silver Spoon a long look.

Silver Spoon blinked, but didn’t break the stare.

“You really think so?”
Silver gave a crisp nod.

“Fine.” Diamond turned back to the stand and put down five bits. “Actually, I think I’ll get a spray of mountain laurel.”

“Great choice, Diamond.” Daisy nudged the bits into her bag and bundled the laurel with bright pink string. “These blossomed just this morning. Lily’s just so proud of them.”

The pink filly twitched her nose at the strong scent. She tasted a petal. Her ears pricked and her eyes grew big and wide. Diamond chomped the rest of the stem in two bites.

Silver tried one for herself. The blossom was even better than she anticipated, with silky petals and a sweet aftertaste.

“I’ll tell Lily you liked ‘em, girls. Oh, and here!” Daisy tossed down a primrose the same color as Silver’s eyes. “Welcome to Ponyville, Silver Spoon.”

“It’s very nice,” said Silver Spoon, “But I didn’t bring any—”

Daisy winked. “It’s on the house, dear. Just don’t tell Roseluck.”

“There, you see? You’re more popular already.” Diamond Tiara munched another laurel stem. “C’mere a sec.” She plucked the primrose from Silver’s hoof, nipped the stem, and tucked it behind Silver Spoon’s ear.

As they moved on, Silver couldn’t help noticing the change in Diamond’s pace. There was room to trot here, but here she… well, Silver couldn’t quite name it. The filly’s stride lurked somewhere between a powertrot and a prowl, relaxed but firm. There was something familiar in it that Silver Spoon couldn’t quite place. But she knew she’d seen it before.

“Miss Daisy’s nice, but she’s just one flower seller.” Silver touched the flower in her hair and watched the shadows passing over them. “I’m not sure if that really counts as being popular.”

Diamond twitched an ear, but didn’t respond.

Silver traced the shadows to a pegasus family skimming the thatched roofs: two mares, a frighteningly buff stallion, and a familiar colt. The stick-legged shrimp with the big ears—Featherfluff or something—straggled behind, tongue hanging out of his mouth as he pumped his wings.

Diamond Tiara followed Silver’s line of sight and slowed to a stop. She locked eyes with the colt. The spindly kid hovered, frozen. He licked his top lip and fidgeted to keep his height. He seemed nervous. Maybe he’d done something. Or maybe he was just embarrassed about his flying; it didn’t look like he was very good at it yet.

The pink filly lightly nodded to him. “Featherweight.”

“Hi, Diamond Tiara.” His wings pumped him a couple inches lower. He tilted his head. “Oh, and Silver Spoon, right?”

Silver nodded.

“This is like, so crazy,” Diamond laughed. “We were just talking about you just now.” She nudged Silver’s hoof. “Right, Silver Spoon?”
“Oh…oh, yes! Yes, we were. I was just saying…” She flipped through the mental catalog of stuff Featherweight did lately. “…how much I liked your extra credit presentation today. It was really detailed, with the photos of frogs and birds and…things.” And bugs. Close-ups of horrible, icky bugs with grubby feelers and freaky legs. Silver suppressed a cringe.

Actually, Featherweight’s pond presentation had been sloppy and rushed. He probably slapped it together over the weekend and he didn’t even bother decorating his display board. True, the photographs were good, but they were the only decent part of it. But that didn’t seem the right thing to say.

Featherweight brightened. “Really?” He glanced at Diamond cautiously. “…Really?” When she shrugged with a nod, he bounced back up into the air. He laughed with a little buck-tooth grin. “Wow, thanks! Ya know, I got this brand new lens for my birthday last week and I knew it was just perfect for close-ups. For a while, I didn’t know if they turned out okay or not because the developer —“

“C’mon, champ!” The buff stallion backtracked on buzzy, impossibly small wings. “Don’t fall behind, work those keels! No pain…”

Featherweight popped up to his shoulder. “No gain!” They bopped their heads together. “Yeah!” He pumped himself higher in little circling swoops and waved down. “I gotta go, okay? Bye, Diamond. See you, Silver. Nice flower.”

Silver Spoon watched him go. She felt the primrose and smiled as they went on their way.

The last sprig of laurel twisted in Diamond Tiara’s teeth. “And now you know five more ponies. Probably more. Not bad for a new kid.”

The dull commotion of the marketplace faded to birdsong and rustling leaves. The buildings had breathing room again.

“Five? We only met two.” Silver Spoon tilted her head. “I don’t think the rest of those pegasi even noticed us.”

“Welcome to Problem Two.” Diamond picked the stem from her mouth and held it up like a baton. “You’re still thinking of the individual when you need to be thinking of the market. Featherweight’s friends with Truffle Shuffle and Shady Daze—he’s in a different grade—and on weekends he bowls with Strike or plays skyball with Rumble. That’s five.”

Diamond savored the last of the mountain laurel before she finished, “Featherweight knows them, and now you know them too. And now that I think about it, Rumble knows a bunch of pegasus foals that don’t even go to our school. You’ve pretty much got the boys covered.” She rolled her eyes. “Except Snips and Snails, maybe.”

Silver made an unladylike face and shuddered.

“Yeah, exactly.”

They rounded Town Hall and Davenport’s Quills and Sofas shop. Oak trees cast dappled shadows over the tidy brick path winding up to the Silver house. The wind carried scents of roses and honeysuckle.

“So, Featherweight’s got connections,” Silver mused. She wondered how she didn’t see Diamond’s plan before. Instead of meeting every single pony, just meet the ones that matter and they do the hoofwork for you. “In that case, who does Miss Daisy know?”
Diamond Tiara’s piercing laugh startled a flock of grackles. “More like who doesn’t she know? She’s only the biggest gossip in Ponyville. Like, the only pony that knows more ponies is Pinkie Pie. She’ll give you good word of mouth too, but she doesn’t count.”

“Why?”

“Pinkie likes everypony. No quality control.” Diamond shouldered her Bleu Rondo bag and admired the antiqued splendor of Silver’s house. “Unlike you, Silver. Good call on that laurel, by the way.”

Silver Spoon flipped her braid with a little giggle. “What can I say? I know quality when I see it. I’m friends with you, right?”

“True.” Silver’s new best friend puffed her chest, content as a cat in sunlight.

On the other side of a tasteful yellow fence, Brass Tacks clipped the rosebushes. The wide-brimmed garden hat should have clashed with his tailored vest, but Brass made it work. He had a way of making everything work. “Ah, there you are, Miss Silver. We were beginning to wonder.”

We? Silver glanced up towards the house. As if on cue, the first note of an aria belted out of a second story window. The note climbed higher and higher until it swandived into mid-tempo Prench. It sounded like the opening to *Les Terres Fantastiques*, if Silver Spoon wasn’t mistaken.

“Mother’s home early.” Silver smiled to Diamond, who’d gone quite silent. She must have been impressed. “When she’s done practicing, you can meet her. If you come by this weekend, maybe you can meet Father, too.”

Brass Tacks nodded to Diamond Tiara. “I see we’ve a guest this afternoon. It’s a pleasure, miss…?”

“Diamond Tiara.” She tossed out the introduction like a candy wrapper. “Anyway, what were we—oh, right. Like I was saying, you’re covered with the boys. Featherweight’s a good pony to know; the colt’s got a good head on his shoulders. He knows how to play ball. That’s good, but colts are just the preliminaries. Winning them over’s not that hard; like, all you need to get on Truffle’s good side is as cupcake and a smile.”

As they passed through the shining foyer and into the parlor, Diamond’s powertrot petered out to a stroll. The shadows of the balcony striped a vase twice their size and fifty times their age. Upon the mantle, rows of crystal statuettes—“Pitch Perfect” engraved upon the silver bases—glittered in the afternoon sunshine. In the hall, ten generations of Silvers peered down at them from oaken frames. Diamond’s stroll shrank into a tip-toe.

“Has anypony told you your house feels like a museum?” said Diamond Tiara.

“No,” said Silver Spoon. She glanced at the oil painting of Great Uncle Silver Chalice keeping watch over the parlor entrance. “But I think you’re the first pony that’s been in it so far.” She placed her bags on the black accent table near the door and checked her hooves for dirt before she went in.

Diamond left her own saddlebag with Silver’s. “The real challenge here is the girls. A couple already met you, and probably already made up their minds about you. Lucky for you, we can still fix that.” She stood upon the hard Mustangian rug, where the rings met at the center. “Which brings me to Problem Three.”

Silver Spoon hopped on the cream sofa. “What’s Problem Three?”

“You’re not gonna like it. It’s a big one.”
“What’s Problem Three?” Silver’s ears drooped. Just how bad was it? “Be honest.”

Diamond Tiara joined Silver on the couch. Her back hooves left little scuffs on the upholstery as she leaned against the black accent pillows. “Silver Spoon,” she sighed, “You’re a dork. And I don’t mean in the cute geek-chic way, either. Like, you are a colossal dork. Only Snails and maybe Twist have dorkitude levels higher than yours. And at least Twist’s lisp gives her some excuse for it.”

Silver Spoon’s ears flattened. “You didn’t need to be that honest.”

“Hey, I call it like I see it.” Diamond shrugged and crossed her legs, hoof on knee. “You’ve got everything else going for you, at least. You know how long it’s been since I’ve seen somepony with their own carriage?”

Silver twisted herself about, searching for symptoms of dorkitude. Whatever dorkitude looked like.

“No, no, you look fine. I mean all the other stuff. You know you don’t need to get every single one of Miss Cheerilee’s questions right, right?” Diamond stretched her forelegs to the ceiling in exasperation. “And then you add on more answers on top of it! I half expected you to ask for more homework. You know who acts like that, Silver Spoon?”

She stroked her braid, thinking it over. “Grad students?”

“Nerds, Silver. Nerds do that.” Diamond leaned forward. “And I don’t know how it works at Wisteria Academy, but around here nerds aren’t cool.”

Silver Spoon pursed her lips and crossed her forelegs. “I’d say getting into a good university is pretty cool.”

Gently, Diamond Tiara patted her friend’s shoulder. “And that’s why you’re a dork, Silvie,” she loudly whispered. “Look, I’m not saying you have to go full Scootaloo or anything. Those science notes of yours are a lifesaver. Just tone it down a bit.” She gestured toward the circular windows behind them. “You gotta remember your market. Sell what they want to buy. And you’re scaring everypony off right now.”

Silver poked at the lace of her Hoity Toity skirt. Now that she thought about it, most ponies around here didn’t wear clothes. Or at least, not as often. “I’m overdressed, aren’t I?”

Diamond nodded. “It’s just Cheerilee’s class, not The Gala. We’re already fantastic; we can do fine on our own. The extra stuff, it just overwhelms the common pony. They don’t know what to do with all the glory that is us.” She folded her hooves, shaking her head. “It’s sad, really.”

“Yes, but…” Silver Spoon shuffled her hooves. “I’d hate to just let everything in my closet go to wast—”

“And that! That thing you’re doing!”

Silver blinked.

“The thing with your hooves.” The pink filly waggled her legs in the air. “Quit doing that.”

Silver Spoon glanced down at her little silver hooves, grinding the lace of her dress into the sofa. Slowly, she let go of the lace and put her hooves down.

“It makes you look all shy and stuff, and what do you have to be shy about? Are you any less a pony than anybody else? Do you have something to be ashamed of?”
“Of course not!”

“Darn right, you don’t. Act like it, then. Ponies respect a pony who looks like she knows what she’s doing,” Diamond Tiara flicked her tail with a pragmatic little grin. “Judges look for confidence above everything else. That’s how you win.”

“Win at what?” Silver Spoon asked.

“At everything.”

“Who are the judges?”

Diamond giggled as if that was the silliest question in all of Equestria. “Everypony!”

“Hm.” Silver regarded her friend coolly. She lifted an eyebrow and smirked. “Ah.”

“What?”

“You’re a pageant filly, aren’t you?” Now Silver knew where she’d seen Diamond’s gait; it was a classic dressage trot. Taffeta Twirl had practiced it all over campus when she trained for Little Miss Manehattan. “So, how many?”

“Oh, not much.” She waved her off with false modesty. “Just fifteen crowns, twenty-six ribbons, and seven cups. I won Grande Empress just two weeks ago, when the finals wrapped up in the Hoofington.” Her smile fell away with a snort. “Got pony pox, too.”

Silver offered a sympathetic shrug. She fluffed an accent pillow and cuddled against it. It was the softest thing in the room. “So, that’s all I have to do? Don’t be a dork and tone myself down, but with confidence?”

“And be seen. We need to do something about how you handle recess. Tea is nice and all, but—”

Silver Spoon’s ears shot up. She loomed over the pillow, staring her friend dead in the eye. “Teatime in the afternoon, Diamond Tiara.”

Diamond seemed to know a nonnegotiable term when she saw one. Her posture relaxed. “Look, other fillies just aren’t up for tea at recess. That’s just the way it is. But it’ll still be afternoon when we get out of class, right? We can just have them here, or at my house.” She jabbed a hoof at the tea set bulging in Silver’s bag. “And do you really think a porcelain anything can live through multiple recesses? You’ve seen our class, right?”

Silver Spoon’s eyes grew saucer-wide. Flashbacks of Scootaloo crashing into daisy beds, Snails skidding into the mud, and Twist tripping over jump ropes paraded through her mind. Her poor innocent teacups murdered by careless, filthy hooves! Cracked teapots! Smudged sugar bowls! Silver gritted her teeth and shivered. “Teatime at home it is, then. But I still don’t want to get all mucky with tag and whatever.”

Diamond Tiara flicked her tail. “Please. I said ‘be seen’, not ‘go completely insane’. We can go do other stuff, like hopscotch or the swings. Or we can just, you know, hang out and talk like we did today.”

“I think I’ve got a jump rope in my room,” Silver Spoon recalled. “And I know a couple of songs. Hackney Hackney, Miss Beauty Black, ‘Mazing Mazie…”
“That’ll get you points with The Dink at least. She can’t get enough of Miss Beauty Black.”

At the parlor door, somepony cleared his throat. Brass Tacks stepped in, side-eyeing the marks on the sofa. “Lemonade awaits in the garden if you wish, ladies.”

“Great! I was getting parched from all that talking.” Diamond nudged Silver’s shoulder as they made their way out. “We’re gonna have you right on track in no time. And I haven’t even told you the best part yet! Summer’s in just a couple of weeks!”

“I don’t understand.” Silver Spoon knitted her eyebrows. There was no school in summer. How could she manage to win anypony over then? They’d all be busy taking harpsichord lessons or vacationing in Monacolt, wouldn’t they? “What happens in summer?”

Diamond Tiara just grinned.

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Once upon a time, summer vacation was for farmers. Foals didn’t have time for school because they had to help their families with the crops and the fields for the autumn harvest. Towards the end of May, Silver Spoon discovered that harvest time came early for the privileged at Ponyville Schoolhouse.

Silver Spoon was a quick study. She left the tea sets at home, kicked her dorkitude to the curb, and trimmed her scholarly skills. Every schoolyard maneuver was precise, every casual conversation choreographed. All this pulled her from the mire of unpopularity, but none of it compared to the intoxicating aroma of an approaching Summer Sun Slumber Party.

Three weeks after Silver Spoon complimented Featherweight’s project, Peachy Pie met her on the way to school and insisted on carrying Silver’s books. “You have so many books, you must be so smart!” she said.

Sunny Daze trailed behind, shouldering the burdens of Diamond’s saddlebag and lunchbox. “Super smart. By the way, Silver Spoon…”

Peachy’s face poked out from behind a dictionary. “We were wondering…”

Silver glanced back at them. “Yes?”

“Do you know who Diamond is inviting yet?” they asked at once.

“Not just yet, girls.” Silver Spoon offered an understanding little smile. “These things take time, you know?”

In class, it was very much the same.

“Can I help you refill your pen, Silver Spoon?” asked Sweetie Belle. “I wouldn’t want you to run out of ink.”

“Your glath’th look thwell today!” called Twist.

“Ya look a little hungry, Silver Spoon,” said Apple Bloom. “A couple of my granny’s apple fritters’ll fix ya right up!”
“Oh, Silver Spoon! I never noticed how pretty your mane is!” breathed Berry Pinch, who had misplaced any lingering opinions of snobbery. “Your braids are so elegant and…braidy!”

Dinky Doo gave up the blueberry muffin from her lunch, which inspired Apple Bloom to double her offer on the apple fritters and throw in an extra apple cobbler. Not to be outdone, Twist dumped a pile of peppermint sticks in Silver Spoon’s lap.

Scootaloo watched it all, wrinkling her nose and shaking her head the whole time. She pretended not to care, but every few seconds she’d stop playing tetherball or riding her trashy looking scooter to give them the stink eye.

Silver Spoon could see her now, skulking on the edge of the playground, as if the pegasus stared hard enough Silver’s tail would turn into moldy hay. Every time she flew up on the swings, there was Scootaloo’s dumb face. “Look, Di. Our biggest fan is back.”

Diamond Tiara opened one eye from the bench. “Her loss.” She stretched out a forehoof. Peachy Pie grabbed it and began filing away at the edges. “If she wants to miss out on only the biggest party of the year, I say let her.” Diamond flinched, nearly kicking Peachy in the nose. “Ow! Watch it, Dink, you’re pulling my hair!”

“Sorry,” Dinky Doo mumbled around the brush in her teeth. “I snagged a knot.”

“Well, you better not snag any more. Unless you decided you don’t want an invitation.”

“No, Diamond Tiara.” Dinky shook her head. “I mean, yes—I mean, I’ll be gentler.”

Silver Spoon looked down as the swing rocked her backwards, braid trailing in front of her face. “Actually—” The swing flew her up. “Speaking of—” And back again. “Speaking of the—sheesh.” She cupped her hooves around her mouth to call down to her swing-pusher. “Take five, Bloom. I want to say something.”

Apple Bloom plopped into the grass with a sigh and let the swing ease into a slow rock. Silver Spoon hopped off to meet Diamond Tiara at her picnic table throne. Peachy Pie worked hooves up front, Dinky Doo combed mane in back, while Sunny Daze and Twist loitered around the perimeter, waiting for the chance to give favors so they could build their own. Sweetie Belle was off getting them a club soda.

At Silver’s approach, Berry Pinch sat up clutching a handkerchief in her teeth, just in case Silver’s glasses needed cleaning again.

Silver Spoon waved her off. “Not right now.”

It was nice to think that the foals of Ponyville had suddenly learned proper etiquette, or that they’d suddenly seen the error of their ways thanks to Silver’s efforts to better herself. It was a pleasant thought, but Silver Spoon was never that naïve.

Only four school days remained, and invitations had to go out before Saturday. Diamond Tiara’s Summer Sun Slumber Party was always an event, but this was the year absolutely nopony could afford to miss. This year was the year Her Royal Highness, Princess Celestia of Equestria, would raise the sun in person, right here in Ponyville. Filthy Rich had reserved a private box with a perfect view of the sunrise months in advance. A box with just seven seats, not counting Diamond’s. Seven invitations. And though nothing was official, everypony knew Silver Spoon already claimed one of them. So, six invitations.

Silver also stood as Diamond’s right-hoof mare to handle the schedule (the post-sunrise tea party was
Diamond’s ears twitched at the approach of hooves. She rolled her shoulders, tilting her head so Dinky could reach the roots. “Yeah?”

Silver Spoon climbed up beside Diamond and lowered her voice. “Speaking of invitations, I think we should make the list now. It’ll be better to do them now than later. We won’t rush through it that way.” She held out a hoof. Somepony placed her notebook on top of it.

“Hm? Yeah, okay.” Diamond waved Dinky away and sat up, cracking her neck. “Scootaloo’s out.”

“Pft. Obviously.” Silver plucked her pen from behind her ear, flipped the book open and crossed out Scootaloo’s name. “And I was thinking…” She paused and looked around.

Fillies pressed around them in a little semicircle of wide eyes and high hopes. They felt Apple Bloom’s breath on their necks. Silver couldn’t hear herself think with Twist wheezing in her ear.

Diamond Tiara frowned. “Shoo.”

The crowd took two steps back.

Silver waved her hoof. “More.” The crowd took another five steps back. “More.” They took six steps this time. Close enough.

Diamond and Silver scooted to the far side of the picnic table, backs turned to the scrounging rabble.

The pen bobbed in Silver Spoon’s mouth as she thought. “I was thinking we should let in Peachy Pie. She’s been carrying all my stuff for a week and hasn’t dropped anything. And she did a good job on your hooves, too.”

“True.” Diamond Tiara examined her hooficure. The fresh coat of gloss sparkled, reflecting little points of light across the grass. “Peachy’s fine, I guess. That means Sunny’s coming too, since those two do, like, everything together.”

Silver glanced over her shoulder. Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie’s tails twirled together as they pressed shoulder to shoulder. They noticed Silver looking at them and gasped in unison. Squeaky little giggles peppered their whispers to each other. “Check and check.”

Diamond popped her back and leaned over to see the list. “Berry Pinch is in, too.”

“But she forgot to put ice in your drink,” Silver Spoon pointed out. The sunlight flashed off her glasses as she squinted in the pink unicorn’s direction. She wrinkled her nose. “And I think she tries a little too hard.”

“At least she tries. It’s been ten minutes and Sweetie Belle’s still not back with that club soda. She’s out too, by the way.”

Silver marked her off. It was such a shame. Sweetie showed such potential in the beginning, but the girl just couldn’t keep the momentum going. “Twist’s peppermint sticks were pretty good.”


“She did help you the other week when you didn’t know the answer to that poetry question. That was before the invite rush even started.”

“But she’s such a dork, Silver. You really want to be seen sitting next to Twist when Princess
Celestia appears? What if she sees us?"

“True. And she always sounds like she’s got a cold…and she never brushes her mane right…” The pen hovered over Twist’s name. It pulled away. “But I wouldn’t be sitting next to Twist, I’d be sitting next to you.” Silver frowned. “Maybe we could sit her next to Berry.”

“Hmm.” Diamond steepled her hooves. “Well, we will need a stand-in if somepony cancels—not that anypony ever would—but just in case. She’s a maybe.”

It was closer to a “no”, but Silver put a question mark next to Twist’s anyway. The last thing anypony wanted was an empty seat. The symmetry of the night would be ruined, to say nothing of the seating and food arrangements.

“Apple Bloom?”

Diamond Tiara rolled her eyes with a long, drawn out groan.

“That’s a ‘no’, then?”

“No, no, I have to invite Apple Bloom. I didn’t last year, so Dad says I gotta this year.” The words came out muffled under Diamond’s hooves. She rubbed her face as if she could scrub away this ugly necessity. “‘The Apples are friends of the family,’ he says.”

“And if you don’t invite her twice in a row, it will look rude.” Half the ponies at any given Manehattan event got in the same way. Silver nodded to herself. “Understandable. Even if she did push me too hard on the swing. What about Dinky Doo?”

“Oh, The Dink was in from the start.” Diamond shook out her hair and sat herself on the table. “A slumber party without Dink’s no party at all.”

Silver blinked. “Really? But you’ve been on her case all week.”

“Well, yeah. I don’t want her getting too cozy. Still gotta work for it, you know?”

“True. Who’s the last pony?” Unless Diamond went back on her Sweetie Belle decision, the only option Silver saw was Scootaloo. And a colt had a better chance of getting in than Scootaloo.

“Cotton Cloudy,” said Diamond Tiara.

“The white pegasus with the blue tail? But she’s not even in our class.” Silver thought for a minute. “Isn’t she home schooled?”

“Didn’t stop her from sending me a batch of cupcakes.” Diamond looked over the list. Not that she had to, because Silver Spoon did perfect work She traded nods with Silver and folded up the list again. Her lazy hoof waved the fillies back over.

Compliments swarmed them like mosquitoes.

They caught each other’s eye.

“When do we tell them?” Silver whispered.

Diamond Tiara flicked her sunglasses open and slid them on. “Hey, we’ve got four more days before school’s out. No need to rush, right?”

“Right.”
Silver Spoon closed her eyes and curled up on the picnic table to bask in the warmth of their devotion. All those sweet words soaked through her coat and into her skin. She opened one eye. Or maybe that was Sunny’s hoof massage she was feeling.

A smile wound across Silver’s face. Ah, yes, indeed. Harvest time was good.
Berry Pinch Ruins Everything Forever

“Psst. Hey, Silver.”

Silver Spoon ducked down to press shoulders with the pegasus beside her. A pair of white hooves cupped over her ear.

Minty breath tickled Silver’s fur as the soft voice whispered, “Loosen the tightrope for smooth skates.” Cotton Cloudy flicked her tail and winked. “But you didn’t hear it from me.”

Silver nodded solemnly. “I won’t say a word.” As soon as Cotton turned away, Silver Spoon tapped Diamond Tiara’s shoulder. “Hey, Di.”

The two fillies traded conspirators’ glances over their shoulders, as if they’d only just now noticed the circle of fillies sitting in Diamond’s living room. The other fillies pretended not to look, as per tradition.

Silver Spoon pressed her muzzle against Diamond’s ear. “The flight rope’s loosened for Smooth Skies.” She angled her glasses to peer dramatically over the frames. Her professional smirk was totally super-mysterious and intriguing. “Not that you heard it from me.”

“Who, me?” The pink filly blinked at the ceiling, the picture of innocence. “I didn’t hear a thing.” Silver Spoon pretended not to look while Diamond leaned to her right and tapped Dinky Doo. “Hey, Dink.”

As the “secret” traveled down the line, Silver peeked over Diamond’s head to see who was left. It wouldn’t be too long, now. After Dinky, it’d pass to Peachy Pie, Sunny Daze, and Berry Pinch before the message got back to Twist, the originator. Playing a game of Telegraph had been Twist’s idea (though Diamond totally thought of it first) so she got to pick the secret.

Silver curled her hooves under her, nestling back into the shaggy rug. It felt like lying atop a big periwinkle teddy bear, nothing like the firm, expensive imports at the Silver house. She’d seen a rug just like it on display in Davenport’s, in the sofa section. The matching blue sofa huddled against the wall, a pyramid of sleeping bags stacked atop the cushions. Sleeping bags were just a formality, of course. Nopony slumbered at a slumber party.

Silver Spoon twitched her ears and looked around. Now that she thought about it, didn’t that clock in the hall come from Time Turner’s shop? A similar set of sateen tablecloths went on sale at Carousel Boutique last week. And Apple Bloom’s big brother made tables and chairs awfully similar to the ones in the dining room. In fact, everything in Diamond Tiara’s house, from the carpets to the curtains to the chandelier, came from Ponyville. How odd. Surely, Filthy Rich could afford to buy older, better furniture?

At back of the room, a white stereo system from Vinyl’s Vivacious Victrolas thumped basslines from Ziegfilly Follies, Sapphire Shore’s latest album. They’d actually started the night dancing to Follies before powering on through the rest of Diamond Tiara’s record collection. Diamond didn’t like repeating music, but the only other option was Mr. Rich’s bluehay records. Cotton Cloudy, the only filly still listening, bobbed her shoulders to the beat.

Behind the sound system, the window stretched for the ceiling, the wall one solid block of glass. Silver had a perfect view of the full moon’s reflection floating in center of the swimming pool. Confetti sprinkled the deck, along with water wings, inner tubes, and a collage of discarded cups and
plates from the dawn of the party, when they all splashed in the sunset.

“What are you looking at?” asked Diamond Tiara. She glanced at Cotton, then the record player. “I can tell Randolph to switch to a different record if you wanna dance some more.”

Silver shook her head and squished her hooves into the soft rug. “Actually, I’m pretty glad Twist chose something we can play sitting down.” After Marco Polo, the limbo, Diamond’s dance party mix—including, but not limited to, The Trottingham Trot, the Marecarena, The Lipizzaner Waltz, and The Cockatrice Dance—and Dinky Doo’s jump rope competition, Silver Spoon didn’t want to stand up until next Hearth’s Warming Eve. “I can’t believe Dinky double-dutched for half an hour.”

Diamond shrugged her shoulders. “You were the one who wanted to do ‘Mazing Maisie.”

Silver shuddered. The chant that had doomed them all echoed in her memory:

’Mazing Maisie, dressed in paisley

Never late and always lazy

Danced the foxtrot in Canterlot

Got all the gents’ eyes on the spot

Now how many coltfriends does she got?

Apparently, Maisie had two hundred and seventy six. She would have had more if Cotton Cloudy didn’t have to stop turning the rope and go to the bathroom.

“Great party, though.” Silver Spoon could still taste the triple layer lemon cake and strawberry ice cream. “Can you believe Apple Bloom’s missing out on this?”

Diamond Tiara sank into the carpet, tail flicking against her leg. “She did it on purpose.” Her eyes squinted, burning holes into the spot where Apple Bloom should have been. Twist sat up and smiled at them. Diamond didn’t smile back.

Silver Spoon tilted her head. “Did she?”

“Come on, Silver Spoon, you were there. You saw me give out the invites. Everypony saw.” A sneer coiled across Diamond’s muzzle and her voice contorted into a mock-country accent. “Oh, sorry, Diamond Tiara. Ah only got sumthin’ more important than th’ biggest party of the entire year, Diamond Tiara.” Her pink hooves ground into the rug fibers. “Ah jus’ figured Ah’d go an’ tell ya that in front of ev’rypony, Diamond Tiara!”

Silver nodded. “So rude.” At the very least, Apple Bloom could have declined through RSVP. “Did she at least tell you why?”

“Something about a reunion or whatever.” Diamond snorted. “She actually went to another party besides this one! Can you even believe that? How does anypony just pass up MY Summer Sun Slumber Party? It’s eight straight hours of fun!” She spread her hooves to the room. “Just look how much fun everypony is having!”

Silver looked.

Eight fillies sat quietly in a circle. The speakers popped and hissed to themselves, the record long over.
Cotton stretched her wings and yawned.

Dinky traced circles in the rug.

Berry Pinch flopped on her stomach, head in her hooves. Her tail flicked impatiently against the carpet.

Next to her, Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie curled together in a giggling little ball. Peachy whispered into Sunny’s ear. Sunny clapped her hooves, and whispered back. They burst into a fit of giggles, hooves over their mouths. Peachy whispered something else and they both exploded into squeaky little squeals. Between them, Telegraph had come to a screeching halt.

Berry slid a green eye to Diamond and outstretched a hoof as if to say, *You see what I’m dealing with?*

“…Yeah, I think Telegraph’s over.” Diamond Tiara stood up, shaking little carpet fibers off her hoof. “What was the message, Twist?”

The redhead jerked, caught in mid-yawn. “Oh, uh… It wath… Um.” She tapped her hooves sheepishly. “Actually, I kinda forgot.”

The slumber party threw back their heads and groaned.

Diamond Tiara rolled her eyes. “Great game, Twist.”

Twist beamed. “Thankth!”

Berry Pinch gave Peachy and Sunny—still whispering and giggling in each other’s ears—an acidic stare. “I didn’t even get my turn.”

Peachy Pie’s head bobbed up as the circle dispersed. “Oh, is it over? Sunny, I think the game is over.”

“Did we win?” Sunny Daze clapped her hooves. “Peachy, I think we won!”

The yellow fillies cheered and gave each other congratulatory hugs.

Berry Pinch smushed her face against the carpet. “Swear to Celestia, I’m gonna…”

Peachy Pie clapped her hooves. “Great job, Sunny!”

““You too, Peachy!” She shyly twirled her tail around her hooves. “But you did better.”

“Noooo!” Peachy hid her face in her hooves. “You did better, Sunny!”

Diamond Tiara wheeled on them, struggling to keep her volume down. “Oh, for the love of—you do not win Telegraph!”

The fillies blinked at her, then at each other. “Oh,” they said.

“Really, it’s more like we all lost,” Silver Spoon observed. “Badly.”

Peachy’s ears drooped.

“We lost?” Sunny shrank behind her friend, sniffing. “Because of us?” Her blue eyes watered. A whine squeaked from Sunny’s trembling lips.
“Great.” Diamond clicked her tongue. “Here come the waterworks.”

Cotton Cloudy dived for the save. “Hey hey hey, c’mon, Sunny! It’s okay, nopony lost, right guys?”

Dinky and Twist and Berry nodded eagerly. Peachy Pie didn’t look so sure, but she smiled at Sunny anyway.

“It’s just not the kind of game you win.” Cotton patted Sunny’s shoulder with her wing. “Okay?”

Sunny Daze stared out at the room with big watery eyes. She hiccuped and sniffled again. “R-really?”

Peachy Pie nuzzled her cheek. “Nobody lost, Sun-sun. It’s not your fault.” She stared hard over Sunny’s shoulder and into Silver’s eyes. “Right, Silver Spoon?”

Silver Spoon flattened her ears and glared right back. Games had winners and losers and rules. That was how games worked. If nopony won Telegraph, the only alternative was that everypony lost Telegraph. It wasn’t Silver’s fault Sunny Daze was a crybaby.

Peachy frowned; she hadn’t stopped staring. That would have been fine—because really, who cared what Peachy Pie thought?—except, now Cotton was staring at Silver, too. And so was The Dink. And Berry. And Diamond Tiara. The welfare of the Summer Sun Slumber Party pressed against Silver Spoon’s shoulders.

“Of course nopony lost.” An elegant smile skimmed across Silver’s face. “Just thinking out loud, pure speculation. It wasn’t your fault at all, Sunny.”

It was entirely her fault.

Sunny Daze wiped her eyes and smiled back. The room let out a sigh of relief.

“Well, there’s still another hour before the sun comes up,” said Cotton. “Now what do we do?”

Diamond paused, twitching her ears uncertainly.

Silver Spoon frowned. How could have Diamond forgotten her own schedule? Perhaps she’d been distracted by Sunny’s outburst. Silver’s tail flicked against Diamond’s haunch. “Ghost story,” she whispered.

Diamond Tiara nodded. "Gather in, everypony."

“Oh!” The Dink sprang up, kicking the air as if she could knock down the next event like apples from a tree. “Oh, is it time? Are we finally gonna—?”

The host smirked as the circle of fillies drew itself tight. She let Dinky’s suspense marinade for a few seconds. Just enough time for her anticipation to infect the other guests. When Berry and Twist closed up the circle, Diamond spoke again. “Randolph? Lights.”

One after another, two dozen little lights in the firefly chandelier winked out. Silver Spoon watched as cozy couches became nebulous blobs, the sound system took on an evil green glow, and sinister shadows slithered across the carpet. Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie held each other as darkness bloomed and the room turned wicked.

Silver Spoon shifted her shoulders as the night swallowed up the hallway lamps, the last hope of light in the house. A spike of moonlight sliced from the half-drawn drapes to the center of the circle.
Eight shadows slanted behind eight fillies.

“Wow, it’s really dark…” Twist whispered. “I can’t see anything at all.”

Neither could Silver. The vague shadows of sofas and tables could just as well be distant mountains for all she knew. The dark ate the world; nothing left but eight little fillies and their shadows and the moon. She had to hand it Diamond. The filly knew how to make a presentation.

Sunny Daze curled her tail around Peachy Pie’s. “It’s a little too dark.”

The Dink’s yellow eyes sparkled. “I know.” Her toothy grin glimmered in the moonlight and made little dimples in her cheeks. “Isn’t it awesome?”

Diamond Tiara’s satisfied smirk agreed that it most certainly was.

“Okay!” Dinky clapped her hooves and leapt to the center of the circle. She had the same spark in her eyes that Mother used to get on opening night. Silver Spoon began to see why Dinky Doo was a slumber party regular. “Which story should we start with? I just heard a new one from my sister, about this white stallion in a suit lurking in Whitetail Woods, with these long, long legs that blend in with the branches!”

The Dink glanced at Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie, huddling together on the far side of the circle. She considered Sunny’s reddened eyes and frowned. “Hmm. On second thought, I’ll save that one. Ooh, maybe I’ll tell The Golden Horseshoe? No, I did that one last time. Headless Horse?”

“You did that last Nightmare Night,” Diamond cut in.

Silver Spoon flicked her tail. She had an idea.

“True.” Dinky fought over her options, her eyes ricocheting in all directions. “Alright, I got one. This one’s a true story. It happened just outside Baltimare to my mom’s friend’s cousin’s fiancé when she was a filly. It happened on a pretty night like this one, and the filly wanted to take her special somepony out into the valley to look at the stars, even though there was a curfew on account of a madmare who’d just escaped from—yeah?”

Silver Spoon held up a hoof. “Actually, Dink…”

Diamond Tiara gave Silver a cautionary frown, but said nothing.

“I think that Berry Pinch should go first.” Silver Spoon eyed the pink unicorn coolly. Those snob remarks had not been forgotten, and Berry had been shooting sour faces at her all night when she thought Silver wasn’t looking. “She never got her turn for Telegraph, so it’s only fair. Dink can go second, if that’s alright with her.”

Dinky huffed. It obviously was not alright with her, but everypony had seen how much missing her turn had bothered Berry Pinch. She stepped back into the circle. “Yeah, I guess it’s fine.”

Silver Spoon adjusted her glasses, watching the pink unicorn stand up. Letting Berry Pinch lead was the politest way to make up for the Telegraph mishap; this way, Diamond, Silver, and The Dink came out looking generous and considerate.

Plus, if Berry went first, Dinky Doo would have to wait. She’d chomp at the bit waiting for the chance to tell her own story, turning it over in her head, making it perfect. Whatever story Berry Pinch had in mind would be blown out of the water. Silver curled her tail around her hooves and smiled.
“Fair enough.” Diamond Tiara motioned to the center of the circle. She side-eyed Silver and smiled back. “Make it good, Pinch.”

Berry Pinch smoothed back her split-ends in a lazy attempt look somewhat presentable as she took her place. She sat with her back against the moon, her face cast in shadows. Her green eyes blinked eerily at the audience.

“Okay. Once upon a time, a colt was going home late at night.” Berry’s voice rasped low, like it was supposed to be scary. It came out sounding like she had a bad cold. “He took the shortcut home because he was carrying a bunch of heavy candy. He was feeling really proud of himself, too, ‘cause he got the most candy out of everypony since his costume was so spooky.” She paused. “Oh, did I mention it was Nightmare Night? Because it was.”

“Nightmare Night?” Silver peeped over her glasses. “It’s, like, the beginning of summer.”

Berry Pinch wrinkled her nose. “Well, it’s not summer in the story. Anyway, the kid was real proud of his haul, right? So when his friends said ‘Can we have some of your candy?’ he just stamped his hoof and told ‘em, ‘Get your own candy, I’m eating all of this myself.’ But then the other kids wouldn’t quit bugging him, right? So eventually, he gets sick of it and he’s like ‘Fine, I’ll just go home and eat it there and I’ll eat it all by myself.’ So he starts heading home.”

Berry leaned over, squinting at Twist and Cotton Cloudy. “But the shortcut home had a lot of interesting stuff on the way. Stuff like a certain statue of a certain alicorn.” She swung in the opposite direction to leer at wide-eyed Peachy Pie and a rather unimpressed Diamond Tiara. “But it wasn’t a statue of Princess Celestia, you guys. This was a statue of…” she paused for effect. “Nightmare Mooooon!”

Silver decided to be grateful Berry didn’t try to add in sound effects.

“Oh, but did he give her a candy offering like he was supposed to?” Berry Pinch shook her head. “Nope. The little colt went right on home saying, ‘Get your own candy, Nightmare Moon! I’m eating all of this by myself.’ And he did. Then he brushed his teeth, went to bed, and that was the end of it.”

Silver Spoon rolled her eyes. “Riveting.” Beside her, Diamond Tiara snickered.

Peachy Pie smiled. “That was a great story!”

“It’s not the end of the story!” Berry stomped her hoof, but the carpet muffled it. “Didn’t even get to the good part, sheesh. Anyways, like I was saying.” She glared at Silver, who pretended not to notice.

“That was the end of it, or so he thought. A couple hours later, the colt hears somepony whispering, ‘I’m huuuuunnngry.’ But he thinks he’s just hearing things or dreaming, right? So he tries and goes back to sleep. Few minutes later, he thinks he hears hooves on the floorboard and the same voice go, ‘I’m huuuuunnngry.’ So then—”

Diamond Tiara groaned. “Then the noise gets closer and he still doesn’t believe it and then the noise is even closer but he keeps being dumb and hides under his blanket.”

“Hey!” Berry’s silly storyteller rasp disappeared.

“Doesn’t even try to yell for his mom or turn on the light,” added Silver. “The idiot.”

“You guys!”
“But then he finally peeks over his blanket and it’s like, ‘Oh no it’s Nightmare Moon or whatever’.” Diamond did jazz-hooves above her head in mock-terror. “And then Nightmare gets her candy when she eats him and that’s the end.” She blew a stray mane hair away from her face. “Give me a break.”

“You guys are such jerks!” Berry Pinch’s ears flattened. In the dark, it looked like they’d vanished completely. “Why’d you have to kill my story?”

“We put it out of its misery.” Diamond yawned, long and theatrical. “I know it’s a slumber party, but I didn’t want you to actually put us to sleep.”

“It’s a good story, Diamond Tiara,” Berry hissed through gritted teeth. “It’s a classic. It’s scary.”

Silver Spoon lifted an eyebrow. “If you’re five.”

“And like I said, it’s almost the first day of summer.” Diamond set her shoulders back, her eyes half-lidded but firm. The relaxed lilt of her voice coiled, primed to strike. “You know, Celestia’s day? You might as well tell it on the beach while we all build sandcastles.”

“Or in a happy meadow with bumblebees and tulips.” Silver grinned. Wherever Diamond was going with this, it was going to be good.

The Dink shrugged. “She’s got a point, Pinch. You know I love a good Nightmare Night story as much as the next pony, but it’s not Nightmare Night.” In a lower voice, she groused, “And you didn’t even tell it right.”

“Exactly. And besides…” The little pink hostess giggled and struck. “Nightmare Moon isn’t even real.”

The room went silent.

“S-she’s not?” whispered Sunny Daze. She still had a death grip on Peachy’s leg. “Are you sure?”

“Nuh-uh!” Berry Pinch yelped. “She’s totally real! Diamond Tiara just likes ruining other ponies’ stories because she’s a…a big, smelly butt!”

Diamond stuck her tongue out. “Takes a butt to know a butt.”

“I dunno. My dad said she was real.” Cotton Cloudy looked to Twist and Dinky. “Right? Your folks, too?”

Twist bobbed her head earnestly. “My auntie told me about her.”

The Dink stared at the moon and didn’t answer at all.

“Yeah, my parents told me the same thing. It was story time and I was four.” Silver Spoon pushed up her glasses with a dismissive little sniff. “But some of us have actually grown up, Berry Pinch.”

The slumber party mumbled amongst itself. Suddenly everypony wasn’t so sure.

“Nightmare Moon’th fun and all…but she’th probably only a thtory.” Twist tapped her forehooves together, quickly glancing away when Berry glared at her.

“Well, you know what my daddy says?” Diamond Tiara pulled herself up and stuck out her chin, ears up and voice silky smooth. “My daddy says that talk is cheap. I only believe what I can see.”

Berry splayed her legs and snorted. Her mouth pinched together in a tight little scowl, pink slip of a
Diamond swooped to meet her nose to nose, teeth bared in a salesmare’s grin. “So put up or shut up, cheapskate. Right here, right now.”

The Dink’s eyes got huge. “Ooh.”

Peachy Pie gulped. Sunny Daze hid behind her, whimpering.

Berry Pinch didn’t blink. “Fine!”

Dinky burst from the circle and bolted for the giant window. Cotton and Peachy barely had time to duck out of the way. “Yes! Let’s do a summoning!”

Sunny pouted. “But I thought you were gonna tell ghost stories.”

“Change of plans. This is way better than any story.” The Dink bounced on her back hooves and pressed her nose up against the glass. “Big window. Clear night. Pitch black house.” She squinted upward, scrutinizing the sky. “And a full moon.”

The Dink whipped around. A moonlight halo set her yellow mane aglow. “It’s perfect.”

Diamond nodded. “Then let’s do it.” She circled Berry Pinch, running her eyes over the party guests. “Unless you’re too scared.”

“I-I’m not!” Twist cried, a little too quickly. “Nope!”

Cotton’s wings snapped open, feathers all fluffed and full. She looked like a Wonderbolts poster. “Me neither.”

Dinky ran for the buffet table. “You know I’m in!” she called over her shoulder. “I’m gonna find a good bowl, kay?”

Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie piped in unison, “We’re not scared either!” Sunny sounded less sure of it, though.

Peachy hugged her friend’s shoulders. “Don’t worry, Sun-sun, I’ll protect you.”

“I’ll protect you too, Peaches!”

“Protection pals!”

“Yay!”

Silver Spoon twirled her tail with a little chuckle. “There’s no point in being scared of something that doesn’t even exist.”

“Yeah right, Silver Snob.” Berry Pinch nodded to Dinky, already pushing a silvery bowl back to the circle. “You’re gonna change your tune when she shows up and eats your snobby butt-face. I bet you don’t even make it through.” She wagged her eyebrows and smirked. “In fact, I bet you turn on the light.”

Silver didn’t dignify that with an answer. She watched Cotton help Dinky carry a pitcher of water. Cotton held the front steady while The Dink gently lifted and poured, careful not to get the carpet wet. Silver spared a glance towards Berry.
Berry waggled her eyebrows again. She had absolutely no business looking that smug.

Silver Spoon nudged Diamond Tiara. “She’s such a pain, why’d you even invite her?”

Instead of sharing a scoff or a sigh or rolling her eyes at how terrible Berry was, Diamond just laughed. “Can’t you tell? Berry Pinch is fun.”

“But she’s so pigheaded! And annoying!”

“I said fun, not agreeable. Just look around, Silvie.”

Silver Spoon humphed. To call Berry Pinch “fun” was a stretch. A huge stretch. An enormous stretch. Even so, Silver couldn’t deny the electricity in the air. Every little ear pricked high and every voice murmured with excitement or fear or wonder or some mixture of the three. The Telegraph disaster happened a thousand years ago.

Diamond Tiara winked. “Like I said, nopony slumbers at my party.”

“Make way, girls! Scrying bowl coming through!” The Dink cut between them, the bottom of the bowl hissing as it skimmed across the shag rug and into the patch of moonlight. Her tongue stuck out the side of her mouth as she twisted her head this way and that, circling the bowl at all angles. Finally, she nodded, satisfied. “There. I think we’re all set.”

The ripples in the water cleared, and the Mare in the Moon’s reflection floated in the center of the silver bowl. Berry gulped and crept closer to get a better look, Cotton right behind her. Together, they peeped over the edge. Their reflections were soon joined by Twist and Cotton, who made space for Diamond and Silver, who did not make space for Peachy Pie and Sunny Daze, though that didn’t stop them. With so many fillies breathing on the water, The Mare in the Moon began to break apart.

The Dink poked Cotton with her horn and shoved the rest of them off. “Come on, we need one kid to do it, not twenty!” She gave the bowl another once-over before she, too, stepped back. Now it was just Berry, the bowl, and the moon. “Go get her, Pinchy.”

Berry Pinch nickered under her breath. She flicked an ear, glancing from the bowl to the crowd. “So, uh…three times, right?”

The Dink rolled her eyes. “No,” she sighed. “Calling three times is for the Headless Horse. Nightmare Moon is five.”

“Why five?” asked Twist.

“Because everything good comes in fours: four legs, four seasons, and such. Bad stuff is always one number off. Nightmare Moon’s really greedy, and wants more than what she’s got, so she needs five.” Dinky waggled her hoof as if she were reminding Berry Pinch to brush her teeth. “And remember, you gotta call loud and clear so she can hear you. It’s a long way to the moon.”

Berry Pinch took a deep breath, nodding. She peered over the lip of the bowl and stared. From Silver’s angle, it looked as if the full moon balanced on the tip of the filly’s little pink horn. “Nightmare Moon.”

Diamond Tiara shared a confident smile with Silver Spoon and lounged on the carpet to watch, using Silver’s haunch as a pillow. Berry was totally gonna chicken out. Nopony ever got to five.

“Nightmare Moon.” Berry’s shoulders trembled.
In the dark, somepony whimpered. The wet wheeze of Twist’s breathing echoed through the room.

“Nightmare Moon.”

The whimpering squeezed into a thin, pinprickly whine. Silver couldn’t tell if it was Sunny or Peachy. It might have been both.

“If you can’t take it, you should just leave,” whispered Cotton.

The Dink’s bright tail lashed in the dim light to shush them all.

“Nightmare Moon…” Berry Pinch’s voice shook on the last syllable. Her chest heaved, eyes flickering to Diamond Tiara. A quiet dare to turn on a light. Diamond shrugged her off.

“Dink?” Twist spoke softer than a whisper. “What happenth if Nightmare showth up?”

“Hm? Oh, she eats you,” Dinky brightly said. “In one bite.”

Silver Spoon flicked her ears. Her confident smile dimmed just a little and she snuggled closer to Diamond. Not because she was scared, of course.

Berry licked her lips. “N-nightmare…” She squeezed her eyes shut and took a great, big breath. “Nightmare Moon!”

In a dark, dark room in a dark, dark house, eight fillies didn’t dare to breathe.

Silver Spoon fiddled with her glasses frames, tail curled tight against her haunch. Her eyes darted from wall to wall, waiting for the shadows to melt together and peel themselves off the wallpaper. Or the stars to wink out, one by one. Or to suddenly come face to face with a wall of sharp teeth and a pointed, dripping tongue.

One heartbeat.

Water sloshed in the pool outside. Crickets chirped.

Two heartbeats.

Somepony coughed. The settling house gently creaked.

Three heartbeats.

Silence.

“Ha!” Diamond Tiara shattered the spell with one syllable. The room was just a room, and the scrying bowl just a shiny pan full of tapwater. “I told you there was no such thing.”

Berry Pinch wrinkled her nose and pouted. Dinky Doo tilted her head to the side and sighed a little. She didn’t seem surprised, if not a bit disappointed.

Silver’s adrenaline evaporated into giggling. Sunny and Peachy snickered, and soon they were laughing too. The Dink kept her dignity with a cool chuckle, while Cotton and Twist fell over themselves, laughing until they couldn’t breathe. Even Berry Pinch smiled at herself. They’d all been so silly!

“Heh.” Cotton Cloudy flapped her little wings and shook herself off. “I knew there wasn’t anything to worry abouUUUGH!” The pegasus flailed, scrambling into Twist. Her shaking hoof pointed at
the dark, tall shadow skimming along the floor.

An eerie orange glow filtered through the door cracks. The shadow swam towards them, shrinking smaller and smaller.

Diamond Tiara rolled Cotton off Twist as she trotted towards it. “Relax, you scaredy ponies.” She nudged the door open wider to reveal an elderly earth pony holding a lantern in his teeth. “It’s only Randolph.”

Randolph nodded solemnly, trying his best to hide a smile.

Silver glanced at the clock. “It’s already twenty minutes till dawn! We’d better get going if we don’t want to be late.” She took her place behind Diamond Tiara, head held high. “Single file, ladies! We don’t want anypony getting lost.”

She watched over her shoulder as the slumber party straightened itself into… well, it was more like a squiggle than a straight line. And Sunny and Peachy were standing too close together. “Eh, close enough.” Silver looked up at Randolph as he led them out into the hallway. It didn’t seem like anypony else was going to meet them. “Di, I thought your dad was going to take us to see the sunrise.”

Diamond stared straight ahead, manicured hooves clicking across the hardwood floor. Her tail swished, as if trying to swat a fly. She didn’t seem to have heard.

“Diamond—”

“He’s working.” Her tail stung Silver’s nose and she pulled farther ahead. “He’s a busy pony, okay?”

“Okay.” It was understandable, Silver supposed. That was just the way of grownups, especially important grownups. They had lots of important things to do and places to be and ponies to meet.

She grinned at the starry, indigo sky as they stepped out into the night. Important fillies had places to be, too. It wasn’t every day a filly got to see Celestia raise the sun up close.

Silver Spoon was certain of four things.

First: It was not her fault.

Second: Everypony, even proper young ladies of upstanding class and sparkling heritage, was permitted a mistake every now and again. Nopony was perfect and to expect perfection one hundred percent of the time would be completely unfair. Ponies made mistakes. Sometimes—though rarely—such young ladies made a mistake about the proper hat to wear when attending a country club, or which knife to use at a dinner party, or certain horrifying mythological figures being less mythological than originally presumed. It was a simple mistake that could have happened to anypony at all. There was nothing to be done about it now and for certain parties to harp upon it after the fact would be quite rude.

Third: Silver Spoon was alarmed at the appearance of Nightmare Moon in Ponyville City Hall. Mildly alarmed. She put her hoof to her chest and gasped lightly, and she most certainly did
not hyperventilate and gasp like a hooked trout. Nor did she scream at the sight of glistening fangs, nor sob into her hooves when the Nightmare spread her pitch-black wings, and Silver absolutely did not crash into Twist in a blind panic and momentarily lose her glasses. None of those things happened. Only vicious, slanderous, ill-bred ponies would dare to say otherwise.

Fourth (and most importantly): It was not Silver Spoon’s fault.

“Not my f-f-fault at all…” Silver dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief and hiccuped. She uncurled herself from the corner of Diamond’s living room with deep, healing breaths. At least her chest didn’t squeeze her lungs anymore.

Slowly, her trembling hooves took her glasses from Randolph, who’d been waiting patiently. It was her third attempt. The glasses didn’t look too damaged, just a bit smudged. Silver swallowed the horse-sized lump in her throat. “Thank you.”

Randolph patted her shoulder with a wrinkly smile. He waited to see if Silver needed anything else before he turned his attention back to Twist. The redhead dangled over the sofa’s armrest, her face hidden by the paper bag she breathed into. At the opposite side of the sofa, Cotton Cloudy plucked at her wings. Little white feathers made a mess of the upholstery. Berry Pinch sat in the middle, staring into space and muttering under her breath.

Silver didn’t know where Sunny Daze or Peachy Pie were, but she heard Peachy’s ragged screaming and Sunny’s sloppy, wet blubbering. Or maybe Sunny was screaming and Peachy was blubbering. Their voices tangled up into one incoherent wail, impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

Diamond Tiara’s tail poked out from under one of the tablecloths. She hadn’t made a sound since… since Princess Celestia’s…absence..

The drying sweat on Silver Spoon’s coat made her shiver. She wobbled away from her corner, in search of some part of Equestria that made any sense. The Dink paced in front of a wall of purple drapes. She paused to stare at them every few seconds, reach for them, and then go back to pacing. When Silver came to sit with her, the unicorn finally sat down.

The two fillies stared at each other with hollow, red-rimmed eyes. Dinky’s left ear flicked erratically. “Hey, Spoons, you think maybe, um…” She rubbed her shoulder and chewed her lip. “Can you, maybe…kinda…” Her ears drooped. “I don’t want to look by myself.”

They gathered up their courage, and together, they pulled the curtain back.

Seven in the morning. Still dark.

Under normal circumstances, the words Dinky used would have gotten her grounded.

Outside, billows of indigo fog rolled over the pavement. Silver couldn’t see the pool or the garden wall or the gate or anything. She could barely see the treetops lit by the mareless moon. It felt like nighttime had taken everything. In times like these, cousin Silver Lining would suggest looking on the bright side. “Well, at least nopony got eaten.”

“I dunno, Spoons. In the long run, getting ate up might be better than wasting away in a world without a sun. We’ll all starve to death, at best.” The Dink wasn’t very good at bright sides. She stared at the thick, rolling fog. “I hope my mom’s okay.”

“Starve?”
Silver turned to find Peachy Pie crawling out from under the sofa. Sunny held on to her friend’s tail like a security blanket. Their faces were a blur of snot and tears and hair.

“We…” Sunny gasped for breath between sobs. “We…we…we’re all gonna dieeee!”

“What?!” Diamond Tiara’s head poked out from under the tablecloth. “No! No, I can’t die yet!” Her mane hung in skinny corkscrews around her ears and flopped into her eyes as she scrambled out. “I can’t! The nationals are in two months!”

“I never told Rumble I liked him.” Cotton chewed a mouthful of primaries. “I haven’t even been to flight camp.”

“Forget flight camp.” The Dink let the curtains fall back into place. Slowly, she turned to the room, yellow eyes huge with a terrible truth. “What are our parents gonna say?”

Berry Pinch looked ready to throw up. Randolph gently nudged a bucket in her direction.

“Oh, you guyth…” Twist clutched her paper bag and stared at the capsized scrying bowl. “You guyth, what did we do? What did we do?!?”

“We?” Diamond Tiara took a step back, frowning. She wiped her nose and flattened her ears. “What the hay do you mean ‘we’, Twist? Berry’s the one that summoned her.”

“Hey!” Berry Pinch pushed off the sofa and marched straight for Diamond. “Hey, hey, hey, don’t you pin this on me, Little Miss I-Only-Believe-What-I-See. You’re the one that told me to do it!”

Diamond dug her hooves into the rug. “So? I tell you a lot of things. I told you to get a better manecut last month and you didn’t do that, now did you?”

“But it was your ide—” Berry squinted, turning towards the drapes. “Actually, it was Dink’s idea, wasn’t it?”

Dinky flinched. “W-well, Cotton’s the one who helped me pour the water in the bowl!”

“Pouring’s not the same as summoning.” Cotton Cloud crossed her forelegs and scowled at Berry Pinch. “How were we supposed to know you’d do all five?”

Berry wheeled on the pair of yellow earth ponies cringing behind her. “And you know what? I wouldn’t have even had to go first or prove anything if Sunny Daze didn’t totally ruin Telegraph in the first place!”

Sunny burst into a fresh flood of tears.

The pink unicorn stamped. “And Peachy’s…hair is stupid!”

“You leave Sunny alone, you big snotface!” cried Peachy Pie. “And my hair isn’t stupid!”

Silver Spoon flipped her tail. “Peachy’s hair has nothing to do with anything.” Though it was a little stupid. “Peachy’s not the one that called Nightmare Moon.”

“Don’t you start, Silver Snob.”

Silver sneered at her and went to go sit with Diamond Tiara. If these really were the last days—figuratively speaking—she’d rather spend it with decent company.

Diamond didn’t seem to agree. She curled herself into a little pink ball, face buried in the soft blue
carpet, and didn’t look like she wanted any company at all right now. “Wish my dad would come back,” she mumbled into the rug. “And my party’s ruined.”

The party? Silver Spoon’s ears pricked. “That’s right, the party’s still happening…” According to the schedule, it didn’t actually end until nine-thirty. She glanced at the clock. They still had a little less than two hours to go. There was still one more event.

Silver Spoon bit her lip and beheld a slumber party torn apart by chaos and madness and really bad hair. Howling wails and sobs warped the air. Fillies turned on each other with bared teeth, like common, filthy alley cats.

Silver frowned. This was not appropriate behavior for young ladies.

She prodded Diamond with her hoof and tried to tell her so. Diamond’s tail swatted Silver’s nose. The host curled herself up tighter, muttering something grouchy and incomprehensible.

This was unacceptable. Somepony had to do something. Silver Spoon stood back up and searched the room for somepony with some semblance of sanity. Sunny and Peachy were lost causes. Cotton and Dink were locked in a shouting match, Berry Pinch was the absolute worst, and Twist looked ready to barf…

Wait. There was still Randolph. Diamond’s butler had been here the whole time, and he’d been nothing but sensible through this whole thing. He hadn’t even flinched when Nightmare Moon appeared and sent the party back to the house with amazing efficiency. Who knew such an old pony could run that fast?

Silver Spoon smoothed back her mane and approached him. “Excuse me?”

Randolph’s baggy eyes seemed baggier than ever in his paled face. He looked down at her slowly, as if dreading what he’d find.

“Randolph, will you give me a hoof in the kitchen, please? It’s nearly eight and I can’t set up the last event by myself.”

His snowy eyebrows lifted at Silver’s expression. “Hm.” Randolph gave the room another once-over. There was little he could do for the situation that he hadn’t done already. He turned back to Silver, thought a moment, then nodded.

Silver Spoon nodded back. “Let’s get to work.”

Sunny Daze was still crying. Or she’d stopped and then started again, but judging from what Silver Spoon heard from the hall, that was doubtful. The girl’s lungs were a miracle of stamina.

Sunny also sat closest to the door, so she noticed first. The yellow filly rubbed her eyes in confusion. A sunless morning of screaming panic had weathered her voice to a croaked whisper. “S-silver Spoon?”

Silver’s lenses glinted in the candlelight. She unfolded a handkerchief from her pocket, tossed it up, and watched it gently settle over Sunny’s muzzle. “Wipe your nose. You’re a mess.”
Peachy Pie lifted her head from Sunny’s shoulders and squinted her bleary eyes. “What’s going on?”

“Business as usual.” Silver performed a quick spot-check of her coat and tail. Less tidy than she’d have liked, but it would have to do. She lifted the pleats of her dress as she navigated her way through the party clutter to the center of the room. Randolph followed two steps behind her.

Berry, Cotton, and The Dink paused in their heated argument to watch as she passed. They looked at each other and traded shrugs.

Randolph rang the little brass bell in his teeth three times.

Diamond Tiara lifted her head from her hooves. She looked from her butler to Silver Spoon to the butler again.

Silver cleared her throat. “Attention, ladies! The last event is about to begin.”

Confused murmurs traveled through the slumber party. Peachy tilted her head and whispered something to Sunny. Sunny shook her head. Twist breathed on her lenses, wiped them off, and put them on again. It didn’t seem to help, for she appeared more confused than ever before.

Finally, Cotton Cloudy said what they’d all been thinking. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Cotton. Why wouldn’t I be?” Silver Spoon swished forward in her white sundress. Light blue satin shimmered on the cuffs and neckline, the pleated ruffles fluttering at her hooves. Mother-of-pearl hairclips held her braid in place. “It follows the dress code on the invitations.”

Silver smiled like the debutante she was, primly calm and confident. Why, nothing was out of sorts at all; everything was normal and moving along wonderfully. Could anypony smile this way if things were not moving along wonderfully? Of course they couldn’t. So there was nothing to worry about. “You remember the instructions on the invitations, don’t you?”

Diamond Tiar lifted her head, blinked once, twice. Slowly but surely, she smiled back. It started small and rickety, but it grew stronger by the second.

Twist looked at her bare back and shoulders, frowning. She seemed a little embarrassed. So did Peachy Pie. Cotton tucked in her raggedy, bitten wings. Dinky smoothed out her tail and mane.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I unpacked your dresses for you, since you all seemed so…” Silver rolled her tongue over her teeth searching for the politest word. “Busy. They’re hanging out in the hall, see?”

Peachy Pie sniffed her stuffy nose and nudged the door open to see for herself, Sunny trailing at her flank. Berry Pinch and Dinky weren’t far behind. Cotton stood on her hind legs to see.

“Oh,” Peachy whispered.

Indeed, seven dresses—styles ranging from Diamond’s cute rhinestone party dress to Twist’s denim jumper to The Dink’s retro smock—hung waiting for them on a wooden rack. Peachy didn’t stare at the wardrobe but beyond it to the dining room across the hall.

A round table sat in the center of a windowless room. Fluffy clouds dotted the bottom of the blue tablecloth. Eight saucers with eight teacups glittered in the light of firefly lamps. The spread was simple: some light toast, yogurt parfaits, stacks of various mini-muffins, an assortment of jams, and a little bowl of daisies.
In the center of it all sat two silver teapots with slender spouts. The first served simple, traditional peppermint tea. In the second, a lemon balm and passionflower blend Silver Spoon brought from home. A little silver sugar bowl glistened nearby, complete with a set of adorable teaspoons sporting pink hearts in the handles.

Silver Spoon’s smile widened. Diamond always said she wanted the best, so naturally Silver’s favorite tea set was the only option. From the look on the party guests’ faces, she’d made the right decision.

Dinky poked the black-and-white checks on her dress. “What is all this, Spoons?”

“It’s eight o’clock, Miss Dinky Doo.” Silver adjusted her glasses. “Tea time.”

Diamond Tiara’s wary smile burst into a grin. She rolled her eyes and laughed. “You fillies are so silly!” She slid back into showmare mode, raising her voice high and firm to pull the tatters of her party back together. “It was on the invites, remember? I told you all to dress for breakfast tea.” She fetched her dress from the rack and slipped in.

The cluster of fillies whispered to each other. A few kept looking between the dark skylight and the glittering tea party, as if they couldn’t exist in the same world together.

Diamond fastened her dress clasps and shook her mane back into position while Randolph slipped a gold locket around her neck. She cocked an eyebrow and fixed the crowd with a hard, blue stare. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

Sunny jumped and snatched her polka-dot dress from the rack. Peachy followed suit. One by one, the rest of the fillies unknotted themselves from their little cluster and got dressed.

Diamond swished her tail, eyes fixed on the wall. She nudged Silver’s right hoof. “Thanks.”

Silver smiled and patted it back.

Dinky’s voice muffled inside of her dress. “Okay, I don’t know if you guys forgot, but—” Her head popped out of the collar and she shook her mane out. “But we’re kinda in the middle of the apocalypse right now?”

Cotton Cloudy pulled her wings through the little back window on her gown. “Yeah, we’ve kinda got more important stuff to worry about than tea parties.”

“You’d think it’d be easy to tell with your nose in the air all the time.” Berry at least had the decency to say it under her breath as she zipped up the shapeless lime green disaster she’d dragged along.

Sunny Daze sniffled at the skylight. “It’s still so dark outside.”

Silver Spoon flipped her tail as Diamond Tiara led them into the dining room. “I don’t care what the sky looks like outside. The clock inside says it’s eight in the morning. Breakfast tea is what we have planned and breakfast tea is what we will have.” She looked back with her friendliest smile. “Just because Berry Pinch summoned the endless night and basically ruined everything forever, it doesn’t mean everything else has to fall apart.”

The Dink frowned. “Pretty sure everything is already falling apart.” She sniffed at the muffins. “Are these blueberry? I like blueberry.”

“The ones on the right are blueberry. And it won’t fall apart if we remember ourselves. We forget teatime today and tomorrow we’re all fighting over corn and hayseed, and wearing horseshoes for
earrings.” Silver took her place beside Diamond Tiara at the head of the table while Randolph filled everypony’s cups. “It’ll be madness.”

Diamond placed a hoof on Randolph’s shoulder before he moved on. “Make sure Sunny and Peachy don’t get the peppermint.” She squinted at the pair as they climbed into their seats. Sunny Daze still looked rattled. “No sugar either. I’d rather have them snoozing than crying again.”

Silver Spoon added a lump of sugar and gently stirred, just enough to bring out the passionflower’s flavor. “Decorum, girls.” She took her cup into her hooves, breathed in the steam, and breathed out harmony. “We have to have standards.”

“Wow, it’s peppermint!” Twist beamed three chairs down, marveling at the tea cup in her hooves. “I didn’t know tea could taste like candy!”

“Actually, it’s a tisane, since there’s no actual tea leaves in it.” Silver fetched herself a parfait and bit of buttered toast. “But we still call it tea anyway.”

Peachy sniffed her cup. “Mine doesn’t smell like candy…” She peeked at the dark, sinister hallway and her ears drooped. “I really wish the sun would come back.”

“You think Nightmare Moon can get in here?” Sunny Daze tried her tea, smacking her lips. She reached for the sugar bowl.

Randolph nudged it out of reach and shut the oak door, sealing away the nighttime like a closet monster.

“I don’t see any Nightmares in here,” said Diamond Tiara. “Do you, Silver Spoon?”

“I see eight fillies having a lovely time at a tea party.” Silver nabbed her mouth with a napkin and folded her hooves in her lap. “These sorts of things aren’t appropriate for teatime. Let’s talk about something else. How did everypony like the new Sapphire Shores record?”

“It was amazing!” Cotton Cloudy sat up in her chair and flapped her wings as she sang. “Oooh, don’tcha sweat the haters, ain’t no time to be withdrawn.” She waggled her shoulders in a little dance. “Filly gotta get-get-getcha pony on!”

“I liked her last record better,” Berry Pinch mumbled with a mouth full of cranberry muffin. It was beyond bad manners, but she didn’t seem to notice. Luckily, Randolph hovered nearby to sweep away all the crumbs falling onto the carpet. “But yeah, Get Your Pony On’s fun to dance to.”

Diamond snickered behind her teacup. “Dancing? Is that what you were doing?”

Randolph set down the dust pan, ears swiveling. Quietly, he ducked out the room, closing the door behind him.

“Better dancing than you.” Berry licked jam off her hoof and reached across the table for another muffin. “You’re still a butt, Diamond Tiara.”

“Yeah, well, you’re—”

Silver Spoon’s ears pricked. “Ladies. Decorum.”

“Oh, right.” Diamond put down her tea and cleared her throat. “It is my opinion, Miss Berry Pinch, that you are in fact, two butts.”
Berry smirked. “Ah, but you are three butts.”

Silver shrugged. *Eh, close enough.* She took another sip and observed the rest of the tea party. Cotton enthusiastically listed everything that made Sapphire Shores the best singer to Peachy Pie and Sunny Daze. They stared back with half-lidded eyes, occasionally nodding. Sunny yawned and let her head loll back on her chair. The Dink plowed through the stack of mini muffins on her plate.

Twist leaned out of her chair, reaching for a little fork that had fallen on the carpet. Her hoof found the handle and dragged it back. As she came back up, she paused. “Oh!” She dragged herself back into her seat and waved across the table. “Hey, Thilver Thpoon?”

A great commotion in the hallway cut off Silver’s response. Muffled, raised voices leaked through the walls. Silver felt the clatter of hoofbeats through the floorboards.

“Infinity butts I may be, Miss Berry,” sniffed Diamond. “However, I feel it is my duty to point out that it is still better than being infinity-plus-one butts. Which is what you are.”

“Thilver Thpoo—”

The door banged open and Twist almost jumped out of her skin.

A squirming horde of adults jammed in the doorway, hooves stepping on other hooves, voices yelling over other voices. Mister Rich led the front, his eyes big and buggy, and his suit looked slightly damp. His mane was a sight.

Actually, everypony looked a sight. Did they run all the way here? Berry’s mom looked like she’d just seen ten timberwolves, Cloudy’s brothers wouldn’t stop yelling, and Dinky’s mom…actually, Dinky’s mom always looked like that. Silver Spoon could just barely see Father’s hat bobbing in the mob. Pitch Perfect’s panicked soprano voice sailed over the clatter of yelling voices, but it was impossible to tell who said what.

“Girls! Girls, are you alright?”

“Don’t worry darling, I’m—!”

“I knew I should have—”

“…Are you having a tea party?”

“Sure we are.” The Dink leaned on the table and popped the last bit of muffin in her mouth. “Relax, we’re fine. We’re all cool here—hey!” Dinky’s hooves kicked as her mother scooped her up into the air. “Ma!”

“Sweetiemuffin!” Dinky’s mom planted a big, wet kiss on her daughter’s forehead. “I’m so glad my sweet little precious treasure’s okay.”

“Ma, come oooon. We’re in public.” Dinky flopped in her mother’s forelegs like a ragdoll. She gave a little nuzzle. “Glad you’re okay, too.”

Diamond Tiara squeaked from somewhere inside her father’s bear hug and a tidal wave of promises to never, ever, ever stay late at the office again. Her hooves flailed over his shoulder.

Berry Pinch’s mom wouldn’t stop crying and got tea all over her daughter’s dress.

“It’s just a tea party,” said Silver Spoon. “You can join us if you want, you don’t need to get so
excited.” She turned towards Silver Laurel and Pitch Perfect, who were panting and frazzled, but still put-together, overall. “Mother, Father. It’s nice to see you.”

“Silver Spoon!” Mother cried.

Silver flinched and wondered if she’d committed some teatime faux-pas. She began to explain that they were running on short notice and there wasn’t time to prepare, but it died away when she realized Mother was smiling. And...crying?

“Brightness!” Father snatched Silver from her chair and raised her to the ceiling. From this height she could see the living room windows fading from pink to blue. A patch of sunlight skimed down the hallway. “Oh, my lovely, dazzling Brightness! You got your cutie mark!”

Silver Spoon stared at Silver Laurel. She blinked. What.

Mother dabbed at the makeup running down her cheek. “Congratulations, darling!”

Silver Spoon’s mouth moved without sounds. What.

Twist sighed in her aunt’s vice grip. “That’th what I was tryin’ to tell you.”

What. Silver Spoon pulled her dress pleats from her haunch. Her mouth fell open and swooped up and up and up. Sweet Celestia, what?!

There it was: the very image of the spoon she’d used to stir her tea not five minutes ago, heart in the handle and all. The best cutie mark in the world for the best talent in the world.

Silver Spoon wiggled her legs in the air, squealing. Oh gosh oh gosh oh gosh there it is it’s right there and it’s so pretty and of course that’s what it is and that makes so much sense THIS IS THE BEST THING EVER IN THE HISTORY OF BEST THINGS I’M GONNA THROW UP!

Father kissed her cheek and finally put her down.

The Dink waved at her from the ceiling. “Congratulations, Silver Spoon.”

“Great job. First one in class to get a cutie mark, aren’t you?” Filthy Rich patted Silver on the back. “How’s it feel?”

Silver Spoon faced the room and took a giggly moment to collect herself. This was still afternoon tea, after all. She cleared her throat with a polite little smile. “It’s absolutely wonderful.”

The silver teapots shimmered, the teaspoons twinkled, and the little saucers glistened as sunbeams crept over the table cloth. Fillies, parents, and older siblings alike laughed, and stamped their hooves and called their congratulations. In the light of a new day and a new cutie mark, the never-ending night seemed like a dream.

“Congrats.” Diamond Tiara leaned against the wall and frowned in the shadow of the table.
Silver Spoon peeked into her saddlebag for another inventory check. Fifteen paper bags crowded against each other, all labeled and categorized by color and potency. It would be better to have individual bags for each type of flower petal, but Roseluck said she didn’t have that many bags to spare, so it was three to a bag.

“Sheesh, Silvie.” Diamond Tiara’s nose crinkled at the powerful aroma. “What’d you do, buy the whole stand?”

“Of course not. I didn’t get any passionflower, since there’s plenty in the pantry already.” She frowned, wondering if they had enough jars for forty five types of petals. “But maybe if I got less they wouldn’t be all mixed together like this. Ugh, I’ll have to sort them all out by hoof.” Silver took a quick whiff for herself. Good thing she didn’t mind her saddlebag smelling like a flower shop. It smelled pretty nice, actually. She tilted her ears in thought. Maybe mixing them up wasn’t such a bad idea.

She slowed to a stop. “It’s like I have ready-made tea blends… Like jasmine-anise-rose, maybe.” Her little smile spread into a grin. “Or ginger-hibiscus-sunflower!”

“Oh-huh.” Diamond stepped to the side, but not fast enough to keep Silver from grabbing her shoulders and squeezing close. The pink filly rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Oh! Or lavender-daisy-dandelion! Carnation-lilac-honeysuckle! Bluebell-baby’s breath-begonias!” She closed her bag, swooning into the market like a lovesick ingénue in one of Mother’s operas. “Oh Diamond, the possibilities are endless! They’re, like, totally, absolutely endless!”

Diamond wiggled out of Silver’s grip, smoothing back her mane. “Sure you don’t want to go back and buy out the herbalist, too?”

Silver Spoon paused in mid-swoon, hooves still over her chest. “Now that you mention it…”

“I was kidding.”

“Maybe we should go back for more peppermint. I mean, I have some at home but what if we run out?” Silver glanced towards Cardamom’s stand. “If Twist comes by for tea, she’ll want peppermint and if I don’t have any it’ll look totally rude.”

“Kidding, Silver Spoon.” Diamond Tiara grabbed Silver’s head and forcibly turned it back to the path. The summer heat turned her face a hotter shade of pink. “Look, are we done yet? I finished my geraniums forever ago and I’d like to get to Sugarcube Corner sometime today and not next year.”

She had a point. They’d left at high noon and now it had to be close to three. Maybe it’d be best to wrap it up. “Just one more stop, okay?”

Diamond grunted, dragging her hooves in the dirt several steps behind Silver’s skipping canter. The powertrot dissolved hours ago. Her ears sunk against her wilted, sweaty mane. She hadn’t smiled all day.

Yeah, better make this quick. Silver scanned the market for the cart. She knew it wasn’t too far from Sugarcube Corner and the cart should still be open, so it had to be somewhere around…there! Silver Spoon picked up the pace. The sooner she got there, the sooner they’d finish.
Diamond Tiara squinted as if she were seeing things. “Apples?” She frowned at the mare in the cowboy hat and her rows of redstreaks and golden russets. A familiar tacky bow hovered behind an apple barrel. “I thought you were getting stuff for tea. And since when do you even like apples? You said they taste weird.”

“The green ones taste weird. That’s why I want red ones.” Plus, red ones were prettier. Silver rose to her hind legs to scope out the apples. Bright, shiny peels on all of them—good candidates.

“Well, hey there, you two!” Apple Bloom’s sister (Apple…jack, wasn’t it?) finished counting out Mr. Breezy’s change and smiled down at them. “How’s yer daddy doin’ these days, Diamond Tiara?”

“Fine.” Di slouched against the stand, shutting down the conversation before it could start.

Silver flicked an ear. Weren’t the Apples friends of the family? It seemed bad manners to not at least fake niceties. Maybe their families were too close for it to be a problem.

Applejack didn’t seem too bothered by it. “So, what can I do ya for? Ya’ll lookin’ for Apple Bloom?”

Apple Bloom’s head poked out from behind a wheel. She blinked at them curiously. Her big ugly bow smushed against the wooden spokes.

“Not right now,” said Silver Spoon. “I’m here on business.” She sniffed at her round red reflection in the redstreaks. “How are your skins?”

Applejack looked at her coat in confusion. “Uh.”

“I mean the skins on your apples. Do you have any? Or can you peel some for me?” Silver tapped her hooves on the apple barrel in anticipation. “I’m going to make tea with them!”

Diamond hunched her shoulders. “Hmph. You’d think we’d go to a tea store for tea but nooo, not us, we gotta go all over Equestria. Surprised we didn’t go into the Everfree Forest…” Her blue eyes glinted dangerously at the shadow hovering at her hooves. “Have a nice time at your other party, Bloom?”

Apple Bloom ducked back behind the wheel.

“Oh, I already did that.” Silver Spoon rolled an apple between her hooves, smiling down at her friend. “The first thing we did after the slumber party was visit Miss Tealove’s new place—did you know she’s opening a Ponyville shop, like the one in Canterlot?—and Father got me one of everything. He got me some infusers, too, and a tea set that came all the way from Neighpon! Did you know they have their own special rules for tea there, too? There’s even ceremonies.”

“No, Silver Spoon,” sighed Diamond Tiara. “I didn’t.”

“And besides Neighpon, there was tea from Trottingham and Zebabwe and…a lot more.” She rested on the cart, her hoof pressed against her cheek. “So many varieties, it’s hard to keep track, and that’s not even counting the herbal teas. You can make herbal teas from just about everything, like fruits and flowers…I mentioned the flowers, right, Di?”

“Only about fifty times.”

“Tealove says she can be my mentor in a few months when she’s done setting up our schedules. She knows so much about tea parties—way more than me—and she’s so nice and always polite. I never
met anypony else that knew all the rules about what to do with your tail at afternoon tea.” Silver buried her face in her hooves, squeaking like an excitable dormouse. “There’s so much to learn!”

“Mmhm. The ol’ cutie mark craziness.” Applejack tipped back her hat, looking down at her with a nostalgic sigh. “When I first got my cutie mark, why I couldn’t leave nothin’ on Sweet Apple Acres well enough alone. Just wanted t’get in everythin’ and do everythin’ about apples and apple farmin’. ” She chuckled and winked at Silver Spoon. “Feels like you gone plumb crazy with happy, don’t it?”

That was a coarser choice of words than Silver would’ve liked (what did plums have to do with it?), but she nodded anyway. “It feels…”

She searched for the word. It didn’t just feel happy or exciting; this wasn’t like a roller-coaster or getting a new kettle. It didn’t feel new, either. It felt old; something always there, something she’d always been…but better. A cutie mark polished off the tarnish of youth to reveal the shining young mare underneath.

“It feels correct,” Silver Spoon told her.

“What, so it was wrong before?” The tip of Diamond’s tail twitched, her voice lilting a deceptive sweetness. “Not good enough?”

Silver blinked. That tone of voice was supposed to be for ponies like Berry Pinch and Twist. “Um. Not really.” She must have misstepped. “I just mean it feels… better?”

Diamond Tiara’s eyes narrowed.

“In…vigorating?”

Diamond pinned her ears.

“It’s more, er…” Each word dug Silver deeper, and she couldn’t think of a polite dodge. Not one that would work, anyway. “Having a cutie mark is…”

“It’s the best!” cried somepony.

Above them, Cotton Cloudy bounced along the apple cart’s awning, buzzing like a hummingbird. She giggled and fluttered down for a soft landing, wings splayed to flaunt the little grey cloud on her white flank. “Check it out!”

Saved. “Congratulations, Cotton.” Silver made a mental note to give Cotton a really good cutedéeanera present. “What’s it for?”

“Rainstorms!” Cotton Cloudy twisted to get a good look at her flank, but it ended up as chasing her tail. “I was just helping my mom and dad put the clouds together for the big storm today and I said ‘We should move those nimbuses to the right’ but nopony was ‘round to do it so I arranged ‘em myself and this appeared!”

It made sense Cotton was the first pegasus their age to get a cutie mark; Featherweight said she’d been first to fly, too. A perfectly acceptable filly to associate with. Perhaps Silver could invite her to tea later.

“Oh, wow, Cotton!” Apple Bloom popped out from behind the wheel, circling Cotton like a dog looking for a place to lie down. “That’s so amazin’! Can I touch it?” Even though Cotton Cloudy never said yes, Apple Bloom poked the cloud with her hoof anyway. A light touch, as if she
suspected the new mark could smear.

Silver Spoon stepped back, guarding her own cutie mark in case Apple Bloom got bright ideas about touching other ponies’ flanks with those dirty, chipped hooves of hers.

“Yeah.” Diamond shrugged. “S’okay, I guess.”

“Y’all are growin’ up so fast.” Applejack shook her head with a laugh. “Why, just the other day, Snips an’ Snails came rushing past here with brand new cutie marks, too. And Carrot Top tells me lil’ Peachy Pie just got hers at camp.”

Diamond Tiara’s ears pricked.

“Heh, wouldn’t be surprised if you had yer own cutie mark before too long, Apple Bloom.” Applejack ruffled her little sister’s hair, making the bow go all lopsided. Apple Bloom grinned under a mop of red mane.

Cotton’s tail playfully flicked Silver’s shoulder. “Silver Spoon got hers first, so now everypony wants one.”

“Mmhm, that’s city ponies for you,” said Applejack. “Gotta be trendy with everything.”

Before Silver could answer, Diamond Tiara pushed between them. “Are we gonna get anything or are we just gonna hang around and talk about butt symbols? Maybe you didn’t notice, but it’s a million degrees outside. I’m gonna get sunburned!”

The pink filly whirled on Cotton. “And if you’re such a big-shot weatherpony now, why can’t you make it not so hot?”

“Oh, that’s right.” Cotton went aloft in one smooth stroke. “Applejack, Medley sent me to ask if you can help pull down some branches and stuff so the storm won’t blow all over the place. She says it’s gonna be a big one.”

“Tell her I’ll be comin’ along soon as I’m done here.” Applejack leaned over the barrel. “’Fraid there’s no peels for you, Silver, but I can still sell you some fine apples.”

“Why don’t ya just peel ‘em yourself?” piped Apple Bloom, though nopony was speaking to her. “It’ll be fresher that way. Besides, it’s your tea, so you should be the one peelin’.”

“Hmm.” Bloom had a point, though peeling apples really sounded like something Brass Tacks was supposed to do.

Diamond Tiara tapped her hoof.

“Just make it two apples for now.” Silver swept the apples into her bag, tossed out five bits, and let the farmer keep the change. “Okay, let’s get to Sugarcube—” She turned to find her friend slogging in the opposite direction. “Corner? Hey, Di?”

“I don’t feel like Sugarcube Corner anymore. Let’s just go back to your place.”

“But it’s just a few feet away.” They could see the cupcakes and candy cane banister through the window. At the register, Snips and Snails fell over each other, probably trying to see all the candy and place an order at the same time. Dorks. “Are you sure?”

Diamond Tiara drew her lips tight and picked up the pace. “Positive.”
Blue eyes peeped over the Battle Clouds board. “Who’s it from?” Diamond looked back to the board and flicked a game piece. “S-17, by the way.”

“Miss.” A very near miss. One square from Silver’s gull.

The blue and white envelope smelled of hoofpolish and perfume. In the return address was a pair of linked horseshoes. “Looks like Miss Shoeshine. C-11.”

“You stomped my cirrus.” Diamond watched the letter opener slice the sides to avoid the teacup seal. Out fell a glossy black card with gold trim and lettering. “Since when does Shoeshine use fancy stationery? She just sends Dad boring white ones.”

“Since now, I guess.” Inside, curly mouthwriting congratulated Silver on discovering her talent, growing into a lady…futures…horizons…proud of you, blah blah blah. Same as all the others. The half-off coupon for new shoes was nice, though. It joined the flock of cards on Silver’s dresser, next to the one from Twist and Bon-Bon.

Diamond kept her eyes on the board. “Hm. C-9.”

“Miss.”

“Are you sure it’s a miss?” The tip of Diamond’s tail swished across Silver’s hooves. One pink ear cocked left as her neck reached around the board. “I wanna check.”

Silver pulled her board close and frowned. “You can’t. You’ll see where all my clouds and stuff are. It’s a miss.”

Diamond’s cheeks puffed like balloons. “Knew I shoulda brought my Oligarchy board…” Her eyes slid to the fish tank. Ferdinand weaved in and out of the turrets of his new castle, a present from Fluttershy the last time Silver dropped by to get fish food. Blue fins swished over the teaspoon emblem. “It’s a special edition, you know.”

“I know,” Silver said.

“With gold lettering and game pieces and platinum stables. The board’s imported wood and it came with an authenticity certificate. There’s only forty of them in the whole world.”

“I know. We played it last time I was at your house, remember?” And the time before that. And before that.

In fact, since the Slumber Party, Diamond hadn’t wanted to do much else. She’d won every game. Silver shouldn’t have taken so long getting tea stuff; Sugarcube Corner would have been a welcome change of pace. The same walls day in and day out got old fast.

“It’s so much better than Battle Clouds. You actually need, like, skill, you know? No offense, Battle Clouds is cute and all, but it’s all luck. Anypony can win with luck, but it’s whatever. If that’s what you’re into, fine.” Diamond rubbed the back of her neck with a sigh. She leaned back in her white chair and blinked at the rows of cards. “…Are you really sure it’s a miss?”

Silver Spoon double checked Cloud Fifty Two, a bright blue square of nothing flanked by more blue
squares of nothing. “Positive.”

“Hm. *Some* ponies are just lucky I guess.” Her eyes never left the dresser.

Silver motioned to the lines of cutecañera cards. “You want to see? I have one from everypony in class except Snails.” Snails and one other foal.

Diamond Tiara sank into the cushion, her mouth tipping down and down into a perfect little frown. “So…no?”

“Who wants to sit around and look at a bunch of cardboard from ponies too cheap to send a real present? So lame.”

Silver tapped her forehooves together. “I was just wondering.”

“And now you’re not. Can we just get back to the game?”

“You were the one looking at them, I just thought—”

“I don’t even know what the big deal is. Everypony gets a cutie mark eventually. And who sends cards by mail?” Diamond’s ears pricked in thought. She sat up. “They should be giving you those at your cutecañera, right?”

Silver Spoon glanced away, suddenly quite interested in her game pieces’ paintjobs. “You’re right...they’re just dumb old cards. Let’s get back to the game. S-13.”

Diamond Tiara didn’t hear her. “Come to think of it, you got your cutie mark two weeks ago...you should have had your party already, right?” She frowned. “Are you not having one?”

This was a very fine game board. Under the new paint, the pieces seemed a bit old, perhaps an antique? Perhaps Father could appraise it to check. Silver Spoon felt Diamond’s eyes on her. “Still having one.”

“Oh, good. Hate for my new saddle to go to waste. I guess it’s just really exclusive.”

Silver’s tail curled over her flank. “Very exclusive. It’s, um...this Wednesday. In Canterlot.”

Waiting until the last minute was so rude, but with all her excitement over tea, she’d forgotten and never found the time to bring it up before. She gulped and looked up, bracing for the worst.

It was worse than she thought. Diamond was smiling.

“Wow, I bet the best ponies are gonna be there, like celebrities and noblemares. I’ve never been to Canterlot before.” She paused. “Well, I have, but...I was just too busy to mingle, you know? Daddy and I are very busy ponies. When are we leaving?”

“Yeah, um. About that.” For a moment, Silver considered bolting from the house and dragging Mother from her voice lessons to ask again. But Mother had been quite clear on the prospect.

“What sort of plus one?”

“*Diamond Tiara, Mother.*”

*Mother looked up. “Who?”*
“My friend, Diamond Tiara. I was at her slumber party, remember? She’s pink and her father runs that big store?”

“Mm. The loud little prima donna.” She turned back to her breakfast. “No, dear. Not this time.”

She could wire Father and ask him, but after the move from Manehattan, Father was in no hurry to break tradition.

Diamond Tiara’s smile vanished. She was no idiot.

“Di…” Just do it fast, like ripping off a bandage. “You’re not invited to the cuteceañera, I’m really sorry!”

Diamond blinked. Her ears waved gently, as if she understood those individual words but not in that order. She chuckled under her breath. “That’s so weird… for a sec I thought you said I couldn’t come.” She chuckled again, waiting for Silver’s laugh to join her.

The overcast sky made Silver’s room feel unnaturally bright for four in the afternoon. Trees rustled by the window. Ferdinand’s tank bubbled. Diamond’s chuckle dried up.

“My parents said it’s just the Silver family. No pony else.”

Still, she could have sworn Mother and Father cleared Wondermint when they spoke of future cuteceañeras last year. And wasn’t Golden Gavel at Silver Spade’s cuteceañera a few years ago? Maybe she misremembered.

“I’m really sorry, Di.” Silver Spoon flattened her ears.

Diamond’s chin shook. “But you said—”

“I know. I shouldn’t have.”

Diamond Tiara’s mouth twitched, but she didn’t say anything after that.

Silver Spoon had no idea Diamond Tiara could get that quiet. Most days she did more than enough talking for the both of them, with plenty of words left over, some never said aloud. Di had a way of speaking loud and clear without ever opening her mouth, and Silver always heard her.

Silver’s tail curled tighter. She heard nothing now. “I’ll just be gone a couple days.” They should have played Oligarchy after all. “You know, Snips and Snails got their marks a little while ago. So did Cotton.”

“And?” The edge in her voice sliced through bone. No mistake of the message boiling underneath: Quit while you’re ahead.

But Silver had been so rude already; she had to at least try to fix it. At least Diamond sounded like herself again. That was good, right? “And I was thinking since their mark mitzvah’s around the same time, maybe—”

The chair toppled with a sharp, wooden smack. “Maybe what?!” Diamond’s hooves slammed the cherrywood table. She loomed on two legs, strands of corkscrewed mane dragging along the edge of the board. “Maybe you’d just pawn me off on some other two-bit cutie mark party? You think I’m just so heartbroken ’cause I don’t get to fawn over somepony’s butt?” A snap of her neck flicked her mane back into place. “Please.”
Silver Spoon shrank behind the board. “Di, come on.”

“Come on, what? You’re the one that can’t shut up about tea and cutie marks. What, you expect me to cry just ‘cause I can’t go to your dumb old cutieañera?” The twitch at her mouth curdled into a sneer. “Get over yourself.” Her scoff wobbled.

Diamond dragged the chair back up and fell into it with a hard thump. She jammed a peg into the board. “S-5.”

“I thought…” Silver wiped her lenses and took a breath to steady herself. “I just thought I’d suggest other plans for the weekend.” She tried to smile. “It can get kinda boring around here, you know?”

“There’s other ponies here besides you, Silver. I spent nine years here without you already. I’ll live.” She folded her hooves and flicked the table with her tail. “We playing Battle Clouds or not?”

“We are.” Silver Spoon stared at the wood grain, up at Diamond’s steely scowl, and back to the board. “Um… what was the last move you made?”

“Sky five.”

A shot into the clear blue, five squares from the nearest cloud.

Silver shrugged with a sad little smile. “Aw, dam. You burned my cumulus. Guess your luck’s turning around.”

Diamond’s hoof tapped out the seconds on the tablecloth. “Is that so.”

The little smile wobbled into a grin. Silver Spoon fluttered her eyelashes. “Mm-hmm.”

The wind bent into a low groan. Tree branches scraped against the windowpane. Silver found herself grateful she’d plucked petals from the rose bushes before the storm hurt them.

“Well, lucky me.” She didn’t even blink. “Next turn’s yours.”

So it was. “Um… Cloud fifteen.”

“Hit.” The chair pushed out before the words left Silver’s lips. “You downed my battle cloud, Silver. You win. Congratulations.” Diamond swung her saddlebag over her shoulder and turned for the door. “I gotta go.”

Silver trailed behind, tail dragging along the carpet. “Already?”

“Yeah, but my dad wants me to, like… do stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“He’s been on this father-daughter kick since Berry doomed Equestria.” Diamond glanced at the dark window as she turned the knob. “Besides, I should get back before the rain.”

“Oh,” said Silver Spoon. “Okay. You wanna walk home, then? Or Brass Tacks could give a ride.”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay. See you later, then.”

“Yeah.” The door clicked shut.
Silver slumped against the table, half-heartedly picking out pegs and gathering pieces. Diamond’s game pieces sagged out of their pegs, twisting lopsided and upside down. Her last battle cloud, a wispy stratus, popped out with a slight touch.

The coordinates read “C-10”. Cloud fifteen was an empty patch of blue sky.

Long ago, it became apparent to Silver Spoon that all offices smelled the same. It didn’t matter if it was for the headmistress, a C.E.O., or a nine-to-five pencil pusher. A home office, as it turned out, was no exception. Nice to know some things never changed.

She nudged the door open. “Hello? Is anypony in here?”

Mr. Filthy Rich peered out from behind the mountain of papers, notepads, binders, and files, a fountain pen between his teeth. Encompassed by shelves, paperwork, and little golf trophies, he seemed different than what Silver remembered.

He didn’t have his tie on, maybe that was it. Or it was because his mane lay loose and natural today, with a curl and a slight frizz that made him look kind of like a lion. Adults had a way of being different ponies in different places, like how Father never talked much at Granddad Silver Tongue’s house, or when Berry Pinch’s mom got loud and smelly at parties.

Mr. Rich tilted an ear and blinked at her; he seemed surprised. “Morning, Silver Spoon. Something I can do for you?”

“Good morning, Mister Rich. Um, I was just passing by and was wondering…” It might have been politer to just wait at home and let her make the first move instead. But it had been over a week already…maybe she just didn’t know Silver was back. Or was sick. Plenty of reasonable explanations, no need to get worked up. Just ask. “Can Diamond Tiara come out and play?”

Mr. Rich’s bushy eyebrows lifted. He put down his pen.

Maybe Diamond got grounded while Silver was away. “If she can’t play, can I just go up for a second and say hi? I got back from Canterlot a little while ago, and I wanted to thank her for my cuteceañera present.” She touched the string of pearls at her neck. Their light blue sheen complemented Silver’s coat and glasses so well she couldn’t imagine how she’d gone so long without them. Father verified them as Aquastrian imports, very rare. “It came in the mail yesterday.”

“Yesterday, you said?” Mr. Rich frowned. “Huh, I thought we sent that out weeks ago…must’ve got lost in the mail. Anyhow, I’m afraid Diamond Tiara’s not in right now, Sil’.”

“Do you know when she’ll be back?”

“Oh, not for a few weeks at least. Diamond’s in Applewood, getting ready for nationals with her coach and visiting her mom. I thought you knew.” He rubbed his chin, leaning forward and accidentally toppling a small tower of files. He managed to catch them with his hooves before they scattered across the rug. “Actually, I figured she was taking you along. She’s always goin’ on about how good you are to have around.”
“Not lately, I’ll bet.” Silver slumped against the doorframe, staring at the tasteful rug. She glanced up as Mr. Rich rose from his desk and made his way across the room. “She’s mad at me.”

Filthy Rich’s booming laugh shook his shoulders. “At you? Hogwash!”

Silver’s ears sagged and she didn’t laugh at all.

“Just because she didn’t take you along doesn’t mean she’s mad at you. You know she didn’t even want me along this time?” He glanced at the row of perfectly-posed Diamond Tiara photos on his desk. “I thought she’d practice here and wait until pageant week so we could leave together, when my vacation started.”

Mr. Rich tried to slick back his mane, but without any pomade, it just popped up again. After a couple more feeble attempts, he gave up. “She wanted to get to work right away, said she wouldn’t start without her coach. Practically jumped in the cab last Wednesday and almost forgot her lucky scrunchie. I’ve never seen her so focused.”

Wednesday. During Silver’s cuteceañera. She sat on the stiff, fringed rug and sighed. “She hates me.”

Mr. Rich snorted. “Diamond’s nuts about you, Silver Spoon. She dragged us around for three hours in Karats’ picking out those pearls.”

Silver lifted the necklace with her hoof. Perfect heft: not heavy, but dense enough to feel. That was how Father knew they were authentic. “With all due respect, Mr. Rich, that was then and this is now.”

At Wisteria, allegiances turned on a dime and Silver knew the signs. “The last times we hung out, she didn’t want to talk to me at all. She wouldn’t let Tacks drive her home and got mad whenever I talked about…well, anything. And when I tried to make it better—”

“It just got worse?” Mr. Rich sighed and kneeled to meet her at eye level. Adults only did that before they either said something important, or something patronizing. Usually both.

“Silver, listen.”

Definitely both.

“Diamond Tiara can get a little…tense when a pageant’s coming up. She wants everything to be perfect, herself most of all. Trouble is, nopony’s perfect and nopony wins all the time.” In a blink, his ears went stiff and his voice darkened. “Despite what other ponies might tell her.”

“But I knew fillies who went to beauty pageants all the time,” Silver said. “None of them ever acted like this.” Taffeta was the complete opposite: obnoxiously happy and loud.

“Not everypony reacts the same way, Silver. Especially not when they’re nervous.” Mr. Rich ran his hooves through his mane again. The tired look came back to his face. “And when Diamond’s nervous, it comes out looking like anger…or worse. But it’s not you she’s mad at, Silver Spoon. I guarantee it.”

The blue pearls rolled in the hollow of Silver’s hoof. She glanced at the spoon on her flank. Not for the first time, she considered wearing a skirt. “You really think she doesn’t hate me?”

“Kid, if she hated you, even the diamond dogs would know it.” Filthy Rich glanced at the necklace, chuckling under his breath. “And for six hundred bits, she better not.”
Silver frowned at the rock pile. The tasteful arrangement of white limestone broke up the great green sprawl that was the Rich estate lawn, and its flat blocks formed convenient stairs. She’d have a better view up there…along with chipped hoof polish and scuffed shoes. Presuming the blazing stone didn’t roast her hooves first.

Silver Spoon paused at the sound of hoofbeats, but didn’t turn to look. The pace dawdled and meandered on the road, not the steady clip-clop of a cabpony. It wasn’t them.

“Whatever,” she sighed. “I’ll just get a hooficure later.” Silver wiped the sweat from her neck, gripped her parasol between her teeth, and made the climb. On tiphoof, she barely saw over the horizon’s edge. Still nothing.

Diamond would have been here hours ago if this stupid town had a train station. Train stations had shade and benches and fans. Manehattan had shade all over the place. A little crowd of small town dawdlers broke over the horizon, chittering amongst themselves. Silver laid back her ears with a huff. “How’s a carriage supposed to get through all this traffic? Gotta be like ten ponies out there, this is an outrage. This town is so dumb.” Silver cringed, hopping from hoof to hoof. “And why does it have to be so hot?”

Another voice piped, “Because we don’t get rain until next week?” The Dink stood at the edge of the lawn, a big pink inner tube hanging from her neck and a white spot of suntan lotion on her nose. Featherweight, Truffle Shuffle, and Rumble stood to her left. On the right, Sunny Daze peeked out from behind her brother, Shady Daze.

Silver crouched to pop open her lace parasol. She twirled it over her shoulder, casting filigree shadows over the rock. “Could still use some breeze now and then.”

“I guess. Anyway, we’re all going to the swimming hole.” Dinky smiled. “Wanna come with?”

Silver Spoon shook her head.

Sunny Daze frowned. Something seemed off about her today, but Silver couldn’t tell what. “Why not?”

*Because stuff’s only worth attending if the right ponies come.* And when Silver was with Diamond, that meant the right ponies did. Besides, Diamond had a pool. A pool was much better than a swimming hole full of algae and fish poop.

The Dink spun the tube around her neck. “You sure, Spoons? We’re gonna swim and look for the lake monster.”

“It can’t be a lake monster if there’s no lake,” Featherweight pointed out. “It’s a pond monster.”

“The point is, it’s a monster.”

Silver’s voice took an edge. “No thanks.” How was she supposed to listen for the carriage with all this talking? “I’m busy.”

Dinky shrugged. “Eh, suit yourself.”
Sunny paused as the crowd pulled away. “Don’t those rocks hurt your hooves? How come you don’t come down?”

“I want to see.”

“See what?”

“The carriage.” Silver nudged up her sunglasses, sparing the yellow filly a glance. “Diamond Tiara’s coming back today. She’s been gone all month.”

“Oh.” Sunny Daze stepped onto the lawn and grew quiet. Her tail flicked over the manicured grass. The thrum of cicadas echoed through the faraway trees. “My friend’s gone, too.”

Silver Spoon looked down. Indeed, Sunny was alone. No bright orange mane at her shoulder, no syrupy voice finishing her sentences, nopony holding her hoof. It was like looking at half a pony.

“I could wait with you,” Sunny whispered. “If it’s okay.”

Silver glanced at Shady Daze, who was busy laughing with Rumble and Dink. Sunny’s older brother didn’t even bother to look back.

“Fine. Just don’t be too loud.” Her voice muffled as she took the parasol handle in her teeth. Silver Spoon pulled her forehoof from the limestone with a hiss. Her shoes burned like four mini-furnaces. She hopped back into the cool grass. “I want to hear the carriage.”

“Okay.” The yellow filly crept into the parasol’s shade, staring at the teaspoon handle. Her eyes trailed to Silver’s flank. “Did you get that at your cutecxtaena?” she whispered. “It’s pretty.”

“I know.”

“I wonder if Peachy Pie’s gonna get anything neat like that with peaches on it.”

The bits Auntie Silver Frames spent on this custom lace parasol could put a pony through a semester of fourth-tier university. “Yeah.” Silver rolled her eyes. “Can’t wait to see peaches sewn on her old burlap saddlebag.”

“Me neither!” Twenty seconds before Sunny forgot the quiet rule. Point to her, that was longer than expected. “Peachy got her cutie mark at camp; she’s been sending me lots of letters and pictures and stuff.”

Silver crossed her forelegs and sat higher to see more horizon. And I’m supposed to care because?

“See, there was this peach tree there and the tree got sick but then Peachy Pie pulled some weeds and spread some stuff around and gave it water until the peach tree got better and made some peaches and everypony ate the peaches in a cobbler!” Sunny Daze panted, out of breath and a big smile on her face. “Peachy Pie’s so talented, Silver Spoon.” The smile dimmed away. Her ears sagged. “…I wish I was talented.”

Sunny’s lower lip trembled. She sniffled with a little whimper.

It was too hot for this nonsense. Silver wrapped her tail out of range of snot and tears, and fixed the filly with a stare. “If you start crying, you can’t sit with me. You’re too loud.”

“S-sorry, Silver Spoon.”
“Don’t be sorry, just stop doing it.” Silver Spoon lashed her tail. Somewhere in the distance, a mockingbird called. “Everypony gets a talent. Don’t even know why you’re making such a fuss about it.”

“I dunno. I was just thinking…” Sunny chewed her lip. “What if Peachy Pie comes back different or doesn’t like me anymore?”

“Make it work or make new friends.” Silver glanced back. Sunny’s annoying milksop face blinked at her with big blue eyes. “Ugh. How am I supposed to know? Cutie marks aren’t that big a deal, Sunny Daze, sheesh. Peachy won’t be a new pony because she’s got a mark, she’ll just be really excited about pear trees.”

“Peach trees.”

“What?”

“Maybe you’re right, Silver Spoon.” Sunny Daze wiped her sweaty nose and sat up. Of course I am.

Silver Spoon’s ears pricked. Over the mockingbirds and cicadas, she heard hoofbeats. Smooth, focused hoofbeats…and wheels. She rose to her hooves.

The smile returned to Sunny’s face. “After all, Diamond Tiara doesn’t have a cutie mark and nothing changed between you guys, right?”

A yellow cab roof blazed bright in the afternoon sunshine. Silver huddled against the parasol handle. Her heart tried to crawl into her throat, tea-laden talks and Battle Cloud memories along for the ride.

A few feet away, Randolph stepped out of the gates pushing along a dolly. “Oh, I think I see!” said Sunny Daze somewhere in the background. Silver hardly registered it.

Gravel crunched under the carriage wheels as the cab squeaked to a stop. The doors clicked open. Silver’s stomach dropped a centimeter.

What if Mr. Rich was wrong? What if Diamond never stopped being mad? Could her social standing weather it? Would she need to start climbing the social ladder all over again? Maybe Diamond wanted her necklace back and Silver would have to go back to solo tea parties, but it wasn’t a party with just one pony and tea parties were her special talent, so did that mean—

Diamond Tiara’s head popped out of the door, practically sparkling. “Hi, Silver Spoon!”

“Hey, Di.” It had been so long since Diamond smiled, Silver had almost forgotten what it looked like. The smile was contagious. For a stupidly long, yet incredibly short moment, Silver felt like the silliest pony in the world.

A blue satin cape shimmered on Diamond Tiara’s shoulders, the edges embroidered with interlocking white roses. On the other side of the cab, Mr. Rich helped Randolph load out a platinum cup big enough to fit three fillies and their dog.

Silver raised her sunglasses. “You took Nationals with no mercy, I see.”

“Like there was any doubt. Still, I tried not to make the competition cry too hard.”

The steel tiara atop Diamond’s mane gleamed like a sword. Small but sturdy, it reminded Silver of the steel beams that held up Manehattan for generations. Little diamond and aquamarine studs
Diamond Tiara leaned on Silver’s shoulder and sighed, “Poor things never stood a chance. I like, almost felt bad for them, you know?” She wiped away a pretend tear. “Just how could they compete…” In a flourish of hot summer air and sequins, the satin whipped away to reveal a blue tiara upon her flank. “When the best filly gets her cutie mark in the final round?!”

“Nice!” Silver hi-hoofed her up high, then down low, east-Manehattan style; a little something she’d taught Diamond the first week they’d met. “It totally matches you!”

“It does, doesn’t it?” She twitched her tail, still stiff from the hairspray. “I got it because I’m a winner, and I’m a winner because I’m the best.” Never one to pass up an audience, Diamond tilted her head towards Sunny. “You know why I’m the best?”

Sunny tilted her head. “Um. Money?”

“Wrong.” Diamond’s dressage canter returned in full force, circling the yellow filly with a smooth and speedy highstep. “It’s because when other fillies stop practice at eight, I go ‘till midnight. When they say it’s lunchtime, I say it’s crunchtime. Winning takes work and willpower.”

“And look, we match now!” Silver curled her tail and pressed their flanks together. “Two perfect cutie marks for two perfect little ponies.”

“Better than perfect. We’re us.” Diamond grinned with all her teeth. “Just older.”

Silver nodded. “Smarter.”

They jumped up for another high-hoof. “Better!”

“Wait…” Sunny Daze waggled her ears, frowning. “I thought you said cutie marks weren’t a big deal.”

“I did not! What a stupid thing to say.” Silver waved her off with a flick of the tail. “You must have imagined it.”

Sunny blinked. “But—”

Silver’s frown cut off Sunny’s blabber. “I remember when I was a little blank flank, making up stories and junk. Then I grew up.” She blinked slowly. “Weren’t you going to the swimming hole?”

“Oh, right…yeah.” Sunny Daze shuffled her hooves. “My brother’s probably looking for me.”

Diamond lifted an eyebrow as Sunny trailed away. “Blank flanks, go fig.” She glanced down and pointed. “Oh, hey! You’re wearing the necklace I got you!”

“It came right after we came back from Canterlot and I haven’t taken it off since. Thanks, by the way.”

Randolph gently cut between them, wheeling the trophy and a small mountain of pink and purple luggage. Diamond untied her cape and tossed it in the winner’s cup as it passed. “Hang that up somewhere nice, okay?”

“Did you do anything fun in Applewood?” asked Silver Spoon. She fetched her parasol from the lawn and propped it against her shoulder. “Besides pageant stuff, I mean. Meet any celebrities?”

Diamond Tiara shook her head. “No time. Mom and my coach took me shopping, but that was
business. When Dad showed up, he talked about going on a tour or to a spa…something about de-
stressing. We never got around to it, though.” She stepped into the parasol’s shade, the steel tiara
wobbling with her movement. Diamond nudged it deeper in her mane. “Winners don’t get crowns
by slacking off.”

“Couldn’t you have gone after the pageant?”

“Coach Razzle had to go back home and mom and dad were…” She rubbed her shoulder and
shrugged. “We just didn’t get around to it. Anyway, how was Canterlot? I bet you got to see a lot of
stuff, right? Was Celestia’s castle as fancy as the pictures? Did you see her?”

“I didn’t really see it.” Silver Spoon vaguely remembered seeing the architecture and some royal
guards when the carriage passed it. It seemed nice enough, from what Silver saw between the
topiaries.

“Oh.”

“I told you Di, it’s just a family cuteceañera. Just Silvers and Silver stuff. Aunt Frames introduced me
to her friend Fancy Pants, though. He’s a very important pony.” Silver Spoon had never heard of Mr.
Pants before, but Auntie said he was very important, so he must have been.

“We just stuck around Silver Tongue Estate, since that’s where the family tree is.” Silver Spoon
closed her eyes and sighed at the memory of her own little teaspoon engraved below Father’s laurel
and Auntie’s picture frame. A real Silver at last.

The parasol’s lacy edges flickered in the summer breeze. That should have made it cooler, but it just
shoveled warm air around. It was far too hot and sweaty out here for fillies of their caliber. They
made their way into Diamond’s house.

“Hm. I was gonna have a Canterlot cuteceañera, too, you know. With clowns and acrobats and…
and an elephant.” Diamond spread out her hooves to gesture an elephant’s size, as if Silver had
forgotten. “I had it all planned out. It was gonna be epic!”

Silver Spoon leaned into the cool breeze of ceiling fans as they entered, sighing at the smooth, chill
marble underhoof. Oh, beautiful indoors, I’ll never leave you again. She paused to see the trophy
room, its violet walls coated in plaques, posters, diplomas, and a single golden golf club hanging
above the window. Inside, Randolph and Mr. Rich rearranged the ribbons and sashes to make room
for the new platinum colossus still sitting in the hall.

Diamond frowned and lowered her voice. “But when I told Dad about it, he was all like, ‘No, we
gotta have it here ‘cause you’ll have school, blah blah, blah. There’s nothing wrong with Sugarcube
Corner and Pinkie Pie’s gonna get hurt feelings, blah.” She kicked over a corner of rug fringe. “S’not
fair.”

Why was Di so hung up about boring old Canterlot? It was a nice city and all, and sure, Celestia
lived there, but the city itself was nothing to lose sleep over. Now, a Manehattan party…that would
be understandable. “I dunno, Diamond. I think I would have liked a Ponyville cuteceañera more.”
She’d heard nothing but good things about Pinkie Pie’s parties.

Diamond Tiara climbed onto the wide ledge by the bay window, frowning at the thatched roofs and
brick facades down the road. “Really?”

Silver nodded.

“You’re just saying stuff.” Diamond flopped down, head and hooves dangling over the ledge. The
tiara dipped forward, teetering on the edge of her head. “Why would anypony want a little party when they could have a big one? What’s the point?”

“Cupcake frosting’s tastier than vinaigrette, for one.” Silver Spoon tipped the tiara back into place with her nose.

“And for another?”

“I could have invited more ponies.” Silver hopped up on the shelf and rolled on her back to see Diamond’s silly upside-down face. She nudged up her glasses to keep them from falling, her braid dragging along the carpet. “Ponies like my best friend.”

Silver’s back hoof pressed against the warm windowpane. It was way too hot to be outside. They should stay indoors and have some lemonade, maybe iced tea. She could get Brass Tacks to bring over the photo album and they could share pictures from their trips.

Then again, going outside might not be so bad. They could go for a dip in the pool, maybe even for a night swim. Were the other foals still at the pond? Truffle’s backstroke might be worth a couple of laughs…or they could prank The Dink while she was looking for that pond monster of hers.

Or they could just stay here by the window and do nothing. So maybe they didn’t have all summer vacation to hang out. They still had the rest of the weekend. The weekend was enough.

“Yeah.” A little smile gleaned over Diamond’s face. “A Ponyville cuteceañera’s good, too.”

Diamond Tiara coiled in the middle of the Cakes’ stairwell, the perfect view to watch the world collapse in on itself as the cuteceañera partied on without her. The tip of her nose poked between the banister bars, a prisoner of her own party. She hadn’t moved or spoken in ages.

“Well. It could be worse,” lied Silver Spoon. She tried to smile, but Silver was relatively new to the art of lying without words, so ended up closer to a grimace. “I guess?”

Tactically speaking, the top of the stairs, where nopony could see, was the better spot to lick their wounds. Eyes honed on the three nasty little upstarts dancing below, Diamond Tiara let the wound fester.

“How?” The word grinded between Diamonds’s clenched teeth.

Silver didn’t have an answer for that. All three blank flanks earning their cutie marks at once while Diamond cut the cake would still be better than this. Silver’s ears flattened. The the nerve—the outright gall—to say being blank was special…even admirable! Which, of course, meant that having cute marks wasn’t. And at somepony’s cuteceañera! Fillies got plenty of birthdays and Hearths Warmings, but a cuteceañera happened once in a lifetime.

Silver Spoon allowed herself an unladylike snort. It is beyond rude. Beyond vulgar. Beyond bad form. This…this is vile! Still, Silver couldn’t say she was too surprised. “That Scootaloo’s always had it in for us. Bet she was waiting all day to trot out that ‘endless possibilities’ junk.”
“Tch. Please.” Diamond spared Silver a side-glance and a scowl. “That loser couldn’t plan her way out a paper bag in the rain. They just got lucky.” She zeroed in on a pink bow bobbing happily through the crowd. “Or at least one of ‘em did.”

The bow stopped at one of the tables. When Silver stretched, she could barely see a small white horn and a bit of purple mane. “Hmph. Full of potential…sure full of something, all right.” Silver Spoon’s ears sank lower. Now she knew why good houses needed gates. Without them, the riffraff got pushy and forgot where they belonged. “They have no right.”

“Yeah.” Diamond Tiara pulled back from the banister and slumped against a stair. A stray blue streamer fluttered down on her tiara. “So what else is new?”

Silver stood up. She adjusted her glasses, analyzing their classmates and neighbors as they laughed and mingled through what was supposed to be Diamond’s party. Nopony looked worried or sad or even happy they were gone. It was like none of them even noticed…and it had been a whole seven minutes.

Silver Spoon spun back to Diamond, light glinting off her lenses. “We need to go back downstairs.”

“No.” Diamond kicked a stray balloon down the stairs. She tried to wave the streamers away, but they’d become tangled in tiara tiers. “I don’t want to.”

The streamers slipped off with a flick of Silver’s tail. She arched her eyebrow. “Yeah, so?”

Diamond Tiara’s glare could have melted all three ice cream cakes downstairs. It would take more than that to melt Silver.

“It’s not like before, Di. We’ve got our cutie marks; we’re mature now. More than that, we’re the best fillies this little town has to offer. We’ve got reputations to uphold, appearances to keep. What we feel doesn’t matter.” Silver clicked her tongue and flicked an ear. She heard Diamond’s name float through the crowd, and she didn’t like the sound of that tone. “We need some damage control.”

Diamond Tiara sat up and took a long look at the pile of confetti at the bottom of the stairs. The scowl dissipated into a thin, neutral line. She met Silver’s eyes.

Silver Spoon leveled her glasses. “Unless you want to let some old blank flanks telling everypony else what to think of you.”

“Hey, there you are!” Pinkie Pie vaulted over the banister, cupcake in one hoof and a party hat in the other. The hat strap snapped under Silver’s chin before she could protest. “Silly fillies, the party’s down there! Unless…”

She squinted and leaned in between them. Her mane smelled like cake batter…was that frosting on her ear? “Are you having a super-exclusive stair party?” Pinkie bopped a balloon Diamond’s way. “You know, if you wanted a party on the stairs, you coulda just asked.”

“We were just taking a party break.” Diamond caught the balloon in her hooves and bopped it back. “We were just going back. Right, Silver?”

Silver Spoon grinned. “Right.”
“Okay…open your eyes!”

The poster poured out of Diamond’s hooves, spilling over the picnic table like a red carpet. Or a blue and gold carpet, to be more precise. “Ta-daaa!”

Silver Spoon gently moved the waxy paper’s edges from the mini toasts before the poster upset the raspberry jam. “Oh, a school talent show?” She hummed, a little smile teasing the corner of her mouth. “Interesting.” Watching their classmates fumble around onstage could be worth a couple of laughs.

A few yards behind Diamond’s head, Snips and Snails struggled with a top hat, a carrot, and a very displeased white bunny. The miasmic trail of glitter and feathers surrounding them spread from the tetherball court to the sandbox.

Silver chuckled under her breath. *Quality entertainment and we don’t have to spend a single bit.* Still, they could watch foals make idiots of themselves any old day. It didn’t seem to justify all that fuss Diamond made about Silver closing her eyes, unless…

“You’re entering?”

Diamond beamed. “Yep!”

Good idea. An easy win was just the thing for Diamond after the cuteceañera disaster, not to mention good practice for pageant season. Silver plopped a sugar cube into her rose tea and gave it a quick stir.

She peered over the edge of the table, where sketches and scribbled notes threatened to burst from Diamond’s Bleu Rondo. All week, Diamond picked at them through class lectures whenever Cheerilee wasn’t watching (and sometimes when she was). In art class this morning, she’d been so focused on her drawings she didn’t hear when it was time to put the crayons away.

Hopefully, Diamond didn’t plan on a pageant routine. The unicycle act that won nationals was amazing…too amazing for just a little school talent show. Silver sipped her tea, watching the pegasus foals play skyball over the field. Featherweight caught the look and glanced down, missing the pass from Rumble. He frowned, big ears twitching nervously.

Behind her teacup, Silver Spoon frowned. Rumble hovered in the corner of her eye, glaring down at afternoon teatime. This act needed a light touch, a win, not an annihilation. “So, do you know what your act’s going to be?” *If it’s too extravagant, maybe I can whittle it down to something more manageable…a dance routine maybe.*

Diamond popped a couple of mini-toasts in her mouth and added a couple more sugar cubes to her cup. It was more sugar than tea at this point. “Actually, I thought you could help me figure that part out. I mean, you’re pretty good at thinking up stuff and since you’re part of the act, it’s only fair that —”

Little bubbles blorped in the tea as Silver fought down her cough. She gurgled it down slowly, for fear of spitting it out. “Back up.” She set the cup down with a clink. “Did you say ‘we’?”

Diamond’s smile grew as she nodded.
“As in you…” Silver’s hoof trailed from the pink filly to herself and back again. “And me. Onstage.”

“We’ll totally own it, too!” Her free hoof pulled her saddlebag into her lap. “Aren’t you excited?”

“Uh.” This was supposed to be good news; Silver offered the bare minimum of a smile. Smiles made good cushions for bad news. Her hooves shuffled in her lap. “I am, but I’m not exactly the talent show type.”

Diamond put her cup aside and tipped her saddlebag. An avalanche of material swamped her half of the table: crisp new music sheets, browning dance steps, a little black budget book, a sketch book, a hardback copy of *Equestria’s 50 Most Marvelous Monologues*, and a notepad gone dark with names of plays, films, songs, vaudeville acts, musicals, revues, and the names of everypony who’d won a Hackney, Poni, or Canter award in the past ten years. Diamond Tiara gave the bag another shake. An extra layer of pastel sketches and scribbles tumbled over what remained of afternoon tea, all of possible outfits. Most of them seemed to be matching outfits; twin tuxedos, shiny jumpsuits, ruffled saddles, and sequin gowns. A roll of measuring tape plopped in the center of it all, the cherry to this pre-show sundae.

Silver Spoon steepled her hooves and gave it all a long, long look. She clicked her tongue and flicked her eyes back to Diamond. “You signed me up already, didn’t you?”

Diamond Tiara pulled the dimpled grin that got her out of classroom cleanup duty. “Miss Cheerilee was very excited. She said she’s really looking forward to our performance.”

“Oh?” Silver eyed Cheerilee bandaging Archer’s leg by the swings.

Diamond fluttered her eyelashes and twirled her mane. “She sure did. Told me it was good to see you coming out of your shell. She’d be so disappointed if you didn’t show up.”

“Is that so?” Silver Spoon closed her eyes to savor the last sip of rose tea, warm and smooth against the chilly nip of early autumn. “Well, life is full of disappointments.”

The dimpled smile crashed. “Oh, come on, Silvy! Don’t you want a medal and free ice cream?”

“I have ice cream at home.”

“It’s not even a hard win! We have our special talents, so that’s half the talent show work right there.”

Silver rolled her eyes. “Yeah. I’m like, so sure tea and etiquette’s really gonna bring the house down. Talent and performing aren’t the same thing, Di.” She shook her head. Silver was never fond of onstage performances, but it was tolerable under the right circumstances. Given a month or so to prepare, maybe she’d have done it. Maybe. “But the show’s in less than two weeks and we don’t even have an act yet.” Silver wrinkled her nose. ‘We.’ Great, now I’m doing it.

“I’ve pulled off worse.” Diamond arranged the papers into neat(ish) piles by type and subject, organized chaos instead of regular chaos. “I remember this one time, when I was six, some kid stole my music. Mom and me had to go get new music and form a brand new routine in four hours. We had to skip lunch and I got blisters in my hooves, but at the end of the day, you know who got a trophy? Me.”

Diamond examined the calluses at the bottom of her right hoof. “If winning was easy, everypony would do it.” She smiled again. “So it’s a good thing we’re not just anypony. We’re a trusted brand; show business is, like, our thing.”
Silver Spoon wrinkled her nose. “Show business is your thing.”

“Don’t be silly. Your mom’s a big fancy opera star, right? It’s in your blood.” Diamond’s tail swished as she hovered over the table, spurring onward before Silver could mount a counterattack. “And you told me how you worked on concerts and plays at your academy, so you’ve got experience.”

“I was a casting director,” Silver grumbled. “I handled the scripts and lighting.” It was important to know one’s place, and hers was tucked in the secure shelter of scenery shadows.

Diamond Tiara not-so-discreetly nudged a waltz into Silver’s hooves.

Silver Spoon’s eyes traced the printed hoofsteps swirling through the page. The unavoidability of the talent show solidified by the second; if she didn’t move fast, it’d be inescapable. She flicked an ear. Getting out was entirely possible if Silver dug her hooves in and pushed, but the pages of show prep told her Di would push back. Hard. Clever ladies picked their battles and secured their sources wisely.

Still, if her place onstage couldn’t be avoided, it might still be mitigated. “I dunno, Diamond. There’s not a lot of options here.” Light push. Go slow, careful. “Neither of us know magic or sleight of hoof, and I’m not very funny, so comedy wouldn’t work. Not unless we were clowns and you, like, just threw pies at me or something.” She glanced at the purple jester caps peeking out from under the tutu drawings. “Which I am not doing.”

Diamond rolled her eyes. “Oh, fine.” She crumpled the jester sketches in a ball, tossing them over her shoulder. “Drama, then. We’ll be—hold on a sec…” Diamond Tiara raked through the loose-leaf pages—Silver made a mental note to get Diamond a binder in the near future—until she got to the tuxes and gowns. “We’ll be glamorous actress divas!”

Least painful category. Good. Silver rubbed her chin, pretending to examine the red and blue tailcoats. She wasn’t out of the woods yet. Silver couldn’t speak for Diamond, but her own acting repertoire was shallower than Scootaloo’s bank account. Embarrassment hazards ran high…bad line reads, forgetting lines altogether, speaking too soft, speaking too loud, tripping…

Dinky Doo and Shady Daze cantered by the picnic table, deep in excited conversation. A jump rope coiled around Dinky’s neck, along with a net and some fishing line. The Dink glanced back at her, smiling around the compass in her mouth. Shady Daze waved.

Silver Spoon gave a polite nod and waved back. In the past few months, she’d carved out a reliable, cozy position at the top of the social ladder. But ladders tended to wobble.

Logic told Silver that the ponies in Ponyville were nice and it was just a little talent show. Experience told her Ponyville also had a way of treating country fairs like The Grand Galloping Gala. No such thing as a little talent show when everypony knows your name. That was the trouble with social climbing—the higher you got, the further you fell.

Silver’s eyes slid back to Diamond Tiara. But that’s what safety nets are for.

Diamond flipped through pages with her nose, skipping from one bombastic act to the next. “We’ll go big and loud for this one.” Her hooves ran over flares, smoke spells, ball gowns the size of circus tents, fancy props…was that a cannon? She hopped over the table and laughed, wrapping a foreleg around Silver’s shoulder. “It’ll be you and me, Silver Spoon! Two shining stars in the Ponyville sky. Best friends-slash-partners, just like Spilled Milk and Cookie Crumbles!”
Silver smiled back. *Too big. Too loud. Too visible.* But with the spotlight shining off Diamond’s tiara, Silver could secure a safe spot in her shadow. And if the carriage crashed, it wouldn’t be Silver in the harness.

Time to start weaving that safety net. Silver drooped her left ear. “I’m not so sure, Di… I mean, I haven’t been on stage that much and you’re so experienced. I don’t want to take up your spotlight.” She said it quietly, casually, honestly. It wouldn’t work if she weren’t at least a little honest.

There was a small moment of hesitation before Diamond said, “I know how to share a spotlight.” Her salesmare’s smile shrank a centimeter as the seed of Silver’s idea took root. “We’d be a team.” Those pushes came lighter, now. Doubtful.

‘Yeah, but you’ve got experience.” Silver’s hoof trailed over the grass. She looked away with a shy little smile. “I’m not the one who’s been onstage since she was what, four?”

“Three.”

“Yeah, three. You know how to win crowds, especially ones like this. It’s your hometown. I just got here.” Silver shrugged, bowing her head to the side like a lonely kitten in the rain. Her braid drooped pathetically over her glasses. The saddest, shiest filly in town. “I wouldn’t want to mess up your style.”

Diamond Tiara opened her mouth, thought a moment, then shut it. In a quieter voice, she said, “Maybe…maybe instead of a headliner, you can be like, my backup pony. Or something. I’ll figure something out, Silvy.”

Silver Spoon offered a gentle nod and a smile.

The pink filly waggled her eyebrows with a chuckle. “You didn’t think I’d let you back out that easily, did you?” She gave Silver’s shoulder an encouraging little shake. “You’re way too good to sit on the sidelines, Silver. How will Ponyville know we’re the best if we don’t remind them?”

“Please,” laughed Silver. “Like they could forget.”

The grin faded from Diamond’s face. “Ponies can forget about you in a Manehattan minute, Silver Spoon.” She tried to pass it off casually, but something sincere stuck to her words and dragged them someplace grim. “Don’t give them that minute. Not even that second. Ever.”

Silver felt her face go blank. She blinked, quite at a loss of what to say.

A strange, crinkly, slimy feeling she couldn’t name slithered under her coat. For some reason, something about secretly weaving her safety net felt…different. Like she’d done something wrong, but that made no sense. It had gone through perfectly.

Diamond Tiara softened at Silver’s expression. “Trust me, Silvy. I know what I’m doing.” She smiled, patting her friend’s hoof. “I won’t let you look dumb. You’re good with me.”

Silver’s ears drooped. The slimy crinkle feeling grew. *Maybe…maybe Diamond’s not such a good safety net after all. Besides, if she looks bad, I look bad.* So now she was back to square one, a long drop and no net. She frowned.

“You do trust me, right?” Diamond’s ears twitched.

“No,” whispered Silver Spoon. It was a genuine smile this time. “No, I trust you, Di. I was just thinking.”
“Oh. About the act?”

“Yeah. I think we need…” A new safety net. “Another pony.”

“What? Why?” Diamond crinkled her nose. “We’re fine with just two.”

“Hey, we’re like, doing it big and loud, right? If it’s drama, it’ll be better to have more characters bouncing off each other.” Her tail gestured to Sunny and Peachy wobbling in their roller skates by the hopscotch lines. “Besides, I think the other entries are double or single acts. Looks like those two are doing some sort of…clown thing.”

“Meanwhile, Dork and Dorkier have that magic act.” Diamond steepled her hooves. “And The Dink’s gonna do her jump rope tricks again. I think she’s working with Rumble. Three ponies could help us stand out more. She tossed her mane over her shoulder. “You know, just as insurance.”

“Great idea, Di!” Silver’s braid flopped as she bobbed her head. “Glad you thought of it.”

“Me too. But who do we get?” Diamond hopped off the bench, trotting towards the tetherball court, the center of the playground. “It’s gotta be just the right pony. Not too shy.”

Silver Spoon put down a rock so that Diamond’s sketches wouldn’t blow away and scurried to catch up. “We can forget Tornado Bolt, then.” She didn’t think Bolt said a word all year; Silver usually forgot the pegasus was even in their class. “And Truffle Shuffle.” Hanging out with snitches wouldn’t do their reputations any favors, anyway.

“Berry Pinch’ll do it, no problem…but she’ll fight us every step of the way.” Diamond Tiara tilted her head to see the skyball game. “Rumble’s got some bug up his butt because he can’t take a joke and Featherweight’s too twitchy.”

“It’ll have to be somepony we can put up with for a week, too.” So, naturally, no Scootaloo. Silver could deal with Apple Bloom, but she couldn’t say the same for Di. Sweetie Belle could work, but for some unfathomable reason, she’d joined forces with the other two.

The gravel crunched under Diamond’s hooves as she circled the court. “Needs to be somepony energetic.”

“Agreeable and low maintenance.”

“And they can’t have anypony else attached to them and gumming up the works.”

At the far end of the playground, a lone figure dangled on the swing by herself. Come to think of it, she’d been all alone since Diamond’s cuteafieria.

The chains on the swing set jingled as the filly rocked back and forth, watching her hooves trace circles in the sand. When the shadows fell over her, she brushed her wooly mane aside and looked up.

“Oh, hey guyth,” said Twist. “What’th up?”

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon looked at each other and grinned.
They regrouped in Diamond’s front yard after school, old costumes and outfits hung near the porch. Twist loved all the act ideas Diamond had down so far, and on the walk from school, she suggested a few of her own.

“We could do juggling! Or cartwheel! Or maybe we could predict the future!”

All ignored, of course. Seniority and status trumped her at every turn, though Twist never seemed to notice. What Silver couldn’t understand was why she bothered suggesting those things at all. None of them knew how to juggle or spin plates, and only Diamond knew how to do cartwheels.

“We can learn,” Twist argued, totally ignoring that she wasn’t in the position to do so. “You like to learn that stuff, right? And Cheerilee’ll be happy we’re trying them new.”

Diamond rolled her eyes. “That’s not the point. We only have a week to get ready. I’m good, but I’m no miracle worker. Not yet, anyway.”

“We could learn in a week.”

Silver shook her head. “Not enough to be good.” Certainly not enough to let other ponies watch. Didn’t this kid have any shame? “You understand?”

“Oh,” said Twist. “Yeah, I understand.”

She didn’t, though. How could she when she tripped through the tap dance choreography sounding like a busted typewriter, smiling the whole time? When Diamond Tiara laughed at how Twist’s fluffy tail got caught in the tutu, Twist laughed with her. Not the nervous, jittery giggle Sweetie Belle made when she got a question wrong, either. Full blown, smiling, snorting laughter. Twist didn’t even have the decency to look sorry or embarrassed when Silver frowned at her pathetic attempts at a pirouette.

Needless to say, a dance act was out. Twist’s “dancing” might make a hilarious solo act, but the safety net was there to make them look better, not worse.

“Silver Spoon, this isn’t working.” Diamond peeled off the black leotard, frowning. Knots of red mane bounced as Twist leapt about the porch with all the poise of a wet dishtowel. “We should ditch her.”

“I don’t think there’s time to find another third.” Silver curled up next to her at the top of the stairs, her back to the front door. “The show’s next week and everypony who was gonna enter already has.”

“Then we’ll go back to two ponies.”

Absolutely not. Silver Spoon patted the sweat from her neck with a washcloth. “It’s just one category, Diamond.” She flinched as Twist tumbled past them and into a topiary bush. Her legs flopped out of a leafy pony’s chest. “There’s more than dancing on the list, maybe she can do something else. Acting, maybe.”

“What, like another monologue?” Diamond rolled her eyes with a huff. “Not unless we put up a sign first: Ponies in the front row, you will get wet. We tried that already, remember?” She cleared her throat, wrinkling her nose for maximum lisp. “Comradeth, Pegathopolith, countrymareth, lift me your ear’th. Th’enator Th’unshower thepeakth of pride, but I tell you Hurricane but thepeakth of ambithon’th and ith a noble warrior. Private Pan’thy doth’th thou object?”

Silver Spoon stifled her giggle with her hooves. Twist had almost finished picking leaves out of her
mane and was on her way over. “I meant we could try a simpler play. One where she doesn’t have to talk as much.”

“Hi!” Twist’s smiling face poked up between them, a paper bag in her mouth. There wasn’t enough room on the top stair for three ponies, so she and her clearance sale glasses just came up to their shoulders. “Are we taking a break?” She set the bag down and nudged it between Diamond and Silver’s hooves. “Cause I bought thome peppermint thticks if you want ‘em.”

Diamond Tiara snatched one and clamped it between her teeth. She ignored the question, tail flicking as she crossed “dancing” off the list of options.

Twist waggled her ears and gave a slight frown. “Oh, we’re not danthing after all?”

The peppermint stick rolled to the other side of Diamond’s mouth. “No. We’re not ‘danthin’.”

“Aw, too bad.” Twist put her forehooves on the top step and pushed herself up to look them in the face. “I really liked it. Didn’t you guyth?”

A low growl rumbled in the back of Diamond Tiara’s throat. “Yeah, I totally love when somepony can’t learn the steps even though they’ve been practicing for three hours. I love when backup dancers fall on their face and I just love when they almost rip the leotard I generously lent them from my own closet.” The peppermint stick snapped between her teeth. “I don’t like dancing, Twist, I love it. What I don’t love is when some four-eyed lamewad who can’t talk right can’t even learn a simple—”

Silver Spoon laid a gentle hoof on Diamond’s shoulder. “The point is, we’ve moved on from dancing, Twist.”

“Okay.” Twist sank back to the bottom step. “What’th next, then?”

“Hm.” Silver glanced at her clipboard, ignoring the stink lines Di had drawn around Twist’s name. “Singing.” She nodded towards the stack of songbooks. Mother’s ill opinion of musicals limited them to pop songs and the opera librettos Silver brought from home. How they’d mix pop songs into a dramatic performance, she had no idea. “But I think that we could probably just skip…”

Twist reached into the pile and flipped to a random page of *The Tragedy of Star Catcher and Sky Wishes*. “Ooh, I’ve never theen thith thong before…”

“Yeah, my mother says it’s not an opera a lot of ponies know.” She reached to take the book back. Senator Redwing had already been butchered on the battlefield; she didn’t need her magnum opus butchered on Diamond Tiara’s porch.

“O, ‘tis a wonder why Wish is always under, yet my Wish is never far.” Twist sang it quietly, working out the melody and rhythm.

Silver Spoon blinked. She exchanged glances with Diamond to make sure her ears still worked right. Diamond Tiara’s raised eyebrows confirmed it. “Twist doesn’t lisp when she sings.”

“Yeah.” Silver rubbed her ears, just to make sure. “And she’s actually on key.”

“North wind carries, west wind parries, wing song meets earth song, always wherever we are…” Twist had surprisingly good range, especially for a first stab at an opera.

Her voice wasn’t sweet or beautiful. Even better, Twist’s voice was decent. Nice enough to listen to,

Diamond lifted an eyebrow. “Perfect’s stretching it a bit. But it’ll do.”

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Too cold. Silver Spoon snuggled into her satin pillow and rolled over, pulling the downy blanket with her, wrapped tight her shoulder. It wouldn’t go up all the way; she felt a slight tug at the blanket corner. Probably caught on something. She frowned in her sleep.

Leftovers of a dream whispered in the dark. “Maybe we should come back later?”

“Later will be too late.”

Something tugged at the blanket again. The quilting slid off Silver’s chest.

A soft, wet noise hissed beside her ear in a steady rhythm. Kind of like…breathing. Something pressed against her blankets. The wet breathing grew louder.

Silver’s eye popped wide. A tannish blob hovered over her face, traces of red fuzziness at the edge and something purple shone in the center. It was moving.

“Morning, Thilver Thpoon!”

Silver Spoon yelped, falling back against the headboard. “Twist?!” She bent over, hooves clamped over her thundering heart. “What the hay are you doing in my house?!”

“Waiting for you, obviously.” Another blob, pinkish grey in the dim light, hopped onto the end of her bed and prodded Silver’s leg. “It’s about time you woke up. I thought you were gonna sleep all day.”

“Diamond Tiara?” Silver squinted and felt around the end table for her glasses. She slid them on and yanked the lamp chain. Diamond sat at the end of her bed, fully brushed and groomed, a collection of papers beside her. Twist smiled beside the end table, chewing a bagel. “What’s going on?”

“Uh, hello?” Diamond gave the papers a little shake. “Rehearsal? Don’t tell me you forgot.”

Silver Spoon yawned, scratching at her loose, tangled mane. “Diamond, it’s…” she glanced at the clock. “It’s six in the morning. The sun’s not even up yet.”

“Yeah, and I should have been here at five thirty, but I had to get somepony up first.” Diamond frowned at Twist before she rounded on Silver. “Seriously, I thought you were supposed to be the punctual one around here.”

“You never said anything about meeting at six in the morning!”

Diamond blinked. “I thought it was obvious. When else would we start?” She didn’t bother waiting for an answer and laid out her work over Silver’s bedsheets. “So, quick recap: when we left off Friday, everypony got their assigned roles. I’m Star Catcher, naturally. Silver, you’re Skywishes, and Twist is Thistle Whistle.”

Silver nodded, leaning over the libretto. She fetched her hairbrush from the end table, working out
the tangles in her mane. “And we’re doing Ne’er Far, right? The big confrontation scene from act five, when Thistle Whistle finds them on Butterfly Island?”

“Right. You have the music?”

Hooves busy braiding, and hairpins stuck between her teeth, Silver pointed her tail at the miniature record player beside Ferdinand’s tank. The score to The Tragedy of Star Catcher and Sky Wishes lay beside it. Hopefully, Mother didn’t mind them borrowing it for a while.

“Good. After you left yesterday, I had Randolph put in a Carousel Boutique order for our costumes.” She smoothed out the concept sketches: traditional pre-classical pegasus togas for Twist and Diamond—complete with a pair of matching wings of wire and feathers—and an elegant, frilled vest for Silver. “They’re not too complicated, so they should be ready before dress rehearsal tomorrow.”

Twist licked the last of the cream cheese off her hoof and yawned. “Are we getting up early tomorrow, too?”

“Six sharp on the weekends, and right after school the rest of the week. We snooze, we lose, girls. And I don’t lose.” Diamond Tiara rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck. “Alright! Clear a space and let’s get started.”

Silver Spoon gritted her teeth and resisted the urge to scratch. She had to hand it to Miss Rarity, the ruff on her costume looked historically accurate, as did the vermillion crushed velvet vest. Did she have to make it so historically itchy, though?

Above the stage, pink and purple clouds lazied across the darkening sky. Wouldn’t be long now.

Diamond Tiara paced circles backstage, muttering lines under her breath and humming melodies. Her pink iridescent wings bobbed atop her toga, a senator’s bronze laurel glimmered as floodlights bloomed to life around them.

Twist stood next to Silver, clinking in her black armor. They looked at each other, then at Diamond, then back to each other again. “You think we should do more practith before the show thtart’th?”

Silver shook her head. “We’ve been running rehearsals all week.” Sunrise to sunset on weekends, three to five on weekdays. “I don’t think an extra ten minutes is going to do much.” Besides, the last thing Diamond needed was to wind herself up fussing over her costars’ mistakes, and she would find mistakes, even if she had to imagine them.

Instead, Silver just listened to the bustle and hustle of the world backstage: hushed last-minute rehearsals, excited chatter, hushed arguments, the smooth roll of Peachy’s skates and tip-tap of Snails’ hooves. If she tilted her ears, she could hear the dull roar of excited voices behind the curtain. It sounded like a full house.

At the edge of Silver’s line of sight, something grey and yellow shifted behind a trunk of stage supplies. Silver Spoon frowned. All the entrants were on the other side, so it couldn’t be one of them or their parents. Looked too small to be a parent, too. She tilted her head, pretending to examine the lights. “Twist, tell Diamond I’ll be right back.”

“Sure thing, Thilver.”
Careful to make light, quick steps, Silver snuck around the sandbags to the far end of the supply trunk. The fat, round colt watching Diamond wore a yellow tuxedo that might have looked handsome on somepony else, but made him look like an egg yolk. An egg yolk with a messy brown mane and a dull grey coat. He didn’t hear the hoofsteps behind him.

“It’s rude to spy on ponies, Truffle Shuffle.”

“Whoa!” Truffle jumped back in surprise. His round cheeks flushed a moment, hoof pawing the dusty floorboards, as if debating whether to make a run for it. “I-I wasn’t! I was just walking by.”

“Right, just casually squatting behind a trunk, watching fillies rehearse.” She hopped atop the trunk, tail snapping as her shadow swept over him. “Maybe that’s what they call a walk in your neck of the woods, but in mine it’s called spying like a creepy little spying creep. That’s illegal, you know. My granddad’s a lawyer and he can totally sue you.”

“Nuh-uh! I’m assistant stage manager, I’m supposed to be backstage. And I wasn’t spying, I was just…looking. I thought I heard Twist. I haven’t seen her in a couple days.” Truffle poked his head around the trunk to watch Twist adjust the wires in her little tan wings. His eyes narrowed at Silver Spoon. “How come she’s been hanging out with you guys all of a sudden? What’re you up to?”

Silver swiped his nose with her tail. “Well, aren’t we just a nosy busybody tonight?” She turned up her nose, leering with hooded eyes. “Don’t you have better things to do, Truffle? Lights to check? Teachers to suck up to? Pies to eat?”

Truffle Shuffle flinched back, his round face twisting into a frown. He grew quiet for a few moments before he drew up his courage and said, “You—you’re planning something mean, aren’t you?”

He looked back at Diamond and Twist. His ears twitched. “…Oh.” Truffle picked at his lapel, stubby tail limp behind him. He shuffled his hooves, probably disappointed he didn’t have anything to tattle about. “You’re…sure you’re not being mean to Twist? Like, you’re not gonna make her do something silly onstage just to laugh at her? Or dump a bucket of molasses?”

What did he think this was, some sort of horror story? Rolling her eyes wasn’t worth the effort. “It’s a triple act, doofus. You know, reaching for stuff to get us in trouble is like, really pathetic.”

“So that’s it. Silver Spoon wrinkled her nose. Trying to get dirt on us so he can snitch to Miss Cheerilee. “What, are you blind? She’s in the talent show with us.” The floorboards clacked as she sprang off the trunk to meet the colt nose to nose. “And I’ll thank you not to distract the ponies with actual talent before they take the stage.”

He stared back at Diamond and Twist. His ears twitched. “…Oh.” Truffle picked at his lapel, stubby tail limp behind him. He shuffled his hooves, probably disappointed he didn’t have anything to tattle about. “You’re…sure you’re not being mean to Twist? Like, you’re not gonna make her do something silly onstage just to laugh at her? Or dump a bucket of molasses?”

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“I am not!” cried Truffle Shuffle, though the whine in his voice meant he totally was. “Why does everypony say that? I just don’t want you being mean to Twist again.”

Silver blinked. Again? “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Truffle.”

“Oh, really?” He took a step toward her. “What about last month, when you kept calling her a blank flank?”

“Tch, what about it?” Silver Spoon lifted an eyebrow. “She was a blank flank. I’m not the one who goes around deciding who gets cutie marks and who doesn’t. Stating the obvious isn’t mean, and anyway, she’s got her cutie mark now, so why does it even matter? Not my fault some ponies can’t handle the truth.”

She jabbed her head towards Twist, who smiled big and wide in the reflection of her own armor. “Does that look like a pony we’re being mean to? Of course it doesn’t.” Her volume spiked, and a
few heads turned in their direction. Silver unclenched her teeth and took a deep breath. *Easy, Sil. Deflect attention, don’t attract it.*

“Well, she does look pretty happy.” Truffle Shuffle picked up his clipboard and held it close. “Yeah, I…I guess I can believe you. It’s just that Twist is my friend, and I don’t wanna see her get hurt. She’s really nice and you’re…”

“And what?” Silver sneered. “I’m mean?” Her tail whipped over the floorboards. “Got any more conspiracy theories or are we done here?”

Truffle Shuffle licked his lips and looked at his clipboard. “Actually, Miss Cheerilee wanted me to tell you guys you’re on first, so you should get ready.” He peeked in their teacher’s direction and drooped his ears. “Sorry, Silver Spoon. I wasn’t being a very professional stage manager.”

“No. You weren’t.” The ice in her own voice surprised her. How dare this fat little tattletale get under her coat like that? Not about to let this foolishness bother her another minute she turned her back on him and cantered back to her companions.

Diamond Tiara met her on tiptoe, stretching her neck to see Truffle Shuffle amble away. “What happened? What’s the problem?”

“Oh, it’th Truffle Shuffle! Hey, there!” Twist waved as he passed to meet with Snips.

Silver flicked an ear. What was this kid’s deal? They were on soon and she acted like it was still rehearsal. No sweating, no knobby knees, nothing. It was like she didn’t even care about all the ponies watching her.

The crinkly feeling wormed under her coat again. “There’s no problem.” *It’s just pre-show jitters.*

“Stupid Truffle Shuffle, going around calling decent ponies mean when he doesn’t even know what’s going on. What nonsense. I’m not being mean. I’m being safe.* It wasn’t like Silver woke up this morning wanting Twist to fall on her face and look stupid—and if she did, that was hardly Silver’s fault. It was in everypony’s best interest that the act went smoothly.

Twist got into position beside Silver. “Wow, lookit all of ‘em! Thith ith gonna be tho thuper!” She waggled her ears, trying to peek at the audience behind the curtain. “I’m really glad you guyth athked me to join you.”

“Yeah, sure.” Diamond gave herself a last once-over in the reflection of Twist’s armor. She shook herself off, puffed her chest and straightened her wings as she took her place at the front. “Okay, ponies! Let’s do it.”

Silver nodded in her shadow. “Let’s.”

She fluffed her ruffed collar, shaking off the jitters. After all, she’d no need to worry. Her safety net would sponge whatever disaster came their way. Wouldn’t fall on Silver’s shoulders, and wouldn’t hurt Diamond’s ego. She glanced at Twist, bouncing on her back hooves. *And Twist has no ego to hurt, so it can’t be mean. Just safe.*

“Good evening, Ponyville, and welcome to the annual Ponyville Schoolhouse Talent Show!” Cheerilee’s voice echoed across the field. Hooves clacked in a polite murmur of applause. “Tonight, we’ve got a wonderful selection of talented fillies and colts.”

Twist bounced on her back hooves. “Ready, guyth?”
“For our first act of the night, Diamond Tiara, Silver Spoon and Twist will perform a scene from the classic opera, *Star Catcher and Sky Wishes!*”

“I was born ready.” Diamond Tiara lifted her head high and led them into gleaming spotlights and the thunder of applause.

Silver Spoon released the breath she was holding. *Perfectly safe.*

Silver picked up the pink iridescent wings off the floor, dusted off the feathers, and placed them back in the travel bag, atop the toga. If they could use it later, perhaps it wouldn’t be a total waste of bits.

“Technically,” Silver said, “we didn’t lose.” Her eyes trailed the listless pink hoof dangling off the pile of sandbags up to Diamond Tiara, slumped against the wall. “We just didn’t get medals.”

Diamond’s head tilted towards the sky, bangs tumbling over her closed eyes. Though she didn’t move, Silver knew when she opened them and looked at her. “Yeah, we did.” The dull roar of foals and parents and relatives bustling backstage nearly drowned out her voice. All the fire fizzled out of it, nothing left but wisps of smoke.

“We thtill did our betht, right?” Twist gently smiled up from the other side of the sandbags. Little white wings still bobbed on her blue toga when she moved. “And we had fun, doethn’t that kinda…”

Diamond edged away, ears pinned tight against her head.

Twist took a cautious step back. “Um…kinda make uth…winnerth?” Her ears wilted. “In…in a way?”

“That’s just what losers and ponies that hang out with losers say to make themselves feel better.” She tried to snort, but it came out a sigh. “We lost. The end.”

“I—okay, we lost.” Silver Spoon rubbed the back of her neck. The shallow imprint ring from the ruffled collar itched under her pearls. “Twist’s got a point, though. We did do our best.”

It wasn’t a perfect performance; Silver knew it wouldn’t be. Even if Diamond worked them twenty four hours—and would have if she could have—there just weren’t enough days to prepare. And Diamond chose *Ne’er Far*, an infamously difficult piece, even for practiced professional ponies. Mother had performed it once and said she never wanted to do it again. Really, for three little fillies with no musical training (Wisteria’s music class and a pageant coach only got one so far) they’d done fairly well.

“The best is all we can do.” Silver shrugged. “My mother says sometimes ponies just have a bad night. Bad performances happen.”

Diamond shook the mane out of her eyes, zeroing in on Twist. “Yeah, well, it wouldn’t have happened if *some*pony didn’t drop tempo in the third verse. You forgot the words again, didn’t
“I knew we should have done another rehearsal before show time.” She pulled in her legs and rolled over, neck leaning over the sandbags. Her voice sparked. “Why didn’t you practice at home?”

“But I did! Theriously!”

“Yeah, well...” The spark flicked out. She slumped against the bag. “Not ‘theriously’ enough.”

Silver Spoon adjusted her pearls, watching Cheerilee talk with the town librarian and Apple Bloom’s sister. Snips and Snails’ moms laughed together in the wings. Silver frowned. Maybe it wasn’t the performance. In retrospect, an obscure thousand year old play presented without context was a poor choice for a little rural school talent show. I shouldn’t have brought that libretto at all.

On the bright side, nopony seemed to notice that but Silver. The safety net came through with flying colors.

Twist shuffled her hooves. “Thorry, Diamond.”

Diamond rolled over with a sigh. “Whatever. Just forget it.”

Twist’s mom, Shimmy Shake waved at them from the wings. Her auntie Sweetie Drops stood next to her, chewing a spare petal from the carnation bouquet. Twist waved back. “That’th my folkth, I gotta go.”

Silence.

“Um. Thee you at school?”

Silver flicked one of Twist’s wings. “It’s fine, Twist.”

Her fuzzy red tail twitched uncertainly. “Really?”

Losing the talent show in front of all of Ponyville and not dying from embarrassment or having Diamond mad at her? Could have gone far, far worse. “You did fantastic.” She held up a hoof as Twist started to unfasten her wings. “I think you can just keep them. Costume doesn’t match either of us anyway.”

The little smile came back to Twist’s face. “Golly, Thilver! Thankth!”

“Don’t mention it.” Silver Spoon nudged Diamond’s leg. No response. Well, at least our dignity’s still intact. That’s a win in my book. She patted Diamond’s shoulder. It’ll pay off in the long run, I’m sure.

The floorboards trembled under more hoofsteps, these heavier than Twist’s, and traveling at a brisk and merry little trot. Silver twitched her ears and looked up. “Good evening, Miss Cheerilee.”

“Hello, girls! Congratulations on a wonderful performance.” Cheerilee’s eyes fell on Diamond Tiara and for a millisecond, the teacher frowned. Her voice softened, but the perk never left it. It reminded Silver of blankets and tomato soup on a rainy day. “You know, I don’t think Ponyville’s ever seen a classical opera before. You introduced so many ponies to something they might never see, otherwise. I’m glad you decided to share it with us.”

The silence stretched uncomfortably. Silver glanced at the sullen, silent Diamond and fiddled with
her pearls. *Come* on, *Di. Ponies are watching.* Silver Spoon picked up the slack with a graceful nod and a smile. “Thank you, Miss Cheerilee. We’re glad you liked it.” She gave her friend a gentle nudge. “We’re just a little tired. Acting is, like, hard work, you know?”

“Not too tired for ice cream, I hope.”

“Wait.” Diamond Tiara brushed her mane out of her eyes and sat up. She blinked, tilting her head to the side. Maybe she’d really been asleep after all. “Wait, what?”

Cheerilee nodded to the cluster of foals a few yards away. “The ice cream party at Sugarcube Corner, remember? All you can eat for all of Ponyville’s talented foals. We’re about to leave in a few minutes, if we can just figure out where Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie rolled off to.” She stretched her neck to survey the area, flicking her ears. “Come to think of it, where’s Twist? I just saw her with you a moment ago.”

“Her mom took her home already,” Silver told her. “I think we sort of forgot about the ice cream.”

Diamond Tiara slid off the sandbags, her left ear knocked to the side and her mouth dipped lopsided. “I don’t get it. Why are we still getting ice cream?”

“Well, why not? I know you all worked very hard. You three spent every other recess practicing your lines, and I noticed all those sketches you drew in class last week.” Cheerilee flicked her tail and bent her neck to meet the filly’s eye. “I admire your dedication, Diamond Tiara, but in the future try and keep the art in art class, *not* my history lecture.”

Silver Spoon averted Diamond’s gaze and swallowed an *I told you so.*

“I think that effort deserves a reward,” Miss Cheerilee said. “Don’t you?”

“I dunno…I guess, but…” Diamond rubbed her shoulders, where the wings had been. “Losers don’t get ice cream.”

“Is that so?” Cheerilee lifted her head and regarded them both. “Well, then. It’s a good thing I don’t see any losers here.”

Diamond Tiara chewed her lip. She glanced from Miss Cheerilee, to Silver Spoon.

Silver nodded with a little shrug. “*She is* one of the judges, Di.”

“Hm. True…” She clicked her tongue and glanced back up at their teacher. “Did you say it was all I can eat?”

Miss Cheerilee just laughed.

The paper straw tilted in the empty, chocolate-stained glass. Diamond nudged it to the side, licked her lips and pointed a hoof. “Okay, but here’s the thing: it’s, like, not even that we lost, you know?”

They nestled together at a round little table towards the back window. A little island built for two, sheltered from heavy traffic and commotion, but still in close proximity of the Cakes’ path to the kitchen.
Silver took a small, ladylike bite of ice cream cake. It was better to just smile and nod, but Silver couldn’t resist a skeptical blink.

“Really, it’s not! I mean, I have lost before—not a lot—because, yeah, sometimes the other pony’s just better than you.” She leaned forward, idly gesturing with her hoof. “I don’t like it, but it’s like you said, Silver. Sometimes it just happens and you gotta be better next time. Maybe we should have started sooner or whatever, I dunno.” Diamond tapped the table, emphasizing each word. “But that’s. Not. The thing, though.”

Silver Spoon tossed up her hoof to wave down another chocolate malt. “Then what is?”

The malt slid into Diamond’s hoof with a clink. Before Silver could blink twice, Diamond sucked it down halfway, cherry and all. She smacked her lips and shook her head, teeth gritted against the brain freeze. “It’s who won.” Her eyes raked across the room. “I mean, just look.”

Several tables down, Snips twirled the magic award on his sticky, stubby little hoof like a propeller. “Hey, check it out!” The ribbon whistled softly as it whipped through the air. “Mine spins!”

Snails wiped the caramel sauce from his muzzle, unimpressed. He slipped the medal off his neck and poked Snips’ round little snout with the tip of the metal star. “Well, mine’s pointier. And it pro’lly spins faster, too. Watch!”

He hung the ribbon on his horn, braced himself against the table and slammed his skinny neck as he rocked back and forth. Snail’s greasy, stringy mane tossed about his shoulders, like one of those obnoxious rock stars who abused salt and broke their instruments all the time.

Seated right behind him, Sunny Daze squeaked and ducked for cover when the medal whistled over her ears. She covered her head with her hooves and pressed herself against Peachy.

Not far away, Truffle Shuffle chewed his waffle cone and gently poked Miss Cheerilee’s shoulder. The teacher looked up from her strawberry float.

“Hey! Watch it, you medalhead!” Peachy Pie’s drama medal dipped into her sundae as she leaned over the table. Her voice piped into an irritating squeal. “Miss Cheerilee! Snails almost hit Sunny with his really sharp medal that could put an eye out!”

Cheerilee waved her down. “I see him, Peachy. Boys, you could hurt somepony that way!” The colts meekly slipped the ribbons back around their necks when she frowned at them. “That’s better. Let’s keep our hooves and prizes to ourselves.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the colts murmured.

After a moment, Snails poked his friend in the side. “Told ya it spins faster.” He caught Silver Spoon watching him and made a face.

Silver, mature young lady she was, resisted the strong temptation to throw her spoon at him.

“They treat it like it doesn’t even matter.” Diamond’s muzzle sank into her malt glass, bitter blue eyes leering over the edge. Her breath fogged the glass. “Those clods didn’t even do the act right. He ate the carrot, for pony’s sake!”

“Well, it’s not hard to win when you’re the only contestant.” Dinky probably would have won instead if she hadn’t gotten the flu. “Try not to think about it, Di.”

Silver turned away and took another bite of ice cream cake. In the corner of her eye, the laces of
Sunny and Peachy’s untied roller skates spilled over the floor. Her ears flattened. *Maybe the Star Catcher performance wasn’t perfect, but it was Muleitzer stuff compared to that cutesy-poo drivel Peachy passed off as drama. Putting We Two on roller skates doesn’t make a dumb, schmaltzy poem any less schmaltzy.*

“They didn’t win because they were good, they won ‘cause they were cute.” The last of Silver’s ice cream cake took on a bitter taste. With a lash of her tail, she looked away. *This never would have happened at Wisteria.* “Hmph. Pedestrians. Wouldn’t know real art if it bit them on the flank.”

“You can say that again.” Diamond sucked down the rest of her malt. “It’s just not fair.”

“Sheesh!”

Silver’s ears twitched at the last voice either of them wanted to hear. She cautioned a glance and bit back a groan. *Of course they’re sitting behind us.* She massaged her temples. *Of. Course.*

The garish purple star splotched across Scootaloo’s face, smudging near the hairline where sweat mussed it. “I knew those jerks were sore winners,” she muffled through a mouthful of rocky road.

Sweetie Belle—somehow her makeup was even worse—looked up and flinched, caught dead center in Diamond Tiara’s glare. She tapped Scootaloo’s shoulder. “Uh…”

The pegasus wiped her mouth with her hock. “Guess I’m not surprised they’re sore losers, too.” She tilted her head at Sweetie. “What?”

Diamond Tiara tossed her mane over her shoulder. “Speaking of cheap wins…”

Scootaloo froze with pricked ears, her hoof caught in the proverbial cookie jar. Slowly, she turned to look at Silver Spoon—who shot back a scowl—then back to Sweetie Belle. “…Oh.” For a moment, she actually had the decency to look sheepish.

Silver flicked her ears. Perhaps the scruffy little urchin finally learned some manners. Perhaps she even realized she owed them an apology for eavesdropping and having awful hair and being the actual worst all the time. Perhaps they might all call a truce and just go back to their ice cream and have a peaceful evening. Silver lifted a hoof to suggest they hold their fire.

Diamond frowned, lifting a curious eyebrow.

The awkward expression vanished in a blink. Scootaloo straightened her posture and flicked her wings. “Like I said, sore losers.” She turned her back on them, scooting closer to Apple Bloom. *Is…is she ignoring us? Silver bit down hard on her spoon. Us?! After what she just did?* She caught Diamond Tiara’s eye. *Never mind. Trounce ’em.*

“Just can’t handle when somepony else is better or more talented at stuff.” The pegasus took a big, sloppy lick of green sherbet. “Anyway, Apple Bloom, do you think we can get the zip lines before next week?”

“Yeah,” Diamond Tiara sneered. “In fact, you were so talented you got your cutie marks in—oh, wait.” She lifted a hoof to her cheek, blinking innocently. “My mistake.”

Apple Bloom cut in before Scootaloo opened her mouth. “Nopony was botherin’ you, Diamond Tiara.” She fiddled with her dreadful skull headband—a slight step up from the tacky bow—and swished her tail. “This here’s an A an’ B conversation, so just see your way out of it.”
A red tinge brushed Diamond’s ears and cheeks. She snarled behind a tight-lipped frown. “Oh, yeah?! Well, maybe—”

Silver Spoon kicked Diamond’s hoof under the table. “Teacher to the right,” she whispered. Silver nudged her head towards Miss Cheerilee, three tables down and already looking in their direction. She felt Diamond’s muscles relax and tapped her hoof again. “Decorum.”

“Guys, come on,” sighed Sweetie Belle. She rubbed her face, smearing the ice cream stains on her mouth into the paint. “It’s too late for this stuff. I’m tired.”

Diamond Tiara loomed over the empty malt glasses, trading a cool look with Silver Spoon. Together, they smiled in silent agreement: Decorum. Quietly.

“Mister Cake?” Silver waved her hoof as he passed. “Another chocolate malt, please.”

Mister Cake brushed off his apron, a frown on his thin face. “Another?” He eyed the fifteen empty malt glasses on their table. “Don’t you girls think you’ve had enough?”

Diamond frowned back. “It’s all we can eat, isn’t it? We can still eat.” She turned to Sweetie Belle with a smile and a sigh. “You know what? You’re right, Sweetie Belle.”

The unicorn opened her mouth to retort, then closed it. She blinked. “I am?”

“Why, of course you are,” said Silver Spoon. She rested her head on steepled hooves, eyes closed. “Really, Diamond, we should be good sports.” She opened one eye, smiling. “Congratulations, you three.”

Diamond Tiara couldn’t bring herself to say it, though she still nodded.

Scootaloo frowned and drew her tail around herself. She looked to Apple Bloom, who looked to Sweetie who looked back to Scootaloo, before they all looked back to Diamond and Silver.

It was Apple Bloom who decided to speak up. “Well, uh…” She exchanged another glance with her friends and cautioned a smile. “Thanks. Y’all did pretty good, too.”

“Thanks.” A brittle grin slithered across Diamond Tiara’s face. Her malt slid onto the table. She plucked the cherry from the whipped cream into her mouth. “But you’re the ones that deserve the praise; you, like, totally deserved that win.”

Silver nodded. “Totally.”

“I mean, I…” Diamond shook her head, chuckling to herself. “I just can’t remember the last time I laughed so hard! Can you, Silvie?”

Silver tossed her hoof to the air. “Oh my Celestia, Diamond, I just thought I’d, like, die. You were just soooo funny!”

“Weren’t they just?” Her voice pitched an octave, dripping with venom. She took a long, long sip of malt and licked the chocolate from her teeth.

Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle looked at each other and frowned.

“When I think about it, it’s not that surprising. Some ponies are just, like, naturally gifted, you know? That clown costume Apple Bloom wore last week? What a riot!”

“Starting early, too.” Silver winked. “Very professional.”
Apple Bloom paused mid-lick of her apple cinnamon ice cream cone. “But I wasn’t wearin’ a clown outfit last week.” She pushed up the headband sliding onto her forehead. “I wasn’t wearin’ nothin’.”

Diamond Tiara blinked in surprise. “Really?” She idly chewed her straw, thinking it over. “That’s so weird, I could have sworn…” Diamond leaned forward, squinting. “Oh.” She drew back to smirk at Silver. “That’s just how she always looks. My mistake.”

Apple Bloom bit her lip and set down her ice cream.

“Hey!” Scootaloo set back her ears, twisting up her face.

“What? It’s a compliment.” Silver Spoon flipped her braid over her shoulder. “You’re all natural comedians, all of Ponyville thinks so. Have you thought of going pro? I could get you a good agent.”

“Oh, Silvie,” Diamond laughed, “With all that natural talent, they don’t need an agent.”

Silver’s sharp giggle tinkled like broken glass. “You’re just so funny. I mean, those raggedy coats?”


Scootaloo ran her hooves through her purple mane, as though brushing off an annoying bit of lice. Her ratty little wings hummed at her back, as if ready to propel her forward.

“Just ignore them, Scoots,” whispered Sweetie Belle. She rubbed the brass star with her hock, smiling at her reflection. “After I show my prize to Rarity, I’m gonna hang it up by my dresser; that spot could use a little shine. What’re you guys gonna do?”

“I…” The pegasus paused to give Silver Spoon another glare before she turned her ears towards Sweetie. “I was thinking above my bed, maybe. Or next to my Rainbow Dash poster.” She rubbed her chin. “But maybe it’ll go better with my other Rainbow Dash poster, the one by the door.”

Diamond Tiara leered over her chocolate malt, drinking slowly. Her eyes never left Apple Bloom’s.

“Oh, Apple Bloom!” Sweetie’s head poked up between them. “What if you put yours in the trophy case?”

“Say, yeah!” Apple Bloom’s ears perked. She rescued her ice cream from the table and gave it a lick. “I can put it right next to Applejack’s rodeo ribbons!”

Diamond chomped her straw, shoulders tense. Silver practically saw the gears turning, regrouping for the next attack.

Silver Spoon scanned the room. Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie went home a few minutes ago. Snips chatted with Truffle Shuffle by the door, Snails finishing the last of his mint shake next to them. No more distractions for Miss Cheerilee; unless they played it incredibly close to the vest, she’d catch on for sure. Already a gamble, and Silver doubted Diamond would bother with delicacy for round two.

Besides, Sweetie Belle was right. It was too late for this; time to pack it in. “Aw, forget ‘em Di.” She flicked Diamond’s thigh with her tail. “Let the babies have their bottle.”

For a second, Silver thought Diamond would shrug her off and push on anyway. Diamond leaned back, spitting out the mangled red and white straw into one of the empty glasses. “Eh, whatever.” Her words echoed as she peeked into her glass to see how much malt was left. “Bet those dorks got
the comedy prize just being blank flank failures like always.” She tipped back the glass and let last of the malt slide into her mouth.

All three blank flanks sat up, ears rigid.

Diamond Tiara’s smile crashed through the floor.

Silence stretched between the five of them. Sweetie Belle hunched her shoulders, investigating the bottom of the empty bowl. Scootaloo took an intense interest in the wall, and Apple Bloom stared at Diamond Tiara, who’d grown eerily quiet.

Silver’s eyes widened. Those pratfalls weren’t staged. That off-key, over-dramatic song was never supposed to be ironic, or clever. It wasn’t clown make up.

There was never a comedy routine.

The pages of Miss Cheerilee’s gradebook rustled. In the background, Mrs. Cake quietly spoke with her husband; something about cradles and showers. Silver heard a terrible creaking sound, like somepony dragging a chair over a hardwood floor.

Beside her, Diamond Tiara sat silent, save for the grinding of teeth.

_Oh, boy._ “Um, Diamond Tiara?” Silver laid a gentle hoof on her friend’s steeled shoulder. It trembled. “Maybe we should get some air?”

Diamond’s eye twitched.

“Okay. Let’s get some air.” Silver gripped the other shoulder and pulled Diamond away from the table. “See you next Monday, Miss Cheerilee!” She kept one hoof tight on that shoulder as they briskly navigated through the tables of Sugarcube Corner and out the door.

Silver didn’t relax her grip until they reached the oak tree two blocks from Diamond’s house. She looked around; the coast was clear.

She removed the hoof and took a step back. “Okay.”

Diamond Tiara threw back her head. Her scream frightened a family of crows into the night. Lights turned on in nearby houses; a window or two opened. Diamond reared up and slammed her hooves against the tree. A shower of acorns hissed down around them.

Silver Spoon flicked an acorn off her shoulder and rubbed her ringing ears. “Better?”

Diamond leaned into the bark, chest heaving and her face an alarming shade of vermillion. She smoothed her mane, picked the leaves and acorns out of her mane, and sighed. “Kinda?” She wiped a bit of chocolatey spit from the corner of her mouth. “No…not really.”

The crickets chirped in the grass. Ponies shut their windows and turned their lights back off. A couple of squirrels lurked in tree roots, eyeing the feast at the fillies’ hooves.

Diamond rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I mean… I—we did _ALL_ that, the whole week a-and they —they come in and just—_just_—”

“I know.” Silver Spoon scratched the back of her neck and gave a long, weary sigh. How long had they been up? Last-minute rehearsals started at seven, and now it had to be close to ten, so they’d been up…too many hours. “C’mon. Let’s get some sleep.”
Diamond rubbed her back leg, likely sore from the tree impact. “Yeah. Okay.” She flicked her tail and made her way down the street to her mansion. “I think Randolph has set up the spare bed by now.”

Oh, right. Only now Silver remembered she was spending the night tonight, since Mother had to meet Father in Canterlot for society matters. Saves me a walk home at least.

As they approached the gates, Diamond Tiara lifted her head in the direction of Sugarcube Corner. Her face still looked kind of splotchy.


She turned back towards the house, but didn’t answer. Strands of lilac mane tickled Silver’s nose as Diamond leaned on her shoulder.

Silver watched the shadows of the gates glide over the grass as the brass gates yawned to let them in. She nodded hello to Randolph and tried to hide her yawn behind her hoof.

Diamond’s voice hissed in the dark. “We’ll get them next time.”

“Right.” Silver’s ears sagged, but she smiled anyway. “Next time.”
"I do not believe it at all!" Cockle Shell cried. "You are not going to perish, and what's more, I believe you quite enjoy telling ponies so. Sympathy is what you're after! You are a silly, selfish colt, Clandestine. The most selfish I have ever…"

Two sharp knocks cut through Cockle Shell’s monologue and jolted Silver Spoon back to her room. She set down *The Clandestine Commons* and sniffed, her breath wheezy and thick. “Yes?” she croaked. Her fuzzy tongue flopped in her mouth as if it didn’t belong there. “Is it time for dinner already?”

The door inched open and Brass Tacks peeked in. “Not just yet, miss.”

Good. Tacks made a fantastic herb and lentil soup, but after almost nine days of it, Silver was in no hurry for more. She rubbed her throat; it hardly hurt at all now. Perhaps she could make a case for some salad or a light sandwich instead.

“How are we feeling this afternoon?” He levitated a fresh mug of ginger and honey tea into Silver’s waiting hooves, exchanging it for the stained cups and mugs on the end table. The door eased further open, but stopped short against his pastern. Brass Tacks glanced at it, frowned, and pushed it back into place.

“Much better,” Silver Spoon said. She gently ran a handkerchief under her nose, rubbed raw from tissues. “I can breathe with my nose again and my throat doesn’t hurt anymore. I think Tealove’s blend is working.”

“Indeed. And significantly less coughing, I notice.” Brass Tacks stepped closer, one back hoof still on the door. He looked her up and down as his magic gathered the mountain range of used tissues on Silver’s blanket. His eye trailed over the stack of books and magazines by the bed, the broken spines of used crossword puzzle pads, and the row of well-dressed dolls on the top bookshelf. “I thought you reorganized your doll collection yesterday.”

Silver coughed a bit of phlegm into the handkerchief. “I did.” She sipped her tea, blinking against the ginger’s wallop. “Then I thought instead of color, maybe they should go by era and size. Besides, I had to put them back after playing with them, so—”

Diamond Tiara’s head burst through the doorway. “You play with dolls?” She squared her shoulders and shoved.

Brass Tacks’ hind leg buckled and the tissues and mugs slipped out of the blue aura. His horn relit before all four hooves hit the ground. He twisted his neck to clamp a saucer in his teeth, legs splayed against the wrinkled rug. A ring of dirty porcelain mugs and tissues hovered dangerously close to the floor.

“Told you to wait, Miss Tiara.”

“You were taking too long.” Diamond smirked at the green unicorn leaning against Silver’s pillow. “Hi, Silver. I didn’t know you slept with dolls.”

Instinct trumped dignity and Silver pulled Archmage Lady Mimic close. She smoothed the red and yellow mane out of Mimic’s jeweled eyes and frowned.
Sometimes when a pony reread the *Equestrian Filly* books she wanted all the matching dolls close by. Was that so wrong? And sometimes a pony wondered what would happen if mares from different time periods and races and politics had to put it all aside and work together to save Equestria from a sea monster and the prom was tomorrow. That wasn’t playing; that was being historically imaginative, a completely different thing.

“Oh, shut up, Diamond Tiara. You sleep with dolls too; quit making that face.”

The smirk washed off Diamond’s face. “Hey, Doctor Truffles isn’t a doll; he’s a doctor that also happens to be a pig. He went to college.”

“Cuddle-ology isn’t a real degree.” Silver sniffed and adjusted Mimic’s little golden shoe. “Mimic is better than a doctor. She’s an archmage and a diplomat, so there.”

Brass Tacks stepped in before Diamond could make a counterargument. “Diamond Tiara…” A black metal wagon hovered into the room. Sharp aquamarine flameslicked along the sides, matching the wheels and the cloth harness attached to the handle. A white sheet tucked in something big and lumpy. “I believe this is yours.”

“Oh, right! My Nightmare Night wagon.” Diamond wheeled it close to the bed and folded back the tarp to reveal bags and boxes of who-knew-what. The long bag with the clothes hanger had a costume in it, and at least three of those boxes were probably make-up kits. A black blanket, decorated in silver spider web patterns lay rumpled at the bottom. “Must have left it in the hall.”

Brass Tacks flicked his short, white tail. “Before either of you get carried away, I must remind both of you—again—that Miss Silver is abstaining from Nightmare Night this year.” He fixed a stare on Silver Spoon before she could protest. “Her father wishes she not overexert herself.” From his tone of voice, Silver suspected the butler didn’t want to let Diamond in at all. Poor Tacks hadn’t known who he was dealing with.

“I can still help her get ready. I don’t need to get out of bed to look.” Silver Spoon sat up to see the wagon better. “I’m not contagious anymore, and I really do feel better.”

“Mister Silver Laurel—”

“Never said I couldn’t have guests,” Silver finished. “He just said I had to rest some more.” It wasn’t fair at all. She didn’t have a fever and barely had a cough. If nopony stopped her, she could totally walk around the house just fine—maybe even walk to school! “You know how he is, Tacks. I sneeze once and Father calls it the plague and calls the surgeon general.”

“You had pneumonia, Miss Silver Spoon.” He eyed Diamond Tiara, likely measuring the trouble it was worth to kick her out. “One can hardly blame him.”

“I don’t now, though.” Silver sniffled and fought back a cough. “It's barely even a cold now. Mother and Father get to go to a party in Canterlot. I should at least be able to talk to somepony. Please?”

Diamond Tiara’s lip trembled in a puppy-eyed pout, complete with brimming crocodile tears. “We’ll be good. We promise.”

Brass Tacks sighed, barely audible over the humidifier’s magical hum. Again, he considered the re-arranged Equestrian Filly set, the re-read books, and the scattered worn-out records by Ferdinand’s tank. “Well…so long as you behave yourselves, I suppose it can’t do much harm.”

He held up a hoof. “But. Miss Diamond Tiara must leave before sundown. No arguments, young ladies.” His hoof tapped the hardwood to emphasize.
Diamond shrugged and smiled, unfazed. “Yeah, that’s fair, I guess. I should leave early for trick-or-treating anyway.” She plucked out a long slab of construction paper sticking out from the boxes, decorated in glitter and crayon pumpkins. “We made you a card. Miss Cheerilee got the whole class to sign it.” Her eyes kept close watch on Brass Tacks.

The calm smile returned to Tacks’ face. “Very good. I shall return on the sixth hour. Miss Silver, ring if you need anything.”

Diamond Tiara smiled and nodded. She watched the door close shut, swiveling her ears until the hoofsteps faded into the hall. The card flipped over and spread out. “Finally! Thought he'd never leave.”

Silver Spoon’s ears pricked. There, on the other side of get-well messages and signatures, lay a map of Ponyville. Pink and purple dotted lines wove through ink streets and crayon houses circled in red marker. “The famous candy map?”

“Nice, huh? I drew a brand new one this year, since so many ponies moved in lately. No frills on this one, no side-tracks. Just cold, hard candy.” Diamond pulled out a red marker, idly chewing the eraser. “Still not sure what to do with these…” The marker tip traced over Golden Oak Library and Tealove’s house. “You’re apprenticing with Tealove, right? You think she’s got anything good?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe some little cakes?” Silver’s loose mane dripped over the bed as she leaned in for a better look. She tapped the purple diamond hovering over a big white house. “Wait, why does my house have that thing over it? We don’t have any candy. We’re not even leaving out a Nightmare lantern.” The constant knocking would disrupt Silver’s rest, Father had said. Her hoof trailed the candy route. The dotted lines circled Diamond’s house, but began and ended at Silver Spoon’s.

Silver lifted her eyebrow with a curious smile. “Just what are you up to, Diamond Tiara?”

A devious grin spread across Diamond’s face. Without another word, she stepped to the window and slid it open. “It’s like this, Silver…”

Berry Pinch’s face burst from the curtains. “We’re bustin’ you out, kid!” Her black pinstripe suit rumpled as the unicorn squirmed her shoulders through the window. A bowler hat slipped off her head and rolled into Silver’s book pile. “Heh, I always wanted to say that.”

Her forehooves found the floor and Berry flopped into the room, one hind leg tangled up in Silver’s good silk curtain. She kicked the curtain off while she twisted her head about, taking in what a decent little filly’s room looked like. Berry’s nose wrinkled at the tissues and medicine bottles. She curled her tail close, eying the bed suspiciously. “You’re not contagious, right?”

Silver Spoon lashed her tail. That raggedy filly had some nerve asking that, after getting tail hair in the curtains and not wiping her hooves. She didn’t even ask how Silver was feeling. “Diamond, what’s she do—” A sneeze threw her head into the pillow. She squinted through watery eyes, her breath light and wheezing. “Doing in…” Her drippy nose sniffed against another coming sneeze. “In my…”

Diamond tossed her the tissue box. “Berry’s coming, too. She helped with the plan.” She glanced back at Berry Pinch, who still looked ready to hop back out the window. “And duh, I wouldn’t have opened the window if she was still contagious. Sheesh, you think I’m featherbrained?”

Berry Pinch opened her mouth.
“Shut up.” Her pink ears swiveled a few moments before she added, “We clear on the perimeter?”

“Yep,” said a voice outside. “I checked front and back.”

Silver scooted closer to the window, leaning off the edge of the bed. Tree branches rustled, flurries of little yellow leaves dusting the windowsill. She tilted her head up.

Dark eyes blinked behind skull face paint. “Boo! Happy Nightmare Night, Silver Spoon.”

Featherweight balanced on the tip of a bobbing myrtle branch, giggling. His teeth flashed bright against blue-black grease paint, the skull’s edges accented in neon green. A skeleton leotard clung to his scrappy body, black bones on white to match his light coat and feathers. “Are you feeling better? Did I scare you?”

Silver smiled back. “Much better, thanks.” At least some ponies know how to be polite. She blinked at the shocks of blue and green running through his soft, pretty mane. Hope that’s not permanent.

Featherweight pushed off the branch for a short, smooth glide to Silver’s windowsill. “I saw the butler mopping downstairs, but I don’t know how long that’s gonna keep him. What’ll we do if he comes back outside?” He walked along the sill’s edge, his wings out for balance. “He might see Silver coming out.”

Silver Spoon rubbed her nose with a tissue and squinted at the foals in her bedroom. “Am I having a fever dream or do you seriously think I’m going out? I don’t know if you noticed, but…” She outstretched a slippered hoof to the vapor clouds wafting from the humidifier. “But I’m still sick.”

“You do look kinda pale,” Featherweight said. He flicked an ear and frowned.

Berry Pinch took a step towards the window. “Seriously, Diamond, she’s not contagious?”

“No, but being a scaredy pony is sure spreading.” Diamond Tiara patted Silver Spoon’s back and leaned her forward. “She’s feeling great, look.”

Silver flopped in Diamond’s hooves like a ragdoll, long strands of silvery mane dangling in her eyes. She coughed.

A shadow of doubt passed over Diamond Tiara’s face. “Um, you do feel better, right? I mean, you said you did.”

“I do, but I don’t think I can walk that far.” She cleared her throat and looked at the map again. Round trip, Diamond’s route had to be at least two miles. “Besides, Tacks wouldn’t let me leave in a thousand years.”

Berry rolled her eyes. “Duh, dat’s why we’s sneakin’ you through the window.” She plopped on her bowler hat, tilting it over one eye. “Dat’s why it’s a breakout, see? Yeah, real quiet-like.” She winked. “It’ll be whispers, kid.”

Silver Spoon made a face. “What is that accent even supposed to be?”

“It’s how gangsters talk. I’m from the Crybaby Lane gang, see?” She pointed at the fake scar running down her cheek.

Diamond laughed. “I didn’t know gangsters talked with marbles in their mouths.”

Not to mention it was a South Manehattan accent—though Berry’s mangling made it hard to tell—and everypony knew ponies like Dirt Nap, Bad Penny, and Cribber Joe came from
West Manehattan. Silver considered pointing that out, but Berry Pinch was so thickheaded it seemed hardly worth the effort.

“Di.” The croak in Silver Spoon’s voice made Featherweight flinch. “I can barely stand, how am I supposed to climb out a window?”

“Easy. I’ll pull and Berry can push.” Diamond Tiara pulled the bagged costume from the black wagon and hung it on the dresser. She gave Silver another once-over, frowning a little. “Look, you’ve been in bed all week, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So maybe you just think you can’t walk ‘cause you didn’t use your muscles for a while. You just need to work your legs a little; get the blood pumping. Try walking a little.” She nodded towards the bag. “Come check out my costume.”

Well, trying couldn’t hurt. The blanket rolled off Silver’s shoulders as she slid off the bed. Her hind hooves eased on the carpet. So far, so good. She set down one foreleg, then another, and stepped away from the bed. All four hooves on the ground and no wobbly legs.

Silver took a step, then another. She smiled. “Huh.” A few more steps found her in the middle of the room, next to Diamond Tiara and the black wagon. She paced around it, investigating the makeup kits and the tiny lantern hanging from the rear. “Maybe you’re right, Diamond.”

“See? What’d I tell you?” Diamond unzipped the bag and pulled out a tattered little wedding dress colored a sallow, sun-bleached beige. Moth holes and jagged little tears cut through the grey veil pinned to the collar. “I couldn’t decide if I wanted to be a bride or a zombie so I decided to be both! See, here’s the tears in the side from where I got bit by the zombie, and when the makeup’s done…”

Silver’s hocks trembled. Her breath wheezed and her barrel struggled to push the air out. But it was alright; she was just lightheaded. She leaned on the wagon to catch her breath.

“It’ll have bite-marks, so I brought plenty of red. I didn’t know what you were going to be, so I just brought all the makeup I had.”

The floor tilted and shook a bit. Diamond’s breath tickled Silver Spoon’s bangs when she said Silver’s name. Featherweight’s shadow hovered over the carpet.

Silver clung to the edge of the wagon and waved them off. “I’m okay.” Silver Spoon closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, Berry Pinch was leaning so close Silver could see all the pink split ends in her bangs. Her breath smelled like grapes and raspberries. Silver “accidentally” coughed in her face.

“Augh!” The unicorn scrambled backward, hooves clamped over her muzzle. “Aw, gross, I’m diseased!”

Silver rubbed her aching chest. “Who can tell? Your face looks diseased enough already.” She tilted her head back to find Diamond Tiara frowning down at her, wide-eyed and holding Silver’s shoulders. “What? I’m fine.”

Diamond snorted. “And I’m Princess Platinum.”

“You collapsed,” said Featherweight. “You weren’t even up for two minutes.”
Berry Pinch covered her nose with a tissue. “If I get the plague because of you, I’m telling.”

“I meant now I’m fine.” Silver Spoon smoothed back her mane and sat up. The room tilted to the side for a couple of minutes. Okay, maybe she not totally fine. But she didn’t feel that sick, just a little woozy. Maybe it felt like her legs were made of gelatin soup, but that didn’t mean…

“You can’t go trick-or-treating.” Diamond said. Her ears drooped. “This was a dumb plan.”

Silver’s lips drew into a pout. “I can so! You’re not the boss of me, Diamond Tiara. Maybe—” She cleared her throat with another cough. “Maybe I can’t run a marathon but I still feel fine.” Silver narrowed her eyes at the wall of doubtful looks. “I do!”

“Quit acting so dumb,” Diamond Tiara pinned back her ears. “What if you die or something? I don’t need that kind of guilt.”

Silver Spoon wrinkled her nose. She wanted to snort, but her stuffy nose wouldn’t let her. Honestly! She’s worse than Father.

Berry Pinch leaned on the fish tank, watching Ferdinand swim through his castle. “What’re you so sore about, anyway? You were the one saying you couldn’t stand and you were right.”

Featherweight perched atop the wagon, tilting his head. “My sister says pneumonia can make you delirious. Maybe she doesn’t even know what’s going on.” He placed his hooves on his chest and spoke slowly, the way one did with exceptionally dense foals. “Hel-lo, Silver Spoon. I’m Fea-ther-weight. I’m. In. Your. Claaaaass.”

Silver Spoon rolled her eyes.

You’re lucky you’re cute.

“I am not delirious. I just changed my mind.”

She frowned at the bed she’d been stuck in for ten days straight, following the tasteful wallpaper to the ceiling tiles, all fifty-eight of them. “Guys, please. I don’t want to get back to bed.”

“She’s worse than Father.”

Diamond Tiara grew quiet. Her eyes slid from Silver’s face to the candy map. Her frown faded. “Maybe she doesn’t have to walk.” She glanced at the wagon, then at Silver Spoon.

The idea clicked. Silver grinned.

The makeup kit plopped onto the carpet. Diamond waved her hoof. “Featherweight, help me get the stuff out of the wagon and someplace safe. Berry, you get some pillows together.”

Berry stayed where she was. “Uh. Did I miss something?” She looked at Featherweight, who just shrugged with his hooves full of cardboard boxes.

Diamond Tiara grew quiet. Her eyes slid from Silver’s face to the candy map. “The plan doesn’t work with a pony that can’t walk, and it’s not like I can fly you.”

Diamond Tiara grew quiet. Her eyes slid from Silver’s face to the candy map. Her frown faded. “Maybe she doesn’t have to walk.” She glanced at the wagon, then at Silver Spoon.

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Diamond Tiara rubbed her chin. “The only problem is getting you out the window.”

Silver Spoon's ears pricked. “Oh!” She swept her blanket over her head like a shroud. “We can just use—”

“The front door!” Diamond smacked her forehead, cackling. “Sterling Silver Spoon, you’re a
genius!”

Berry Pinch blinked. “What.”

Diamond pointed at Berry as she cantered to Silver’s closet. “Get a move on with those pillows. We don’t have all night. Silvie, you have a costume? I don’t think the bat costume can work lying down.”

Featherweight raised his hoof. “Uh. What exactly are we—”

“I’ve got a back-up,” Silver said. “How fast can you do my makeup?”

“Like Rainbow Dash on cider day.” The makeup kit popped open with a kick. “Let’s get you some candy.” Not looking up from the foundation and blush, she held up a hoof.

“Yeah!” Silver bumped it. “But you can keep the taffy.”

Berry Pinch rubbed the back of her neck and sighed. “You’re wrong, Feathers. They’re both delirious.”

“You can breathe under there, right?” asked Featherweight.

Silver Spoon folded back the white sheet from her face and sat up in the wagon. “For the millionth time, yes.” She waved her hoof at him. “Now get out of here before Brass Tacks comes back. Berry’s already gone, look.”

A little pink tail slipped over the windowsill. Silver flinched at the crunch of twigs and leaves. Her roses had better not be bruised.

Featherweight swept across the room in three quick wing strokes. He paused, hovering over the sill. “We’re still meeting you outside Davenport’s?”

Diamond Tiara looked up from Silver Spoon’s bed, an undead bride in a tattered gown with a round pillow dangling from her teeth. “Yeah.” She fluffed the pillow and laid it at an angle against the pillow resting against the backboard. After a few small adjustments, she pulled the comforter up and over the clump of blankets and pillows resting just beneath it. “Well? Looks just like her, right?”

“Uh…” Featherweight flapped out, glancing over his shoulder. He closed the window to a crack before he said, “I think her dad’s gonna notice she doesn’t have any feet. Or hair.” The colt dipped out of sight.

“He’s got a point.” Silver said. She patted the downy blankets lining the bottom of the wagon before she nestled down again. “I don’t sleep under my blankets, and my hair’s easiest to see in the dark.”

Diamond nodded slightly, conceding the point. Her right hoof reached into the costume kit on the floor and came back up with a pale grey wig dangling at the end of it like a dead rat.

Silver Spoon made a face. She couldn’t tell if it used to be part of a witch costume or if somepony scraped it off a bathroom floor. “That’s supposed to be my hair?”

The wig plopped on the round pillow. “Everypony’s a critic.” Diamond glanced back with a
sardonic half-smile. “And no offense, but did you see yourself before my hairbrush and mane gel came to the rescue?”

She ignored Silver’s indignant scoff and went to work spreading the strands over the blanket, taking care to cover any empty patches. The Clandestine Commons splayed over ‘Silver Spoon’s’ haunch, as if it’d been dropped mid-chapter. Lady Mimic cuddled against the wig. Diamond tucked in the pillows and stepped back to add the final touch: an old pair of glasses on the end table, next to a half-drained glass of water.

Silver pulled the white sheet up to her chin and sank until just her head peeped out of the wagon, watching Diamond Tiara shove her equipment under the bed and draw the curtains. “Huh.”

In the soft green glow of the humidifier, it did look a lot like her, especially with the wig. Diamond even remembered an extra lock of hair sticking out at the edge of the blanket for the tail. “You know, this might actually work.”

It was too dark to see, but it didn’t matter. One could practically hear the smug grin on Diamond Tiara’s face. “You ready?” She spread the spider web blanket over the white sheet, up past Silver Spoon’s shoulders.

Silver nodded, trailing a hoof down her wavy tresses of mane. She tried to lay herself flatter, careful not to wrinkle her muslin dress. Chilled metal bit at her lacy socks. Not for the first time, Silver wished she had a full length mirror in her room. “You sure I look okay?”

“You’re fine,” Diamond sighed. “Now, shush. Dead ponies aren’t supposed to talk.”

The white sheet fell over Silver’s face. If she squinted, faint green pinpricked through the threads. We’re really doing this. The door squeaked open. Silver heard rustles of cloth and the world went black. A good sign; hopefully that spider web blanket would be enough.

“Here we go,” Diamond whispered. “Try to keep the sniffling down and for the love of net gain, don’t sneeze.” In a louder voice than necessary, she added, “Night Silver Spoon! I’ll bring you back lots of candy.”

The door clicked and Silver braced her hooves against the sides when the wagon lurched into motion. It got a little brighter, more grey than black.

Diamond’s little bridal shoes clacked. Wagon wheels thundered over hardwood and hissed across what must have been a rug.

Silver lifted an ear. Is that our Mustangian rug? Are we near the parlor already?

The wagon hit a hard surface with a thunk, and it thundered again. More hardwood, or was Diamond cutting through the kitchen? Wait, were they slowing down?

The wagon slowed to a stop. No more clicks of little shoes.

A tall, horned shadow cut across the shallow light. “Ah, Miss Diamond Tiara.” The smooth roll of Brass Tacks’ voice echoed a little. That had to mean they were in the foyer. So close. “You’re leaving almost ten minutes early. Everything is alright, I trust?”

A tickle nagged at Silver’s throat. She swallowed it. Don’t cough.

“Silver Spoon told me she felt tired.” Diamond’s weight leaned on the wagon, her back against Silver’s cheek. “She helped with my costume—isn’t it great? She wanted to help put all the stuff
back in the wagon and I was like, ‘No, you’re gonna tire yourself out’, but you know that Silver, always ladylike and…”

The shadow loomed over the wagon. His breath rippled over the tarp. Silver Spoon held hers. The tickle in her throat became a scratch.

“…and stuff.” Diamond chuckled too casually. “She’s sleeping now, so I closed the curtains for her. You don’t have to do it.”

“Hm. In that case, I’ll see you to the door.” With a hum of magic, the wheels crawled over the floorboards and onto the carpeted walkway.

“Oh, you don’t have to—”

“Nonsense,” Brass said. “It’s no trouble.”

The scratch burned in Silver’s throat. She flattened her ears against the cough.

“I must say, Miss Tiara, your wagon seems…more burdensome than it did before. Are you certain you want to cart it around all night?”

“Uh-huh. It’s my candy wagon.”

The front door creaked open. Fresh autumn air rippled through the sheet and brushed the edge of Silver’s hooves. Shrieks of laughter sparked in the distance. Nightmare Night was so close Silver Spoon could’ve smelled it if her nose wasn’t stuffy.

Brass Tacks hummed. “Are you quite certain, Miss Diamond Tiara? Nightmare Night is known for mischief.”

The wagon bumped over the welcome mat. “It’s better known for candy. We’ll be fine.” Diamond paused. “Uh, my group, I mean. The group of ponies I’m going with. Yeah.”

“Best of luck to you, then. Stay well. All of you.” The door shut.

Silver Spoon doubled over in a storm of hacks and coughs and snorts and more coughs. She folded back the sheets and let Nightmare Night’s orange sunset stream over her shoulders.

“Did—” another snotty cough. “Do you think he suspects anything?”

“How could he? He didn’t stop us.” Diamond adjusted the bridal veil clipped to her tiara without breaking stride.

Silver lay back in the wagon and took in the view. Strings of little lights weaved from branch to branch, already glowing eerie blues and whites. Yellow maple leaves twirled across the sky. A flock of pegasus Power Ponies drifted over the rooftops. Fillisecond waved down at them.

“Hi, Blossomforth!” called Featherweight’s voice. “Hey, guys.”

The wagon slowed to a stop and Silver sat up. In the reflection of Davenport’s showroom window, a sallow filly dressed in a white bell-sleeved gown blinked back. Waves of stringy, silver mane fluttered over her shoulders and tired bags under her eyes made them look brighter. Silver couldn’t tell if her gaunt cheekbones were the work of pneumonia or Diamond’s makeup, but it worked either way.

She adjusted the blue pendant around her neck and smiled. Ponyville never saw a more elegant dead
A gangster unicorn joined the elegant filly in the window. “So, we gonna go or is youse gonna lookit yer mug all night?” Berry Pinch and her atrocious accent leaned against the building, looking her over. “What’re you s’posed to be, anyway? Some kinda fancy dust ruffle?”

Silver Spoon wrinkled her nose. “I’m a ghost, you clod.” She thought a moment. “Or I’m a corpse and the wagon’s my casket. The point is I’m dead.”

“What’d you die from?”

“Your breath.”

“Ha ha.” Berry Pinch took the cloth harness from Diamond Tiara and stepped in, adjusting the straps to her barrel. She pulled the wagon a few inches, getting used to the feel of it. “Sheesh, you’re heavy, Silver Spoon.” Berry rolled her shoulders under the pinstripe jacket. “This candy bonus better be worth it, Diamond.”

Silver wrapped the spider web blanket around her shoulders with a huff. “Maybe you’re just an out-of-shape wagon puller.”

Diamond Tiara and Featherweight whispered and nodded together by the wall, the candy map stretched between them. Featherweight chewed a marker between his teeth. “So we split up after Bon Bon’s, so I can cover Thunderlane’s while you get Pinny Lane. Then we meet back and hit Sugarcube Corner before the festival.”

“Right,” said Diamond. “Maybe we can drop by Shoeshine’s house on the way, if we make good time. We’re off, ladies and Featherweight.” She glanced up from the map. “And Silver’s right. I pulled that wagon across the whole house just fine. You just need more exercise.”

Berry Pinch snorted. “Yeah, right. If it’s so easy, why don’t you pull it?” It didn’t stop her from walking, though. The wagon crept at parade speed, so she probably wasn’t even pulling that hard. Whiner.

“Because I’m obviously not the one who needs the exercise. This is an opportunity for you to get your flabby muscles into shape.” The map rolled up with a snap and Diamond tapped it on Berry’s nose. She slipped into her powertrot and pulled ahead. “You’re welcome.”

Featherweight jumped into a twirling corkscrew above their heads. The tips of his hooves skated along the lights. “Yeah, Berry! No pain, no gain!” He must have started workout regimens with his brother again. His long, pretty feathers angled and he dipped beside them in a lazy glide.

Silver wondered who’d made his costume. The bones over his bony frame should have been hilarious—Featherweight the skeleton? The jokes wrote themselves!—but it wasn’t. If anything, it brought out the lean muscle in his barrel. Like how the paint on his cheekbones brought out the autumn in his eyes. Those big, soulful eyes, all dark and…looking at her?

“Are you okay, Silver Spoon?” He fell to eye level. “You look kind of flushed.”

*And he’s considerate, too.* Silver brushed back her mane with a little sniffle. “I’m fine, thank you.” She frowned and raised her voice. “But I could do without Berry Pinch hitting every bump in the road.”

“Keep talkin’ and yer walkin’, Silver Snob.”
Di flicked her tail. “Not if you want your thirty percent of candy profits.”

Berry Pinch slowed, tilting her head. “This is our first stop?”

She frowned at the garden of parsley and violets a few feet ahead of them. A little tan cottage cast a humble shadow against the surrounding birch trees. “This place doesn’t have pumpkins or Nightmare emblems or anything.” Berry’s nose wrinkled at the scent of honey and candlewax. “Looks like an old lady’s house.”

“I didn’t even know this place was here,” Silver Spoon said. Town Hall and Davenports’ usually blocked view of the house, though she remembered glimpses of the flower garden from time to time.

Berry, Silver, and Featherweight readied their loot bags and pillowcases and Diamond knocked on the door.

The knob turned, and Diamond Tiara and Berry Pinch didn’t even let the door open half an inch. “Nightmare Night, what a fright!” Featherweight was half a second off, but he made up for it with volume. “Give us something sweet to bite!” Silver’s soft rasp got lost in the loud voices. It still counted if nopony heard, right?

“O-oh!” Junebug had wide, green eyes and a coat the color of dying grass. “W-well, d-don’t you all look precious?”

“Listen up, sweet cheeks, we ain’t precious, see?” The infamous gangster tilted her hat and gave her best mobster sneer. “This here’s a stick up, see? We’s here to relieve yous of yer candy.”

The zombie bride reared up on her hind legs to show off the bloody, mangled dress. Her head lolled with a groan. “Muuust….eaaaat….poniiiiies…”

“Sweet Celestia!” Junebug pressed a hoof to her face. “Robbed and eaten in the same night? Whatever will I do?”

“My spirit is restlessss.” The ghost of Silver Spoon let her rasp flicker into whispers. She didn’t have chains to rattle, so she just waved her hooves instead. “Woooooooo….”

The skeleton’s tongue stuck out in thought. “And I’ll…uh…use my skeleton power on you!”

“How t-terrible!” Junebug tried to hide her smile, but the giggles gave her away. “Oh please, s-scary dead ponies and mean gangster, won’t you take some candy and spare me?” She stepped back to reveal a wicker candy bowl.

Silver’s eyes widened. King size bars. Every one of them.

“Can-dyyyy…” The zombie’s head flopped forward, shaking a wedding gift basket. “Caaanmnndyyyy!”

Crybaby Lane’s most notorious unicorn nodded, watching bars plop into the money sack. “Yeah, that’s right. Into the bag, toots. And don’t tell no coppers, dig?”

The ghost of Silver Spoon fell against her pillow with a sigh. “I am appeased.”

Featherweight’s mouth was too full of chocolate to say anything, so he just waved.

“N-now be gone, little scary ponies, I have to get back to my…huh.” Junebug paused and angled her head towards the cloudy sky. Thunder rumbled and an ominous wind rolled in from the west. “You
kids, um, be careful out there, okay? It looks stormy.”

Silver wrapped herself in the web blanket. Her ears drooped at another rumble. “Di, I don’t think I should be in the rain.” Her shoulders shivered. She didn’t feel so sure about the dropping temperature, either.

“Rain’s not scheduled for another week. Medley and White Lightning said so.” Featherweight felt at his face paint. “Hope this is waterproof…”

Berry Pinch narrowed her eyes. “Hey, quit talking like that! I waited all year for this, and I am not going home early just because of a little drizzle.” The wagon jerked forward and the unicorn jumped into a gallop. “C’mon, let’s get to Miss Cheerilee’s!”

Diamond dug out the map and checked off Junebug’s house. “Besides, it’s probably just Rainbow Dash and her stupid cloud. I saw her spook Shady Daze’s group while we were at Davenport’s.”

“Are you sure?” Silver Spoon’s nose honked in the handkerchief. She hadn’t taken her eyes off the dark clouds.

“She was throwing lightning around like it was going out of style. I’m sure.” She patted Silver’s hoof.

A distant voice boomed over the rooftops, loud enough to hear, but too far away to make out. Something about celebrations…nighttime? Silver swiveled her ears. She caught “admiration” and “glorious feast”. It came from the Nightmare Night Festival. “The mayor’s megaphone is really loud.”

“And annoying,” added Diamond. “She’s gonna make everypony go deaf.”

They rounded on Cheerilee’s house, a modest little place with a lawn full of cardboard tombstones. Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie skipped away from her door, dressed as jars of peanut butter and jelly. Candied apples glistened in their baskets.

Diamond and Featherweight picked up speed.

Cheerilee’s house. But Cheerilee still thinks I’m… Silver stood up on wobbly legs. “Wait.”

Berry Pinch’s gallop slowed to a canter. Not enough.

“Diamond! Guys, wait!” Silver yelped and reached forward to tug Berry’s tail. “Wait!” The wagon banged to a halt. Silver plopped onto her stomach. The dry air cracked her throat and made her cough. “We can’t.”

The group exchanged frowns. “Sure we can,” said Featherweight. “It’s right there, see?”

Berry snatched her tail out of Silver’s hooves and lashed it like a snake. “We can and we are.” She ignored Silver’s whimper and pressed on.

They came close enough to read the bad jokes on the tombstones. Silver hid her face as the wagon passed Time Expired and I Told You I Was Sick! “Please, we can’t!”

Diamond Tiara held up a hoof. “Hold on, guys.” She turned towards Silver with a raised eyebrow. “What’s the matter?”

“Miss Cheerilee will be in there.”
“Duh.” Berry rolled her eyes. “It’s her house. So?”

Silver sank into the patchwork quilts lining the wagon. Her face poked out from the web blanket. “I’m still supposed to be at home. In bed. What if she tells my parents?”

Diamond twitched her ears and a frown grew on her face. Featherweight looked to Berry.

Berry shrugged. “No problem, just don’t let her see you. Just hide under the blanket like you did at the house. Done. Let’s go.” She pulled the wagon a couple inches before Diamond’s hoof stopped her.

“Yeah, but…” Diamond chewed her bottom lip, her eye on Silver. “Then she won’t get any candy. I don’t think Miss Cheerilee’ll give extra. Not after last year.”

“And whose fault is that, Little Miss My-Grandpa-Has-A-Fever-And-The-Only-Prescription-Is-More-Candied-Apples?”

“Let’s just go to the next place,” said Diamond. “Those candied apples aren’t that great anyway.”

Berry Pinch’s stomp shook the wagon and her fake gangster glare turned into a real one. “The hay they aren’t!” She wiggled one foreleg out of the harness without another glance at Silver Spoon. “If you’re too chicken, I’ll just get some by myself! Featherweight, you in for some candy apples?”

Featherweight sank to the ground, one hoof absently pawing the dirt. “Well, uh…” His eyes flicked from Cheerilee’s to his hooves.

Diamond Tiara glared at him.

He bunched his shoulders and shook his head. “Mm-mm.”

“Fine.” Berry pulled out the other leg and slipped the harness off her shoulders.

The wind rippled through Silver’s blanket. She tugged it close and wanted to tell Berry Pinch she was being super rude and stubborn, but ended up just sneezing instead.

“Have fun managing Nightmare Night by yourself.” Diamond’s syrupy sing-song voice trailed behind the unicorn. “Without my candy map. More good candy for us, right guys?”

Berry humphed and took a step towards Cheerilee’s house.

“Of course, you’ll have to hit all those houses yourself…but I’m sure you can do it.” Diamond Tiara leaned on the wagon, watching from the corner of her eye. “Maybe Mister Breezy has licorice this year. Or maybe he has dental floss and hygiene pamphlets. If only somepony had been watching who bought what at Barnyard Bargains last week.”

“Not everypony shops for candy.” Berry Pinch fidgeted with her lapels and glanced back. “Bon Bon makes her own.”

A smile curled along Diamond’s face. “Bon Bon…doesn’t she live on the other side of Ponyville, Silver Spoon?”

“She sure does.” Silver sniffled and smiled back. “Wow, Diamond, you think she can make it?”

“Oh, of course! After all, she doesn’t mind walking all by herself. I’m sure she can get all the way across town before Miss Bon Bon goes to the festival.” Diamond idly examined the map. “I wonder what would help with that?”
Berry Pinch took a longer look behind her.

“It would be nice to have a shortcut,” sighed Silver Spoon.

Diamond Tiara nodded solemnly. “Sure would.”

“Augh!” Berry Pinch kicked a rock into the cardboard graveyard, where it bounced off *That Test Really WAS A Killer!* She stomped back to the wagon with more drama and huffing than necessary and climbed back into the harness. If Silver Spoon cared two feathers what Berry thought about anything, the venomous glare might have worried her.

Featherweight whistled from high in the air. He must have slipped away while they were busy. “Peachy’s group is headed south and Dinky’s is resting. Torch Song’s house is wide open, and—” He squinted. “And she’s getting ready to leave soon!”

Diamond and Berry looked at each other wide-eyed. Silver sat up. Even she had heard the legends of Torch Song’s caramels.

The unicorn tightened the harness strap and ran into a gallop. “You heard the colt, let’s go!”

“Happy Nightmare Night, kids!” Nurse Coldheart waved and slipped her bloody hockey mask back into position.

Silver Spoon stashed her pillowcase full of candy behind the pillow. After a few moments, she rubbed her shoulder and sat back up. The lollipop sticks dug into her neck and candy wrappers bulging at the sides poked her coat. She tried shifting it to the side, but it bulged too fat to fit anywhere else. Silver dragged her haul back into her lap and sighed, “I think I have too much candy.”

Featherweight laughed a sticky laugh full of chocolate and marshmallows and half a vanilla wafer. “That is the opposite of a problem.”

Berry Pinch unwrapped Coldheart’s bubblegum and plopped it into her cheeks. “I’ll take some if you don’t want it.” Just how she planned to do that, Silver had no idea. Berry’s own load barely fit in the money sack, the bit symbol’s paint stretched under the bulge. “I mean, you’re too sick to eat any of it anyway. You haven’t touched a piece.”

Silver wrapped her hooves around her candy. Hadn’t anypony heard of pacing? This could last her until Hearth’s Warming, maybe even longer.

Diamond Tiara’s wedding gift basket bounced on her hip. Too loaded and tired to keep up the powertrot, she fell back to plod with the rest of them. Just as well, Coldheart was the last of the evening. “What’d I tell you? Is my map good or is it good?”

Berry rolled her eyes. “Great, now we’ll never hear the end of it.” She smiled when she said it though, so the answer was yes.

Indeed, Silver had to admire Diamond’s efficiency. Quality houses over quantity meant no bag space
taken up by raisins, pennywhistles, or—Celestia forbid—dental floss. Not only that, but twelve of the
select fourteen houses had ponies more than willing to give doubles and triples of king size candy
bars, peppermint sticks, truffles, and a rainbow of other various candies.

Nopony was home at the library, and Silver couldn’t get near Cheerilee’s or Tealove’s, but the haul
more than made up for it.

“Now we top it all off with the Nightmare Night festival!” The tattered lace twirled at Diamond’s
prancing hooves. “You’re going to love it, Silver Spoon. There’s spider toss and dancing and—”

“Can she do that stuff?” asked Featherweight. “It’s kind of hard to toss spiders from a wagon.”

Silver rested her head on her loot bag. “I can still watch.”

“Watching’s better anyway. Maybe Cotton will fall into the apple barrel again.” Diamond giggled
into her torn gloves. “Last year, Featherweight threw a spider so hard it missed the web and hit his
brother instead! Bulk trampled half the pumpkin patch, remember?”

Featherweight pressed his wings close to his sides. “Yeah. I remember.”

“Uh, guys?” Berry Pinch slowed, tilting her ears. “Is it just me, or does it sound kind of quiet for a
festival?”

Silver lifted her ears. Crickets chirped amongst rustling leaves and flapping banners. In the distance,
a train whistled long and high, like a timberwolf.

In a low voice, somepony said, “That’s because there isn’t one.” Dinky Doo hobbled out from the
shadows of Sugarcube Corner. Her tail dragged under her firemare costume and her eyes were pink
and puffy…had she been crying?

Featherweight flapped his wings, though his candy weighed him to the ground. “What are you
talking about? There’s always a festival.”

The Dink wiped her nose with her sleeve. “ Didn’t you hear? Princess Luna came to Ponyville and
can…cancelled it. Forever.”

Silver yelped and hung on to the lurching wagon as Berry Pinch rushed over.

Pinch twisted her head in all directions, trying to catch some sign of merrymaking or the band.
“What? Why?! She can’t!” Her sad green eyes looked back at Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.
“Can she?”

Diamond didn’t say anything.

“She is a princess,” Silver Spoon whispered. “I guess she can cancel any festival she wants.”

“No, not the festival.” Dinky cradled a lost spider from the toss game and tucked it under her hat.
“Luna cancelled Nightmare Night. All of it.”

Silver Spoon huddled beside her candy. She found herself doubly grateful Diamond brought the
wagon. Pneumonia was bad, but missing the last Nightmare Night ever was so much worse she
couldn’t even wrap her mind around it.

The little firemare rubbed the corners of her eyes. “I, uh…I’ll catch you later, okay? I’m gonna catch
up to Pinkie’s group and make one last Nightmare offering.”
Featherweight ran up as Dinky turned to go. “Wait!” He rooted his hooves around his bag and pulled out a mooncake and a lollipop the size of his head. “Give her this for me.”

Berry waved over the others and they ducked together in a huddle. “You think this is for real?” Her eyes searched Diamond’s, then Silver’s. “This could be one of The Dink’s pranks, right?”

Diamond lifted her head and watched Dinky Doo trail off towards the Everfree. “I don’t think she would lie about this one.”

“Yeah, she loves Nightmare Night more than any foal I know,” said Featherweight. He hadn’t taken his eyes off Dink either. “Actually, I think I’ll go, too. Last chance and all. How about you guys?”

Diamond shook her head. “My wagon will get stuck in the branches and stuff.” She gave her basket a long, long look and took a deep breath before adding, “Dink! Hold on, take my candied flowers, too.”

Dinky trotted back, her ears up in surprise. “You sure? You love those things.”

“A bribe’s only a bribe if it’s valuable, right? It’s worth a try.” She didn’t mention she’d already eaten all the daisies.

Silver fished out a couple of popcorn balls. She tried not to cough on them as she handed them over. “Tell her who it’s from, okay?”

The Dink smiled a little. “Sure thing, Spoons. C’mon, Featherweight, we gotta catch up.”

Silver Spoon watched them go, then shoved her loot bag back under the pillow, careful not to squish anything when she put her weight on it. Losing the bulky popcorn balls helped it fit much better. *Silver linings, right?*

She yawned, snuggling into the quilt-lined wagon to let her tired shoulders have a rest. Silver had been sitting up for what felt like hours—what time was it, anyway?—and for the first time in days, welcomed the chance to rest. The scent of sugar and caramel melted with cotton and dusky metal and fallen leaves. “So now what do we do?”

“Let’s go to the festival anyway,” said Berry Pinch. “I told my mom I’d meet her there and she’ll be worried if I don’t show up.” She frowned. Since Dinky broke the news, Berry’s ears hadn’t stopped swiveling, like she hoped to hear the band or the laughing ponies. Nothing but banners flapping in the breeze and a lonely train whistle. “Besides, maybe there’s other ponies there who—”

Diamond stiffened. “Duck.”

“What?” Silver yawned again. “Why would you want to go to the pond this hour of the nigh—”

“No, duck!” Diamond took Silver by the shoulders and shoved her deep in the wagon. The sheet flapped over Silver’s face, mouth half-open with another question. “And be quiet!”

Before the spider web blanket fell upon her, Silver peeked out of the sheet. Amongst the branches and the fairy lights she caught a flash of red feathers. They looked a little like… Silver Spoon’s eyes widened. Like the feathers on Mother’s masquerade mask.

“…don’t like it. It’s dangerous, Pitch.” Father’s voice muffled, though Silver didn’t know if it was from distance, the blankets, or Diamond’s rump practically sitting on her face.

“Oh, Laurel, stop being dramatic! It’s just a little village party, I’m sure it just got a bit rowdy. You
know how that...*pink* one can be.”

Mother’s sigh made Silver’s ears go flat. With nopony important around and Canterlot far behind, she’d let all the pretense of politeness drop from her voice. It sounded like a piano wire strung too tight and played too much. Maybe the Fancy Pants party hadn’t gone well.

“Rowdy? Pitch Perfect, it was a veritable disaster area! Did you see that stage?”

Mother sighed again. “Yes, dear. I saw it.”

“And just what’s *that* look about?” Father’s voice hardened. “I know what I saw, Pitch. Just because Upper Crust made that ‘stage fossil’ quip, that’s no reason to take it out on—”

“Laurel! Please, dear. It’s *fine.* Look, there’s one of Silver’s little friends.” Silver-plated horseshoes clicked with a slow gait. “Hello, Diamond…Tiara, was it?”

“Yes, Miss Pitch Perfect.” The blanket under her haunch dampened with sweat, but Diamond’s tone wavered sweet and high, somewhere between *I-love-your-dress* and *It-was-like-that-when-I-got-here.* “Oh, and this is—”

The harness buckles clinked in the dirt. Little hooves faded into the distance.

“That *was* Berry Pinch. We just finished getting our candy and were just about to share some with Silver Spoon.” Her tail twitched and flopped as she fidgeted on the blanket, practically sitting on Silver’s face. “And then I’m gonna go home. And that’s all.”

Silver Spoon’s nose tickled. *Oh, Celestia, not now!* The tickle wrinkled her face up and up and up…

“Oh, that’s nice,” Mother said. “But perhaps you should wait on that. Silver’s still sick in—”

Silver Spoon covered her sneeze with her hooves.

“Achoo!” yelled Diamond Tiara.

Father made a disapproving noise. “Mm. Perhaps wait a *while.*”

Nopony answered her; nopony said anything at all. After a few moments, Silver felt Diamond sigh with relief. When the heavier hoofbeats faded away, Silver Spoon cautioned a teensy peek. Nopony out there but Pinkie Pie in a chicken suit.

“Diamond!” Silver wriggled her way back to fresh air, coughing and wheezing into the handkerchief. “H-home!” She flopped to the edge of the wagon, wide-eyed and short of breath. “Now!”

Diamond Tiara struggled in the harness, one leg tangled in the strap and the others tripping over it. “I know.” She yanked the edge of her dress. The tattered edge of her dress train twisted up in the wheel’s axle. “I *know!*” Diamond shook off the harness and yanked harder. “The stupid…thing’s…stuck in the thing!”

How long did it take to walk home from here? Eight minutes? Five? Silver Spoon wrung her blanket, biting her lip. “Diiiiiamond!”

“How it—*I* know, darn it! I’m trying!” The dress ripped. Diamond plopped into a pile of leaves and candy wrappers. She shook the wedding veil out of her face and scrambled back to the wagon. Diamond didn’t bother with the harness this time and just grasped the harness between her teeth.
“Silver, catch!” Her loot basket went flying.

The candy plopped safely in Silver’s lap. “Got it! Go, go, go!”

Diamond Tiara burst into full gallop. The wagon pitched over rock and dirt and Ponyville became a blur. There went Sugarcube Corner and the library.

The breeze became a chilled stab in Silver’s throat. She ducked her head down and folded herself over the cargo. One hoof free to cradle the candy, the others braced tight against the black metal. Out of the corner of her eye, the spider web blanket fluttered off her back and into the wind. Silver had no idea where the pillow was.

Diamond’s head lolled forward. Over the rushing wind, Silver heard Diamond wheeze and her gallop get unsteady.

Davenport’s black windows rushed by them and hope glimmered in Silver’s heart. She lifted her head to see the house. Her hope crashed into her stomach. *The upstairs light’s on!* “Di, we’re not gonna make it!”

Diamond Tiara pinned her ears with a snort. “The hay we’re not.” The road sloped down to the Silver house and she bunched her shoulders. “Silver, hold on to the haul! I’m letting you go.”

“What?!”

The wheels screamed in Silver’s ears. Her stomach flew into her chest and the world slid into a blur of blues and purples and oranges and lights and stars. The wagon pitched left and flipped Silver Spoon into the night. She shut her eyes and tried not to scream.

She crunched into something soft. Silver creaked one eye open to discover…roses. She opened the other eye. Bruised and broken yellow roses covered her face and withers, and thorns dug into her dress.


The adrenaline evaporated with her sweat and the chill of night hit Silver full force. “Halfway there.” Her shivering hooves pushed up the window (still unlocked, thank goodness) and turned to the loot.

Silver’s candy went first. The pillowcase sagged and dragged and needed a running shove or two, but it got in there. But Diamond’s candy had a basket, not a bag. If Silver just shoved it in there, it’d spill all over, and she didn’t even know for sure if it’d fit.

Light bloomed on the other side of the bedroom door. *Di can get it later.* Silver Spoon gripped the windowsill and pulled herself up…up… and slipped back into the bush, coughing up a storm.

Silver shook her head, trying not to wheeze too loud. It felt like all the air had been stomped out of her lungs, but she’d no time to get her breath back. Why was this so hard?! She sniffed, wiped her sweaty hooves on her dress, and tried again.

Her shaking haunches pushed her up to grab the sill with rubbery hooves. Silver gritted her teeth and pushed, pushed, pushed. She felt her barrel scrape over the windowsill. With another little push, Silver was halfway in. Her back half flopped in the night, her tail tangled with leaves and thorns.

“Okay…” Silver Spoon coughed. The humidifier fogged her glasses when she looked up. Dark and…more dark. Just the thin line of light at the bottom of the door. “Now, I just…” Her back hooves scraped the side of the house. She huffed and pushed. Not a strong push, but all she could
manage. “Just…gotta…”

Something soft and solid slammed into Silver’s flank and she plopped inside with a squeaky yelp. She looked up to find Diamond Tiara gathering the scattered candy around the bush.

Diamond righted her wagon and held up a questioning hoof. *You okay?*

Silver nodded and weakly waved back. She dragged her aching muscles to bed. Her dirty gown dragged behind her; it’d get rumpled in bed, but unlacing the back took too much effort. *Whatever. At least I’m back.*

“Ah, Miss Silver Spoon.”

A new sheet of sweat broke on Silver’s shoulders.

The silhouette in the doorway lit his horn and shut the window. “I believe that was to be closed.”

Silver Spoon’s mouth slung open, searching for words that wouldn’t come. “I…I…”

The blue light flashed brighter, illuminating Brass Tacks’ thin face. He blinked at her evenly. “Hm. I don’t see why you put on your good dress just to go to the bathroom.” He shrugged and unlaced the silk ribbons on Silver’s back. “But it’s as I told Master Silver, fillies do the strangest things. One never can quite figure them out.”

Silver Spoon let her dress fall from her shoulders and crashed into bed. “Thanks, Tacks.” She rubbed her face in the pillow pile, cuddling into the sheets against her shoulders. They still smelled like cough medicine and tea. “I owe you one.”

“Indeed.” He left the door ajar, as if a careless foal had left it that way. “Two weeks cleaning your room on your own ought to do it.”
Reasoning With Hurricanes

“I can’t…see…the back!” Diamond Tiara’s hooves slipped from the mailbox and she plopped into the grass. She shook herself off and rubbed her haunch, glaring daggers at the little red flag dangling at half-mast from the mailbox. “Silver, you’re a half-inch taller than me. You take a look.”

“You’ve already looked for like, ten minutes.” Silver Spoon craned her neck to squint at the aged brass. When was the last time somepony cleaned that thing? “I don’t really think I’m going to find any—”

Diamond stamped her hoof and twisted her face into a sour little pout.

“Eugh.” Silver rolled her eyes with a sigh. “Fine. But if my new shoes get dirty, I’m footing you the bill for new ones.”

She bunched her legs and jumped for an extra boost. On tiphoof, Silver just barely touched the grass. Why does Mr. Rich need a four foot tall mailbox, anyway? After a moment’s hesitation, she stuck her muzzle in. One forehoof gripped the edge of the mailbox while the other pressed against the warm metal. It smelled like old coins and rust. “I don’t feel anything, Di.” The tin-can echo of her voice made Silver’s ears ring.

Silver pulled her head back to let in some light. “Can’t see anything, either.”

“Well, look harder!” Diamond Tiara’s hooves paced through the grass, stopping every couple steps to try and peer over Silver’s shoulder. “There’s gotta be something! Are you sure you checked the back?”

Silver Spoon rapped her hoof against the back of the mailbox. “Mm-mm. Nothing’s in here, Di. Sorry.”

She dropped back on all fours and rubbed her achy elbows. Her shoes didn’t look too bad, though the pearl finish seemed a little chipped. Still, she’d ask Tacks to buff them when she got home.

The mailbox slammed shut with Diamond’s kick to the post. Her pout congealed into a bitter scowl.

Silver Spoon met it without a blink. “Hey, I’m not the mailpony, don’t blame me. It probably just didn’t get here yet.”

Or it got lost in the mail. Silver didn’t fancy a cross town trip to the post office, and she especially didn’t fancy Diamond raging vendettas against the weird-eyed mailmare. Sources said Dinky’s mom had a habit of screwing up the mail, and a fight with The Dink was the absolute last thing Silver Spoon needed right now.

Not far away, a couple of voices murmured to each other. One of them laughed. Instinctively, Silver smoothed back her mane and adjusted her glasses before she turned to look.

On the other side of the fence, Cotton Cloudy and Tornado Bolt picked up speed as they trotted past the Rich property. They kept close to each other and didn’t stop to say hello or wave. When Cotton glanced up to notice Silver Spoon, she flattened her ears and went aloft, high into the clouds. Tornado Bolt flapped ahead of her.

Two weeks after White Lightning came to Family Appreciation Day and still not a word. Silver rubbed the back of her neck and suppressed another sigh. At this rate, Diamond wouldn’t need to
start a spat with The Dink’s mom; just being a popularity risk would cut connections for them. Silver hadn’t checked the polls, but she suspected they hovered somewhere between math homework and alfalfa sprouts.

“I sent that thing, like, four weeks ago!” Diamond gave the mailbox post another kick and whirled on the empty sky with a snarl. “I know Applewood mail doesn’t take that long. Even when it’s not express mail it doesn’t take that long! Bet some stupid mailroom toady lost it.”

“But you sent a backup letter too, didn’t you?” Silver gently guided Diamond away from the dented post before somepony had to yell “timber”. “A couple days after you sent the first one, just in case?”

Diamond swished her tail, relaxing her shoulders a little. “That’s right, I put it right in Post Haste’s mailbag and that guy never loses anything.” Her wrinkled, sour expression smoothed out and the fires died down. Diamond Tiara’s ears sagged. “So why isn’t anything here yet?”

Silver Spoon considered it. “Maybe she didn’t send back a letter. You said she has a telegraph, right?”

“Yeah, but telegrams are way faster. I would’ve gotten it already.” Diamond flicked a thoughtful ear. “Then again, a telegram might not be addressed to me. It could just go to the house.” She frowned. “Or to Dad’s work.”

Silver sat up, brightening. “Oh, then that’s easy! We can just ask your father when he comes back from work.” Mystery solved.

“Yeah, that’s not happening.” Diamond adjusted her tiara and swung towards the house at a stiff canter.

“Wait, what?” Silver scrambled to catch up. “Why not?”

“Because it’s not.”

The front door banged open with one kick and slammed shut with another. Diamond’s hard little hoofsteps left indents in the plush red rug.

Randolph’s head poked out of the trophy room, a bottle of polish hanging from his neck. He blinked at Diamond Tiara, then Silver Spoon. The old cob pulled a sympathetic “better you than me” face, and slowly pulled his head back inside, closing the door behind him.

Silver pursed her lips with a little “humph”. It’d be so much easier to just ask, though! A little awkward, sure, but at least Diamond could know for certain instead of tearing into everything and everypony over it. Four weeks and two days is more than enough time; at a certain point, young ladies need to recognize a lost cause. “Yes, but—”

“No. Happening.” Diamond flattened her ears.

She paused in the hallways to shoulder off her saddlebag onto a divan where it bounced over the velvet cushions. The bag wobbled on the edge for a few seconds before flopping back on the floor.

Something told Silver Spoon they wouldn’t get around to studying for Friday’s test after all. At least they had Thursday off as a study day.

Let’s see... Silver rubbed her chin, mentally thumbing through Miss Cheerilee’s review as they passed through the game room. We did homonyms and a little bit of eastern poetry? No, that was Monday’s quiz. Friday is the history test.
The pinball machines, pool tables, and hardwood floor of the game room gave way to the periwinkle carpet and monolithic windows of the living room. Diamond took a moment to root through the newspapers and business magazines on the coffee table for new mail. No such luck. She snorted and stomped back out and towards her room.

_The history test covers famous ponies of the Classical period, and we talked about Smooth Sail and…_ Silver Spoon frowned. And who else? She recalled something about artists who did…statues? Paintings?

At the edge of Silver’s attention, Diamond Tiara muttered under her breath, “Wonder if it’s too early to get train schedules…”

Silver’s eyes followed the watercolor country landscapes hanging in the hall (Ponet did watercolors…was he on the test?) before shifting to the portraits on the stairwell. She paused on the third step to study the detailed crosshatch sketch of somepony in a big straw hat, proudly displaying a pile of bits in front of a tent.

“…a surprise,” said Diamond Tiara.

Silver tripped over a stair. “Sorry, what?”

If Diamond noticed Silver hadn’t been listening, she didn’t show it. “I said do you think she might come as a surprise? The letter could’ve gotten there late, so she had to rush and didn’t have time to send anything.” She paused on the stairs and frowned at a ten-by-twelve glossy of herself and her father riding the little boats at Whinnyland. “That’s possible, right?”

For the life of her, Silver still couldn’t figure out Mr. Rich’s décor choice. No nice oil portraits at all, not even a little one. Instead, a modest line of photographs stretched along the stairs: a teenaged Filthy Rich playing cards with some stallion in a bandana, young Diamond cutting the ribbon to a new Barnyard Bargains…lots of pictures of Diamond Tiara, actually. Silver Spoon pricked her ears. Diamond didn’t look much older than six or seven in any of them, except the ribbon-cutting one. Weird.

“Uh, sure,” said Silver Spoon. “I guess she could. You told me she’s spontaneous.” She hopped up the rest of the stairs, with Diamond right on her tail. “But you know, even if she doesn’t—”

Diamond Tiara paused at the top stair and stared at her with big, round eyes. Her pricked ears slowly began to droop.

“Not saying she won’t!” Silver held up a defensive hoof. “But if—if—your mom can’t make it, you’ve still got your father, right?” She nudged Diamond’s shoulder and offered a hopeful smile. “I mean, think about it. A corporate exec against cloud pushers, bartenders, and farmers? You’ve got Family Appreciation Day in the bag.”

After all, Mother’s presentation last week went wonderfully. Silver puffed her chest. Shattering a drinking glass with one’s voice was always a surefire crowd-pleaser. But business stuff affected everypony in Ponyville, so it only made sense Diamond’s father would do just as well. Probably more.

No smile from Diamond Tiara. She didn’t even lift her ears. Silver decided to bring in the big guns. “It’s an easy win, right?”

“Probably.” Diamond pawed at the rug and nudged open the door to her room.

“ Probably, nothing. I know it is.” If Silver brought it down to sheer numbers, a company CEO made
more than an Applewood agent. Though showing off lots of cool celebrity clients likely had more
cloud.

But for once, clout probably wasn’t what Diamond was after. Silver Spoon sighed and patted her
friend’s shoulder. “I’m sure something just came up last minute, Di.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Diamond didn’t smile, but her ears perked a little. She fell into her fuzzy beanbag
chair with a ploof. She idly pawed through the moat of magazines scattered at her hooves. “Mom did
tell me business was taking off. When we broke for lunch at Nationals practice, she showed me her
little book full of all the new clients she’d picked up.”

“Oh? Anypony I’ve heard of?”

“Not yet,” said Diamond Tiara. She nosed open a copy of Show Horse. The cast of Blame It On
Baltimare smiled from the red carpet. “It’s her job to make them big. She was actually gonna meet
with one of them right after the pageant, so I helped her pick out a new pair of earrings.”

“You told me.” Silver high-stepped between the magazines and old comic books. “The amethyst
studs, right?”

“Mm-hm. She said I’ve got excellent taste, and Mom never says that kind of thing unless she means
it.” A smile crossed Diamond’s face, but it didn’t stay there. “Saying nice stuff just to be nice isn’t
how a pony gets success. Like, if you’re a pushover, maybe ponies will like you, but they won’t—”

“They won’t respect you,” Silver finished. “Not how it matters.” She nodded to herself, adjusting her
glasses. “Like, that junk is nice and all, but reputation’s forever.”

The bed usually made a much better sitting spot, but not today. Silver glanced at the wrinkled sheets
spilling over the bed and onto the carpet. She cleared a spot and curled next to Diamond’s beanbag.
Curious, she peered at the magazines under Diamond’s hooves. Apparently Spilt Milk had broken
contract and gone solo. Her manager had no comment.

After a quiet moment, Diamond rolled over and sat up. She rubbed her shoulder, glancing at Silver
Spoon a second before her eyes went back to the magazines. “Silver Spoon, can I ask you a
question?”

“Uh.” I’m gonna hate this question, aren’t I? “Go ahead.”

“How come your parents moved to Ponyville?”

Yep. Silver’s tail curled tight against her. “They said the country air would do us good. And it’s good
for commuting.”

“So, that means it’s a good place, right? It’s no Canterlot or Applewood, but it’s still okay. There’s
nothing wrong with it, it’s just little.”

“It’s alright.” Not Silver’s first choice (or fifth) but decent enough. Equestria had worse places.

“So it’s not a loser town?” The intensity of Diamond’s stare made ants crawl under Silver’s coat.

Young ladies ought to be polite, especially to friends. Silver Spoon played with her pearls,
considering the proper response. But friends were supposed to be honest too, right?

It was then Silver realized the hot blue stare didn’t aim at her at all, but the wall beyond. Discreetly,
she turned. Oh.
A simple oval picture frame hung between a paper lantern and a Sapphire Shores poster. A mare with a golden coat stared out of it with sharp eyes that matched her violet jacket. Soft purple streaks cut through the pinned up pink curls. Her loose posture didn’t quite fit the polished smile. A winning pageant sash stretched between her hooves and a very young Diamond Tiara’s.

A picture Silver had seen hundreds of times, but only in Diamond’s room.

She opened her mouth, thought a moment, and closed it. “No, Di. I don’t think it’s a loser town.”

Downstairs, a door slammed and a voice laughed, full and excited. Silver pricked her ears and grasped the change of subject for dear life. “I think your dad’s home.”

“Already? It’s only six.” Diamond rolled off the beanbag and poked her head out the door. She twitched her ears and trotted towards the stairs, with Silver close behind. Mr. Rich laughed again. “What’s he so happy about?”

The acoustics didn’t favor echoes the way Silver’s house did. All the soft carpets and furniture muffled sounds and made the words hard to make out. Something about upticks….explosions? No, expansions.

Silver Spoon leaned over the edge of the stairs, swiveling her ears. She heard “wolves” once and “apples” twice. From the look on Diamond’s face, she heard it, too.

It couldn’t hurt to ask. “What could be so exciting about apples?” Silver whispered.

Clouds darkened behind Diamond Tiara’s eyes. She lashed her tail and grumbled something too low to hear.

“…and that’s just fine timing, don’t you think?” The words solidified as Mr. Rich turned into the hallway. His cleanly pressed tie dangled from a suit slightly rumpled from a long day’s work.

Randolph tottered beside him, carrying a ribboned hat box. Judging by the smell wafting from it, Silver didn’t think it had a hat inside.

Mr. Rich looked about. “Now, I know I saw her saddlebag up front, so she’s got to be around here.” His eyes fell upon the stairs and Filthy Rich’s face lit up like Las Pegasus. “Diamond! There you are, darlin’! Heh, what are you doing hiding at the top of the stairs?”

“Nothing.” Diamond Tiara shook off the storm clouds and went down to meet him. “Hi, Daddy. Did you make any money?”

“Sure did! The Hayseed deal went through.” He nodded towards Randolph lifting the beet cake out of the hatbox. “And they were nice enough to offer something for the trip home, too.”

Diamond perked up. “Ooh, it did? But I thought you said they didn’t want to expand. Did you show them the profit margin charts?” She paused to sniff the cake on the table. “Do I have to eat that?”

“Well, it wasn’t an easy sell; I’ve really got Miss Peppercorn to thank for smoothing out all the wrinkles. But yes, I showed them the charts.” He chuckled and kissed the top of his daughter’s head. “And I’ll just tell Turnip Truck you appreciated the offer. Hello there, Silver Spoon. How’s your folks?”

Silver dipped her head. “Very well, sir. Thank you.”

“Good, good. By the way, Diamond, I ran into Miss Cheerilee this afternoon.”
“You did?” Diamond’s voice soaked in plausible deniability.

“She says Family Appreciation Day’s already going on.” Mr. Rich tilted his head with a little frown. “How come you didn’t say anything?”

It seemed Diamond hadn’t expected that. Her hooves fidgeted, looking for a quick and easy answer. “Oh, uh…”

Silver Spoon took the opening. “We’ve just been really busy, sir.” She shrugged with a girly little giggle. “You know how it gets. Di’s been helping me catch up with school stuff, since I’ve been out sick.” Lightly, she elbowed Diamond in the ribs. “We have a lot of studying to catch up on.”

Diamond Tiara rolled her eyes and shoved her off. “It just never really came up,” she added with a touch of nonchalance.

Too much nonchalance, it seemed. “Hm.” Filthy Rich lifted an eyebrow and frowned again. “Are you sure that’s the only reason, Diamond Tiara?”

Diamond rubbed her foreleg and leaned against a table. She glanced at Silver Spoon, the beet cake, her hooves, the landscapes on the wall—anywhere but her father. “Um. I…”

Light glistened off Silver’s glasses. She stiffened as the realization hit. She sent those letters in secret. What in Equestria did Diamond plan to do if her parents figured it out? In such a small town, running into each other wouldn’t be hard at all. She swished her tail around her hooves, remembering the empty mailbox. Not that she needs to worry about that now, anyway.

“I…thought maybe you’d be too busy,” Diamond finally said. “I didn’t want to bother you.”

Mr. Rich wrapped a foreleg around Diamond’s shoulders and gave a little squeeze. “Aw, princess. I always have time for you. I promised, remember?” He looked up with a sudden smile. “Say, you’re off on Thursday, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Zap apple season’s right around the corner, so I was thinking…”

Diamond’s expression dipped into a frown, but she caught it at the last minute, wrenching it back into a neutral mask. A quick study; Silver had taught her how to do that.

“I’m heading down to Sweet Apple Acres tomorrow morning, why don’t you come along?”

The fillies exchanged quick looks. Silver shrugged, out of convenient excuses.

Di gave a stiff little smile. “Sure, Daddy.” The fur along her spine stood in a furious little ridge. “That sounds great.” She chewed her lip and waited a moment. “By the way, did you happen to get any mail for me? Or a telegram?”

Mr. Rich glanced down. “Hm? No, I don’t think so. Why?”

“No reason.”
“Nice work today, Silver Spoon.” Tealove held the door open for her apprentice, balancing a steaming porcelain cup and saucer on the other hoof.

Silver took her seat on the teahouse patio and politely received her milk tea. “Thank you, Miss Tealove. I’m sorry about your tablecloth.”

“Accidents happen, Miss Silver, though you’re normally so smooth in your pouring technique.” She added a sprinkle of cinnamon to the tea and stirred it in. “Is there something wrong?”

“A little distracted, that’s all. I’m meeting Diamond Tiara in a little while.” Her hoof touched the cup. Still a bit too hot. “She’s been at Apple Bloom’s all morning.”

Tealove must have noticed something amiss in Silver’s expression, because she frowned. “Is there something wrong with Apple Bloom?”

“No, ma’am.”

Twelve scrolls and a bucket of ink wouldn’t be enough to list everything wrong with Apple Bloom. She had split ends in her tail, dirt in her fetlocks, and chipped, filthy hooves, and she insisted on wearing that tacky bow all the time.

And Apple Bloom was far too loud. One could hear Apple Bloom’s obnoxious megaphone screech clear across Ponyville. It might not be so bad if her accent wasn’t so atrocious.

Silver folded her hooves. “It’s just…”

The filly was a walking, talking disaster on four legs. Bad enough by herself, but when her ruffian cohorts joined in, well, say goodbye to your peaceful afternoon. Their squabbling riot—in public, no less—nearly ruined the field trip to Canterlot Gardens.

“We’ve had some conflicts of interest.” Silver flattened her ears.

Apple Bloom was a bold-faced liar, too. And everypony kept falling for it! Anypony with eyes could tell those cutie marks in plate spinning and…boopity-doopting or whatever were totally fake. Instead of owning up when Diamond Tiara rightfully called her out on it, the snot just turned around and made a big stupid show out of her bogus “talents” to rub it in.

Nopony thought it was weird, nopony found it suspicious, and when the truth finally came out everypony just let that smug little blank flank off the hook. No lecture, no detention, no nothing! Sure, Apple Bloom apologized to the class, but Silver Spoon knew she was only sorry she got caught.

Silver tucked her braid back, wrinkling her nose a little. “We’re not exactly friends.”

Curly blue mane brushed Tealove’s face as she leaned to smile at her protégé. “Not quite your cup of tea, then?”

That joke should have gotten old weeks ago, but Silver laughed anyway. “You could say dealing with her is a travest-tea.” She smiled at her own joke and admitted, “I suppose she’s not the absolute worst.” Snips and Snails pulled far and ahead in that contest, and Scootaloo made them both look like Princess Platinum.

At least Apple Bloom had some home training when that ratty pegasus didn’t drag her down. The girl ranked low-tier on Silver’s list, but at the absolute bottom of Diamond’s. I don’t know what a pony has to do to rank lower than Scootaloser, but it’s gotta be bad.
Tealove lifted her head as a pair of ponies approached the teahouse. “Oh, that’s my eleven o’clock. I’ll see you next week, dear.” She topped off Silver's tea before she skirted off. “I hope things work out with your friend.”

“Thanks. Me too.” Diamond hadn’t even arrived yet and Silver already felt exhausted. She rubbed her temples and sighed. “Sweet Apple Acres. Just what her bad mood needs…”

She took a long sip and closed her eyes. The warm breeze thread through her mane. A pair of chittering larks chased each other over the roof of the teahouse. The eye of the storm. *Might as well enjoy it before Hurricane Tiara tears through Ponyville.*

“As soon as Mr. Rich gives his presentation, it’ll be over.” Silver Spoon put down her cup and steepled her hooves. Her reflection skimmed across the dark blue porcelain. “I just need to ride it out a couple more days, that’s all.”

On her best days, Diamond Tiara had better sense than some adults. But bad moods had their way of clouding better judgment. Silver Spoon shook her head. *No reasoning with hurricanes. All you can do is prepare for them.*

Out of the corner of her eye, Silver caught Cotton Cloudy’s mother passing by. Cotton herself trotted a few steps behind. Judging from the bounce in their manes, they’d come fresh from the spa.

*Prepare and repair the damage.* “Good morning, Cotton Cloudy; Miss White Lightning.” She fluttered her eyelashes. “Cotton, I love what you’ve done with your mane.”

Cotton flicked her tail, unimpressed. “It’s not really morning anymore.”

White Lightning frowned. “Cotton, be nice.”

The filly sighed. “Thanks, Silver Spoon.” She fidgeted on her hooves, waiting to move on. Her mother stayed put.

That mare deserved roses. What a lifesaver. “Hey, are you doing anything this weekend? I’m having a morning tea.” She smiled, small and demure. Not trying too hard, but still genuine. She plucked out a blue and white invitation card. Silver’s embossed cutie mark glistened on the back. “Or if you have plans, I could do afternoon tea instead.”

Cotton Cloudy picked up the card like it could bite her. “Well…”

“My goodness, look at that. You’ve got adorable little business cards!” White Lightning fluffed her feathers, leaning over to look. “Isn’t that nice, Cotton?”

“Mm.” Cotton’s eyes trailed from the card to her mother before finally resting on Silver Spoon. She flicked her tail again. Caught between her mom and a hard place, she finally said, “I’m free Sunday morning.”

Silver clapped her hooves together. “Wonderful! I’ll tell the others that.”

“Others?” Cotton stepped back. “What others?”

“Oh, not many.” *Tornado’s too quiet. I should figure out where that kid stands.* “Just Tornado Bolt and Peachy Pie.”

The little pegasus lifted an eyebrow. “And that’s all?”
“Well, Sunny Daze is likely coming too, but I think that goes without saying. I may invite Rumble…” He’s big with the other colts and has had a bug in his butt since last September. Some ponies need to learn how to take a joke. “I don’t think he likes tea, though.”

“He doesn’t.”

“What a shame.”

Cotton Cloudy tilted her head, squinting. “And that’s all?”

“That’s all.” Silver Spoon finished the last of her tea and glanced at the clock. Diamond ought to be done by now. Today was not the day to leave her waiting. “It’s here, at Tealove’s; I’m thinking… ten?”

“Ten’s cool, I guess.”

“Great.” Silver dabbed her mouth with a napkin and pushed away from the table. “Please excuse me, but I have somewhere to be.”

As soon as she was out of teahouse range, Silver bolted. She rounded Sugarcube Corner, peering through the waves of multicolored coats and manes in the market crowd. No twinkly tiaras among them. Did I get here early after all?

Somepony poked Silver’s shoulder. “Silvie!”

No such luck. Silver Spoon braced herself and turned to find Diamond Tiara bouncing on tiphoof and…smiling? “Hey, Diamo—”

“Bunny ears!”

Silver blinked. “What?”

“She was wearing bunny ears! A whole little blue bunny outfit, hopping over watering cans and singing a little song!” Diamond rocked back with restrained laughter. She looked about two seconds from exploding with it. “I… I almost couldn’t believe my eyes. I swear I, like, almost died right there on the apple farm.” She wiped a tear from her eye. “I knew she was a dork, but—”

“Hold on.” Silver Spoon peeped over her glasses with a sardonic smirk. This was too fast. Too weird. Too good to be true. “We’re talking Bloom? As in Apple I-Can-Burp-The-Alphabet Bloom?”

“Oh, forget burping.” Di bit her lip and squeaked. “She was singing the alphabet song when she did it.”

Silver’s hooves hid her giant grin. “Shut. Up.”

“In the bunny suit.” Diamond’s silky tail waved in the air. “Little cotton tail on her butt and all! Like, I can’t even tell you how stupid it looked—like, fifty times stupider than usual. At least!”

“Excuse me.” A few feet away, a vendor frowned from her honey stand. The hives around her buzzed so loud Silver barely heard her. “Could you keep it down? You’re upsetting my bees.”

“Sorry, Honeybuzz.” Silver fished out a few bits and bought some honeycomb to make up for it. She broke off a piece to share to Di, trying to lower her voice. “Fifty times? Is that even possible?”

They moved on before Honeybuzz could complain about loitering. The marketplace didn’t look too interesting today. Daisy waved at them from a stand selling pots and pans.
“Oh, it is.” Diamond Tiara acknowledged Daisy with a nod and licked up the honey before it dripped on her fetlock. “Wish I brought my camera. I can’t remember the last time I laughed so hard.”

Neither could Silver Spoon. At least not laughed and meant it. Maybe this wasn’t just the eye; maybe the storm was over. “Lucky. Wish I could’ve seen it.”

Roseluck manned the flower cart six stands down, in the spot Applejack usually set up shop. So much for those pink lady skins.

“See? I told you the apple farm wouldn’t be so bad.” She chuckled and patted Diamond’s shoulder, ready for more dirt on Apple Bloom’s dumb outfit.

Diamond sucked on her honeycomb and gave a halfhearted chuckle. “Yeah. It was pretty okay, I guess.” She’d stopped smiling.

Silver’s better judgment told her young ladies shouldn’t pry. It’ll just upset her again, and anyway, it’s none of your business. Eat your honeycomb and shut up.

But sometimes, even proper young ladies couldn’t resist. “Hey, Di? If I ask you a question, you promise not to get all weird and grouchy about it?”

“Since when do I get grouchy and weird?” Diamond pointedly ignored the flat look Silver gave her. “Look, whatever. Just ask.” Her pace picked up to a close-stepped trot.

“What’s your deal with that place? You ruin a good pair of shoes stepping in a rotten apple or what?” If Silver Spoon ruined a pair of Caulkin Clips, she’d never want to see that place again either.

The honeycomb stuck out the side of Diamond’s mouth as she sucked on it. “What? No, nothing like that. It’s just dumb.” She glanced to the side, watching Rainbow Dash haggle with a vendor. Diamond’s tail swept close to her legs and she said something else too quiet for Silver to hear.

“You say something?”

She kept her eyes on the vendors. “I used to go over there a lot when I was littler. Just got sick of it. Nothing to do there.” Her ears pinned. “Ponies always talking to me when I don’t wanna talk...they never leave you alone. And Dad kept acting like it’s the best place in the world.”

Diamond crushed an empty can with her hoof. “Like fresh air and apple pies would make me forget they were fighting.” The can made a satisfying clang when she kicked it. “Like I was too stupid to figure out what’s going on at home just because I’m not there.” After a quiet moment, she looked back at Silver Spoon. “Told you it’s dumb.”

“Oh,” Silver whispered. She considered the proper response to that, but without precedent to draw from, she came up blank. Wisteria Academy had its share of fillies with dead parents, but not divorced ones. Divorce made ponies talk. “Oh, that’s…”

Diamond Tiara saved her the trouble. “It’s fine. Don’t bother.”

“Okay.”

The subject dropped, but the remains of it lingered in the air. Silver needed to clean it, and fast.

She scanned the area. No nice accessory or dress shops in sight…weather was too bland to note…Silver huffed in frustration. Ponyville always had something weird going on. There just had to be
“Hey! You bite it, you buy it!”

Silver pricked her ears at Daisy’s voice and turned. Her jaw dropped. The sun burst through storm clouds, trumpeters trumpeted, choruses rejoiced, and rainbows shimmered in Silver Spoon’s eyes. *Perfect.*

She stretched her neck to follow Granny Smith gathering up her dentures and waddling through the market. The old pony bent over Honeybuzz’s stand talking sweetly to…Honeybuzz? No. Silver smothered her laugh with her hoof. *No, she’s talking to the bees!*

“Diamond!” Silver Spoon tapped Diamond Tiara’s shoulder, trying to whisper and failing horribly. “Diamond, lookit!”

Diamond swatted Silver’s hoof with her tail. “Silver Spoon, I’m not really in the—” She turned just in time to see the beard of bees crawl over Granny Smith’s chin. “Okay, wow. That’s almost weirder than the rabbit ears.”

That wasn’t all. Diamond pointed at a blue polka-dotted thing cringing at the old mare’s ankles. It looked kind of like a pin cushion with legs.

“What the heck is that?” Silver crept closer, squinting.

The puffy cushion thing tilted to the side and a lock of red mane poked out. A bonnet! Not only that, an honest-to-goodness pioneer pony bonnet, straight out of a Hearth’s Warming pageant if the pageant had zero budget and no costume designer.

Apple Bloom went stiff and stared them dead in the face. Against the lace, her cheeks went bright pink.

She didn’t smile, though a bright and wicked light danced in Diamond’s eye. “Oh. My gosh.”

Silver nudged her leg. “If we taped her butt to a record player, think we’d get music out of that stupid thing?”

“Yeah.” Diamond chuckled under her breath. “Maybe it’ll play The Alphabet Song.”

“Or The Bunny Hop.”

Apple Bloom tugged the bonnet around her face and zipped behind a beehive—too little, too late, dork!—and whispered something to her granny. Fat lot of good it did now; she was already out in the open.

Silver sniffed. *That’s just what you get, going out in public like that.* Playing fast and loose with common sense bit everypony in the butt eventually.

Granny Smith smiled in Silver’s direction and waved. “Hellooo, half-pint’s friends!”

Forget the honeycomb. This was way sweeter. “Hiii, Granny Smith!” Her sugary smile could rot a mouthful of teeth.

Diamond Tiara let her silence speak for her and waved. Her gaze burned holes into Apple Bloom’s ugly bonnet.

Apple Bloom looked ready to faint.
Silver winked at her. “Hi, half-pint.”

Even Diamond’s infamous bad mood couldn’t stand against that. They broke; Silver Spoon doubled over, screeching with laughter. Diamond Tiara crumpled into a giggling puddle under her. They laughed until they ran out of air and laughed hiccups.

For the first time in four weeks, they went home with smiles and high spirits. Sometimes all a pony really needed was a good laugh. And why not be happy? Diamond had Family Appreciation Day in the bag (even if the presenter wasn’t her first pick) and Silver’s weekend sat primed to smooth out all the wrinkles in her social circle.

A filly couldn’t ask for a more perfect day.

It wasn’t until Silver Spoon was in her nightgown she realized she totally forgot to study.

“…capturing the wholesale market, purchasing in bulk…”

Silver Spoon’s ear dipped toward the lulling white noise in the background. Like warm milk. She sighed in her sleep. Milk in tea…mmm, more milk for your tea, Princess? I’d be delighted…

The gentle wash of tea at the bottom of antique cups. Perfect posture, no splashes…everypony applauds. Silver’s ear twitched. No, just one pony applauding. The acoustics in this castle are terrible!

Silver opened her eyes—which she was just resting—to Diamond Tiara’s enthusiastic applause as Filthy Rich took a bow. Silver suppressed a yawn and tried a little golf clap of her own. Presentation time started already?

She rubbed her dark-circled eyes and spotted the multicolored pie charts. Weren’t those supposed to come at the end of the presentation? The clock above it read two-forty-seven. Silver blinked. When did that happen?

“Thank you, Mr. Filthy,” piped Miss Cheerilee.

Silver Spoon shook herself, double checked the clock, and the long shadows stretching from the desks. Did I seriously sleep through the whole thing? She remembered trying to double check her answers, but Cheerilee picked up the test before she got the chance.

The headache from last night throbbed. “That is the last time I pull an all-nighter.” She wiped a spot of drool from her mouth. Did anypony see? Silver couldn’t hear any snickers and didn’t see any amused faces. Miss Cheerilee pushed on with her talk and Mr. Rich happily packed up his graphs; neither seemed offended.

Silver glanced to Diamond Tiara. Her friend tilted forward in her chair, her hooves folded and ears up while Apple Bloom talked Appreciation Day plans with Cheerilee. From the look of it, the gears in Diamond’s head turned too loudly to hear snoring—not that Silver snored—and had been turning for quite some time.

Excellent. Silver relaxed in her chair and sent a smile Di’s way. Whatever she was cooking up, it smelled delicious.
Apple Bloom and her obnoxious voice popped up between them, blocking Silver’s view. “Applejack an’ Big Macintosh’ll be too busy to come an’ speak.”

Diamond Tiara leaned back to catch Silver’s eye and smirked with a “watch this” wink.

“Oh,” said Cheerilee. “Is there anypony else in your family that—”

Up shot Diamond’s hoof, right on cue. “Miss Cheerilee!”

Apple Bloom went pale. Silver Spoon grinned.

“Granny Smith isn’t working the harvest,” pointed out the ever-most-helpful Diamond Tiara. “She could come.”

Silver could applaud. A thing of beauty. In one clean sentence, Diamond Tiara kicked Bloom down a notch and got her back for being such a colossal pain, all while looking good for Cheerilee in the process. Quick, clean, and smoother than Granddad Silver Tongue.

Monday couldn’t come soon enough. That silly little hayseed is gonna look ridiculous!

Silver could call Granny Smith’s presentation many things, but not “ridiculous”. At all. Nor silly or funny or embarrassing or awkward, either.

“And that is how Ponyville was founded.”

Silver Spoon slumped in her chair, open-mouthed.

An unusual stillness hung over the classroom. No quiet giggles from the back. No fidgeting, squeaky chairs or rustling papers. Nopony leaning over their desk to pass notes or look out the window. Even Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie didn’t whisper to each other. Every eye stretched wide, spellbound.

It had been that way for twenty minutes.

After all the timberwolves and lightning storms, it still felt like Granny Smith just started.


And besides all that, Granny Smith united them all under the banner of Ponyville itself. She didn’t give a good presentation; she gave a magnificent one.

Silver shook her head. She had no words.

The shortest Family Appreciation Day presentation blew every entry before it out of the water and into the stratosphere, Silver Spoon’s and Diamond Tiara’s included. For once, Apple Bloom claimed a legitimate win, not with dumb luck or deceit but just the best trump card in town.
Beside Silver Spoon, Apple Bloom’s eyes shone with awed admiration. Silver tilted an ear forward. *Did she know?* After all, Diamond planned her presentation with her father. Why not Apple Bloom and her granny?

Something Diamond said at the slumber party rattled in the back of Silver’s head: *Bet she did it on purpose.* Her eyebrows knitted. Could it be possible? *Did she plan this?* Silver Spoon frowned at Apple Bloom’s innocent smile. *And if she did, when did she start setting up the pieces? Last Friday? The marketplace? Earlier?* Her eyes widened. *Could Bloom be some sort of proto Dr. Caballeron—a chess master of the highest caliber tearing down everypony foolish enough to stand in her way?*

Her eye slid back to Apple Bloom’s big stupid, stupefied face.

...*Probably not.*

Still, mastermind or not, Silver couldn’t deny the shift in mood, nor the look on everypony’s faces. Whether she liked it or not, the social ecosystem of Miss Cheerilee’s classroom had changed. Time to adapt.

*Point to you, hayseed. I know when I’m beaten.* Silver Spoon clapped.

Diamond Tiara’s head swung so fast her mane smacked her nose.

Pitter-patter claps joined Silver’s until it built into full, enthusiastic applause. Diamond’s hooves stuck fast to her desk.

Scootaloo bopped around in her chair like an irritating kangaroo. “So if it wasn’t for you, Ponyville wouldn’t even exist!”

Silver Spoon inwardly sighed. *Next she’ll tell us water is wet.* She looked over Bloom’s head at Diamond Tiara.

Di stared back with a little frown. She didn’t seem mad, but her eyes flicked around her head, indigent and lost. And probably a little embarrassed.

*It’s over, Di.* Silver offered a sympathetic smile. *Just let it go.*

“Hey yeah!” cried Apple Bloom, absolutely not helping at all. She leaned towards Diamond’s chair and Silver Spoon did her best not to cringe. “If it weren’t for my Granny Smith, yer daddy wouldn’t have Barnyard Bargains!”

The trump card. A thin, priceless thread slung between their families. Everypony knew old connections topped almost every other…except debt. The ultimate, inarguable reason to swallow one’s splintered pride and play nice. *Can’t reason with hurricanes, but you can’t argue debt, either.*

The other foals in class murmured, nodding in agreement. If they didn’t figure it out before, they knew now.

Silver closed her eyes and sighed. In a way, she felt glad of it. Even a deaf and blind nag with dementia could see the only sensible choice left, aside from just stabbing themselves in the hoof. Nopony in Equestria, nobody in the entire world could be that—

She opened an eye. *Oh.* Her ladylike smile plummeted. She knew that look. *Oh, no. Di, no.*

Diamond Tiara fidgeted, unsure and struggling for the words. “But…” She set her hooves hard against the desk.
She couldn’t.

Silver’s eyes darted from classmate to classmate. I just rebuilt our reputation! Two hours of teatime listening to Tornado’s stupid Power Pony theories, all for nothing! An entire weekend of work!

“But she’s just…”

She wouldn’t!

Silver’s teeth dug into her lip. Diamond Dazzle Tiara, for the love of Princess Celestia! She rubbed her hooves over her face. Please, please, please don’t finish that sentence!

“…just a kooky old lady!”

Silver’s head thunked on her desk. She would.

Right on cue, the class gasped in collective horror and Silver’s stomach curled into a tight knot. This day just needs to stop. Forever.

It didn’t. Somewhere back in the rest of the world, Miss Cheerilee flipped through a stack of papers. “Class, before you go, I’ve got last week’s tests.” A paper slid under Silver’s hooves. “Sleep is for beds, not desks,” she whispered.

“Yes ma’am,” Silver told the desk. She flipped over her history test. The day got worse.
Father nodded. “Sit.”

Silver Spoon climbed onto the couch, staring at the tight-knit threads in the parlor carpet. She felt the solid, firm foundation underhoof, and tried to ponder the Mustangian import’s age instead of pondering how much trouble she was in.

Father loomed over one end of the coffee table. Mother stood frowning at the other. Between them, in the center of the table, lay Silver’s history test. Red ink bled through the back of the page; even face down, the damage could not be denied.

“Sterling Silver Spoon.” Father kept his tone level and calm, as if appraising a painting for the museum. “Would you care to explain what we are looking at?”

“It’s…um. My test.” She cleared her throat and kept her head down. Perhaps if she made it clear that she understood the seriousness of the situation, it wouldn’t be so bad. “My history test.”

Silver dared a quick glance. Her parents didn’t seem angry; they rarely did. Silver Spoon wished they would. Anger burned out faster than disappointment.

Mother stepped closer and flipped the paper. “And what is the grade?”

“It’s…”

“Look at it, dear. Turn it over and tell us what you see.”

Silver bit her lip and dragged her eyes away from the carpet. Dozens of red X’s swarmed rewritten and crossed out answers. Along the margins crept tiny notes of “NEEDS WORK” and “PLS REVIEW” in Cheerilee’s big, curly mouthwriting. Waiting at the top, a single scarlet letter.

“It’s a C, ma’am,” she whispered. “A C-Minus.” Staring up at Mother’s neutral gaze and Father’s concerned frown, a lump grew in Silver’s throat. “I’m sorry.”

Father adjusted his monocle. “Don’t apologize to us, Silver Spoon. It’s not our education.”

“Nor is it our future,” added Mother. “It’s yours, and it will be here sooner than you think.” She took a seat at the far end of the sofa. “What happened here?”

“Um.” Silver took a breath and a quick moment to collect herself. “I just missed a lot of work when I had pneumonia. And when I got back, I tried my very best to study and catch up in time, but—”

Father narrowed his eyes. “Really.” He tapped the C-minus. “You’re telling me this is your best, Silver Spoon? That is the story you want to go with?”

Silver Spoon looked away. Alright, maybe she hadn’t tried her very best but she had tried…a little. Trying a little was better than not trying at all, right? “I did study on Thursday night and Friday morning. You saw, remember? I was in the kitchen with my books.”

“Yes, I remember. But what happened to the rest of Thursday?” Mother's question didn't sound like a question at all. “As I understand it, Miss Cheerilee gave you the entire day off to study.”

Father nodded. “For that matter, what happened to Wednesday afternoon? Or Tuesday? Or Monday? Silver Spoon, you had over a week to catch up and I know for a fact you spent hardly any
of it at home with a book.”

“So I’ll ask you again, young lady.” Mother’s bright orange tail lashed across the black upholstery. She narrowed her eyes and leaned forward. “What happened here?”

“I was…” Silver rubbed the back of her neck and sighed. “I was hanging out with Diamond Tiara.”

Father made a disapproving noise in the back of his throat and exchanged a frown with Mother.

“Mm.” Mother folded her hooves and nodded, as if to confirm something. “The nouveau Rich child.”

Silver Spoon blinked. What could be the matter? Sure, Diamond had her weird moods and bad turns, but overall made a perfectly reasonable choice in friends. Yet, Silver heard something familiar in Mother’s tone.

Her voice grew soft. “Do you not like Diamond Tiara?”

Mother’s lips pressed together and she didn’t answer. She didn’t have to. Twitching her ears, she turned away to hide it, but Silver saw the look in her eye anyway—the same stainless disdain usually saved for panhandlers, mezzo-sopranos, and fake jewelry.

As if on cue, Father swooped in for the save. “Brightness, this has nothing to do with liking Diamond Tiara or not.” He tilted Silver Spoon’s chin up to meet his eye. “Yet, you must understand this test isn’t an isolated incident. We’ve spoken to Miss Cheerilee and she says your grades have been slipping.”

Silver drew back against the couch. “But it’s not—”

“Not by a lot, yes, we know.” Mother scooted closer and wrapped a foreleg around Silver’s shoulder. “But it isn’t just that. Cheerilee says you never speak up in class anymore. You don’t volunteer to demonstrate math problems or involve yourself in class projects; you hardly even raise your hoof.”

“We’d understand if you were struggling with the material or really had just fallen behind from the illness. But this?” Father sighed, inclining his head towards the history test. He set his derby hat on the table and took a seat on the couch next to Silver Spoon. “This isn’t like you at all.”

Parents pressed against her on both sides. Silver’s hoof traced dark lines in the velvet sofa. She wished they’d just punish her and get it over with.

Mother nuzzled the top of Silver’s head. “Silver Spoon, you love history. Why, back home, I think you spent more time in museums than your father.”

*That’s not even fair. Ponyville doesn’t even have museums and barely has a history to care about.* Silver pursed her lips and considered telling Father so.

As one, both parents stared down at her from miles up. Silver swallowed the argument back down. “So, am I grounded, or…?”

“Would grounding correct this grade point average?” Father didn’t wait for an answer. “No, it would not.”

Mother smiled. “Happily, Miss Cheerilee has offered a chance to make it up through extracurriculars. Quite graciously, I must add. Mr. Martingale never would’ve allowed it.”

She’d loved her old V.P. position in the Junior Debutantes, after all. *Maybe Ponyville has a chess club. I always wanted to join Chess Club.* She let herself smile a little. “Yeah, I could do that.”

“Well then.” Father gave her one last nod and moved aside to let her off the couch. “You’re excused.”

*And not a moment too soon.* Silver made for the door as quickly as good taste allowed.

“Oh, and Brightness?”

One hoof on the door handle, Silver Spoon looked back. “Yes, Father?”

Father fetched a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his monocle clean. Without looking up, he said, “See to it that it’s a project without Diamond Tiara. This is not a request.”

“Yes, sir.” Knew that was too easy.

Silver leaned over the teacher’s desk to study the two sign-up sheets: pee-wee hoofball and The Foal Free Press. “Hmm.”

At least Cheerilee made the choice easy. Silver Spoon threw a ball as well as Fluttershy threw a New Year’s Eve party, so newspaper staff it was.

She glanced at the date. The newspaper staff held its first meeting this Wednesday. By now, all the good writing jobs had likely been taken. *Great. I get to take home the stink of ink and paper every week.*

Maybe a position of food writer or proofreader could still be open. Something far away from the actual printing. Her hoof traced the available positions from the bottom up.

PRINTING: SHADY DAZE

Thank goodness for that.

SPORTS: RUMBLE

COMICS: BERRY PINCH
FOOD & DINING: TRUFFLE SHUFFLE

So much for the best position. And since when could Berry Pinch draw? The kid barely got stick figures right.

ROVING REPORTERS: APPLE BLOOM. SWEETIE BELLE. SCOOTALOO.

Gross. Still, reporting worked as a last resort and beggars couldn’t be choosers. And it was still better than printing. Silver would have to make the best of it and try not to cross paths too much.

PHOTOGRAPHER: FEATHERWEIGHT

At least one of her coworkers wasn’t terrible.

FACT CHECKER: _______

An office job all about telling other ponies how wrong they were? Perfect! There’ll be plenty of facts to check, too. Scootaloo probably thinks Neighrobi’s a continent. Silver Spoon glanced at the final position as she took out her pen.

EDITOR: DIAMOND DAZZLE TIARA

Silver pulled the sheet close and checked again. No mistaking it. Big capital letters and Z’s like lightning bolts: Diamond’s signature for sure.

“Sorry, Silver Spoon. Maybe next year.” Miss Cheerilee offered a conciliatory smile. Mother must have told her about the condition. She leaned to look over the sign-up sheets. “I think you might have missed one, Silver.” Cheerilee brushed aside the hoofball sheet to reveal the last option:
Ponyville Schoolhouse Student Council. “We could really use more ponies on it, too.”

Silver adjusted her glasses and gave it a look. “Huh.” Eight slots open out of ten, not including Student Pony President… She squinted. Twist? Really? The girl was a nice enough foal and all, but seriously? President? What, did only five ponies vote?

She had to balk at Ponyville Schoolhouse’s questionable taste in vice presidents, too. “Truffle Shuffle?” What is this, Dork Club Incorporated? “I thought he did the paper.”

Cheerilee nodded. “He signed on for the paper months ago, but when he saw how much the student council needed more ponies, he offered to help. It was very nice of him.”

“It sure was, Miss Cheerilee.” Suck up. Is there anything that fatty won’t do to get on the teacher’s good side?

The bell rang and foals trailed into the classroom in a dull roar of schoolyard chatter. Silver spotted Diamond Tiara towards the back, running three-legged and holding a huge stack of Stall Street Journal back-issues. She didn’t notice when Silver waved.

“Ooh, Thilver Thpoon!” Twist stopped to peek over Cheerilee’s desk. Her chipped hooves reached for the sign-up sheets, but couldn’t quite reach. “Are you going to join the student council? We can really, really use more foals on that staff, and…” She glanced at the name at the top of the press positions. “Oh…you’re probably joining the paper, huh?”

If only. Silver chewed her pen cap thoughtfully. “Miss Cheerilee? Um, I’m happy for the opportunity and all, but how exactly does this help my grade? I mean, it’s not history, just regular old school stuff.”

“History doesn’t just happen in books and on battlefields, Silver Spoon.” She took her seat and began sorting out last week’s homework assignments. “I know it doesn’t always feel like it, but history’s happening every day, even right here in Ponyville. Think of it this way: you’re shaping it instead of reading it.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Silver Spoon signed her name in two smooth strokes and looked back up at her teacher. “How do I write about that, though?”

“Maybe you can, um, talk about how it’s like how ponies did government stuff in olden times?” Twist had some nerve, barging in on somepony’s private conversation to give opinions nopony asked for. Though Silver had to admit, the idea wasn’t half bad. “We’re really glad to have ya, Thilver!”

Silver cringed closer to the desk, watching Cotton Cloudy float by. “Um, Twist? Could you not advertise this? I don’t like to advertise my, er…charitable work.”

Diamond Tiara gave Cotton a weird look, frowned, and went back to her paper with a shrug. Cotton, too busy fussing at Featherweight, didn’t seem to notice. She took her pencil box back from him, landed near the front window, and began to lay her pencils out on a desk. Silver’s desk.

Diamond Tiara gave Cotton a weird look, frowned, and went back to her paper with a shrug.

“Hey, that’s my seat!” Silver lightly tugged her teacher’s hoof. “Miss Cheerilee, Cotton’s in—”

“I know,” said Cheerilee. “I’m switching you.” She flipped through the homework pile and handed down Silver’s A-plus vocabulary exercise. “I warned you two twice about passing notes in class.”

Silver frowned at the weather pamphlets and molted feathers coating the inside of Cotton’s desk. Her
own orderly desk now sat between Dinky and the new Trottingham kid. “But that’s not fair!”

Cheerilee lifted an eyebrow. “Well, causing distractions for your classmates isn’t very fair to them either, is it?”

“I…no, ma’am.” Silver folded her homework into her notebook, gathered her saddlebag and took her new seat.

How in Equestria had Cheerilee found out about the notes? I’m always so careful. I couldn’t have slipped. Somepony must have said something, and it didn’t take a genius to know who.

Silver turned in her seat and gave Truffle Shuffle the coldest stare she could manage. The chubby colt dared to look at her half a moment before he averted his eyes. Obviously guilty.

Twist tapped his shoulder on her way to her desk. “Truffle, gueth what?” She whispered in his ear, not-so-discreetly pointing in Silver’s direction.

“Really?” Truffle fetched an apple from his bag and took a tiny bite, still trying not to look directly at Silver Spoon. He chewed slowly, tail curled tight against his flank. His eyes trailed from Silver to Diamond Tiara. “A-are you sure?”

Twist bobbed her head enthusiastically.

Truffle Shuffle put his head in his hoof. “Great.”

“Hmph.” Silver flipped her mane and turned back around. “Isn’t it just?”

“Di, you wanna do afternoon tea at Tealove’s tomorrow?”

“Mm-mm, too busy. Tomorrow’s Wednesday. First press meeting, remember?”

“Oh. Right.”

“You could still come to my house and help me get ready today, though. I’m really gonna need it. This rag’s like, a total disaster, so we should start early.”

“Actually, uh…I can’t.”

“Sure you can, everything’s already set up in my room, and I just need an extra pair of hooves to—”

“No, I really can’t. I’ve got extra credit stuff to do after school today. We meet on Tuesdays.”

“Huh. Well, that’s fine, I guess. I mean, we can do something Friday, right?”

“You bet. Friday, for sure.”
The wooden gavel clacked three times. “Attention, everypony! This meeting of The Ponyville Schoolhouse Student Council will now come to order.” Truffle Shuffle’s voice took on a slight echo in the empty classroom.

Silver Spoon raised an eyebrow. She looked around at the semi-circle of empty seats surrounding Cheerilee’s desk, currently occupied by Truffle and his dumb gavel. “Everypony” seemed a strong word when there weren’t even enough foals for a bridge game. She couldn’t see much point in the seating arrangement, either. Couldn’t they just arrange three desks in a circle instead of repositioning the whole room?

“We will now call attendance.” Truffle cleared his throat and pulled out a little notepad. “Student Pony President Peppermint Twist?”

A desk away from Silver, President Twist (seriously, how was that a thing?) sat up and waved her hoof. “Here!”

“Vice President Truffle Shuffle?” He raised his own hoof. “Present.” Truffle’s chubby frown made his cheeks puff like a grumpy chipmunk. “Silver Spoon?”

Silver rolled her eyes. “Duh, I’m obviously here. Look, is all of this really necessary? We’ve only got three ponies, it’s totally obvious who’s—”

Truffle clacked his gavel. “Order in the council!”

“Hey, you just can’t—”

CLACK!

“Okay, but—”

CLACK! CLACK!

Twist leaned over her desk to gently tap Silver’s shoulder. “We’re not thuppothed to talk unleth we have the talkin’ thtick.” She pointed at the white birch twig lying by Truffle’s notepad.

“Oh.” Silver Spoon sank in her seat and kicked the side of her desk. How was I supposed to know that? Not like anypony bothered explaining any of the rules.

Still, she could respect a request for order and decorum. While Truffle read the dull minutes of last week’s boring meeting (something about new glass or whatever) Silver kept her comments to herself and reread her science notes.

“…have a new member. Silver Spoon?”

The birch clattered on Silver’s desk and started to roll away. She jumped to catch it in her teeth before it hit the floor. Looking back up, she discovered everypony’s eyes on her.

“Uh...”

Twist wiggled her ears, smiling expectantly.

What exactly did she expect? A plan? A speech? Silver hadn’t prepared a speech. She should have prepared a speech. What was the Council protocol for this? Surely there had to be protocol, why else all that business with the gavel, but what if she did something dumb again?

“I…” How am I supposed to follow rules I don’t know? This is stupid. This is all so stupid! Why
can’t I just write a book report instead?

Truffle took his seat on the opposite side of Twist. He made a little “go on” motion and wouldn’t stop staring at her. He had a fat, ugly frown on his stupid, fat, ugly face and the gruffiest mane Silver ever saw on a colt. *When was the last time you washed your hair? What a toad.* Did he have to keep staring? Hadn’t his mother told him staring was rude?

Silver held the twig close to her chest and flattened her ears. *I bet he’s just waiting for me to mess up so he can go tattle to Miss Cheerilee and get me kicked out.* Truffle knew Silver’s grade relied on this extra credit. He had to know. *Just wants to make me feel bad because he’s a fat ugly jerk.*

In the wide, empty classroom, Silver squirmed under the spotlight. *And it’s working.* She cleared her throat. *I wish Diamond Tiara was here.*

“Hello. I’m Silver Spoon,” she whispered. “It’s…a pleasure?” Her ears drooped. Maybe it’d be better to just apologize and quit. “I’m here for three weeks to learn about student government for, um…extra credit.”

Silver sighed and handed the birch twig back to Twist before she could embarrass herself anymore.

Truffle Shuffle glanced at Twist. He knitted his eyebrows and didn’t say anything. He seemed a little confused.

“Hey, it’th okay. Plenty of ponieth need extra credit.” Twist smiled and put the birch to the side. “We don’t really need it except for debateth and at the beginning.”

“Okay.” Silver rubbed her temples. *Pity from the ladder’s bottom rungs. Sweet Celestia.*

“You’ll like Council, really! We do a lotta fun thtuff.”

“I guess.” She let the knots in her stomach loosen and readjusted her glasses. “I’ve never really looked into politics. Until this Monday, I didn’t even know we had a president.”

Truffle rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, not a lot of ponies do. I think me, Twist, Namby Pamby, and Snails were the only ones that voted last year. And Snails voted for The Great and Powerful Trixie.”

“Who ran against her?” For the life of her, Silver couldn’t recall an election race at all. Maybe it happened before she got to Ponyville?

“Nopony did.”

“Ah.” That’d do it, too. “So…what do we do around here, anyway?”

Twist dragged out a huge roll of paper. “I’m glad you athked!”

The roll unfurled over Twist’s desk and kept on rolling until it hit the edge of the wall to reveal a huge mouth-drawn thermometer. Bit prices ran along the side, leading up to the drawing of… something.

Silver peered over her desk, squinting. What was that? A baseball diamond? A kite?

Twist lifted her head with pride. “We’re trying to get a new window!”

“You’d know that if you paid attention to the minutes,” Truffle grumbled.
Silver Spoon elected to ignore that comment and sat up to see the boarded up window at the back of the room. The bottom planks showed signs of rot, and on rainy days, water leaked onto the floor. Miss Cheerilee had to move a bookcase in front of it because the back row complained about a draft.

“Oh, yeah. It got smashed when that…mismatched snake statue thing ran around Ponyville, right?” The town had smelled like sour milk for two weeks.

Truffle Shuffle gave Silver a weird look. “How do you not remember Discord?”

Silver shot the look right back. “Uh, because I wasn’t here?”

“Yeah, she went on that Canterlot field trip with me, remember? We had to thtay in a hotel when the train track got covered in mashed potato.” Twist lifted the top of thermometer to show the rest of the room. “Anyway, we’ve been getting money for weekth and weeth and look! We’re thuper close!”

“You’re about three hundred bits short.” Not exactly what Silver would call “close”, but whatever. “…Wait, why are we getting the school a window? Like, isn’t that something the mayor or somepony should do?”

Twist shrugged her shoulders. “We tried athking the thkool board about it.”

“But they didn’t have enough in the budget, so Twist said we could try and raise the bits ourselves.” Truffle Shuffle grinned at the president. “Like with the talent show.”

Silver swung over the side of her desk. “Wait, that was you? That whole thing?”

“Yup.” Twist thought about it and shrugged. “Well, not the whole thing. I mean, Cheerilee and Truffle helped put a lot of it together, but I came up with the idea.”

“Why in Equestria didn’t you say anything, Twist? I mean, you’re Student Pony President for peat’s sake!”

“You never athked.”

If Silver Spoon lived to be a thousand, she’d never understand some fillies. “No,” she said with a chuckle. “I guess I didn’t.”

“But now we need something else.” Truffle Shuffle turned the birch twig over in his hooves, examining the slender tip. “More than half the class is busy with the newspaper or hoofball or special talent stuff. I don’t think we can get foals involved in another big project. It’ll have to be something we do ourselves.”

“Then we’ll all make sure we do our betht.” President Twist smiled encouragingly at the tiny council. She nodded at Silver Spoon. “Right?”

Silver Spoon frowned at the great circle of empty chairs. “...Right.” Three schoolponies raising three hundred bits. Thankfully, Miss Cheerilee graded on effort and not monetary success. “It’s not impossible, I guess.”

Truffle sat atop his desk, chewing the tip of the twig in thought. His ears pricked. “Wait! Silver Spoon, that’s it!” He swung around, hoisting the stick high to smack it on Silver’s desk like a gavel. “You’re rich!”

Silver frowned, edging herself out of smacking range. “And?”
Twist clapped her hooves. “Ooh, I get it! Thilver can jutht pay for the retht of the window. Maybe even a better window!”

“With stained glass, just like in Canterlot,” added Truffle Shuffle. He giggled a little as he bounced in his seat. “Maybe with a picture Miss Cheerilee in it, so everypony’ll always know what a great teacher she is, even after she retires.”

Before somepony started suggesting silk curtains or lattice lights, Silver Spoon snatched up the twig. “Uh, excuse you. Who said the Silvers are paying for anything? It’s your window, Mr. Vice President.”

“Yeah, but we all go here, Thilver,” said Twist. “That maketh it your window, too.”

Truffle nodded. “Besides, your family’s got a thousand zillion bits as it is. They’re not gonna miss three hundred.”

“We already pay for the school, you clod!” Silver’s polished horseshoes braced hard against the desk. “What do you think taxes are?”

“Oh, come on, Silver Spoon! For once, you can do something really positive for this school instead of just being—”

“How, wide load?” Silver loomed so far over the desk, she practically stood on it. “What?”

“Uh, guyth?” Twist waved a hoof in the background. “Hey.”

“Instead of…” Truffle flinched back, looking at his hooves. He glanced at the fund thermometer, brought his head up, and shot Silver’s glare right back. “Instead of being a mean, selfish, tightwad jerk!”

“Right, I’m the jerk because I won’t let you milk my account dry.”

“No, you’re a jerk because you’re always a mean, selfish, snobby pony, Silver Spoon! Always! ‘Scuse me for thinking that maybe for once—”

“Wow, thinking about something besides brownnosing and cupcakes.” Silver’s teeth clenched in a nasty little sneer. “Slow down before you hurt yourself.”

“Order in the counthil!” Twist jumped on Cheerilee’s desk and banged the gavel until the light fixtures rattled. “Guyth, look at yourthelveth!” She spread her hooves to the room. “Fighting? Name-calling? That’th not how politicianth act!”

Silver Spoon didn’t know about politics, but she certainly knew that ladies did not stand on top of desks and scream like a firebrand. With a sigh, she settled back into her chair. “I’m sorry, Truffle Shuffle.” She folded her hooves, tilting her nose in the air. *Sorry you’re an ignorant little toad.*

Truffle Shuffle sank back in his desk and crossed his forelegs. He glared at Silver Spoon, looked back at Twist and sighed. “I’m…sorry, too.”

The gavel went back to its resting place and President Twist eased the meeting back on track. “Okay. Thilver are you really sure you can’t donate anything?”

“They’re not my bits to give.” Silver Spoon recalled the sad, lonely echo of her penthouse apartment. Instead of waltzing at the Grand Galloping Gala this year, Mother and Father went to bed early. “So,
yes. I’m pretty sure.”

She shook off a twinge of sadness. Now was not the time. “Besides, if I just fork over the money, that’s philanthropy, not politics. I don’t think Cheerilee will count that for my grade.”

Truffle blinked and considered this. “That’s…actually a good point.” He scratched his head, glancing down at his cutie mark. “But there’s gotta be something we can do. Earlier this weekend, I thought maybe we could put our special talents together, but…” He got quiet when he glanced at Silver Spoon.

Silver lifted an eyebrow. “What?”

“I’m not exactly sure what you could do with a cutie mark in... Um.” He looked away.

“Tea parties. It’s a tea spoon.” What in Equestria did he think it was? What else would it stand for?

“Well, let’s think about that.” Twist twirled a pencil in her hoof, looking over her clipboard. “Thilver knowth tea and fanthy thtuff. I can make candy, and Truffle, you can do all kindth of food.” She bounded into the center of the circle, beaming. “I motion we have a bake thale!”

“I like it,” Truffle said. “We wouldn’t even be spending the school’s money, ‘cause it’ll all be stuff we made ourselves. I second the motion.”

“Adults do like buying stuff from cute foals.” Silver shook her head. “But for three hundred bits? I don’t know.”

“It’th worth a try,” said Twist. “Unleth you’ve got an idea?”

Silver didn’t. “Okay. I third it.”

The Ponyville Schoolhouse Bake Sale passed by universal vote.

Miss Cheerilee normally went home early on Monday afternoons, but for the student council’s presentation, she made an exception. For once, Silver found herself glad Truffle Shuffle always stayed on the teacher’s good side.

“We don’t really know what we’re gonna make yet,” said Twist, “But I can make plenty of peppermint thticks and Thilver offered to make iced lavender tea and cucumber sandwiches for ponies who don’t want any thweet thtuff.”

Silver frowned at the pencil and crayon drawings in her hooves. They still seemed too minimal for an official proposal. It needed some colorful borders, or charts. Diamond Tiara always said teachers love charts.

She’d hoped to consolidate and finalize some last minute changes with Diamond over Friday afternoon tea. The council needed ways to spice up the presentation (Truffle had suggested paprika).

But Diamond hadn’t been home Friday afternoon. Or Saturday. Or Sunday. The maid mentioned something about a family dinner and a welcoming party—visiting relatives, it sounded like. That
could certainly take up a weekend, but why hadn’t Di said anything about it earlier? Had she not known?

“We were thinking of setting it up near—” Truffle Shuffle rubbed his eyes, yawning. Between writing his food article and delivering early issues of The Foal Free Press, he’d been going to bed late. “Near a place with lots of traffic, like Sugarcube Corner or the town square.”

Silver Spoon switched drawings of food and drinks for an ink sketch depicting a mob of fine-dressed ponies running for the bake sale. Bit signs swarmed their top hats like flies.

“In conclusion, we think our bake thale can get a new window, bring the thchool lot’th of money, and make it a better place.” Twist and Truffle Shuffle took a bow.

Outside, peals of laughter rolled across the playground. Silver peeked out the window to discover Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie sharing a copy of The Foal Free Press. Sunny buried her face in Peachy’s mane, shoulders shaking with giggles. Peachy laughed so hard, no sound came out at all.

There, in the middle of page one, the notorious Bubblegum Fail photograph still took Ponyville Schoolhouse by sticky, bubblegum storm. Every foal Silver had seen today either had the paper, was looking for the paper, or talked about the paper.

The first issue came out Friday morning and sold out by the end of the afternoon. Truffle said the second printing sold out again at today’s recess. The Foal Free Press wasn’t just a success, it was a phenomenon.

Snails caught Silver’s eye as he passed the window. He lowered his sunglasses and winked.

*Ugh. Three days of celebrity status and already a show horse.* Silver ignored him and looked back to Cheerilee.

“A bake sale sounds like a wonderful idea, kids.” The teacher opened the door for them and walked them out into the playground. Truffle trailed behind, eyes half closed. “I’ll ask the mayor about reserving a spot in the square right away.”

Twist took the visual aids back from Silver Spoon and added them back to the clipboard. “Thankth, Mith Cheerilee!”

Silver stretched her neck over Twist’s haunch to see the playground. The tips of Berry Pinch’s ears poked over a newspaper. Cotton sat on a branch, reading over her shoulder. Pipsqueak played tag with Rumble and Shady Daze. The Dink jumped rope. Featherweight snapped photos of The Dink jumping rope. No Diamond. She hadn’t been at recess, either.

“How soon do you think you’ll be ready?” Cheerilee asked.

Twist thought on it. “I know my auntie Bon-Bon’s not busy right now; the candy’ll be ready by Friday.”

“I can do it in a week, if somepony helps.” Truffle nudged Silver’s leg. “You know anything about pastries?”

“Mm. I know how to make parfait and petit fours. I’m better at arranging them than making them, though.”

Silver stopped in her tracks. There! In the basement window, a pink flash of movement and a glint of metal. Diamond Tiara’s smiling face peeped out, surveying her success. No sign of leaving soon. It
looked like she’d be staying at the presses today, too.

“I thiiiink we can have it all ready the Friday after next,” said Twist.

“I know we’ll all be looking forward to it. Great job, Student Council!” Miss Cheerilee gave them a congratulatory nod.

Twist knocked hooves with Truffle in an awkward, lopsided imitation of a hi-hoof. “Yeah! I’m gonna go talk to Auntie about the candy right away, tho we can start making the menu at the next meeting.”

Diamond’s eyes met Silver’s. She stood up in her big swivel chair, waving and holding up an issue of the paper.

Silver held up her own issue and nodded in silent congratulations.

“Sounds great, Twist. See ya!” Truffle Shuffle tilted his head, stepping closer to Silver. “What’re you looking at?” After a second, he must have figured it out, because he flinched and tried to hide behind Silver.

Diamond Tiara knocked on the window. She pointed to Truffle and then tapped the non-existent watch on her fetlock.

Truffle Shuffle sighed. “Well, that’s the boss. Better get going before she gives the staff the journalistic integrity speech again.”

“But it’s Monday.” Silver waved at the window until Diamond’s huge chair swiveled back around. “I thought The Foal Free Press only met on Wednesdays.”

“Not anymore.” Truffle yawned again and rubbed his eyes. “Says something about…go-getters…crush time…I dunno, it was a long speech. I just know it’s Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, now.”

“Oh.” There went afternoon tea for almost half the week. But Di worked harder than any non-senior filly Silver had ever known, and it obviously paid off. Proper ladies appreciated and applauded their friends’ successes.

*Never mind. Tea for one is still nice. I’ll just have to get her on Thursday.*

“Truffle makes a good point.” Silver Spoon took the birch, twirling it in her hooves. “Why would ponies buy cookies from us when they can get it across the street at Sugar Cube Corner? I propose we branch out, give Ponyville something unique.”

“Like with what?” asked Twist.

Truffle Shuffle paced within the circle of desks. “Well, if it’s not something sold at Sugarcube Corner, then it can’t just be something ponies can find at, say, Barnyard Bargains, either. It’s got to be something special.”
Silver nodded. “Something fancy.”

“But still appealing.”

A hush settled over the room. Truffle Shuffle and Silver Spoon looked at each other. “Gourmet!” they cried in unison.

“We can do petit fours and pizzelles and macarons! I can use my pearl inlay dessert stands and wear my new dress.”

“Ooh, I always wanted to do real gourmet. I’ve got this one crème brûlée recipe I’ve wanted to try since last summer. And Pipsqueak’s been telling me how much he misses his grandma’s treacle tarts, we could try that too. Oh, soufflé!” Truffle put his head in his hoof, sighing with a dopey smile. “I always wanted to make soufflé. And crepes!”

“We should make some flan, too.” Silver nodded. “Everypony loves flan.”

Twist took the birch. “Um. I like the idea and all, but I dunno if my kitchen can do anything that fancy. Or that much of it.”

Oh, right. Twist had a kitchen for candy making, not baking. From what Silver remembered, the house looked on the small side, too. “We certainly can’t do it at my house.” Even if Brass Tacks let them use the kitchen, Mother wouldn’t stand for a mess. Plus, they probably didn’t have the equipment for it. “Truffle Shuffle, what about your house?”

The colt’s face wilted. He looked so downhearted Silver almost felt sorry for asking. “My grandma’s house is kinda…cramped. And I don’t think she’d like it.”

“Sugar cookies it is, then.” Silver sighed.

Twist tried her best to lift the room’s spirits. “Aw, c’mon guyth. Cookieth aren’t that bad.”

“No, but they don’t get crowds.” Silver rolled her new official student council secretary pin in her hooves. “It’ll get us a couple of charity buys, at best.”

Truffle took the birch. “I’ve got an idea. Why don’t we ask the Cakes? They’ve got a catering business, right” As the idea took root, the twinkle came back to his eyes. “I’m sure they’ve made all kinds of gourmet food before, so they must have the right equipment.”

Twist’s gavel clacked on the desk. “Then we’ll try it. If the Caketh are too busy, I bet Pinkie Pie would love to help.”

“We can go on Thursday right after school,” said Truffle. “I know they’re all home that day.”

Silver frowned. “Does it have to be Thursday? Can’t we do it Saturday?”

“I’ve got thpeach therapy that day. And the day after, we’re going to my couthin’th houth.” Twist offered an apologetic shrug. “Thorry.”

“I think Sugarcube Corner might be too busy that day to ask, anyway. And we oughta ask as soon as possible, so we can know for sure when we can work. Thursday’s the only day we’re all free.” Truffle cocked his head. “Unless you’ve already got plans? Maybe we can work around it?”

“No.” Silver glanced down at her little brass pin. Technically, she had nothing to cancel. She never actually got the chance to make arrangements for Thursday tea. “No, I’m free that day.”
“Gourmet bake sale, you say?” Savoir Faire perused the slim menu.

Silver Spoon had spared no expense on presentation, going straight for the printer Father used for dinner invitations. Glossy black paper made the embossed white lettering stand out with class, but not too much flourish. At the top, the event’s title twisted in a beautifully shiny golden font to match the council’s logo.

“Soufflé, raspberry chocolate mousse, ricotta cheesecake, crème brûlée…” The Prench stallion smiled with a little chuckle. “My goodness! What ambition for, how you say, such little ponies!”

“Merci, Monsieur Savoir Faire. We all worked very hard.” Silver Spoon twirled her braids, shyly looking up with a little smile. She motioned to the menus in her saddlebag. “Could you put a few of these in your restaurant, s’il vous plaît? It would help us quite a bit.”

“Encourage ze gourmet culinary arts and help ze school? Oh, oui, mademoiselle. As a gentlecolt, it would be my pleasure.”

He gathered the last twenty copies in Silver’s bag and set them on the counter, on top of The Ponyville Express.

Wait. Silver took a closer look. The Express wasn’t that thin, and didn’t print headlines in bold, red fonts. In fact, it kind of looked like… She squinted at the story under the menu: THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXE’S SECRETS REVEALED!!

Silver blinked in surprise. Mr. Savoir Faire didn’t have any foals. He didn’t have an apprentice or young relatives hanging about either, and this was hardly the hot hangout for Ponyville Elementary. What in Equestria was he doing with a school newspaper?

Not just one, either. Front-page reports of a disastrous Cake Family outing poked out from under a coffee pot. The Princess Celestia article sat rolled up in the pocket of a pony busy bussing tables for the breakfast rush.

Savoir caught Silver looking and smiled. “If you include ze fancy cakes, perhaps you may attract a certain princess, non?”

“Perhaps.” She curtsied to the room and turned to go. “On behalf of the Ponyville Student Council, thank you for the help.”

The crisp morning air nipped at Silver’s coat as she trotted past the boutiques and specialty shops en route to Diamond’s house.

Rarity waved from her door, still in her fluffy robe and slippers. She had a cup of coffee in her hooves and a copy of The Foal Free Press on her doorstep. “Good morning, Silver Spoon.”

Silver grinned and picked up speed. “Morning, Miss Rarity!” On weekends, Carousel Boutique didn’t open until ten. Judging by Rarity’s slippers and half-brushed mane, it had to be a quarter-past eight, at the very worst. “Early enough for Di to be awake, too early to leave the house. I’m right on time!”

She could still hardly believe it. Gabby Gums pushed The Foal Free Press’ circulation to unheard of
levels. School project success on this scale hadn’t been seen since Fair Weather got the Wonderbolts to perform at a Wisteria Academy assembly.

“We are absolutely having celebration tea today.” Silver patted the bulge in her saddlebag. She’d stayed up late last night making a new can of ginger-rosemary-ginseng, Diamond’s signature blend. “Good thing I came prepared.”

The brass gates of the Rich estate glimmered at the bottom of the hill. Silver wondered if Truffle Shuffle bugged Di on the newspaper staff the way he bugged her at student council. Was Berry Pinch a pain, or did she actually learn how to take orders? Did Shady Daze really insist on wearing that atrocious visor? So much to cover from the past two weeks! Juicy news made for a fun read, but it still couldn’t hold a candle to good old-fashioned tea party gossip.

Silver Spoon rang the bell, bouncing on her back hooves. She struggled to restrain the unladylike grin growing on her face.

The door creaked open. For a moment, Silver wondered if she had the wrong house.

A mare Silver had never seen before loomed in the doorway. She had a coat the color of an overripe watermelon and the expression of somepony eating it. Violet mane swooped around her ears in rigid arcs and bandages crisscrossed her muzzle. The gold chain around her neck said “country club”, but its size screamed “pawn shop”.

Silver’s smile faded under the harsh stare. Her eyes watered at the scent of hairspray and French monkshood perfume.

“Well?” The mare stepped forward with confidence; nothing like a visiting aunt or business partner. She belonged here. “What do you want?”

“Oh...” Silver glanced away. She’d been staring. “Good morning. Is Diamond Tiara in?”

The mare stepped forward. She seemed to take up the whole doorway, if not the whole house. “And you would be?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. My name is Sterling Silver Spoon, ma’am.” In the shock of it all, Silver had entirely forgotten her manners. She curtseyed, head held high to show her prim little dinner party smile—always a hit with the adults. “I’m a friend of Diamond Tiara’s.”

“Silver Spoon...” The mare pricked her ears. “Of the Manehattan Silvers?”

“The very same!” A bubble of excitement rose in Silver’s chest. For the first time, somepony in Ponyville finally knew her family! Without prompting?! Tacky necklaces notwithstanding, this pony obviously came from good stock. “I’m sorry if I was rude before, you surprised me. I’m happy to make your acquaintance, Miss...?”

“Mrs. Rich. Diamond’s mother.” She softened, offering a polite smile. It made her flinch under the bandages. “I’m afraid I’ve been away for a little while.”

“Oh.” Silver thought back to the portrait hanging in Diamond Tiara’s room. Suddenly, the conspiracy surrounding the Family Appreciation Day invitation for Golden Glitter made a lot more sense. Had Di even mentioned another mother? Silver couldn’t remember.

“Mrs. Rich, I came over to invite Diamond to morning tea. Is she available?”

“You just missed her.” Mrs. Rich gestured towards the stairs. “She left about an hour ago.”
Newspaper stuff on a Saturday? Silver frowned. “Do you know when she’ll be back?”

Mrs. Rich shook her head, suppressing a yawn. She reached to take a glass of orange juice from a maid and said, “Her father took her up to the office with him, but I’ll tell her you came by.”

That meant she could come back any time between three and midnight. Silver’s shoulders slumped. “Alright, thank you anyway.”

As she turned to leave, Silver felt her bulging saddlebag and thought of the spare menu crushed between the tea canisters. Mrs. Rich probably knew plenty of ponies on the up-and-up who’d appreciate fine cuisine. Maybe the trip up here didn’t have to be a total waste after all.

“Before I go, the Ponyville Schoolhouse Student Council is holding a gourmet bake sale next Friday.” She offered the menu with the least creases. “It’s being held in the square.”

Mrs. Rich took a sip of orange juice and examined the menu’s shiny lettering. She blinked slowly. “Student council, you say?”

“That’s right, ma’am. We’re raising funds to replace the window broken in the Discord disaster.”

“I see.” Mrs. Rich’s eye trailed from the menu to the little council pin on Silver’s bag strap. “Diamond never mentioned you had a student council.” She flicked her tail and hummed. “You’re a member, I assume?”

Silver twitched her ears and took a small step back. Something didn’t quite feel right. “Yes, ma’am. I just made Secretary.”

“Really! Well then, congratulations, Silver Spoon.” She put the menu aside, never breaking eye contact. “I’m sure your parents must be very proud, considering the circumstances.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Silver’s tail swished close to her legs. She tilted her head and thought a moment before asking, “The circumstances...?”

Mrs. Rich shook her head sympathetically. “Such a shame to hear about Laurel’s financial troubles. It’s bound to happen to everypony from time to time, but half the family fortune gone in a year?” She put a hoof to her chest and sighed. “You poor things, I hope you’re doing alright.”

“We...” Half the fortune? A sinking feeling grew in Silver Spoon’s chest. She’d known money was a little tight, but... “We are, ma’am. Thank you for, uh...your concern.”

“Think nothing of it, sweetie.” Kneeling down to eye level, Mrs. Rich’s shadow fanned over Silver Spoon’s shoulders. “Please don’t feel too bad. It was all just poor timing, really. A bad situation, no doubt, but for it to happen just when Pitch is aging out of the stage?” She gave a gentle, sympathetic smile. “I just can’t imagine. Concern is the least I can do.”

Silver took another step back. She knew it was impolite to fidget with one’s glasses, but she couldn’t seem to help it. “That’s very kind of you to say, ma’am.”

“Why so downhearted? Chin up, Silver Spoon.” Mrs. Rich stood back up to full height and took a sip of orange juice. “I’m sure it comforts the Silvers to know that at least their daughter is successful.” The sympathetic little smile swelled into a grin. “It’s not everypony who makes Class Secretary. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Rich.” That didn’t really feel like the correct response, but what else could she say? She swallowed the hardening lump in her throat. “If you’ll excuse me, I...I think I should head
home now. It was a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Rich.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, hon!” The syrupy sweetness in her voice hardened. “Oh, and Silver Spoon?”

Silver glanced over her shoulder.

“Welcome to Ponyville.” The door slammed shut.

Seven miniature crystal ponies reared in the light of a sunny Sunday afternoon. Rainbow dots splashed over the mantle and onto the carpet from the sparkling prisms. All seven without a single speck of dust or spot of damage since the day Mother won them.

“Eighty-two…eighty-four…eighty-six…eighty-nine…” Silver Spoon balanced on her hind legs to read the years engraved on the silver and ebony bases. “Ninety-two… ninety-three… ninety-six… hm.”

Mother won her last award four years ago. Silver Spoon remembered that night a little bit. She’d worn a big silk bow on her tail and a muslin dress so long it trailed behind her. Brass Tacks and Kiss Curl had braided a rainbow of tiny jewels in her mane, so Silver and her mother could match.

The rest of the night seemed a blur—she’d probably fallen asleep, since award shows ran past bedtime—but Silver still remembered the unicorns sitting in the row in front of her. They’d held each other’s’ hooves, both in tears by the time Mother finished the winning duet. Until that moment, Silver hadn’t known that adults could cry.

Across the hall, somepony had left the door to the drawing room open. If she stretched a bit, Silver could see inside from the parlor doorway.

Mother lounged upon the chesterfield, holding a long, white quill in her teeth. Squat, organized towers of music sheets and grading rubrics covered the coffee table in front of her; a little paper city under hoof and pen. Her mane, untied and unpinned, spiraled down her back and over her shoulders. Only now did Silver Spoon notice grey hairs threading through the orange.

Slowly, Mother’s left ear swiveled toward the door. “Silver Spoon.” She dipped the quill in red ink, marked a few papers, and set them aside before reaching into another pile. “It’s rude to spy, my love.”

Silver stepped across the hall, taking care around the century-old vases. She paused at the door and stared down the long, empty hallway. Generations of Silvers stared back from their picture frames. “I wasn’t spying, Mother. I was just watching.”

She crept into the drawing room, silent save for the occasional click of hoof on tile. Silver rested her head upon a footstool, watching Mother’s quill scribble across the page. Apparently, Torch Song needed to work on her breathing exercises and had a bad habit of singing through her nose.

“Mother? Can I ask you a question?”
Mother looked up with a wry smile. “I don’t know, can you?”

Silver smiled back. She should have known better. “May I ask a question?”

“For you, Silver Spoon? Two questions.”

“Do you like being a music coach?” Silver scooted closer, eyeing the stack of graded papers. Sheet music for My Fair Filly and Mare of la Manecha topped the pile of upcoming assignments. “Even though not many ponies around here sing opera?”

“I like it well enough, yes.” Mother cleaned the quill tip and tucked it behind her ear. She took a seat on the floor, at eye level with Silver. “What’s your real question?”

The hair tie slipped off Silver Spoon’s braid as she twirled it in her hoof. “I don’t think it’s very polite.” Looking up, she found no disapproving frowns. “Do you teach lessons because you want to, or…” Or because you have to? The sentence trailed off somewhere Silver Spoon wasn’t sure she wanted to go. Is our money okay? Is our reputation okay? Are we okay?

The tick of the grandfather clock echoed in the drawing room. Dust motes floated through the still, afternoon air. Mother quietly waited. Silver Spoon fiddled with the raggedy tip of her braid.

“Mother, did you stop singing because you got too old?”

She waited for Mother to become offended, or cross, or hurt, but Mother did none of those things. Instead, her green eyes creased with a sad little smile. Picking up the hair tie, she smoothed out Silver’s mane and began to rebraid.

“It’s a young mare’s stage, my love. I knew that part a long time ago. And after all, I’ve still got my legacy; most ponies never get that much.” She finished the braid and kissed the tips of Silver Spoon’s ears. “Don’t you worry about me.”

“Okay.”

On the far wall of the drawing room, high above the fireplace, the Silver Family’s crest hung grey, gold, and white. Older than the opera awards, older than the vases in the hall, even older than Granddad Silver Tongue’s estate, the standard’s colors prevailed.

“By the way,” Mother said, “How is your extra credit coming along, Madam Secretary?”

“Miss Cheerilee says after I write my paper about it, I’ll have my A-plus back. It’s going well.” Silver Spoon smiled the way fillies with bright futures were supposed to smile. Her eyes never left the crest. “It’s going really well.”

“Hey, are you feeling okay?”

Silver Spoon listlessly blinked at the shadow creeping over the newspaper page. She considered telling Twist that her tangled mess of a manecut was blocking her light. But whatever, it wasn’t worth the effort.

“Sure I am.” She didn’t bother lifting her head from the page. “Why?”
“I dunno.” The wooden bench creaked under Twist’s weight. Her pepperminty breath puffed against Silver’s mane. “You just looked kinda sad to me.”

“Well, I’m not. I’m just reading the school paper, see?”

Silver sat up and actually read the headlines she’d been blankly staring at for twelve minutes. If nothing else, the Press served as a nice change of subject. “Can you believe the Mayor’s mane isn’t naturally grey?”

Twist took a look for herself. “Oh, neat! It’s actually pink.” She smiled at the bright patches leaking through the hair dye. “Kinda pretty, too.”

“I—” Silver paused, caught a bit off guard. “Yeah, sure, I guess. But Twist, isn’t it, like, just soo scandalous?” She leaned forward, prompting Twist to take the next quip.

Twist tilted her head to the side and blinked. Maybe she didn’t know what scandalous meant.

“Like, can you even imagine? All this time we thought Mayor Mare was all old and distinguished, but she’s got colors like a spring filly!”

“She sure doeth.”

“Well?” Silver strained under the conversation’s death throes. *Come on, work with me!* “Isn’t that just so weird? Isn’t it funny?”

Twist shrugged. “Not really. I didn’t know it was pink, but plenty of ponies have pink hair. Fluttershy and my mom have pink hair.”

Silver Spoon rolled her eyes. Twist made a decent president, but she had a lot to learn about the art of interesting conversation. “Whatever, forget it.”

“Okay.” Twist seemed to sense that something had gone wrong somewhere. She offered a peppermint stick.

It would have been rude to decline, so Silver accepted it.

A flurry of movement and dust kicked up at the edge of the playground. Foals swamped Truffle Shuffle and Berry Pinch in a writhing cluster of grabby hooves and rustling paper. Berry managed to drop her stack and tumble out before they got to her, leaving Truffle buried in the fray. The new Foal Free Press had just hit.

Chances said the papers would sell out before Silver even got there, but it was worth a shot. Silver rolled the peppermint stick under her tongue and slid off the bench. “So, what’s this week’s the plan for the bake sale?”

Twist followed her at the shoulder, a bounce in her step. “The Caketh need Sugarcube Corner open on Thursday, ‘cause they hafta get ready for a baking contest. Truffle told me about it Saturday afternoon, and we decided that instead of holding a meeting, you guyz should cook on Tuesday.”

Makes sense.” The teeming crowd dispersed before Silver even got close to the newspapers. Not one issue left; just her luck.

“I wanted to talk to you about it, too, but you weren’t around. Thorry about that.” She waved to Truffle as he passed them on his way back to the office.
Truffle nodded at them and tossed a rolled up paper their way.

Silver caught it with a thankful nod back. “It’s fine, I was busy this weekend.”

Diamond’s voice echoed up from the open basement door. She didn’t sound happy. “….like your worst column yet! Gabby Gums di—”

Featherweight followed down after Truffle, closing the door behind him.

Silver casually strolled as fast as she could to the tiny window above Diamond Tiara’s office. Movement rattled the big chair and every couple of minutes an angry little pink hoof slammed the desk.

“Oh! I’m almost done with the candy,” Twist said. “I’ve got extra time, tho maybe I’ll make some sprinkles for…”

If Silver Spoon strained her ears, she could just make out faint voices under Twist’s candy ramblings. She couldn’t make out the words, but from the severe volume and tone, she knew they couldn’t be nice. Somepony had goofed. Badly.

“Sounds good, Twist.” Silver glanced back to show she was still listening. “So I’ll just meet Truffle after school tomorrow and we’ll check in on Thursday for final review?”

The basement door creaked open slowly, quietly. As if somepony had something to hide.

“Yes, just like a regular council meeting.”

“Okay.” Silver turned just in time to catch Sweetie Belle limp onto the playground, Scootaloo and Apple Bloom not far behind. Their tails sagged behind them, and they looked at each other as if they’d done something wrong. Of course, they did everything wrong anyway, so that hardly narrowed it down.

In the basement, the big chair swiveled to reveal a grouchy little bundle of Diamond Tiara balling up an issue of the paper. The latest issue, it looked like. She tossed it at a trash can, missed, and kicked her desk drawer in frustration.

Silver Spoon tilted an ear in thought. “Huh.”

Twist tapped Silver’s haunch. “You sure you feel okay?”

Silver Spoon’s eye trailed from the sulking Diamond Tiara to the three blank flanks moping by the merry-go-round. She adjusted her glasses with a smile. “Never better.”

Truffle took his crème brûlée from the oven with all the care of a father holding his new foal. He squinted at the custard to make sure it had set properly before sprinkling a bit of brown sugar on the top. “And now, you just need to sit and wait just a little bit.”

Silver Spoon looked up from frosting petit fours and gave him a weird look. “Are you talking to your food?”

“Maybe.” He peeked into the mini-oven to check on the soufflé for the fiftieth time. “So what if I do?
Ponies talk to their food all the time.”

Silver cut the petit fours until she had lots of tiny slices. “No, ponies talk to plants, Truffle. Plants are alive.” She arranged them in a nice starburst shape and placed them in a travel box, alongside the Truffle’s box of treacle tarts. Silver’s flan wiggled beside the chocolate eclairs.

Truffle ignored her, whispering encouragement to the soufflé. Apparently it was almost “show time” and he didn’t want it to be nervous. What a weirdo.

Still, Silver couldn’t call the colt totally incompetent. She’d eaten a snack before arriving, but that hadn’t stopped Truffle’s recipes from whetting her appetite. The sweet, rich scent of caramel and vanilla wafting from Truffle’s side of the kitchen made her nose twitch.

“I don’t even know why you’re so worked up about your crème brûlée,” she said. “It smells amazing, so it probably tastes the same way.”

Truffle Shuffle’s head shot up. He stared at her, a weird little frown creasing through his flour-caked face.

“What? Do I have jam in my mane?” Silver Spoon reached back to feel before she remembered her braids were still tucked under the chef hat. It looked positively idiotic, but Truffle had insisted and the only other option was hairnets.

The colt shrugged and licked a spot of chocolate off his fetlock. “Nothing, it’s just that you’ve never said anything nice to me before.” He glanced at their stack of boxed gourmet dishes, flicking his little stub tail. “I didn’t think you even knew how. Thanks.”

“Well, maybe you’d get more compliments if you did more things worth complimenting.” Silver thought on it a moment before adding, “And you’re welcome. That’s really a new recipe?”

“Pretty much. I made a test batch last weekend, but it got kinda burned and now our kitchen’s full of smoke. I still don’t know if it was my fault or the oven’s. Probably both.” Truffle’s head popped over Silver’s workstation, looking over her cucumber sandwiches and a bowl of lavender petals. He pointed at the glass pitcher at the far end of the counter. “Can I try some of your purple iced tea?”

“Lavender tea.” Technically, lavender and vanilla. Silver poured him a sample cup and slid over the sugar bowl.

Truffle tried a little, nodding to himself. “I like it. But do you really think iced tea goes with the rest of the food?”

“I don’t; it’s too sweet for a lot of this stuff and the weather’s too cold. It’s just the best option, since iced tea will keep longer and is a safer bet for a crowd. Plus, I’ve already done lavender tea with petit fours and crepes, so I know it’ll work.” She shrugged. “Besides, we’ll have some warm milk there too.”

“Oh, okay. I was just wondering.”

Silence settled over the kitchen. In the corner, an egg timer tick-tick-ticked away the seconds. The soufflé still had sixteen minutes to go. Everything else had already been taken care of or else had to be made fresh on sale day. Nothing left but to wait.

“So!” Silver Spoon finally broke the silence. ”Cotton Cloudy tells me Cloudsdale’s got The Foal Free Press now. It sounds like you’ve got a real hit on your hooves. Congratulations.” She might as well congratulate somepony.
Truffle leaned on the counter. “Thanks…”

“You don’t sound very thankful.”

"I am.” He sipped his tea without even the pretense of a smile. “Thanks to Gabby Gums, our little school paper’s more popular than the regular newspaper. It’s the biggest thing since powdered sugar. Shady Daze started coming in Tuesdays just to keep up with print orders.”

Truffle cradled the teacup in his hooves, blankly staring up at the light fixtures. His ears drooped. “In fact, there’s so much demand, Diamond Tiara’s talking about asking Miss Cheerilee for a second printing press.”

Silver sealed up the pitcher of tea, gesturing towards the crème brûlée. It looked cool enough to transport now. “And the problem is?”

“It’s…aw, I dunno.” Truffle rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve been feeling kinda weird about it. It’s a newspaper, shouldn’t there be more, ya know, news in it? A gossip column’s one thing, but now it’s nearly half of the paper.” He wrapped up the crème brûlée and gently, gently, lowered it into the waiting wagon with the rest of the food. The little chubby frown deepened. “And besides all that, the Gums articles feel…not very nice.”

Silver rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on, Shuffle. All news does is tell the truth, and sometimes the truth isn’t nice. Remember when The Canterlot Chronicle busted that locoweed smuggling ring last winter? I bet those smugglers didn’t like having their pictures in the paper either.”

“That’s not the same thing, Silver. Those were criminals, these are just our neighbors. It’s not a crime to dye your mane.”

It ought to be. Silver Spoon recalled Featherweight’s mane from Nightmare Night and made a face. “Maybe not, but ponies obviously want to know about it. It sells, Shuffle. If this kind of thing is so terrible and makes them feel so bad, then maybe they shouldn’t buy it. Have you guys gotten any complaints?”

He took some time to think about it. Finally, he admitted, “No. Not that I know about, anyway. I’m just on delivery and orders now.”

“Don’t you also write food articles, too?”

“Used to.”

Truffle Shuffle squinted at the soufflé through the oven door. He made a gesture for silence and took it out, admiring the beautiful golden crust. Until he secured the soufflé in a box, he didn’t speak a word. Even afterwards, the little chef didn’t dare go above a whisper. “Food and Sports got downsized to make room for more Gabby Gums. Comics is totally gone. Berry Pinch just types now.”

Silver tied up the remaining boxes of baked goods in elegant ribbons, smiling at the effect. Choosing school colors to accent the food made for an inspiring touch. She’d have to make sure the plates and dinnerware matched, too.

Watching Truffle hitch himself to the cart, she mentally thumbed through the paper’s positions and ranks. Sports…weather…opinion…hm. The tip of her tail flicked thoughtfully. “What about Apple Bloom? Did she get downsized, too?” She opened the front door for Truffle on his way out.

“Thanks. I’ve never seen her on the typewriters, so I don’t think so. Pretty sure she writes…” He
took a few steps before pausing in the doorway. “Actually, I’m not sure what she writes. I never asked. I know that Diamond Tiara has her do lots of field work, though. Why?”

Silver Spoon shrugged. “Just wondering. See you on Thursday.”

“’Kay, see ya.”

Truffle Shuffle went at a safe and steady pace, whispering to his souffle. In a few minutes, he rounded the corner and was gone.

“Finally I can take off this stupid hat.” Silver let her braid fall over her shoulder, smoothing out the flat, mussy bangs. “All finished, with an hour to spare. Not bad.”

In three more hours, the street lamps came on. Three hours until she had to be home. She sighed. Three hours with nothing to do.

“Smile!”

“Eep!” Silver flinched back from a blinding flash.

When the spots cleared from her vision, she found herself nose to nose with her own reflection in the glassy black eye of a camera lens. A familiar silhouette fluttered just above her head.

“Featherweight? What are you doing here?”

Her eye trailed past the camera, following the strap around his slender neck up to Featherweight’s rakish little smile. Not that I’m complaining.

“Hiya, Silver Spoon. Just working, like always.” The pegasus angled his wings for a swift, gentle fall to the ground. He didn’t so much land as he settled like a feather, nimble hooves barely scraping the welcome mat. “Right now, I’m here to get my daily bagel!”

Earning a cutie mark, in Silver’s humble opinion, agreed with Featherweight a great deal. Those giant saucer ears had a smooth pivot instead of a nervous twitch, and he’d stopped twitching like he had parasprites in his pockets. Maybe not the strongest flier in school—Cotton Cloudy still claimed that title—but nopony matched Featherweight’s gentle, smooth wingstrokes.

“It’s really important to keep your carbs up,” he explained with a little buck-tooth smile.

She wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but she smiled anyway. “Oh, definitely. But right now, I’m afraid the Cakes…”

Silver Spoon couldn’t help but notice they were just a couple dozen inches from touching noses. She shook herself and got her head back on track. “The Cakes closed the kitchen so me and Truffle could use the kitchen this afternoon. Mr. Cake is still here though, if you want me to get him.”

“Oh.” Featherweight’s grin dimmed a little. “No, that’s okay. If it’s not open, I can just come back later.”

“Actually!” Silver lifted a hoof before he flew away. “Uh, I don’t have any bagels, but I actually have some petit fours that didn’t make it to the bake sale.”

He tilted his head. “What’s a ‘petty for’?”

“Petit four. It’s like a cupcake, but fancier. You can have them if you want.”

“Wow, really?” Featherweight bounced on the welcome mat, flapping his little wings. “Thanks,
Silver Spoon! That’s really nice of you.”

She nodded and stepped back to open the door for him. “It is, isn’t it?”

The colt took one of the tall tables at the front and let the bulky camera slide off his shoulders. His saddlebag plopped down beside it. “Sheesh, what a week.” Pinion feathers fanned out in a stiff arc as Featherweight popped his back. He rubbed the crick in his neck and let his wings flop at his sides. “And it’s not even half over.”

Half-listening, Silver considered the tray of reject petit fours with a frown. These things hadn’t made the cut for a reason. All these lopsided tops, crumbly bottoms, burnt sides, and frosting disasters hardly made for a good presentation.

Too late to take back the offer now. She sighed and nudged the tray on the table. “Here you go. Sorry they look a little weird, but—”

In a blink, Featherweight shoveled the lopsided cake into his cheeks. Little crumbs tumbled down the sides of his chin as he licked yellow frosting off his hoof and reached for another. “What are you talking about?” Down went the red velvet, burnt top and all. “Deeff arr delifuff!”

Slowly, Silver climbed into the tall, pegasus-friendly chair. Her tail dangled several feet off the floor. “But it’s so ugly.”

“Well, they don’t taste ugly!”

Featherweight unclasped his bag, letting loose a small mound of photographs. He idly shoved another cake into his mouth, chewing slowly as he spread out the photos, organizing and reorganizing.

His tail flicked in irritation. “Darn it…can’t use any of these.”

From the looks of it, he was right: blurred smears of color, weird close-ups of ears, noses, and wings, lens flares blotting out silhouettes… On the other hoof, the black-and-whites of crickets and rainclouds looked okay. A night shot of a shadow-dappled treehouse reminded Silver of those creepy novels Dinky loved.

“I don’t know,” said Silver Spoon. She tapped a photo of pink and orange clouds shadowed in the deep violets of settling dusk. “This one’s kind of pretty.”

It looked like last Saturday’s sunset. The Saturday that Silver had emergency tea in the gazebo by herself. What an awful weekend. She curled up in her chair and sighed. Thinking of unpleasant things when entertaining company wasn’t at all polite, but now that she’d started she couldn’t seem to stop.

Featherweight admired the photograph with a smile. “Thanks, my sister told me the same thing.” He nosed the sunset aside in favor of a medium-size glossy of Mr. Davenport speaking with an exterminator. The photo under it revealed Applejack sniffing a pear. “Too bad it’s not real news.”

News... Silver Spoon stared at yesterday’s rushed issue Press of the press sticking out from the bottom of the photo pile. Slowly, her ears stood straight, eyes widening with horror.

Mrs. Rich knows. The only pony in town who knew the real reason the Silvers moved to Ponyville. In all likelihood, she knew more than Silver Spoon herself. So if she knows, then maybe... Her eyes drifted to a blurred photo of a grey filly moping alone on the playground. Maybe Diamond Tiara knows, too. And if she runs The Foal Free Press, then does that mean—
A frown crossed Featherweight’s face. “What’s the matter?” He pushed the cloud picture forward. “It’s okay if it’s not news, it’s still a nice picture. You can have it if you want; I owe you for the cakes anyway.”

“Thanks, but it’s not that. It’s— Silver licked her lip. “I’ve just…” She mentally swatted the idea away. What a stupid thought. *Di’s my best friend, she wouldn’t do that.* “…been feeling kind of lonely, that’s all. Diamond’s been really busy lately.” *She wouldn’t.*

Featherweight rolled his dreamy eyes. “Tell me about it. She’s been driving us like a diamond dog all week.” He rubbed his sore shoulders and shook his head with a sigh. “I don’t know what happened, but it’s like she got an extra dose of mean lately. Nothing we do is good enough anymore. Maybe it’s ‘cause that last Gabby Gums article didn’t do good, or maybe she’s just got a bug in her mane. I dunno.”

*That’s right; it’s Gums who writes the articles, not Diamond.* Not that it helped. If Silver’s suspicions were correct, then Gabby Gums had far less reason to keep Silver’s secret under wraps than Diamond did.

Still, in the end, it was the editor who decided what made the paper and what didn’t. There’d still be nothing stopping the editor from writing an article of her own. And *Diamond wouldn’t. Surely.*

“You know, she actually made everypony come back to work and put out another issue to make up for it? The same day, Silver!” Featherweight pulled out a packet from his saddlebag. “I just got these back and I don’t even know if I should bother turning them in. She’ll probably just toss ‘em out for not being ‘juicy’ enough.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I’m starting to hate that word.”

A twinge bit at Silver’s stomach. She couldn’t deny the potential appeal of the Silvers’ financial situation. The have-nots loved nothing more than seeing their betters dragged down to their level. The Celestia article proved that. Best friends or not, it was a good story. *Maybe too good to pass up, if Di’s that desperate for juicy gossip.*

Featherweight spread out the new set of photos to study them. “The developer took forever with these. They’re actually from a couple weeks ago; probably too old to use.”

Silver looked them over. It seemed like just average school stuff. Peachy Pie and Sunny Daze holding hooves on the swings (news to literally nopony ever), the Trottingham kid in a dorky school uniform, a shot of baby Apple Bloom…wearing a diaper on her head?

“Wait a sec.” Silver leaned forward.

Had Truffle Shuffle mentioned anything about Scootaloo or Sweetie Belle pulling typist duty? Silver didn’t think so. And Diamond had yelled at them yesterday. The same day the weak article hit. (She’d likely yelled at everypony that day, but still.) Apple Bloom’s paper position remained a mystery. On top of it all, all three blank flanks didn’t share one ounce of class between them.

“What?” Featherweight hovered out of his chair. “What is it?”

“Hm? Oh, it’s nothing,” said Silver Spoon. “Just thinking out loud.” *It’s one of them. It has to be. But which one?*

Silver nudged the baby photo aside to discover a cringe-worthy photo of Scootaloo swamped ear-to-hoof in muck. Another revealed Sweetie Belle wearing an atrocious hat. Interesting.
Featherweight tipped the camera toward himself, staring into the lens. He glanced at the piles of photos, then back to himself. He frowned. “I don’t think I really like being staff photographer.”

He gestured toward the pink cloud picture in Silver’s hooves. “I love taking pictures, but I like just doing it for me. I really wanted to follow in my sister’s hoofprints and be editor.”

“You have a sister?” Silver studied the mud in Scootaloo’s feathers and didn’t look up. Maybe Featherweight was right about the pictures being unusable. No way would Gabby Gums publish an article about herself.

“Yeah, Namby Pamby. She’s at flight camp right now. I was hoping I could be editor like she used to be and surprise her when she came home. I know it’d make her proud.”

“Mm-hm.” So Featherweight didn’t like Diamond’s regime either. How many other ponies on staff agreed with him?

This afternoon’s conversation with Truffle Shuffle rattled in the back of Silver Spoon’s head. He’s just a delivery guy and typist. The guy’s barely even involved. So if he feels guilty about the gossip column… Her eyes drifted to the humiliated Sweetie Belle’s red cheeks. I bet my best teapot Gabby Gums is feeling it too. She’ll want out. As if Di would ever it happen….I bet it’d make her nervous, though.

Silver slowly blinked at the diaper on Apple Bloom’s head. Gums wouldn’t run these pics, but a paper editor in need of insurance sure would. Even if Gabby Gums—whoever she is—is willing to go down, there’s no way she’d drag her loser friends down with her.

Her eyes flicked back to Featherweight. And then, in all that tension, somepony’s going to do something stupid. She steepled her hooves. Paper-ruining levels of stupid.

“Featherweight, you said you want to be editor, right?”

“Yeah.” The colt perched on the table, lifting an eyebrow at Silver’s expression. “Guess I’ll just have to try for it next year.”

Silver Spoon slid the three photos forward. “How about this year?”

“What are you talking about, Silver Spoon?”

That weird little crinkle feeling squirmed under Silver’s coat. She rolled her shoulders and ignored it. I’m just being safe. She thought back to the family crest hanging in the drawing room. Nothing wrong with safe.

“I was just thinking that maybe these pictures aren’t as useless as you think.” The sunlight glinted off her glasses. She smiled. “And maybe there’s a way for both of us to get what we want.”

“This stuff is awesome!” Rainbow Dash tipped back her head and let the bowl’s contents slide into her waiting maw. She smacked her lips and licked the bottom of the bowl. “What’d you call this, again?”

“Crème brûlée!” Truffle Shuffle beamed in his little tuxedo. He’d been grinning all afternoon like
he’d been accepted to the fanciest culinary school in Canterlot. “Glad you like it, Rainbow Dash!”

“You got any more?”

Truffle popped the lid off another steaming pot. “Do I?!”

The pleats of Silver Spoon’s dress rustled as she walked up to them. “Ahem. We do have spoons, Miss Dash.” She lifted her tray of dinnerware.

Rainbow took a spoon and two more bowls of crème brûlée and flew back to a bench under the oak tree. Miss Twilight Sparkle and Miss Fluttershy waited for her, sharing crepes over lavender tea. Silver didn’t know where Pinkie Pie had gone, but between her and the Cake twins, the petit fours and peppermint candy vanished in under an hour.

Bulk Biceps floated past them, balancing two plates of food in his hooves, and three more on his back. His tiny wings carried him up and up and up into Friday’s late afternoon sky. Waiting on a shop roof, Featherweight welcomed his brother with open hooves.

Silver lifted her eyebrows at the dozens of discarded plates scattered about Featherweight’s hooves. “Where does all that food even go?”

The skinny colt waved down at her as Bulk gave him a congratulatory pat on the back. Not far away, a bell rang to mark the end of the bake sale. Silver waved back, put down her silverware, and went to meet up with Twist.

The Student Pony President huddled beside the money box, fiddling with an abacus. “Hi.” She took a pencil out of her mouth and scribbled on her notepad.

“Hey. So, what did we make?”

“Let’s thee. If I carry the ten, multiply by two…” Twist marked the data, frowning. She shook her head with a sad little sigh. “Thorry, guyth. We didn’t make it.”

“What?” Truffle Shuffle’s head popped out from behind a stack of cookie trays. “How? That doesn’t make any sense, Twist! I could have sworn we sold out.”

“Yeah, I want to see your math,” demanded Silver Spoon.

Twist hid her face behind the notepad. She made a weird noise kind of like a giggle and kind of like a snort. “But it’s true. We didn’t make the goal.” She flipped the notepad around and grinned. “We went over it.”

Truffle lit up like a firecracker. “Oh my gosh, we beat it by like fifty bits!”

“Sixty-five, actually.” Miss Cheerilee leaned over Twist, smiling and holding a half-eaten éclair. “You really went above and beyond on this one, student council. Great job!”

“Thankth!” Twist chirped.

“And Silver Spoon, excellent work on your report. I especially liked your comparisons of the low-staffed student council to Chancellor Puddinghead’s cabinet.”

“Thank you, Miss Cheerilee.” Good thing she’d decided to reread her history books last week. “What’s my grade?”

“Something tells me you’ll be very happy with it.” Cheerilee’s little wink screamed A-plus.
Truffle undid his sparkly bow tie. It seemed he’d been waiting all day to get out of it. “So, how soon do you think we can get a new window?”

“Oh! Do you think we can get stained glass?” asked President Twist.

“Is there enough in the budget for curtains?” Silver grinned at the idea. “Maybe with lace and velvet?”

Truffle Shuffle made a face at that, despite the fact that he had zero good taste in interior design anyway.

Cheerilee took a bite of éclair and glanced aside. “Well, actually…” She looked back at the path leading up to the schoolhouse. “As it turns out, we don’t need a new window after all. Earlier this week, Mrs. Rich approached the board and offered to fund a new window herself.”

Truffle wrinkled his nose. “You mean Diamond’s mom?” He looked to Silver for an explanation, but Silver only shrugged. “Huh. That’s…weirdly nice of her.”

“But what about our bake sale?” Twist still looked a bit perplexed.

“You still earned lots of money for the school, kids, even if it’s for a different part of it. You should all feel very proud of yourselves.”

The student council exchanged looks.

“We do, Miss Cheerilee,” Twist finally said. “What doeth the new window look like?”

Cheerilee coughed into her hoof.

Twist scratched the back of her head. “Well, we got a new window. That’s the important part.”

“And it does have stained glass,” Silver Spoon pointed out.

Truffle Shuffle groaned at the giant stained glass depiction of Diamond Tiara. “I am really not looking forward to that view.” He flicked his stubby little tail with a snort. “At least it’s a back window.”

The basement door creaked open a few feet away. Diamond Tiara took a look around before crawling out, dragging her saddlebag. Her ears drooped so low they practically touched the dirt.

Truffle didn’t give her a second glance. “Walk ya home, Twist?”

Twist nodded. “You can thtay for dinner, if you want. My mom made hayburgerth.”

“Sounds good.” Truffle waited a few seconds before asking, “Silver, you coming to next week’s meeting? I know your extra credit’s done, but we could still really use the help.”

“Um.” Silver craned her neck over Truffle’s head. It was almost nightfall, but Diamond was en route for the swings. Taking her sweet time, too. “We’ll see.”

He gave her a long look. Not surprised, not disappointed, not much of anything. “Yeah. That’s what
I thought.”

“Nothing personal.”

“Sure.”

Silver Spoon offered a little wave goodbye. She watched them go a little while, then shoved down the twinge in her gut and ran to catch up with Diamond. Not that she’d gotten far. “Hey, Di! I didn’t think I’d catch you out this early on a Friday.”

It took a moment or two before Diamond seemed to register somepony speaking to her. She lifted her head and tried to smile before she lowered it again. “Hey, Silvie.”

“I just saw the new window. Looks amazing, huh?” Silver smiled encouragingly and jostled Di’s shoulder.

“I guess so.” She didn’t even look at it. In a soft voice, she said, “Miss Cheerilee demoted me this afternoon. I don’t think I’m gonna stay with the paper.”

“Oh.”

It was all Silver Spoon could think to say. She looked at the little dots of stars sprinkling the indigo sky. The crickets chirped in the grass as she waited for somepony to say something.

“Silver Spoon?”

“Yes?”

“I know it’s kind of late, but…would it be okay if we had tea at your house?” Diamond stared at the ink stains on her hooves. Her voice sounded quieter than the crickets. “I don’t want to go home yet.”

Silver slung a foreleg over Diamond’s shoulder. “I’ve got some ginger-rosemary-ginseng with your name on it.”

“Thanks, Silvie.” Diamond Tiara’s shadow of a smile slowly developed into a real one. “You’re a really good friend.”
The Third Wheel

The grand piano hurtled straight for Apple Bloom. One could only guess at the speed, but from the speed lines and the shadows, Silver presumed it was hurtling. Green stink lines wafted off the cross-eyed, drooling Scootaloo, too dumb to notice the flying shark about to devour her, scooter and all. Diamond didn’t even give her enemies the dignity of coloring within their lines.

“Miss Cheerilee’s gonna be mad if she sees that,” said Silver Spoon.

Diamond Tiara added more teeth to the shark.

Silver triple-checked the teacher. Four rows up, Cheerilee helped out the new colt with the silly hat—Mutton Hash or something—with his art project. The colt’s amber eyes blinked behind a mask of wet paste, construction paper, and paint. The teacher begged him to keep still as she carefully cut glue and a fake pinecone out of his mane.

It looked like she’d have her hooves full for a while. The coast seemed clear, but a filly never quite knew for sure with Miss Cheerilee. “Diamond, I really don’t want to spend our last day before vacation in detention.“

“Oh, like she’s even gonna give detention over a drawing. You worry too much, you know that, Silvie?” Diamond finished the tangles in Sweetie Belle’s tail and started on the dunce cap. “We’ve already finished our harvest project—”

“I finished our project.” Silver glanced at the sequined gravy boat train on Cheerilee’s desk, next to Rumble’s giant ear of corn.

Diamond colored in Sweetie’s long, raggedy scarf in mismatched ugly colors. The end of it tied around the shark’s tail, about to lift the unicorn into the sky. “Well, I came up with the design idea and sequined the base. Besides, it’s only busy work to kill time. So stupid. We should just be able to start vacation early.”

One more lightning bolt for good measure, a dash of bloodthirsty red in the shark’s pupils, and it was complete: a magnificent crayon testament to the epic failure that was the Cutie Mark Crusaders.

“Where do you think we should leave it for them? Do you think we could sneak this in a saddlebag or should we just give it to them on their way out?”

In the corner of Silver Spoon’s eye, Sweetie Belle painted a foam orange for a cornucopia while Apple Bloom and Scootaloo glued them in. They’d added grains and vegetables this morning; just the fruits were left. Before one of them caught her looking, she turned back to the drawing. “I’m… not really sure,” she said.

“Hm. Yeah, Miss Cheerilee could catch that, and it is kind of old-school.” Diamond rubbed her chin with a crayon-stained hoof. “What if we leave it somewhere they hang out a lot?”

“No, I mean…” Silver frowned at Apple Bloom, who stood on her desk stuffing in the ball bearing cranberries and liable to fall on her face any moment. Maybe she’d land on her own project and crush it. Or maybe she’d slip and crush Pipsqueak’s papier mâché porridge. “I’m not sure we should do it at all.”

Slowly, Diamond lay down her drawing. Her eyes searched Silver’s for traces of sarcasm or hints of an alternate idea. When she found none, she frowned. “What’re you talking about? Of course we should. If this is about Miss Cheerilee—”
“It isn’t.” She shrugged. “The Gabby Gums thing is over, Di. It’s been, like, two months.”

“It’s been a month, two weeks, and three days.”

“…Right.” A month, two weeks, and three days of sniffling over teacups, glowering over plates of cucumber sandwiches, mapping out intricate revenge plots and burning them when they weren’t good enough. Over a month of Diamond’s wrathful silence steeping a boiling temper. “Blank flanks” day in, day out; Silver Spoon couldn’t remember the last time they just played a normal drama-free game of Oligarchy.

“Look, maybe it’s time to cut our losses and let it be. It’s over, Diamond Tiara.” Silver didn’t budge at Diamond’s incensed scoff. Before her friend could cut in, she added, “I mean, we can’t change what’s already happened, right?”

For a moment, the wrath faded from Diamond’s face. “I—well…no.” It returned in a blink, her eyes cold and bitter. “But I can sure get them back for it.” At Silver’s sigh, her teeth clenched hard. “They deserve it, Silver Spoon! I mean, just look at it from your angle: if you’d worked your tail off setting up a fancy tea party, you’d be proud of it, right?”

“Well…yeah, but—”

Her hooves ground into the desk’s woodgrain. “And what if your tea party suddenly became the most popular tea party in town and every single pony wanted to come and your mom said you did an amazing job?”

“Oh, Di?”

“And your dad said it was one of the most amazing successful small-town tea party turn-arounds he’d seen in decades and ponies came in all the way from Cloudsdale—Cloudsdale!—just to see your tea party—”

Silver Spoon ducked low and hissed as loud as she dared. “Diamond!”

“What?!” Diamond Tiara’s head swung up to discover half the class staring back at her. She looked back down at her desk to discover a crumpled, shredded picture under her hooves. The only salvageable section was the shark and half a lightning bolt. “…I spent half the afternoon on that.”

Cheerilee took a few steps toward them.

“We’re fine!” Silver tossed her braid and grinned her best nothing-to-see-here grin. “We just, um, broke a few crayons. Mm-hmm!”

A lie that wouldn’t even fool Snails, but it was enough to get the class to stop looking. Cheerilee opened her mouth to say something, but Truffle Shuffle tugged on her tail to show off his dessert diorama.

Not taking her eyes off the class, Silver whispered, “Di. Breathe.”

Some foal in the peanut gallery whispered, “Her face is all red.” A cluster of ponies giggled. A colt—it sounded like Rumble, but Silver couldn’t see to be sure—snickered and said Diamond’s face looked like a grumpy tomato. Jerk.

Diamond Tiara folded her legs over the ruined picture and rested her chin on her fetlocks. “I just don’t get it, Silvie. They’re natural disasters but they get to keep on winning anyway.” She balled up the tattered remains of her drawing and shoved them in her saddlebag. “It’s not fair.”
The bell rang. Harvest vacation had officially begun. Stools scooted away from desks and foals climbed over each other to turn in their art project. Apple Bloom and Scootaloo made it there first. Right on cue, the ball bearing cranberries rolled out of the cornucopia and onto the floor. Sweetie Belle slipped on one and crashed into Twist who crashed into Pipsqueak and Peachy Pie. They all fell in a big pile and laughed about it. Cheerilee told them to be more careful next time, but she laughed, too.

“No.” Silver Spoon frowned. “It’s not.”

Diamond packed up her stuff and started for the door. “And you still wanna let them get away with it. Even after they sabotaged my school paper. On purpose.”

It suddenly became difficult to look Diamond in the eye. Silver hung back and waited for the gnawing in her gut to go away. *For pony’s sake, can we please not talk about that paper anymore?*

She took her time meeting Diamond at the door. “Look, I’m just not sure it’s worth it.” Silver stepped closer, lowering her voice as Sweetie Belle passed by. “It’s like you said; they wreck everything they touch. Maybe including us.”

“Oh, okay.” Diamond wrapped a foreleg around Silver’s shoulder and tried to laugh it off. “So maybe it didn’t work out a few times before—”

Silver flattened her ears. “Or at all.”

“—so that just means we need to get back to the drawing board. Innovate. Innovation’s what keeps a business in business, you know.” She gave herself a resolute nod. “Winners never quit, Silver Spoon. We just need to try again.”

Silver hung her head with a sigh. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Hm.” Diamond clicked her tongue and considered her friend’s drooping ears. “But… I guess for now we could take a break. Not like I’ve got any ideas anyway.”

Now, that was more like it. “Cheerilee didn’t give us any homework over the break and since we don’t even need to help bring in harvest, it’s just three weeks all to ourselves. We can do, like, whatever.” The possibilities rolled off Silver Spoon’s tongue. “We can go shopping, have tea, and that movie theater’s finally gonna open in a couple days!”

“Finally. They’ve been building that thing since the Mare-Do-Well fad. We’ll have to pop by the Summer Harvest Parade next week, too. My dad’s riding on a beet float with Mr. Turnip Truck.”

Silver shivered under the wind whistling through the leaves. She’d need to start wearing sweaters soon. “Why does Ponyville call it a summer harvest when it’s winter in a couple of weeks, anyway?”

“Summer Harvest started it. I guess she got to name it, too.”

The growing smile on Diamond’s face made Silver smile, too. Three weeks with some well needed blank flank breathing room. No schemes, no vengeance, no competitions, and nothing to fight for. Perfect. “Race you to Daisy’s flower stand?”

Diamond Tiara rolled her eyes and laughed. “Silver Spoon, you run at, like, negative two miles an hour. That’s not even a race.”

“I didn’t hear a ‘no’.”
“It’s not a ‘no’, it’s a merciful offer for surrender. As your best friend, it’s only fair.”

Silver nodded, pretending to think it over. “You do make a good point—hey look, a distraction!” She tore down the street fast as her manicured hooves could take her.

Diamond Tiara gave Silver Spoon a thirty-second head start before she left her in the dust. She hadn’t been kidding about mercy; usually Silver just got ten.

The Dink leaned against her doorway, a lopsided grin on her lips and a basket of black candles in her hooves. “Tiara, Spoons! What’s up, you guys bored of vacation already?”

“Not yet, Dink.” Diamond gestured toward the candles. “What’re those for?”

“Looks like another monster hunt.” Silver had hoped for a less…outdoorsy adventure, like a monster story or jump rope.

“Even better!” The Dink opened the door wider to reveal Shady Daze packing up a wooden talking board and matches. Pipsqueak sat atop Mystery Manual to the Macabre Vol. II: Advanced Edition, polishing a set of little silver mirrors.

“Me and the boys are headed up to the graveyard. After sunset, we’re gonna ask the ghost of old lady Root Work where her treasure’s buried. I was gonna take Pinchers, but she’s got a cracked hoof and can’t walk too far. You guys wanna come along?”

To a muddy, dusty graveyard full of bats and rotting ponies and cobwebs and scuffed shoes? Hardly.

Silver Spoon flicked her tail and looked to Diamond Tiara, keeping her face neutral. On the other hoof, if it kept Di out of her funk, Silver Spoon could tolerate it, provided that she got to change shoes first.

Diamond considered the mysterious arrangement of mirrors and extra sets of goggles. “I do like treasure…” She shook her head. “I’d better not. I’m not supposed to be out after dark anymore.”

“Well, duh.” The Dink pushed up her goggles and pointed to the carrot fields outside. “Why do you think I’m doing this at my aunt’s house? No way I’d get away with this at home.” She narrowed her yellow eyes, grinning with all her teeth. “Besides, it’s not a real adventure if you can’t get in trouble.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to push my luck. I just got out of hot water with my parents.” Diamond took a long look at an artist’s rendering of ghost treasure and sighed. “Maybe next time, Dink.”

“Sure thing, Tiara. See ya Spoons.”

So that made twelve. Twelve foals in all of Ponyville worth hanging out with, and all of them were busy or out of town. Or sick, in Cotton’s case.

Diamond gave Golden Harvest a polite nod on their shortcut through the carrot patch. “Guess it’s just you and me, Silver Spoon.”

“There’s always Feather—”
Diamond Tiara glowered.

*Open mouth, insert hoof.* “Just throwing it out there.” Silver looked at the ground. She’d be lucky if Diamond could even tolerate Featherweight’s face by next year.

Diamond nudged Silver’s leg. “Aw, don’t be like that. Come on. Let’s go get sundaes at Sugar Cube Corner.”

Her eyes followed the sloping hills of the carrot patch down into the valleys of Sweet Apple Acres. Apple Bloom’s brother pulled out of the orchard, lugging a wagon full of red delicious to the apple silo or wherever ponies stored apples.

“Well…” Di fished out a slip of paper from her saddlebag. “While we’re here, let’s drop off my dad’s note. If we hurry, we can catch Big Macintosh before he goes in.”

How the stoic, silent stallion could ever be related to Apple Bloom, Silver had no idea. He’d never win prizes for being a conversationalist, but he bore a tranquil dignity she’d have never thought possible in a farm pony. Certainly not of somepony related to Apple My-Voice-Is-A-Bullhorn Bloom.

Big Macintosh scanned the note, took time to mull something over, and then read it again. “Noon,” he said.

“Okay, I’ll tell my dad.” Diamond’s hoof reached to take back the note, but her eyes and ears trailed eastward. Voices piped near the barn, loud and excited. “Excuse me, Big Macintosh? Is Apple Bloom home today?” She smiled.

Silver Spoon narrowed her eyes. *No.*

“Eeyup.” Big Macintosh nodded towards the barn and went on his way.

Diamond Tiara smiled wider and waggled her eyebrows.

Silver pursed her lips and grabbed at Diamond’s tail. “You said we were getting ice cream.”

“We are.” Diamond’s tail slipped out of Silver’s hoof and bopped it. She made a beeline for the barn.

Silver stayed put. “You said we were taking a break, Diamond! You said!”

A yard ahead, her friend looked back. “I am—we are.” Two yards ahead. “Right after I check this out for a sec.” Three yards…three and a half.

“Oh, fine.” Silver Spoon gritted her teeth, running to catch up. “But just a look. Say our piece and get out.”

“Right. Hit and run.”

When they could smell hay, they cut their speed to a stealthy crawl. Diamond pressed her shoulder to the barn door, crouching to pounce. Silver claimed high ground atop a bale of hay to scout the surroundings. Coast looked clear: no sign of Applejack or Granny Smith, and Big Macintosh worked well out of hearing range.

Diamond listened close, tail swishing in anticipation. She looked up and mouthed, “They’re got a float.”

Of course they did. Silver rolled her eyes. *Bet it holds a whole eight minutes before it falls apart.*
“It’d be totally fun!” screeched Scootaloo’s voice. A pony couldn’t ask for a more perfect cue. They locked eyes with a nod. Three…two…

Diamond pounced. “More like funny—”

“Looking!” Silver chimed. Maybe not their best quip, but hey, it was a flop day. They laughed at it anyway.

Funny looking wasn’t the half of it. The bulbous, bloated tumor of a float took up a fourth of the barn, the wimpy little wheels clashed with the color, and it smelled like somepony forgot to clean their porch after Nightmare Night. A perfect fit for these dorks.

“What is that thing, a giant orange?” Silver barely got it out before she sputtered back into giggles.

Apple Bloom screwed up her face and stroked the hideous thing as if Silver Spoon hurt its feelings. “It’s a pumpkin.”

Diamond shot Silver a wry smirk. Fish in a barrel. “More like a lame-kin.”

Wood groaned under the smelly orange failure. Silver took a small step back. *Check that: three minutes before it falls apart.* The last thing she needed today was a lame-kin bath. *Time to move on before these three losers drag us into—hold on.*

She adjusted her glasses. Make that three losers and one new foal. Silver Spoon frowned. *A wild card.*

The new kid’s coat had the shade of apple cider, a slight pudge, and a manecut straight out of a high-end Brocs salon. Her round green eyes stared at them like an oncoming train.

Diamond’s eye raked over the filly. “Who’s the new blank flank?”

With absolutely no regard for personal space, Apple Bloom met them at the nose. “She’s my cousin, Babs.” The little snot didn’t flinch or even break eye contact. She smirked proudly. “She’s from Manehattan.”

*Not the good part, I bet.* Silver could practically smell the spray-paint and welfare checks. What, those lamewads suddenly thought they were cool because they got to run with some discount Manehattanite? Pathetic.

Diamond Tiara humphed in approval. Impressed. “Manehattan, huh? Well, I guess you have that going for you.”

Was that sarcasm? It didn’t sound like sarcasm. Silver Spoon pawed the hay. Sometime today she’d have to explain the difference between the Manehattan worth visiting and the Manehattan to avoid after dark. Best to remind Di where this kid’s bread was buttered.

“Hmph. Suppose you’re gonna join their little club—what’s it called?” Silver’s eyes crossed as if the sheer stupidity of the phrase fried her brain. “The Cutie Mark Crusaders?” Her crushing smile chased Apple Bloom and her tacky attitude back to the shelter of her loser posse. At Silver’s side, Diamond barely contained her giggles.

*That’s more like it.* Silver lifted her nose in the air, waiting for the dumb new loser to make her dumb loser move so they could go get ice cream, already.

Babs blew her bangs out of her face. She stared them dead in the eye and gradually—so gradually
Silver thought she’d imagined it—her expression changed. Her posture changed. Her *everything* changed. She grinned. “Heh. More like the Cutie Mark Crybabies!”

Silver Spoon blinked. *Wait, what?*

Babs chuckled under her breath and took a spot at Diamond’s opposite shoulder without even a moment’s hesitation. She gave Silver a wink and a nod. Somewhere in the background, a Crusader cried out in horror.

*No, seriously, what?*

Had Silver misread this kid? She supposed just standing in a barn with somepony didn’t automatically make them friends, but if they weren’t friends, why hang with them at all? And weren’t they cousins? Nothing about this added up. *Maybe it’s a trick.* A trick would explain why Bloom suddenly wasn’t afraid of them.

“No, seriously, what?*

“Ooh, big city attitude.” Diamond Tiara got that familiar smile. The smile for sugar-lump-rumps, the smile of sisters-in-arms. The smile supposed to be reserved for Silver Spoon. “I like it.”

Something in this barn smelled rotten, and it wasn’t the pumpkin. But a proper lady knew there were proper times and places to rock the boat, and now was not one of them. Silver smiled and nodded. “Mm-hmm.” Better to wait and see what happened.

Babs brightened at Silver watching her. “Yeah?” Grinning, she eyed the smelly lame-kin on wheels. “Well, there’s more where that came from. Check this out!”

The front wheel flew off with one kick. The float flopped on the hay like somepony tripped it.

Despite herself, Silver Spoon chuckled. The wheel thing was funny enough on its own, but Scootaloo’s outraged sputtering made it hilarious.

Babs puffed her chest out, ready to say more, when the lame-kin creaked and groaned. The skinny wooden splints snapped under the pumpkin’s weight. The float moved.

Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle scattered out of splattering range and watched in horror. The float crashed out of the barn, tumbling wheels over stem down the hill, bounced off a wheelbarrow, and crashed in a magnificent explosion of seeds, splinters, pumpkin innards, and mechanical gears. Lame-kin shrapnel splattered against the apple trees in little orange starbursts.

“Looks like somepony’s pumpkin just got squashed.” Babs stuck the landing like a pro.

Silver Spoon had to concede good work when she saw it. If this was a trick, then Babs was an expert magician. Smooth, too: the way she’d done it, any adult would think it an honest accident at worst. Effective, though a bit reckless.

She smiled, but tossed Diamond a cautious side glance. “Nice move,” she whispered, “But too many like that, and somepony’s gonna tattle.”

Apple Bloom puffed herself up like a wet cat, outraged and raring to bite. “When I tell Applejack—”

Babs snapped on her heel, looming to cast her cousin deep in her shadow. “You’re gonna tell Applejack what?”

Apple Bloom practically deflated on the barn floor.
Diamond Tiara met Silver’s cautious glance with a confident smirk and whispered, “I think she’s got it covered.” She slung a hoof over Babs’ shoulder. “Come on, Babs, you can hang with us: the cool ponies. Not these babies.”

Silver peeked over Babs’ shoulder. “Now can we get sundaes?”

“Sure.” Diamond winked at their newest member. “On the way, what say we give you the newbie tour?”

Babs picked up the pace, a sudden spring in her step. “That sounds great!”

*Okay, so it’s not the original plan, but this...works.* Of course it worked. It had to work. Diamond Tiara had something to do and she smiled again, that meant it worked.

“Yeah.” Silver Spoon forced her smile wider. “Yeah, like, totally great.”

The last bit of strawberry milkshake plopped into Babs’ mouth. She licked her chops and leaned over the table for napkins. “Didja see the look on Bloom’s face when Silva Spoon popped up in fronta her?”

“Ha! She totally jumped out of her skin—oh! Oh, and what about Scootaloo?” Diamond Tiara flopped in her chair, cackling louder than appropriate for young ladies. Louder than Silver could remember in a long while. “Guess she knows how to fly after all.”

“Yeah, right out the door!”

They crossed legs and bumped hooves upways and sideways; some new West-Manehattan thing Babs said all the fillies did now. Or so she said. If she made up the whole thing herself, it wouldn’t surprise Silver Spoon one bit. The two of them laughed like they’d been the best of friends since diapers.

Silver loomed over a half-melted chocolate shake, rolling the cherry stem in her mouth. She laughed (politely) when they laughed and smiled when they smiled. Babs held her hoof out for Silver Spoon to try the weird hoof-bump, but Silver knew young ladies ought to shake hooves *properly* and declined. It had nothing to do with the fact that Silver didn’t have Diamond’s speed, nor that her hoof kept slipping on the last bump.

“You’ll never get the hang of it if you don’t try it,” Diamond said.

Babs pushed her glass aside, scooting closer to reach Silver’s hoof. “It’s kinda hard to get at first. If ya want, I could help—”

Silver Spoon edged away, clutching her melted milkshake. “I *know* how to do it.” She tossed her braid over her shoulder. “I just don’t *want* to.”

“Oh. Okay.” She put her hooves back in her lap.

“Where do you think those Goofsaders ran off to?” Diamond sat up, squinting through the window’s early-morning glare. “It’s still too early for a movie and the pond’s too cold to go swimming.”

Babs chuckled under her breath. “They wouldn’t be caught dead at the movies after last time.”
A few unused bang snaps from the joke shop rolled around in Diamond’s hoof. She glanced down into the bag with the fake spider and itching powder, courtesy of Babs Seed’s vacation budget. “I’m not even sure the movies will let them in.”

“Yeah, we didn’t even have to run them out that time.” Silver Spoon dipped her muzzle in her glass and smirked. Sweetie Belle had screamed so loud the management kicked her and her blank flank buddies out of the theater.

“I heard ‘em talkin’ the other night,” Babs said. “Something about a...Twilight Sparkle? I think they’re headed there. If we leave now, we could probably head ‘em off.”

Silver looked up from her shake. “Now?”

“Well, they ain’t gonna stay there all week.”

“But Di, what about Tealove’s? We were supposed to brunch there, remember?”

Diamond Tiara didn’t look away from the window. Her ear didn’t even turn in Silver’s direction. “Were we?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s Wednesday, Diamond.” Silver Spoon frowned. “We always have brunch and tea on Wednesday. It’s the whole point of meeting at sunrise. It’s tradition!” A three-week old tradition, but it still counted.

“We just had milkshakes, though,” Babs pointed out, despite having absolutely no say in when to alter traditions.

“Yeah, and this is a special occasion. Babs is only here for, like, another four days.” Diamond shrugged and hopped off her chair. “We can do brunch next week, okay?”

Silver shrugged back with a smile. “Okay.”

It wasn’t.

The fluffy white cat rolled past the dresser, fiercely kicking at the soft, wool belly of a catnip mouse. Not for the first time, Silver wondered why Rarity bothered keeping it in the boutique. Wouldn’t it shed all over the clothes? Then again, it also kept to itself most of the time, usually glowering at the top of a scratching post or grooming under a table. Maybe it only got in the mood to play every once in a while.

Silver Spoon waggled a stray bit of ribbon. “Kitty.”

The cat chewed the toy’s button eyes. It blinked at her.

A brown face edged into Silver’s line of sight. She ignored it and looked to the dressing room. How long did it take one filly to try on a dress? Di needed to pick up the pace.

“Kitty, kitty?” She shook the ribbon harder. *And this stupid cat needs to pay some attention to her before—*

Babs shifted in her seat, pawing the carpet with her hoof. “So, uh…Silva’ Spoon?”
Before something like that happened. “Yes?”

“Uh, Diamond Tiara says you’re from Manehattan, too.”

“I am.” The ribbon did corkscrew flips and erratic twirls over the carpet. A ballet no cat could resist, a perfect temptation to scamper over and provide a distraction.

The cat hopped onto a desk covered in sketchbooks and bobby pins. It rolled on its back, stared Silver in the face and meowed. If she didn’t know any better, she’d say it looked smug. Useless bag of fur.

Silver Spoon threw in the towel. “What about it?”

“...Nothin’ ‘bout it.” Babs got quiet a little while before adding, “I was just wonderin’ what neighborhood you’re from. I mean I know your mom does opera, but you don’t really sound like the other girls from the theater district.”

“Because I’m not. Mother used to live near the Haypacking District when she was a filly, and we’d go down there for shows and to see my grandma, but that’s all.”

Silver Spoon stared through the boutique walls, over the Ponyville skyline, and straight into her old familiar Sixth Avenue. This time of year, it smelled like fresh snow and spiced coffee. She wondered if Gran Jeté would miss her when she didn’t come by for Hearth’s Warming.

“We lived in West Manehattan, just outside Pell-Seed.”

“Hey, no kiddin’! I’m just ten blocks from there.” Babs blew her bangs out of her face and laughed. “Small world or somethin’, huh?”

“Yeah.” With effort, Silver managed to keep her nose unwrinkled. What a crock. As if she’d ever make it past the doormare. “Sure you are.”

Babs curled her tail close to her haunch. “I am!” Her voice pitched sharp and cracky, typical sign of a liar.

The dressing room door banged open to reveal Diamond Tiara in a sparkling blue dress. She walked backwards, still examining herself in the mirror. “Guys, tell the truth: does this make my barrel look weird?”

“Looks good to me, I guess,” said Babs, surely eager to change the subject. She rubbed the back of her head and squinted at the white piping on the sides. “I don’t really know much about this stuff, though. Uh, whatta you think, Silvia?”

Silver Spoon didn’t let this faker out of her sight for a second. “It’s fine.”

“You didn’t even look!” Diamond stamped to Silver’s side in a huff. “Silvie, come on! I gotta know if this works before pageant season starts! Last year at nationals, Taffeta said I looked like a peach stuffed into a straw and I’m not gonna let her say it again. Seriously, does my barrel look weird?”

Silver looked. “Your barrel’s fine, Di. Really. Maybe you could use some more white to match the accents, though? Some shoes or something.”

“There, darling, you see?” Rarity stepped from the dressing room cradling an array of little cocktail hats in her hoof. Several pairs of shoes orbited her lit horn. She picked out a pair of off-white slippers and levitated them in front of Diamond’s nose. “The belle of the ball, just as I told you.”
“Well, I wanted a second opinion.” Diamond lifted her hooves one by one to let the slippers on. “It’ll be okay, I guess.” Her neck twisted around to see her tail. “But I think I need something else back here. Do you have, like, an extra bow, or…”

Rarity bobbed her head. “I’ve just the thing!” Together, they ducked into the accessory room. “I lucked into a stunning roll of gossamer the other day, and…”

Silver swung back to Babs, eyes narrowed. “Ten blocks down, that’s Sixteenth. I’ve never heard of Apples on Sixteenth Street.”

“Really?” The filly cocked her head to the side and blinked. “I thought Ma knew all the fancy ponies in our neighborhood, what with all her dinner parties. You sure your folks never met The Oranges?”

“Uh…” It was Silver’s turn to tilt her head. She stared vacantly at Babs’ clean coat, unchipped hooves, and high-end manecut, waiting for the world to make sense.

Of course The Silvers knew The Oranges. So did half of West Manehattan. She recalled somepony with a tall hair-do and golden necklace at Mother’s last cocktail party. The one who always seemed eager to hear Silver Spoon play harpsichord after dinner. But, no… surely not.

“You…you don’t mean Valen—”

“Valencia and Mosely Orange, dat’s them!” The tension washed out of Babs’ shoulders and she scooted herself closer, grinning like Pinkie on a party day. “We’re in the tall brownstone across from that one candy shop sellin’ lollypops that look like—”

“The Bronclyn Bridge,” Silver finished.

None of this added up. Surely she’d have met Babs at the foal’s table during Hearth’s Warming or something. “But since when do The Oranges have a foal? And why do you have a Bronclyn accent?” A gross thought wormed into Silver's head. “You don’t go to Wisteria, do you?”

“Oh. Well, uh…” In a rush, Babs stood up to check out the rest of the boutique. She plunged her head into a rack of Nightmare Night costumes. Her voice rose up from a thicket of bat wings and spooky capes. “I haven’t been livin’ there too long. I used to live up in Bronclyn. At, er… Lady Sweetheart’s.”

Sweetheart… A name from The Father’s charity list, if Silver remembered right. One of the orphanages, and not one of the better ones. Okay, so that made a little more sense.

“And no, I don’t go to Wisteria’s. Pops says you gotta apply real, real early to get in.” Babs peaked out from under a chiffon pinafore. “I’m on a list though, so…maybe later?”

“A list for what?” asked Diamond Tiara. She had a Carousel Boutique bag slung over her shoulder and two more held in her hoof. “What’re you doing in the costumes?”

“Oh, you know. Just lookin’ around, talkin. You know.” Babs shuffled her hooves in the carpet, her eyes darting between Diamond, Silver, and the door.

“So, what school do you go to, then? Vineyard?” Silver couldn’t blame Babs for being a little embarrassed, but it wasn’t really that big a deal. Hundreds of fillies didn’t make Wisteria, after all. “Gingerroot? Merrylegs East?”

Babs went stiff at the last one. “Uh…yeah. Merrylegs. For about a year.” Her tail curled in tight. She drew farther into the clothes rack. “S-say, Diamond, you ever try out the costumes here? Some look
pretty sweet, like the—"

“Really? What’s it like?” Rumors of Wisteria’s century-old rivals flooded the junior halls for more semesters than any filly could recall. When the senior team rolled in, Silver and Wondertmint used to take shelter in the library, just in case those rumors had any truth to them. “Is the freshman hunt real?”

“It’s an okay school, I guess.” Babs nosed a lamb costume aside and ran her hoof along the wolf outfit’s fabric teeth.

Bells rang at the front of the boutique. The sound cut off midway, as if somepony’s hoof muffled it. “Sorry!” whispered a timid, squeaky voice. Sweetie Belle.

“Aw, don’t worry about it, Sweetie Belle.” Scootaloo didn’t bother whispering. “It’s your sister’s shop, what could happen here?”

Babs popped her head out of the clothes rack, ears twitching furiously. Her eyes darted between Silver Spoon, Diamond Tiara, and the front entrance. The wolf outfit dangled from her hoof. She grinned.

Diamond grinned back. Silver Spoon rolled her eyes, but smiled anyway.

Apple Bloom chuckled. “Yeah,” she said. “Guess you’re right.”

The crabapple bounced off Scootaloo’s shoulder, bashing her left wing. She yelped, flapping headfirst into Sweetie Belle, who screamed and crashed into Apple Bloom, who’d been too busy ducking apple cores to see the ditch in front of them. Nopony saw the final crash, but the screams and dust clouds spoke for themselves.

“Yes! Triple crybaby in the corner pocket!” Babs pumped her hoof and flopped back in the high branches of the apple tree. She let her foreleg dangle for a hoofbump.

A branch below, Diamond Tiara bopped it. “Nice!”

Silver Spoon dangled from the bottom branch. Her horseshoes waved a few inches above the grass. Proper young ladies did not climb up and down filthy, buggy trees like some common squirrel. Besides, she didn’t know how.

“Are we done yet?” She flinched. That came out a bit more petulant than she meant it to. Maybe Di hadn’t noticed?

Five feet up, Diamond scowled. Yep. She noticed. “We just barely got up here Silver, sheesh.”

“Di, there’s bugs down here! And my legs are getting tired and I think I stepped in mushy apple.”

Babs smiled and waved down at her. “So come up here instead. You can sit up here with me an’ your hooves won’t hurt.” She tossed down a red gala. “C’mon, the view’s amazin’!”

The apple thumped hard in the grass. Silver Spoon refused to turn her head. “I don’t want to. Young ladies shouldn’t run around dirty farms climbing trees, Diamond.” She tried to stamp her hoof, but had nothing to stamp.
“Ugh, fine, don’t get your tail in a knot. We’ll be down in a sec.” Diamond’s face vanished into the rustling leaves and dappled shadows. Her back hooves gripped the trunk to stabilize her way down. “C’mon, Babsy. Guess we’re gonna miss that sunset after all.”

Silver flattened her ears. That lowbrow thug is Babsy now? “You can see the sunset perfectly fine from down here.”

In a low voice, Babs said something; probably something lame and dumb and totally not cool at all.

“No, no, it’s okay. Don’t worry about it, Babs,” said Diamond. “I swear she’s just like my stepmother sometimes.”

The strength drained from Silver’s forelegs. She sank into the grass, trying to drag up a smile or a smirk, some expression a boring wet blanket wouldn’t have. In the end, she settled for a neutral poker face.

“I didn’t know you had a stepmom.” Babs hopped into the grass next to Silver. She smiled at her. “Hi again.”

“Hm.” A fake smile wasn’t worth the effort. Silver lashed her tail and turned away. In the corner of her eye, Babs’ ears drooped. Good.

“Well, I do.” Diamond Tiara slid down the trunk. She had bits of sticks and leaves in her tail, but she didn’t even seem to care. “There’s a couple hours left before the sleepover. If we can’t dig the crybabies out of their hole, what do you girls wanna do?”

Quietly, Silver Spoon suggested, “We could always—”

“You got a pond not far from here, right?” Babs pointed towards the horizon. “I could find some good pebbles and show you guys how to skip rocks.”

“Yeah, okay. If The Dink’s up there looking for that lake monster, I’ll introduce you.” Diamond sprang forward at a canter. “She’s the coolest kid in school—besides me, of course.”

“And me.” Silver Spoon scrambled to keep up. Nopony had said there’d be cantering after all that tree climbing.

“Wow, you got lake monstas in your school?” Babs met Di at her shoulder and they laughed at her dumb joke together. She didn’t huff to keep up. She didn’t even break a sweat. If anything, Babs only hung back because Diamond knew where they were going.

With Diamond Tiara several paces ahead and the wind in Silver’s ears, just staying in the conversation became a struggle.

“I wish you could stay at Silver’s for the sleepover.” Diamond’s voice grew faint. “It stinks you have to sleep at Applejack’s all week, but you can still stay and play Oligarchy, right?”

“Sure thing, Diamond. Hey, you wanna hear how I snatched Bloom’s bed? Happened when…”

Their voices faded as they crested a hill. Silver Spoon panted in the valley. Her hooves still hurt from gripping that branch and getting her good horseshoes chipped up just didn’t seem worth it. She slowed to a walk. “Whatever. I’ll just catch up later.”
The sheets rustled around Diamond’s shoulders. The guest bed squeaked under her shifting weight.

Even without glasses and in the dark, Silver Spoon knew when somepony stared at her. She opened her eyes and rolled over. “What? Is your pillow too lumpy?”

The silhouette of Diamond Tiara’s mane fluttered in the moonlight. “Huh? No, the pillow’s fine. I was just thinking about something.”

“Something like…?”

Silence. “It’s nothing. Go back to sleep.”

Silver pulled up the covers and rolled back over. “If you say so.”

Two seconds later, lamplight seared through her eyelids.

Diamond Tiara sat at the edge of her bed, wide awake and frowning. Her hoof leaned on the bedside table, a little island between the two beds. “Babs thinks you don’t like her.”

A second passed. “Oh. That’s interesting.” Silver cooed herself deep in the sheets to block the light out. She studied the gingham pattern of her bedspread and waited for one of them to go back to sleep.

“Well? Do you?” Diamond’s gaze cut through the fluffy comforter to prickle Silver’s fur.

“Sure I do. Babs is great.” Silver hoof reached out and flicked the lamp off. “Goodnight.”

Diamond snorted. The light turned back on. “I don’t believe you.”

Fake snores rumbled from Silver’s blankets.

“I know you don’t snore, Silver Spoon.”

The snores grew louder.

Diamond’s bed squeaked. Perhaps she’d decided to go back to sleep.

The springs squeaked again. Once, twice, thrice…not exactly like somepony setting into bed. In fact, it kind of sounded like somepony preparing to…to jump!

At the last second, Silver tucked and rolled. Not fast enough.

Diamond Tiara landed on all fours, each hoof pinned against writhing blankets and the squirming hostess trapped underneath. Her mane dangled over Silver’s nose. “What is your problem?”

Bristling, Silver backed deeper into the gnarl of bedsheets. “I don’t have a problem!”

Diamond’s head burst through before Silver could block the entrance. “Oh, come off it, Silver Spoon. You’ve had your tail in a knot this whole week and darn it, I wanna know why! What, are you still mad we didn’t go to Tealove’s?”

Yes. “No.” Silver’s mouth twisted up in a tight little scowl. “And I’m not mad.” Her ears lay flat at Diamond’s concrete stare. “I’m…I’m just…vexed.” Yes, vexed seemed a good word for it.
"About what?" If Diamond didn’t know what vexed meant, then it didn’t stop her. "What’ve you even got to be vexed about? Everything’s perfect. We’re not bored, you’ve got somepony to talk Manehattan stuff with, and we’ve got those loser blank flanks on the ropes, and we can’t even get nailed for it 'cause Babs covered all our bases."

"And what happened to taking a break, Diamond Tiara?" Silver kicked off the bedsheets and let them fall off the bed. "What happened to you and me just hanging out for once?"

A stupid question and they both knew it. Babs happened.

"Yeah, and you also said we should stop because nothing was working. Well, now it is. We’re not outnumbered anymore. For once we’re winning, and winning by a lot!" Diamond pointed out the window to their victories. "Why can’t you just be happy about that?"

Silver backed against a pillow and gathered up Lady Mimic. She buried her nose in the unicorn doll’s hair, staring at the lamp. "Because." Before Diamond could ask “because why”, Silver curled her tail around her hooves and added, “You’re not winning with me.”

Diamond Tiara’s face slackened as the issue slowly untangled itself. “That—” The words knotted up in her mouth. She sat down, clicked her tongue and sighed, “You are so dumb sometimes.”

Silver Spoon lashed her tail and stuck her lip out.

Diamond Tiara’s face slackened as the issue slowly untangled itself. “That—” The words knotted up in her mouth. She sat down, clicked her tongue and sighed, “You are so dumb sometimes.”

Diamond rolled over, her mane spilling into Silver’s lap. “Oh shut up, you know I don’t mean it. Silver Spoon, Babs is my friend, but she’s not my best friend. She’s not here forever; she’s going home in a day, maybe sooner. I just wanted to make good on the time we had.”

She nudged Silver’s shoulder. “And maybe I wanted you to lighten up a little for once. We’re nine, not fifty-nine.”

“Hmph.” Now that Silver thought on it, lately Brass Tacks had taken time to point out relaxing bath salts and suggest more calming teas. Maybe Diamond had a point. Still…

“It’s not just that, Di. Something’s been bugging me.” Her hoof felt about the table for her glasses.

Diamond Tiara eyed the wrecked nest of blankets and sheets surrounding them. “No kidding.” She grabbed the glasses and put them in Silver’s hoof.

“Thanks.” The guest room came back into focus. Silver winced at the messy bed and nudged Diamond off. “I gotta fix this.”

After a moment spent watching Silver Spoon struggle with the sheet, Diamond Tiara sighed and helped her straighten out the other end. “So, what’s bugging you, Silvie?”

The sheet pulled tight. Silver tucked in the left side, careful to get the edges and corners. “Babs is Apple Bloom’s cousin, Diamond. I know Bloom’s annoying and a loser and a failure and super rude, but she’s still her cousin.” She peeped over to make sure Diamond had the other side straight before tossing the pillows back on. “And she switched over so fast. Like, not even half a minute.”

The satin comforter walked over on little pink legs. A muzzle poked out and said, “You’re overthinking things. It probably wasn’t a switch and she just never liked The Goofsaders in the first place.” Diamond flapped out the comforter and let it settle. “Or Babsy knows good company when she sees it. I mean, between us and them, who’d you choose?”

“Us, of course.” Silver gripped a corner of comforter in her teeth and together, they dragged it up to
the pillows. She gave the left side a little tug to make it symmetrical. “But I’m also not Apple Bloom’s cousin.”

“Maybe they’re not that close.”

Silver Spoon lowered her glasses, lifting an eyebrow. “Uh, have you seen The Apple Family?”

“Besides the ones in Ponyville? No.” Diamond flipped her tail and met Silver’s look. “And you haven’t either.”

The bed didn’t meet Brass Tacks’ caliber for neatness, but it worked for tonight. Silver folded back the comforter, fluffed the pillows one more time and nestled into the sheets. “I don’t know. I still don’t like it, Di. I mean, if Babs turned on Apple Bloom—her cousin Apple Bloom…”

Silver Spoon looked Diamond Tiara in the eye. “What’s stopping her from turning on us, too?”

Diamond Tiara climbed back into bed, pulling her stuffed pig under the covers. She grabbed the glass of water from the nightstand and took a sip. A long sip. She stared at the twinkling studs of her tiara under the lamp, ears swiveling in thought, though her expression never changed.

“Di.” Silver cradled Lady Mimic close. “What’s stopping her from—”

“Babs is okay. When was the last time we hung out with somepony this much fun?” Diamond propped her chin on the pillow and chuckled. “Did you see Apple Bloom’s face when we popped out of her dumb little clubhouse? Priceless!”

Scootaloo got so mad she’d actually hovered off the ground for three whole seconds—a personal best, probably. Her feathers had puffed up so much she looked like that lamekin float. Silver Spoon hid her muzzle under the blanket and giggled.

Cuddling her pig, Diamond sang, “I see a smi-ile.” She laughed and turned off the light. “Not everypony’s out to get you, you know. It’ll be fine, Silvie. Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

Silver yawned and put her glasses on the nightstand next to the tiara. “Yeah, okay.” The least she could do was give Babs an honest chance. It was only fair. “I trust you, Di. Goodnight—for real, this time.”

“Night, Silver.”

Mud oozed through Diamond’s bangs and plopped onto her nose. She huddled against the beams, staring into the dark crawlspace under the platform. “Silver Spoon?”

“No.”

Diamond tried crawling in after her, but a mud ball thrown from the crawlspace stopped her. That and the fact that only one pony could fit under there. “Silvie, come on.”

“No, I s-said!” The knot in Silver’s throat made her voice tremble. Hot tears stung her eyes. She didn’t know if the wetness on her face came from tears or mud or mucus or some awful combination of the three. She didn’t want to know. Her shoulders shook with a mangled sob.
The steady clip-clop of hooves pounded above their heads. Silver bit her lip and tried to stay quiet. What if one of those ponies heard something and tried to investigate? They’d be worried. They’d get other ponies to help them look for the filly crying under the train station and bring their lanterns and then they’d…they’d…

“Silver, please.” Diamond Tiara’s ears drooped as the soft sobbing started again. She seemed close to tears herself. A stiff filthy thing lay between her hooves, probably her tiara. “It’s going to get dark soon.”

“I don’t care. I’m not coming out.”

When Silver touched her braid, she just felt mud, grime, tangles, and more mud. How would she ever explain why the platinum shoes she got for her cuteceañera were ruined? How would she explain any of this? “I can’t.”

Through blurry glasses lenses, it looked like Diamond frowned.

“I can’t. I-I…” Silver Spoon shut her eyes against the tears, but they came anyway. “Diamond, they’ll…they’ll see me.”

A fresh wave of hooves in an array of different sizes and colors passed the hiding spot. One set paused a terrible five minutes—it seemed five hours—before finally moving on. Wood creaked over Silver’s flattened ears.

Ponies everywhere. On all sides. Who all knew her name. Silver Spoon whimpered, missing the tall, anonymous towers of Manehattan so hard it hurt. The Manehattan that Babs got to return to.

“We should have just gotten ice cream.” Silver chewed the inside of her cheek. The spiny ball of sorrow in her chest boiled into hot, fluttering anger. “Darn it, Diamond Tiara! I told you we should have just left them alone! Those blank flanks wreck everything they touch and you know it but you still drag us into their mess! I just wanted one vacation in peace, but you couldn’t even let us have that. I told you this would happen.”

Diamond Tiara flinched back. “I…but they—” Her mouth moved silently, searching for words and finding none. She flicked mud from her mane and sniffed. Finally, she sighed and said, “Yeah. Yeah, you did. A lot.”

A second of silence. The second became a minute. In the dark, the minute went on forever. And then, just loud enough to hear over hoofsteps and Silver’s wet, heavy breathing: “Silver Spoon? I’m sorry.”

Silver inched forward. Not entirely out of the crawlspace, but just enough to see her own filthy nose in front of her face. “What?”

Cradling her muddy tiara with one hoof and reaching out with the other, Diamond sighed again. A long, tired sound. “You’re right. I should have listened to you, Silver. I’m sorry. I just thought we could…”

Diamond rubbed her cheek. It just made the cheek filthier. “Whatever, it didn’t work. But Silver, we really have to go.”

The laughter bubbling out of Silver Spoon bordered on hysteria. “Go where?” She summed both of them up in a sweep of filthy hooves: ruined coats, tangled, matted manes, mud coating every crevice, stained glasses, puffy red eyes, ragged braid, and tarnished tiara. “I can’t go home like this. I can’t go anywhere like this!”
“Well, maybe we—oh, no you don’t!” Diamond grabbed Silver’s tail before she could slide back into the crawlspace and dragged her to the edge of the platform. “We can use the back entrance to my house and…” she trailed off, noting the sun’s position. “No, maybe not. Mother’s home by now.”

Diamond checked the perimeter for ponies and stepped out in the open, one hoof still on Silver’s tail. Her neck stretched over the train platform to see the road beyond. “I don’t think she’d hear us if we stayed quiet, but she’d probably smell us.”

“Oh Celestia, we smell, too?!” With her stuffy nose, Silver had no idea.

Diamond Tiara tried to smile. “Yeah, but not that bad.” A bad lie, but Silver appreciated the effort. “Our houses are both kinda far, anyway. The Dink’s house is even farther.” She squinted at the houses around the corner. “You think Twist can keep a secret?”

“I doubt it.” Twist had a bad habit of letting things slip, and she likely wouldn’t get why something had to be secret in the first place.

“Hmm.” Diamond’s tongue ran along the edge of her teeth. She stood up.

“You’ve got an idea,” said Silver Spoon.

Diamond Tiara nodded. “You’re not gonna like it either. But you just have to trust me on this, okay?”

Free of Diamond’s hoof, Silver inched back under the train platform. “That’s what you said last time.”

“I—alright, I was wrong about that, but I’m not about this. Okay?” She blinked at Silver’s silence. “Also, there’s a spider on your leg.”

Silver barreled out into the open so fast she left dust clouds.

“Oh wait, it was just a piece of grass.” Diamond innocently rolled her eyes towards the sky. “My mistake. But since you’re already out…” She gestured down the block. “See that place across from Vinyl’s? The one with the bottle weathervane? That’s our ticket. If we run—”

“Ponies will see us. Especially if we run.” Silver cringed behind Diamond’s hip.

“If we sneak, they’ll get suspicious and look closer.” Diamond reached down and yanked Silver to her hooves. “And honestly, if you saw us running down the street looking how we look, would you recognize us?”

“Good point. Let’s do it.”

When they ran, Silver Spoon kept her eyes on the road, not on her own filthy hooves, not on the ponies they passed. She didn’t give herself time to think or observe, she just put one hoof in front of the other and tried not to trip. It wasn’t until they stopped Silver realized Diamond held back at a quick trot slow enough to stay at Silver’s shoulder.

The two-story house before them seemed decent enough, though it wouldn’t score any pictures in *Finer Stalls and Stables*. It had a patched hole in the roof and rows of grapevines in the backyard.

A sign hung above the door. Silver tilted her head at it. “Why’d you bring us to a bar?”
Diamond knocked twice with her hoof, thrice with the brass knocker. “It’s not just a bar, duh. You know a bunch of ponies run businesses out of their homes.”

The door swung open. Silver’s mouth dropped.

“This one belongs to Berry Pinch.” Diamond eased Silver’s mouth shut. “Pinch, three questions: is your mom home, do you have a curling iron, and can you make tea?”

Berry Pinch blinked, one hoof in a cast and the other holding a raisin cookie. She gaped at the dripping, stinking ponies on her doorstep. “Um. What?”

Diamond Tiara lifted her head with as much authority as a muddy filly could muster. “I’m calling in my favor.”

A spark of recognition lit Berry’s eyes. “Oh my gosh, Diamond Ti—”

“Pinch!” Di made a quick ex-nay motion. “Time’s an issue here.”

“Oh. Oh, right, come on in.” Berry Pinch stepped aside for them. “No, Mom’s not home yet and no, I don’t have a curling iron.” She glanced at Silver Spoon, waiting for a jibe.

Silver Spoon wiped her feet, fretful eyes searching the empty tables and bar stools.

Berry knitted her eyebrows and frowned. “And yeah, I can make tea, but none of that fancy stuff.” She shook her head with a disbelieving chuckle. “Silver, that really you under all that mud? Wow.”

Silver’s ears wilted. She stared back with wide eyes and didn’t say anything. Her throat felt tight again.

Concern wrinkled over Berry Pinch’s face, but she kept it to herself. “We might not have curling irons, but I do know how to braid. I can even do the French kind.” She took some paper towels from the bar and handed them to Diamond. “You know where the bathroom is, right?”

“Upstairs, first door on the left.” The tension eased from Diamond shoulders. Her steel tiara shone again with a few rubs, though it took all the towels to do it. “And I should close the door so the dog can’t get in.”

Berry lifted the remaining half of her cookie to them. “You got it.” In a lower voice, she added, “Try and get Silver to lighten up, huh? She’s freaking me out.”

______________________________________________________________

Five rinses, three scrub-downs, two bottles of shampoo, and half a bottle of conditioner later, Silver popped the drain and shook herself off.

Diamond Tiara—previously satisfied with just two scrub-downs—sat on the counter, teasing a comb through her damp tangles. She tossed over an extra towel for Silver’s mane.

“Thanks.” First things first, Silver wrung her mane out and wrapped it up tight. Coats dried fast, but barring a freak rainstorm, she couldn’t explain a sopping wet mane. The bathroom had no rugs, so she took extra care coming out of the tub. “You know, it’s weird. I spent half this week mad at Babs and now, after she did what she did, I’m not anymore.”
By all rights, Silver should have been. She wondered why that was. Perhaps she’d softened up to Babs when they traded jump rope tricks and reminisced about the famous Hearth’s Warming pole in the center of Manehattan Square. Or perhaps it happened when Babs styled Diamond’s mane for the parade.

Still, that didn’t explain why Silver wasn’t mad now; if anything, it meant she ought to be angrier. Bitter, at the very least. But Silver Spoon didn’t really feel much of anything besides exhausted.

*It’s my own fault, really.* Silver couldn’t fault the train for hitting her when she’d heard it coming five miles away. She should have stepped off the track. She should have run out of the tunnel. Ponies stuck to their own. Sometimes they mixed together for a little while, but in the end, they always stuck to their own. Silver knew that. She’d known that before she knew how to read.

Diamond Tiara didn’t seem to. Even after Silver’s warnings, she hadn’t seen the turnaround of Babs Seed coming at all. From the expression on her face, she still couldn’t quite believe it. She gave Silver a quiet little smile.

Silver smiled back. It really stunk being right, sometimes.

“Yeah, I can understand that. I’m not really mad, either,” said Diamond. The comb hit a nasty snag and she winced, gritting her teeth. “Not mad at Babs, anyway.” That old, familiar scowl returned.

Silver Spoon drew a fluffy yellow towel around her heavy shoulders. “Diamond?” The sparse little bathroom gave Silver’s voice a little echo. “I think we should stop. Not just a break, I mean the whole thing: revenge, blank flanks, let’s just…drop it. It’s not working.” She rubbed a light bruise on her shoulder. “I don’t think it ever will.”

Diamond’s mouth drew into a thin, tight line. She looked ready to rail entire litanies of reasons why they had to push on, but all she said was, “Winners never quit, Silver Spoon.”

She finished combing her hair, hopped off the counter, and walked out. “Mom says the only thing worse than a loser is a quitter.”

“Which one?” Silver followed her down the hall and into the living room. Made for a pony twice her size, the towel trailed behind like a cape.

The tiara waited for them on a coffee table, newly polished and shining as if nothing ever happened at all. It slid back into Diamond’s mane and finally, she looked like herself again. After a short moment, she said, “The first one. My real one.” Her ears went stiff. “Don’t tell Spoiled I said that.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me you had a stepmother, Di?”

“I dunno. Since she wasn’t back from her trip yet, I guess I just didn’t think about it.” She made sure her coat had dried before sitting on the couch. “And you weren’t around when she came back, either. She says she met you, by the way.”

“Oh-huh. She seemed…” Silver considered the proper word. “…thoughtful. Do you like her?”

“Sometimes.” Diamond shrugged. “I think she likes me, too. More than she likes most ponies, anyway.”

Silver Spoon joined her on the couch—if one could really call the tiny, threadbare thing a couch—and studied the ugly wallpaper. Inspirational lithographs and squat bookcases full of almanacs ran along the walls. The carpet desperately needed shampooing and the sunfaded curtains looked cheap. “What’s this favor Berry Pinch owed you, anyway?”
“None of your beeswax, that’s what.” Pinch carried a pair of teacups in a sputtering green aura. Her horn glowed hot with effort, and to her credit, the cups landed on the table with only a few spilled drops. “And I still owe it.”

Diamond sniffed the tea and took a sip, a little confused. “But—”

Berry Pinch shook her head. “This doesn’t count.” She glanced at Silver. “You’re hiding out here because of parent stuff, right?”

Silver didn’t answer, but Berry must have read something in her expression because she seemed satisfied.

“Thought so. Parent stuff doesn’t count.” She rubbed her hurt hoof and chuckled. “I mean, if I counted this sort of thing, I’d be a bigger butt than Tiara.”

Diamond smacked Berry’s haunch with her wet tail. “Takes a butt to know a butt.”

“So you finally admit you’re a big smelly butt. Good to know.” There wasn’t room on the couch, so Berry Pinch sat on the armrest. “How’s the tea, Miss Fancy-schmancy Tea Expert?”

Silver took a sip, swishing it slowly to get the full flavor. “Mediocre.” She smacked her lips, took another sip to be sure, then nodded. “You steeped it too long and the tea itself is a painfully generic black blend—not like you can tell under all the lemon and sugar. I could make a better cup with four broken hooves and a blindfold.”

The teacup warmed Silver Spoon’s hooves. She closed her eyes, breathing in the steam as she felt the knots in her shoulders relax. “Oh, but I am, like, so glad you made it. Thanks, snotface.”

“Don’t make it weird, Silver Snob.” Berry lifted an eyebrow with a smirk. “And since when am I a snotface? You never call me that.”

Silver unwrapped the hair towel and let her mane fall to her shoulders. “Not to your face.”

Berry Pinch lit her horn, tongue sticking out in concentration. Her magic lifted Silver’s mane and sectioned out panels to braid. After a few botched tries, she got a weaving rhythm going. Painfully slow, but so smooth Silver barely felt it. “So, are you guys okay?”

At the far end of the street, Scootaloo carried a purple kite. Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle tailed her, dragging a wagon full of fireworks. They laughed together, excited for some random new adventure sure to leave somepony in stitches.

Diamond quietly watched them through the window, her expression calm and shoulders slack. She shut the curtains and sipped her tea.

“You know what?” Diamond Tiara glanced at Silver Spoon and smiled. “I think we are.”
Considering the Methods of Mobilization Within a Manehattan Shark Tank

Silver Spoon lay back to admire the well-earned spoils of a successful Hearth’s Warming. A sparkling moat of wrapping paper and ribbons reflected little dots of light along the walls. Father had opted for yellow lights this year and in the cloudy morning, Silver’s twenty-six presents took on a heavenly glow.

She didn’t even mind that she’d received fourteen fewer gifts than last year (not counting gifts from friends). As an older, wiser, young mare with a cutie mark, Silver understood the need to downsize, and ponies usually got fewer presents with age anyway. The new tea sets, dresses, jewelry, shoes, and the deluxe stationery kit (including a magnificently thorough day planner with a silver clasp) more than sufficed.

Mother cuddled in the comfort of her new dressing gown, the one Silver Spoon helped Father pick. One long, silk sleeve dangled from her hoof as she pointed toward the pile of presents. “I think you’ve missed one, dear.”

“I did?” The sea of wrapping paper churned with Silver’s search—no new presents hid under them. Nothing at the back of the pole or sticking out between the lights. Nothing new in her porcelain Hearth’s Warming doll, either. “Where? I don’t see it.”

Father tried to hide his smile behind his mug of eggnog, but did a poor job of it. “Maybe a cup of tea could help you remember. From your newest set, perhaps?” Ever-so-slightly he nodded at the jade teapot upon the coffee table.

Silver didn’t hear a rattle when she gently shook the pot, though she felt something move inside. She lifted the lid to discover a violet envelope sealed with shiny gold wax. A pink wisteria flower bloomed in the topleft corner, just like an official notice from…but that made no sense at all.

“Why would Wisteria Academy send me letters?” Well-wishes for the holidays hardly required an official seal and colors. Besides, schools didn’t send former students letters, save to beg for alumni bits.

“Hm. Why indeed?” Father’s grin breached the edge of his mug.

Silver didn’t bother with a letter opener and cracked the wax seal by hoof. A letter plopped upon the table. Two shining silver tickets fluttered down after it, both marked with the official Wisteria seal.

Impossible. Silver caught them before they hit the ground. She held them under the light to confirm: The Wisteria Annual Winter Gala: Esteemed Guest. Silver Spoon stared as if Celestia had hoof-delivered them herself.

“I—but…but how?” She stared at her father, who grinned down with the biggest smile she’d seen since the move. Her eyes widened. So did his grin. “Don’t tell me it gets better?”

Mother slid the letter forward. “Much better.”

The letter still smelled of Headmistress Avalonia’s office. Violet ink on smooth, thick paper. Silver skimmed the pleasantries until she reached the heart of the matter. She read it. She stared up at her parents, open mouthed. “You’re kidding.”

She read it again:
…it delights us to extend a cordial invitation to the grand opening of
The Silver Spoon Ballroom, located in the south gardens.
You are allowed one guest of your choosing.
Kindly remember school dress code, enclosed herein.

We at Wisteria Academy eagerly await your arrival.

“I can’t believe it!”

“I take that it meets your approval, Brightness?” Father wrapped a foreleg around Silver’s shoulder and kissed the top of her uncombed head. “It’s a little late to return it.”

“Oh, Father! Father, I love it!” Little fillies twenty, fifty, a thousand semesters from now would know the Silver name. Her name. “But I thought we didn’t have the funds for—”

Mother waved her off. “We donated the money ages ago. Some of it before you were born, I think.”

“It’s only they didn’t finalize the building arrangements until now,” added Father. “Remember to thank Granddad, too. He helped with the final adjustments.”

The words barely registered, but Silver Spoon nodded anyway. Finally, a real chance to redeem her reputation! Not just now, but for semesters to come.

No doubt her good standing lay shattered by spiteful, vicious tongues, but even shattered reputations could be fixed under the right circumstances. Nopony could deny the staying power of a namesake. Future students of the Academy would never know why Miss Sterling Silver Spoon left Manehattan. No, they’d read her name every day until it became part of the vernacular. “Let’s all meet outside Silver Spoon after three,” they’d say, and know that this Silver Spoon had been a very important pony.

Silver squealed and pulled on her new Prim Hemline parka, the price tags still swinging from the sleeve. “I’ve got to tell Di! She’ll be so excited!” The fluffy hood plopped over her eyes as she felt through her presents for the matching boots.

Father flipped the hood back, amused. “You’ve got all day to visit, what’s the rush?”

“Yeah, but there’s so much to do until then! The gala’s in just a week, and I don’t know if Diamond’s dresses fit the dress code. I know she got one last month from Carousel Boutique, but that’s a pageant dress, she can’t wear it twice. Besides, it’s not warm enough for winter in Manehattan.”

Father looked at Mother. Mother hummed under her breath.

“Then again, we’d be inside anyway, so it might not matter. But would our coats match?” She turned in a circle, double checking the new coat’s colors. Neutral browns and blues went with most things, but young ladies could never be too sure. If nothing else, she could cross-reference some magazines or ask Miss Rarity.
Pulling on her boots, Silver glanced over her shoulder to discover her mother frowning. “Not that I need to buy anything else. If this doesn’t match, something older will be fine.”

“No, Brightness, it all goes together perfectly. We made sure of it.” Father’s smile turned gentle. Too gentle.

Silver paused, the last boot in hoof. “What’s the matter?” Mother had the same expression. “Is something wrong?”

“Silver Spoon…” Mother glanced aside, as if she’d find a better answer in the discarded wrapping paper. “Silver, dear, are you sure you want to invite Diamond Tiara to the Winter Gala?”

“Of course!” Silver laughed, but the concern in her parents’ eyes made it stammer. “Who else would I bring?”

After a long pause, Mother sighed, defeated. “I can’t say I know.” She rearranged herself, fluffing the robe’s collar. The smile returned, warmer. “Nevermind us, dear.”

Father nodded. “I’m sure you’ll both have a wonderful time.” He took a swig of eggnog and patted Mother’s leg. “Go tell her the good news.”

As it turned out, Diamond Tiara not only had a suitable dress and coat, but suitable shoes, vests, shawls, and hats, too. Any of them could have made an amazing ensemble, now it was just a matter of choosing. And navigating Diamond’s closet.

They’d split up to cover more ground, calling to each other through the hangers and shelves in a fashionista’s version of Mareco Polo.

“I think I’ve got it.” Diamond’s voice rose from the depths of the sweater section. “Okay, so I’m thinking if you wear that new powder blue dress, I can wear that ruffle gown I got for my birthday. The one with the satin collar. We’ll have, like, perfect synergy!”

Silver Spoon weaved through a forest of hat racks, ears swiveling to catch Di’s position. She ducked under the shelves to take a shortcut through the hanging purses. “The emerald one?”

“No, no, the seafoam one.” The glittering tiara bobbed over a sea of bearing reins and lacy saddles. “With the sequins.”

Diamond’s head burst through the purses, the ruffle dress hanging from her mouth. “Ha! Found you first!”

Silver Spoon giggled. “It’s your closet, of course you did.”

“Pff, like that means anything.” Diamond slung the dress over her shoulder and made her way to the carpet path that led to the door. “Dad says he tried to find my locket in here one morning and he didn’t find his way out until sunset.”

From the faraway recesses of the entrance, Mr. Rich moaned, “I almost starved to death! It was awful; I saw my life flash before my eyes. My life and boxes and boxes of shoes.”

“Your dad’s silly.” Silver stood on her back legs and peered over the clothes racks.
Mr. Rich waited by the open door, skimming a business magazine. When he spotted Diamond and Silver, he waved his tie to them as if they’d just returned from the war.

Mrs. Rich paced behind him, pausing every few minutes to poke her pointy muzzle over Filthy Rich’s shoulder. She’d not stopped pacing since Silver showed off the tickets. A smile flickered at her husband’s joke, and she laughed a microscopic laugh. “Diamond? Did you find something?”

Diamond Tiara held up the dress as high as she could. “Uh-huh!”

“Proper language, Diamond.” She ventured a few steps into the closet to meet them. “Bring up the dress, I want to see it.”

Diamond’s face shifted, biting back a huff. “…Yes, ma’am.”

Filthy Rich nuzzled his wife’s shoulder. “I’m sure it’ll be fine, hon.”


“And it’s nothing like Canterlot, either.”

Mrs. Rich nodded, though she didn’t seem too convinced.

“We’ll be okay, ma’am,” said Silver Spoon. She patted Diamond’s shoulder. “I know West Manehattan like the back of my hoof and we’ll be with Brass Tacks. He’s the safest pony in Equestria.”

As Diamond approached with the dress, Mrs. Rich watched Silver Spoon out of the corner of her eye. “I’m very sure he is.” She arched an eyebrow at the ruffle dress twinkling in the closet spotlights. “Is this it?”

Soft, swirling taffeta rolls on the train and sleeves made the dress unfurl like waves upon the sea. A high neckline left it modest, and the sequins and ruffles kept it fun. Diamond straightened out the collar before handing it over. “It’s the one from my birthday, remember? I thought I could wear it with some earrings or a—”

“Absolutely not. Too gaudy; you’ll look like a sparkly cabbage.” Mrs. Rich scanned the lines of clothes and depths of the closet. She clicked her tongue. “Shouldn’t wear an old dress, anyway. We’ll find a proper outfit in Canterlot.”

“But I really liked—”

“We can’t commission a new one on such short notice, so we’ll have to make do with what we can find.” She frowned at Silver as if that was her fault. “Get your coat, Diamond, and don’t dawdle.” Mrs. Rich checked her watch. “We can make the next train if you hurry.”

Mr. Rich blinked. “What, now?”

“Of course now, Fil. The party’s in five days, she’s leaving in three, and the stores close at sunset.”

Diamond Tiara grabbed a puffy jacket and zipped it halfway. “Can Silver Spoon come with us? I want her to see the new dress so I know we’ll have synergy.” She glanced at Silver. “Maybe if you run back to your house really fast, you can get your dress so the clerks know what to look for.”
But Mrs. Rich shook her head. “Silver can come along next time. Hurry and find your boots.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Let’s step lively, ladies!” Brass Tacks’ voice carried over the overlap of Manehattan’s train whistles and chugging engines. “We’re expected to check in at Manefair Hotel by noon.”

No pony had to tell Silver Spoon twice. She jumped the last step of the train, weaving through wayfarer’s hooves and luggage, flicking her ears at the old, familiar song of Grand Stable Station.

A busker’s clarinet echoed through the century-old train tunnels. A menagerie of accents threaded all about her, one conversation melting into the other. Some pony from Hooflyn needed a new passport. An anxious mare from Trotten Island worried the long lines could make her miss the train. A trio of south-side foals begged for more ice cream while a company of Broncs stallions debated Wonderbolt stats.

An indignant filly from Ponyville struggled to fight through the crowds. “Hey! Watch the coat, it’s dry-clean only!” Diamond held her saddlebag close, trying to duck through the crowds and trot at the same time as she caught up to Silver Spoon. “When he said ‘lively’, I’m pretty sure he didn’t mean ‘take off like a maniac’.”

“Indeed, I did not. Do try to stay close, Miss Silver.” Brass Tacks frowned beside a stack of levitating luggage. He did his best to stay firm against Silver’s excited prancing. “We’ll see more of the city soon enough.”

Silver Spoon stepped back into the Manehattan air with a contented sigh. The wind snatched at her mane, carrying along scents of smoke and metal, carrot-dogs and old brick, axle oils and perfumes.

The greatest city in the world hadn’t changed a bit: a grand and dynamic metropolis always alive with energy, yet comfortably stable. If Manehattan could be called chaos, then it was an ordered chaos. The clang of construction and the clatter of wheels beat a steady rhythm. A pony just had to follow the beat and the city spread wide for them. Dozens of neighborhoods meshed together with endless ponies, with everypony in their place.

As the cab driver loaded their luggage and made small talk with Brass Tacks, Silver watched pedestrians cross traffic. The trained eye always knew the difference between ponies that walked because they wanted to and those who walked because they had to.

Strangely, none of this magnificence seemed to impress Diamond Tiara at all. She stayed close to Tacks until they climbed into the cab. As they moved down 29th Street, she glanced at a tower or two, but never marveled at them. She didn’t notice the variety of well-dressed ponies or complain about the heavy traffic.

Now that Silver thought about it, Diamond didn’t say much through the train ride, either. Probably just tired, or maybe she’d seen all this before.

“Is this your first time here?” Silver pulled out a map of landmarks, ready to mark some off. “We’ve only got a couple days before the gala, so I don’t want to show you places you’ve already been. We could check out historical landmarks or the boutiques or—oh! The old neighborhood!”
The cab turned on 24th Street just in time for Silver to see the penthouse rooftops sail over tourist shops. She wondered if any of her friends were home. “Tacks, you sent out the telegrams, right? They know we’re coming early?”

Brass Tacks nodded behind his newspaper.

Diamond Tiara lifted her head. She’d been staring at a Bridleway ad pasted to the back window. “You say something? I wasn’t listening.”

“I asked if you’d been here before,” said Silver.

Diamond tilted her tiara with a dismissive flick of the mane. “Naturally. Dad takes me down here all the time when he has business trips. He gave me a tour of Stall Street.” She looked at the Bridleway flyer again.

Apparently, a new musical had opened last week: Hinny of the Hills. A play about a half-donkey didn’t sound engrossing, and musicals were opera’s half-baked cousin, but it couldn’t hurt to try. Silver nodded to the flyer. “You interested?”

“Maybe.” Diamond shrugged. “Not really. Hey, the party’s at your old school, right? How is it?”

“The gala?”

“The school.”

A question so absurd, Silver had to laugh. “It’s only the best school in the city. Probably the best in Equestria if you don’t care about learning magic. Only the best fillies even get through the gates.” Except maybe the scholarship students, but who cares about scholarship students, anyway?

“Mother said that, too.” Diamond sighed and nudged her suitcase with her hoof. “Still don’t get why she couldn’t just let me pick out my own dress. Like, it’s my dress, you know?” She kicked the suitcase and flattened her ears.

Silver didn’t know the correct response for that, so she offered a sympathetic shoulder pat. It seemed to suffice.

In the seven-story shadow of Madame Wisteria’s Academy for Young Fillies, Diamond Tiara fluffed her scarf for warmth. The greatcoat couldn’t hold against the breeze, and she stepped through the gates shivering. Her eyes traced the frozen ivy snaking over the bricks, up and up and up. Windows glowed in scattershot squares of light. Every so often, the ghostly silhouette of a pony shifted behind them.

Sightseeing hadn’t panned out, so Silver had decided to make up for it by arriving early to show Diamond the school grounds. Too early, perhaps. The clack of their shoes echoed in the quiet courtyard.

Diamond pointed to a pair of shadows bent over a book. “I thought you said it’s still winter vacation here.”

“Oh, it is,” said Silver Spoon. She tucked her braid under her cloche hat and hopped over the old
crack in the walkway. “Fourth floor’s the library, so somepony must have come back early to study. Anyway, that’s Wisteria Hall, most of the regular classes are there—you know, literature, history, math, etiquette, that kind of stuff.”

She nodded towards a rotund building to the left. “That’s Waterfire Gym. The dining hall’s in there, too.”

An orange mare in sunglasses and a sport coat nodded back to them from the walkway. Coach Pacesetter stood too far away to greet, so Silver just smiled and waved. “She taught my tennis class.”

Diamond pulled her coat tighter. Her jeweled slippers fidgeted in the snow, hooves likely as numb as Silver’s. Snow boots didn’t match gala dresses, but young ladies knew how to tough it out. “This is all just one school?” She stopped a moment to look over her shoulder, shrugged, and moved on. “Like, for little fillies and not like…a college or whatever?”

“For the best little fillies. We’ve got upperclassmares too, but they have classes on the top floors, so we don’t really see each other.” In three more years, Silver would have joined them, dining in the senior lounge and waiting to lap up the prestige of graduation day. She sighed. 

Oh, well. Graduating in Miss Cheerilee’s class is just as good.

Silver’s eyes lingered on Star Song Auditorium, home to orchestra performances, spelling bees, chess tournaments, class plays, and graduation ceremonies.

I suppose.

“Hey.” Diamond nudged Silver’s hoof and pointed. “Do you know her? I think she’s been watching us since we got here. It’s weird.”

Several yards away, a sea-blue pegasus filly hovered over the hedge maze. Gems decorated the lavender up-do and gold filigree tipped her primary feathers. Under a white trenchcoat, a ball gown billowed at her hooves.

“It’s Fair Weather!” Silver Spoon laughed and reared up to wave her old friend down. “She lived in my old building with me and Brights and we were all the best of friends. Oh, Di, you’ll love her! She knows everything about everypony, she’s so much fun. Fair! Over here!”

Fair Weather’s earrings sparkled with a flick of the ear. She lifted higher into the air, up and over the auditorium without a glance back.

Diamond Tiara twitched her tail. “Best of friends, huh?”

“She probably didn’t see us.”

“If you say so, Silvie. Is the other pegasus your friend too?”

Other one? Silver looked down to see a full, fluffy yellow tail vanishing into the hedge maze.

Silver frowned. Unless she’d finally discovered what variety meant (fat chance), only one filly at Wisteria had that tail style with that color. “That’s strange. Since when does Fair Weather hang out with Toplofty?”

An old, familiar voice spoke up behind them, gentle and mumbling. “Uh, since last summer, I think.”

Diamond Tiara searched for the voice, only to discover a pair of massive stallions walking towards
them. Both unicorns towered over her in dark grey suits, their eyes hidden behind shiny sunglasses. They’d likely teleported here.

A pale green filly ventured out from behind their fetlocks. Two gold streaks cut through her forest green mane, styled into smooth, round bob. Reliable as the moonrise, the black combination lock on her flank was the only new thing about her. “Welcome back, Silver Spoon.”

Silver met her with a light shoulder hug. “Good to be back, Wondermint.” She smiled up at the unicorns. “Hi, boys.”

The bodyguards nodded in tandem.

Wondermint leaned into the hug and smiled, though it seemed dimmer than Silver remembered. “I really missed you, Silver.” She peered over Silver’s shoulder warily. “Uh, Brass Tacks is with you, right? I hope you didn’t come here by yourself.”

“He’s by the fountains, not too far.” Silver rolled her eyes at her old friend’s frown. “Wonder, come on. Nopony’s going to kidnap us in the middle of campus.”

“Hmph, that’s just what criminals want you to think.” Wondermint stepped back to investigate Diamond Tiara, golden eyes on watch for mussed fur, questionable accents, or any other signs of thuggery. “So…who’s this?”

The quiet, pensive pink filly who’d kept to herself and trailed behind Silver Spoon the past two days vanished with a lift of the head. Like a magician’s trick, the veils of her hair swept back to reveal the prestigious Diamond Tiara: back and bold and better than ever. She stepped forward and held out her hoof.

“The name’s Diamond Dazzle Tiara, great to meet you. My daddy’s the president and C.E.O. of Barnyard Bargains.”

Wondermint’s gold-shod hoof gingerly shook Diamond’s sparkling slipper. She waited for Diamond to initiate the rest of the introduction. When Diamond didn’t say anything else, Wonder took back her hoof and said, “Good afternoon, Diamond Tiara. I’m Wondermint.” She gave Silver Spoon a wary look. “Of the East Manehattan Mints.”

“Her mom runs the Equestrian National Bank.” Silver smiled and slung a hoof around Diamond’s withers to prove she was safe. “Wonder’s got more money than half of Canterlot, probably. Richest filly in Equestria, right?”

“Yes. I think the only foal with more is a colt in Canterlot, by a few hundred bits.” She shrugged. “Mama says we’ll be tied by next year.”

Diamond lifted her eyebrows with a smirk, intrigued but not overly impressed. “Huh. Not half bad.”

“Heh, yes. We do alright.” Warmth came back into Wondermint’s smile. Her stance relaxed. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’ve heard of Barnyard Bargains. Is it a new investment, or…?”

“We haven’t expanded very far yet, but Dad says we’ll have some in Fillydelphia and Hollow Shades by summer. It’s the oldest, biggest, and most successful business is all Ponyville. Our family practically built the financial cornerstone of town.”

Something clicked for Wondermint. She skimmed Diamond again. “Oh, how very interesting. Have you two seen the new building yet? Congratulations by the way, Silver Spoon. It’s beautiful.”
Hairline cracks of pink sunset wriggled through the grey clouds. One by one, the lamps flickered to life. The white orbs hung from wrought iron poles, radiated a soft, comfortable heat. The gala couldn’t be more than twenty minutes away.

“Not yet, no. I wanted to show Di Wisteria before the party started.” Silver squinted at the line of carriages lining up at the gate. Early arrivals trickled into the gardens, jewels and gowns winkling in the lamplight. She recognized Bankroll and Sand Dollar with Mr. Martingale, her old teacher. “Do you know when Prim and Brights are coming?”

Wondermint laughed. “Knowing Brights, she got here two hours early to talk the wait staff into buying stocks.”

Diamond Tiara stepped between Wondermint and Silver as they shared a giggle. “Shouldn’t we be heading in now? It looks like they’re starting.” As if to prove her point, light piano melody drifted over the hedge maze.

“Silver’s the Guest of Honor,” Wondermint reminded her. “She can’t come in until fifteen minutes after it starts, so everypony has time to show up. And it still doesn’t start for a half hour.”

“Oh.”

“Anyhow, I’ll see you two inside, okay? Stay safe, Silver.”

“Yeah. You too, Wondermint.” Silver Spoon shuddered under a brisk January breeze. The lamps wouldn’t get to full warmth for a while. Maybe it’d be better to kill time touring the trophies in Waterfire Stadium. “Come on Di, I’ll show you my old tennis team’s trophy.”

The Silver Spoon Ballroom locked in step with most of the other minor buildings dotting Wisteria’s campus: a marble and glass structure tucked into the willow trees and rose beds. It had small open patio in back and a tall, curved glass roof to let in the sun and stars, so the ferns and wisteria inside could grow. A cozy place ideal for tea parties and other little get-togethers, proud of its sensibility and comfortable in its station.

A filly couldn’t ask for a better building. Silver had to wonder, as she admired the silver-framed plaque adorning the entryway, if Father requested a design suited just for her. “Tacks, take another picture before we go in, please.”

The unicorn’s breath puffed in little white clouds with his chuckle. “Six aren’t enough?”

“Seven’s a lucky number,” Diamond Tiara pointed out. Her dark purple ball gown didn’t match Silver’s ensemble at all, though the light blue ribbon tying the back—a last minute addition from a Manehattan boutique—offered some semblance of unity. Parapets of rhinestones spiraled down the wide, flared skirt to match the jeweled slippers and sapphire choker. Armored in jewels and velvet and crinoline, Diamond seemed set to conquer the Grand Galloping Gala itself.

Looking at her own powder blue gown and storm-grey stole, Silver couldn’t help but feel underdressed. Wisteria Academy favored simplicity, but a fancier pair of earrings couldn’t have hurt. She studied her reflection in the eye of the camera, searching for some tiny flaw she’d missed.

Brass Tacks levitated his watch from his tuxedo’s breast pocket. “The hour strikes, young ladies.
Shall I make your presence known?”

Silver Spoon swallowed the niggling doubt in her throat and nodded. “Yes, please.” She followed Tacks to the entrance, huddling against the doorframe. Her ears fidgeted to catch whatever viperous gossip whispered behind the marble walls.

Diamond flicked Silver’s hocks with her tail. “Nervous?”

“Not really.” Silver shivered against the satin of her gown. “It’s not like anypony could say anything, even if they wanted to.” Celestia knows what a mess my reputation’s in by now. “I’m an honored guest; it’d be, like, way beyond rude.” Stop shaking, Silver. You’re perfectly safe. They can’t touch you.

The doors creaked open and a bell rang. Twirling conversations hushed and the band fell silent. Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara stepped into foyer to meet Headmistress Avalonia and the ocean of staring eyes beyond her. From the depths of the crowd, Wondermint raised a glass.

_They can’t touch you._ Silver Spoon let go of the breath she held and smiled.

Headmistress Avalonia stepped to Silver’s side and cleared her throat. “Everypony, your attention, please. The Madame Wisteria Academy for Young Fillies is honored to present tonight’s esteemed and honored guest, without whom this night would not be possible.”

Near the wall, a champagne filly curled upon a velvet cushion, her face hidden behind a lace fan—Palanquin, no doubt. She leaned over to whisper in Fair Weather’s ear. Fair Weather nodded.

Silver flicked her tail. _Pony’s sake, Fair. Just cuddle up to Discord while you’re at it._

“It is thanks to a generous set of donations from the Silver Family our school is bestowed this lovely ballroom.” Avalonia keenly ignored the whispers snaking through the crowd. “The Wisteria Academy’s Two Hundred and Fifteenth Annual Winter Gala is honored to welcome our very own Miss Sterling Silver Spoon to the grand opening of The Silver Spoon Ballroom.”

Silver bowed her head and curtsied to waves of polite applause.

Diamond Tiara gently cleared her throat.

Headmistress Avalonia inclined her hoof. “And guest.”

A twinge of some emotion crossed Diamond’s face, but vanished before Silver could spot it. Trotting her showmare’s trot, she kept to Silver’s shoulder as they cut through the crowd.

Silver Spoon’s earrings jingled as her ears swiveled to filter through the familiar voices in search of the ones she liked best. No easy feat when somepony greeted you every two seconds.

“Good evening, Silver Spoon.”

“Good evening, Sand Dollar.” Silver waved to her and nodded to a cluster of passing scholarship students she didn’t know the names of.

“Ah, Miss Silver! I hope you’ve been keeping up with your studies.”

“Yes, Mr. Martingale.” Silver stepped back from one teacher and nearly ran smack into another. “Oh! My apologies, Miss Sugarcoat. Please excuse us; I think we’re being called.” She took Diamond’s hoof and pulled her past the chocolate fountain before the etiquette teacher could remark
on their posture.

A black pinstripe suit and a fiery yellow puffball of mane bobbed through the crowd, moving at a
clip to meet them. The tip of a little brown horn poked through the coiffure. “Silver Spoon?”

“Brights!” Silver laughed and spread her forelegs to meet the brown unicorn’s hug. “Ha, I knew it
couldn’t be hard to find you.”

Brights Brightly rolled her eyes towards her horn. “Yeah, it’s kind of obvious. Oh Silver, it feels like
I haven’t seen you in twelve forevers!” She stepped away to look her over. “And you haven’t
changed a bit. I mean, the cutie mark’s new, but that’s all. It’s for tea, right?”

“Naturally.” Silver nodded towards the heart-shaped lantern on Brights’ flank, an exact match for her
family’s company logo. “No prizes guessing what yours is for.”

“Ha, nope!” Brights laughed, shaking her head. “Seriously, it’s like you never left, Silver. And to
think, dumb old Palanquin said you’d gone country.”

A filly with a deep raspberry coat stepped from the crowd, dressed in a simple black cocktail dress.
Her pink mane spiraled upwards, held with little ruby hairpins. “Quin just likes to hear herself talk,
you know that.” Primrose Path didn’t offer Silver a hug, just a smile and a nod. “Evening, Silver.
You know, just last week that old gossip tried to pass along this bogus thing about how you’d be
walking here ‘cause you couldn’t afford to take the train. Of course, I was like, ‘Silver Spoon
wouldn’t bother come all this way if she was broke’ but then she was like—oh hey, Wondermint.”

Wondermint peeked over Primrose’s shoulder and smiled. Her bodyguards stood aloof in the corner.
“Good evening, Silver Spoon. Hello again, Diamond, um…”

“Tiara,” said Diamond Tiara. She turned her smile up to full brightness.

“Oh yes, this is my plus-one, Diamond Tiara.” Silver gently nudged her into her circle of Wisteria
friends.

Primrose and Brights turned as one, blinking as if this had been the first time they’d seen her. They
looked at each other, then back to Diamond and Silver.

“Oh, hello.” Primrose Path cocked an eyebrow and side-eyed Wondermint, who shrugged. “Pleasure
to make your acquaintance.”

Brights gripped Di’s hoof in a firm businessmare’s shake. “Evening, Diamond Tiara. Brights
Brightly the Third, heiress to the Brights Brightly Corporation—we’re lighting up this whole campus
right now, you know. Not to mention most of Manehattan, Applewood, Baltimore, and Los Pegasus.
”

She winked and slipped a business card in Diamond’s slipper. “Remember: Brights Brightly lights
nightly!”

Diamond stared at the card a moment, then smiled. “Wow, you really don’t waste any time, do you?”

“Nope!” Brights’ smile was absolutely shameless.

“My dad would like you. He’s the president and C.E.O. of…”

While Diamond exchanged the regular pleasantries, Wondermint nudged Silver’s withers. Her eyes
gestured towards the left.
Somewhere alarmingly nearby, a sweet, bubbly voice giggled.

Silver’s ears shot up. Not five yards away, Toplofty watched with outstretched wings. Fair Weather and Palanquin flanked her.

“Oh, stars.” Under her dress, the hair along Silver’s spine prickled. Through tremendous effort, Silver maintained her smile. Palanquin almost never got up from her pillow, and she never, ever bothered walking anywhere. Not unless Toplofty gave her a good reason.

Wondermint shook her head when Silver tensed to move. “No use. Look.”

A pack of Toplofty’s second-tier vultures skulked a respectful distance away. At least half the ponies here had three hooves in their own offshoot cliques and one hoof trying to carve a spot in Toplofty’s circle. No telling how many fillies stood between here and safety.

“Sorry, Silver. Most of them got here before I did.”

Silver’s eye darted to Diamond, still busy discussing Barnyard Bargains with Brights Brightly. “Any idea what her game is?”

“None. I’ve barely seen her or Fair since Homecoming.” Wondermint nudged Brights, who nodded and kept on talking.

Primrose Path saw them, too. Her hooves fidgeted to run, but politeness dictated she make the next move. She gritted her teeth and held out her hoof. “So, Diamond, how do you know Silver Spoon?”

Diamond Tiara wrapped a hoof around Silver’s shoulder and squeezed for dear life. “We’re friends.” Diamond might not have known the intricacies of a Wisterian ambush, but she certainly smelled blood in the water.

“Oh, absolutely!” Silver squeezed back, keeping an eye out for an exit. “The best of friends! You know, my tea parties just wouldn’t be the same without her.”

“I don’t doubt it. Speaking of tea, why don’t we have some?” Primrose fluttered her eyelashes and stepped into Toplofty’s path. “It’s such a beautiful night, why don’t we all sit on the patio? I just want to visit the chocolate fountain first.” She swept back into the crowd.

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon made a beeline for the patio, Wondermint and Brights Brightly flanking their sides.

Behind them, Primrose Path’s voice perked in a delighted, “Hello, Palanquin! How are you tonight? Oh, and Toplofty, are those new earrings?”

The patio doors lay just ten feet away. Bless you, Prim.

Fair Weather’s beaming face popped into their path. “Silver Spoon, hello!” Her wings spread wide—and rudely—to eat up most of the doorway. “I wondered where you’d stolen off to. How’s Ponyville?”


Brights jostled Fair’s wing out of the way. “If you’ll excuse us, we’re having tea.”

“Golly, what a crazy coincidence!” The crowd parted for Toplofty, who beamed wider and brighter
than Pinkie Pie and Diamond Tiara on pageant day put together. Her yellow mane bounced on her shoulders as she skipped up to them. “We were just about to do the exact same thing!”

Fair Weather nodded. “We sure were.”

Palanquin finally appeared at Toplofty’s side, mouth pinched. She’d probably had to speedwalk to catch them. “Hello, Silver Spoon. It’s been a while.”


Fair Weather at least had the decency to look away.

“We almost thought we’d missed you all.” Palanquin slid a green eye towards Primrose Path, who offered an I tried shrug by the punch bowl. “You’re ever so popular these days, Silver Spoon. However you manage to do it, I’ll never know. Evening, Brightly. Mints.”

Brights Brightly, shouldered off to the sidelines, frowned. “Quin.”

Wondermint pressed close to Brights’ side and didn’t say anything at all.

“Just in time to have tea with the guest of honor!” Toplofty wrapped one foreleg around Silver’s withers, the other around Diamond’s, and hugged. Her feathers mushed against Silver Spoon’s cheek. “Mm! How lucky are we, huh?”

“…Yeah.” Diamond Tiara cast Silver a should-I-be-worried glance. “Who are you, again?”

Toplofty blinked and pulled them all into a walk. She hadn’t had to introduce herself in years. “Ha! That’s what I get for getting ahead of myself.” She shrugged her lilac shoulders, giggling. “I’m Toplofty, of the east Manehattan Loftys.”

Somepony opened the doors for them, and all six fillies stepped onto the patio. Somehow, it seemed more populated than it had been a few moments ago. Toplofty quickly found a table and offered Silver a seat.

Silver let Diamond sit first before taking her own. “Thank you, Lofty.” She smiled. “You’re too kind.”

“Aw, Silvs.” She slipped in next to Diamond, watching Wondermint quietly take the long way to the far side of the table. “You know I’d do anything for you. Us Wisterians have to look out for each other. Right, Minty?”

Wondermint folded her hooves and blinked as her walls went up. She’d never mastered the art of verbal sparring, but her walls were nearly impenetrable. She’d stay quiet for the rest of teatime, if not the remainder of the party. Nothing safer than silence.

Palanquin brushed snow off her hooves and curled next to Silver before Brights had a chance to sit. “It’s a lovely patio, isn’t it?”

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“Sure is.” Brights Brightly narrowed her eyes at fillies chatting around them, many of them the same familiar faces nipping at Toplofty’s heels not ten minutes ago. “It’s certainly a popular spot.”

“I know, right?” Fair Weather swooped on the last seat, blinking back at the unicorn’s frown. “Oh no, I’m so sorry, Brights! You weren’t about to sit here, were you? I’ll get up.”

Brights Brightly’s hackles rose, but she said the only thing she could. “Don’t trouble yourself. It’s
“alright.” She took a table nearby and called down a waiter for some steamed milk.

While the waiter took Brights’ order, Palanquin took the opportunity to ask for Earl Grey.

Silver Spoon rolled her eyes. *Leave it to Palanquin to choose the most uninspired tea ever.* “My friend will have lemon and ginseng.”

The waiter nodded. “And for you, Miss Silver?”

“Surprise me.” Silver glanced at Diamond Tiara, who kept Toplofty occupied with weather small talk.

The tip of Diamond’s tail swished thoughtfully, and she leaned forward with her hooves folded. She sat on guard and on watch, though perhaps unsure of what to watch for. Understandable; Lofty had that effect on ponies. For now, Di seemed alright.

Meanwhile, other whisperings of the room buzzed in Silver’s ear:

“—got some nerve…”

“Can you imagine? She acts as if nothing’s happened at all.”

“…didn’t even need another ballroom.”

“My mom donates, but you don’t see me with a building. Like, she doesn’t even go here.”

Silver flipped her tail and paid it no mind. Jealous naysayers came a dime a dozen, and half the smack fillies talked had no malice in it anyhow; talk for the sake of talk. Besides, even Silver Spoon couldn’t rebuild a reputation weathered by Palanquin’s tongue, not in one night and certainly not surrounded by Lofty’s dish lickers.

*Ladies pick their battles wisely.* Silver nodded to her old tennis team, a few of them stopping to shake her hoof and deliver congratulations. *Maybe I can’t fix it all, but I may not need to.* After all, she still had allies where it mattered. That, plus a carefully maintained decorum, and she might still make it.

Her eyes darted back to Palanquin, who flicked her fan open and pretended to study the skylight. *Who even brings a fan in the middle of winter?* “Admiring the architecture, ‘Quin?”

“Mm, it’s a gorgeous building, Silver Spoon.” Palanquin idly stroked her auburn mane, smiling at the rafters. Her eyes slowly slid back to the table guests. “Why, it’s enough to…leave a pony bankrupt.”

An unusually strong opening, but if Palanquin wanted to waste her big plays early on, Silver couldn’t complain. “Thank you. It’s one of the best presents a filly could receive. I’m sure you’ll have one of your own one of these days.” Silver shrugged and reached to take her tea. “Dean Avalonia would never leave you out. She thought to give your sister a fountain, after all.” She took a small sip: strong, simple black with a hint of lemon. Not bad. “A library wing, a plaque in the gym… I’m sure your mother will think to give you *something.*”

Though of course, Wisteria policy maintained just one namesake for each family. But it was the thought that counted.

Fair Weather popped an *hors d’oeuvre* in her mouth. “So, you didn’t get your tickets until Hearth’s Warming, huh? Guess that explains why nopony got an rsvp from you ‘till the last minute.”

Palanquin nodded. “Of course, there’s no knowing how long it took to get there. I expect the mail’s
slower way out in the country, down in…” Her hoof twirled in the air, searching for the name.

“‘Quin, don’t be silly, you know it’s Ponyville,” said Toplofty. “Everypony knows Ponyville, right, er…?” Toplofty closed her pink eyes and hummed. “You know, I don’t think I got your name.”

“Diamond Tiara, I think?” Fair Weather looked to Di for confirmation, then nodded. “Yes, that’s it.”

Toplofty lifted her eyebrows. “Not the same Diamond Tiara whose father runs Barnyard Bargains?”
Genuine and sweet, Lofty’s smile could have warmed a windigo’s heart. “Largest business in the whole town, right?”

Silver Spoon narrowed her eyes.

Lofty giggled. “What, I can’t read a business magazine now and then?”

“Um…yeah.” With a jittering little laugh, Diamond’s shoulders slowly relaxed. “Yeah, I am—he does! Oldest and largest business in Ponyville since before the town got officially founded.”

Impressed murmurs rolled across the table and into the crowd.

“Huh!” Toplofty folded her hooves under her chin and leaned over the table. “I have to say, Diamond, that’s really impressive. I mean, if not for your address, I bet you’d totes make Wisteria material with those kinds of credentials.”

Fair Weather nodded. “Such a posh little pony. It’s no wonder you’re Silver Spoon’s best friend.”
Before Silver could try to derail, the pegasus turned to her with innocent eyes. “That’s right, isn’t it? You two are just the bestest of friends?”

Silver Spoon stirred a bit of sugar in her tea, took a deep breath, and nodded. She didn’t trust herself to keep decorum if she spoke.

“Inseparable from the start, too. Ponies like us, we’re just, like, drawn to each other, you know?” Diamond sipped her tea with a smile. A genuine one.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it.” Toplofty’s voice lilted sweet, welcoming, and completely unreadable.

Silver’s stomach tied in a knot. If she could just sniff out the angle of attack, she might parry with a bit of gossip. If she knew any.

Palanquin winked. “Only the best for our Silver Spoon.” Her eyes widened, wild with delight. “Goodness! Lofty, Fair, would you look at her tiara!” Laughter crept into her voice and poisoned every word. “Can you even believe it, ladies? A real, actual tiara, just like a princess!”

Doubt crept into Diamond’s face. She flicked an ear and tried to pass it off with a chuckle. “Heh, I don’t know if I’d say—”

“Oh no, but you are! Why, practically the princess of Ponyville. After all, you’re certainly dressed for it.” Toplofty’s wing played with the ruffles of Diamond’s sleeve.

“Positively majestic,” said Palanquin.

Fair spread her wings like Celestia on the five-bit coin. “Extravagant!”

“Oh ooh and those slippers! Right out of a fairy tale, huh?” Toplofty shared a giggle with Palanquin. “You’d better watch out, Diamond Tiara. Luna might get jealous.”
This is too easy. Silver frowned behind her teacup. It’s not even a fight. They’re just toying with her.

Diamond Tiara folded her hooves in her lap, letting her curly bangs dangle in her face as needlepoints of laughter bit into her skin. Pain shot across her wide blue eyes, staring at Silver Spoon.

And she knows it. Everypony knows it.

All too late, her mistake lay in the Manehattan moonlight, clear as thin ice. Distracted by the delight of the new building and returning to her old haunts, Silver Spoon had forgotten the first thing she’d learned from the move: Manehattan is not Ponyville. After almost a full year of absence, she’d returned rusty and unarmed. No good gossip to parry with and no secrets to wield.

Still, if Silver was out of practice, she still knew her backstroke in this ocean of privileged ponies. But Diamond…well, dogpaddling in small ponds just didn’t cut it.

“What’s the tiara made of, ‘princess’?” All pretense of sincerity dropped from Toplofty’s voice. “Platinum? Silver?”

Palanquin hid her face behind her fan and stage whispered, “Tin and shot glass?”

Fair Weather—the two-faced sycophant—didn’t even bother with tact and blew into full on laughter.

Toplofty waved a hoof. “Oh, ‘Quin, be nice.”

Diamond slugged back the last of her tea and looked up to face everypony at the table. Her eyes shone with the threat of tears, but her teeth clenched in a vicious snarl of a smile. “It’s made of diamonds,” she said. The teacup trembled in her hooves. “And steel.”

Wondermint brushed her mane back and stared at the table cloth. New money, old money, or no money, she knew a furious pony when she saw one.

Gearing up for a counterattack, Diamond Tiara paused. Her ears swiveled to follow a passing cluster of scholarship students. She turned towards the ballroom, apparently struck by something, though looking into the throng of rental dresses and cheap shoes, Silver couldn’t say what.

The bottom of Diamond’s mouth trembled as if she might cry after all. “Uh, sorry, there’s something I have to…to look into.” She pushed out her chair, careful of the stiff crinoline. “I’ll be right back.”

Palanquin watched Diamond bolt into the throng of partygoers and flicked her hair with a scoff. “Fifty bits says she won’t be.”

Voices pitched up at the far edge of the patio in a gossipy tizzy. No doubt it’d travel back to them in a few minutes, whatever it was.

Fair Weather sneered. “Eighty says she comes back in another trashy circus tent dress.”

“Oh my gosh, Silver Spoon, she is just adorable! Funniest filly I’ve met since…well, I can’t even remember.” Toplofty dabbed a tear with her handkerchief, though she didn’t laugh hard enough for it. “There, you see, ‘Quin? I told you Silver Spoon’s not such a stick in the mud.”

Fair Weather elbowed Palanquin’s side with a chuckle. “But didn’t I tell you guys? Didn’t I? No pony in Manehattan plays their cards as smooth as Silver does.”

“Alright, so I’m wrong once in awhile.” Palanquin rolled her eyes. “So sue me.”
Silver Spoon blinked. “Pardon?” She tried to keep an eye on Diamond through the window, but she’d gone behind a pillar.

“Credit where it’s due, Miss Silver. Truly a brilliant move on your part.” Palanquin lifted her teacup high. “In a thousand years, I’d have never thought you capable of a Foxglove Maneuver.” She said it just loud enough to reach the surrounding tables.

Brights Brighty’s ears shot straight up and she spun about in her chair.

“Well…” Toplofty steepled her hooves and closed her eyes with a gentle little sigh, appreciating the night air. “Maybe you just don’t know Silver Spoon, ‘Quin.”

The tradition had as many aliases as it had schools. At Merrylegs East they called it a Pyrite Pass. The public schools knew it as The Cuckoo Shuffle. In Canterlot (rumored to originate there), they’d simply named it a Zirconia. Wisteria Academy always knew it as The Foxglove Maneuver.

An ancient, but simple concept: invite a pony (usually some uppity scholarship student) as a joke and see how long it takes them to figure out everypony was laughing at them. Done right, the game could last the entire night, though Silver knew of only one pony who’d managed it.

“Mmm, it reminds me of the good old days. I mean, there’s just nothing like a classic Foxglove.” Toplofty draped a hoof on Silver’s withers and tipped her head back to grin into Brights Brightly’s horrified face. “Is there, Brights?”

And there it was. Silver frowned. I’ve got to hand it to Lofty. The filly knows how to bait a trap.

At Silver’s frown, Palanquin tilted her head. “You look a little troubled. Whatever’s the matter, Silver Spoon? You pulled it off beautifully.”

Toplofty’s giggle sounded how being pinched felt. “Oh, she’s just a little sulky it wasn't perfect. Chin up, Silver! Take pride in your victory—oh, unless…” She put her hooves to her mouth in faux-shock. “Unless it wasn’t?”

Silver Spoon gritted her teeth behind a tight-lipped smile.

Fair Weather gasped on cue. “No! You can’t mean a sincere invitation?”

“Fair, what a thing to say! Nopony’s that desperate.” Lofty took Silver’s hooves in hers and pulled her in so close Silver smelled Lofty’s bilberry conditioner. “I know you’ve had your differences, but to imply she invited new money—”

Palanquin snorted. “Ugh. Practically rolled off the mint. It’s even worse than a—hm?” She flicked her fan open and leaned back to hear the whisperings behind her. “Well!” The fan snapped shut. “It appears our very own Ponyville princess is getting chummy with the charity case.”

“You mean Pot Luck?” Fair Weather struggled to see over the crowd.

Silver rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Sure she is, ‘Quin.” New money or not, Diamond still had standards.

“Uh, excuse me?” Glaring, Palanquin swung her fan towards the ballroom. “I am not a liar, Miss Silver Spoon.”

“And kindly notice that I did not call you one, Miss Palanquin, but I’m sure you’ve simply misunderstood. There’s no reason for Diamond Tiara to associate with scholarship students.” Silver Spoon sat up in her seat to see for herself. Her face fell.
She’d been right. Diamond wasn’t talking to the scholarship student, but the mare accompanying her.

Not in school colors or wearing an official flower, the mare couldn’t be a teacher, but a guest. Pot Luck’s guest. Silver Spoon couldn’t quite see the face, but she’d know that pink mane, golden coat, and streamlined dress suit anywhere. After all, she’d seen her on Diamond’s wall hundreds of times.

In the foyer, Golden Glitter draped a hoof around Diamond Tiara’s withers and gave her daughter a squeeze. A chubby red pony in a nicer dress than she could afford—Pot Luck, most likely—smiled next to them while excited scholarship fillies and bored gossips watched from the sidelines.

Fair Weather sucked her teeth. “I bet Pots is blabbing on about that stupid play. Again.”

Normally, that would be Toplofty’s cue to giggle and chide Fair for not appreciating a schoolmate’s accomplishments, but she’d grown quiet. Thoughtful. Dangerous.

“Oh, is she in a play?” Silver Spoon dove for the change of subject and gripped it tight. If she could get Fair Weather on a tangential rant, she’d fly the conversation clear to Mustangia. “Like, for the school pageant, or…?”

“Bridleway,” Fair Weather sneered. Her feathers ruffled the fine silk of her dress. “Got in by the skin of her teeth, I bet. Whatever, you know it’s just gonna close in like, two weeks or something.”

“Have the reviews come out?” Silver fluttered her eyelashes and didn’t dare look away from Fair and her fascinating opinions. “What’s it called?”

Fair Weather said that she couldn’t recall. More like she never bothered to learn it.

“I think the critics liked it, last I heard.” Palanquin thought on it, tapping her fan against her hoof. “It’s…um, Something… on the Hill?”

Silver thought back to the flier in the cab. “Hinny of the Hills?”

“I guess,” said Palanquin. “She would be in a play about a half-donkey.”

Fair Weather lifted a wing as if ready to clap somepony over the head. “Ugh, and she acts like she’s so much better now! I mean, where does she even get off?”

Toplofty shifted in her chair, ears struggling to hear the rumbles of gossip over Fair’s steadily rising voice.

“Like, you know she actually spoke to Bank Roll in the hall the other week, right? Right in the hall in front of everypony and out of nowhere!”

Got her. “No!” gasped Silver Spoon. “I don’t believe it.”

“Oh, you’d better believe it, Miss Silver! I flew right on by and saw the whole thing with my own eyes—of course, you know I’ve got eyes like an owl, Silver—and I am telling you, that arrogant little toad just skipped up to Bankroll all like, ‘Do you know if the economics project is due this week?’ like it was nothing. Oh, poor Bankroll, I just thought she’d die. What is Wisteria coming to, girls? I don’t know where ponies get off these days, I really don’t.”

“Fair, you can’t let fillies get to you this way. Look, your feathers are all in a fluff now. Besides, it’s a good thing our little Pot Luck’s successful.” Toplofty lifted an eyebrow at Silver Spoon with a wry
nice-try grin. “Why, she’s doing so well she even brought her agent for a plus-one.” Her grin swelled at Silver’s furious stare. “Oh. Speaking of which, isn’t that your plus-one hugging hers, Silver Spoon?”

“Oh, I, um…can’t see from this angle.” Silver looked away and fiddled with her glasses frames. A small gesture, but more than enough for Toplofty.

The filly watched her for a moment, just to be sure. “You brought her for real, didn’t you?” Toplofty’s whisper trembled with absolute delight. “Didn’t you?”

Silver Spoon’s ears drooped and she averted her eyes to the window. Golden Glitter had her muzzle in Diamond’s ear. The two of them nodded and parted ways. Diamond had her confident trot back, but she moved slower, not with defeat but with purpose. A flock of fillies trailed her at a safe distance with Primrose Path at the front.

“Ooh! Here she comes again,” said Fair Weather. “Looks like you owe me fifty bits, ‘Quin.”

“Small price to pay.” Palanquin fished out a pouch of bits and slid it across the table. “I haven’t had this much fun since forever.”

Silver Spoon couldn’t see Diamond’s face yet, but she already felt the hair on her spine stand up. A hurricane was coming.

Something must have shown on her face, because Wondermint—after a moment of consideration—broke decorum and reached across the table to take Silver’s hoof. “It’ll be alright, Silver.” She offered one of her rare comforting smiles. “You made the best of your circumstances, that’s all anypony can ask.”

Palanquin waved her fan in the air, as if flagging down a courier. “We’re over here. By the way, I just love your dress!” Hardly bothering to lower her voice, she turned to Fair Weather and added, “That is the ugliest dress I’ve ever seen in my entire life.”

“Really, ‘Quin?” Diamond Tiara didn’t bother sitting. The red rims smoldering under her eyes matched her eyeshadow. Her concrete smile had a lazy curve to it. “Weird, you’d think a pony with so much money could afford a mirror.” She spoke with a smooth, serene lilt.

Silver Spoon had never seen her so angry. “…Di?”

Diamond gave her a slow, impassive blink. “Silver.”

Silver touched her hoof under the table, staring up at her. Diamond, please. Whatever it is, don’t do it.

Diamond’s tongue ran along the edge of her teeth. Her gaze bounced from pony to pony, resting a long moment on Toplofty, who waved at her. She glanced back at Silver Spoon’s expression, gritted her teeth, and sighed. Diamond let the sun come back to her face and patted Silver’s hoof back.

“Silvie, you’ll never guess who I just ran into. My mom’s actually here! I don’t want to drag you from teatime, but she’s been dying to meet you.” Diamond pulled Silver’s chair out without letting go of her hoof. “You’ve got to come say hello.”

“What a lovely idea, Diamond!” Silver gave Diamond’s hoof a thank-you squeeze. “I’d love to.”

The game was over. It had been over since Diamond abandoned the table ten minutes ago. But Toplofty had never been a gracious winner. “Your mother, Diamond? But I thought you lived in
Ponyville, what’s she doing all the way in Manehattan?” She twirled her hoof in her mane, the picture of innocent curiosity. “Is she a teacher?”

“No, actually. She’s a talent agent.” Thunder rumbled in Diamond’s casual laugh. “Just got a Wisteria student on Bridleway.” Willing to drop it there, she pulled Silver from her chair and turned for the ballroom.

“Ah!” said Toplofty. “So she’s the help.”

Silver Spoon took one look at the brief flash of lightning in Diamond Tiara’s eyes and stepped back. A pony could only take so much.

“Hm. I guess you’re right, Toplofty. She is.” Diamond adjusted her steel tiara, idly investigating her reflection in the glossy flooring. “I don’t always see my mom as much as I’d like to, but I don’t think I need to tell you what that’s like, Lofty. After all…” Her gaze shot up and straight into Toplofty’s eyes. “Yours hasn’t been seen in three years. Oh, Hearth’s Warming just ended, didn’t it? Make that four.”

The dull chatter around the patio collapsed into silence. So quiet Silver could hear a monocle plop into a champagne glass.

Wisteria’s horde of ladder-climbers, dish lickers, gossips, haters, gawkers, and rivals; the beautiful old money, glittering new money and hopeful no money alike, watched and waited. Surely any moment now, Toplofty would laugh it off, lobby an insult, or at least deny it.

She didn’t.

Toplofty’s glittered eyebrows pinched together. One wing drooped crooked and a couple of feathers fell to the floor. Her cheeks turned a furious shade of pink. Her mouth opened a little, but no sound came out, not even a gasp of outrage. For the first time in the six years Silver knew her, Toplofty—first and only daughter of a hotel mogul and a senator—frowned.

Wondermint leaned over to Brights and whispered, “Is that true?”

Brights Brightly surveyed the crowd and the growing rumbles of doubt. Every added second of silence eroded Toplofty’s reputation. “Doesn’t matter,” she said. “It is now.”

Palanquin retreated behind her fan.

Diamond Tiara idly twirled her mane and blinked at the crowd as if she’d just noticed them. “What? Don’t tell me you guys didn’t know that? Funny, all of Applewood does.”

She shrugged and looked to Toplofty again. “Hey, don’t worry, Lofty. Like, it’s no big deal, right? I’m sure she’ll be back eventually. Not like Silk Stocking would just abandon you for some pretty chorus colt. I mean, that’d just leave the business in ruins.” Diamond pretended to think for a moment and clicked her tongue. “Wait, my mistake. That’s exactly what happened.”

Silver shook her head. She had no words. All this time feeling terrible for bringing Diamond unarmed to a swordfight, and now she pulls a sledgehammer from her pocket.

In the quiet of the patio, somepony laughed—a squeezed, hysterical little giggle of disbelief. After a moment, Silver Spoon realized it was coming from her. “Oh no, I’m sorry, I don’t…” She put a hoof to her mouth to suppress it, but it only made her laugh harder.

Toplofty snapped her frazzled wings back with a snort. Her breath hissed through clenched teeth.
“Oh, shut up, Silver Spoon! What, like you’ve got room to talk? You’re too broke to even afford Wisteria anymore because your father’s too stupid to track who handles his money. This building wouldn’t even exist if your grandfather hadn’t bailed him out.”

Palanquin’s eyes stretched wide. Quietly, she eased into a chair on the far side of Toplofty. Fair Weather went aloft and slid into the anonymity of the crowd.

Silver touched her pearl necklace and looked at the ground. Of course she shouldn’t care about anything Toplofty said, but to hear it out loud and in the open… it hurt more than Silver expected.

Ugly murmurs of disapproval rumbled through the crowd. Tongues tisked, heads shook, and absolutely nopony would look Lofty in the eye. Wondermint, Primrose, Brights, and everypony else within reach folded around Silver Spoon to offer consolations and apologies on Wisteria’s behalf.

Realization dawned on Toplofty’s face. She assessed the room, measuring her chances of recovery. For a moment, it seemed like she’d double back and apologize. “I…”

Diamond Tiara giggled.

Toplofty swallowed hard, wrenching her hooves into the tablecloth. In a low, husky voice she hissed, “The only reason you’re both here is charity and pity, Silver Spoon. I hope you know that.”

Palanquin peered over her fan. “That might be, Lofty, but at least Silver still remembers her manners.” She shut the fan with a sneer. “Not to mention her composure. Silver Spoon, that was completely uncalled for. I apologize.”

“Insulting the guest of honor, and in her own building, too.” Diamond shook her head. “Just terrible. I mean, I’m just from little old Ponyville and even I know that. Come on, Silver, my mom’s waiting by the fountains.”

The crowd parted before they even moved. A few reached out to offer their own little apologies as they passed.

Brights gave Diamond another card on their way out. “Nice meeting you, Diamond Tiara. Have your dad wire mine sometime.” She gave Silver Spoon a little pat on the back. “Sorry Lofty’s such a nag, Silver.”

Silver nodded to the room graciously. “It’s alright. We really did have a lovely time, otherwise.”

“We sure did.” Diamond paused when they reached the door. “Oh, and tell Toplofty I loved her dress. Saw it on clearance last week in Canterlot.”

The burst of winter air made Silver Spoon’s teeth chatter. “Diamond, what was that?” She said it more to herself than anything.

“What? I didn’t do a thing. Toplofty’s the one who put her hoof in her mouth.” Diamond rolled her shoulders, trying not to shiver. “Technically, I don’t need to follow any of Wisteria’s rules. I’m just the tacky plus-one, remember? Besides, I didn’t break any of ‘em.”

Diamond had a point. She hadn’t raised her voice or been rude at all. She’d made an unthinkably
bold hit—any other pony than Toplofty and Silver might have called it cruel—but one well within legal boundaries.

“No, I guess not,” said Silver Spoon. She looked over her shoulder at the warm light of her ballroom and wondered who’d fill the power vacuum. Palanquin couldn’t hold the roost alone, after all. *I bet it’ll be Primrose Path. She’s craftier than Brights and bolder than Wondermint.* Come to think of it, only returning to Ponyville held Silver back from taking the position herself.

*No doubt Fair Weather’ll just move back to her old spot.* The blue pegasus silently flew a respectful distance behind them, waiting for a chance to kiss flank. Her gaudy gold feather tips jingled like a coin purse. Silver looked away before they made eye contact, but Fair Weather swooped in anyway.

“Hey, you know I didn’t mean any of that, don’t you Silvs? I mean, you know how Lofty can be and when you were gone, what else was I supposed to do? That’s just how it works, you know? No hard feelings, right? I was never really against you, Silver Spoon, truly I wasn’t.” Fair Weather banked right, so that she fluttered just overhead. “Miss Tiara, who does your mane? It looks amazing.”

“I know.” Diamond rolled her eyes, but didn’t bother shooing the pegasus off. “I just told the truth, Silver Spoon; nothing wrong with that. Honesty’s an Element of Harmony, you know.” She waited a few seconds before adding, “And it’s not like you were gonna do anything.”

“Di, it—” With a cautious glance upwards, Silver moved in closer and lowered her voice. “It’s not like that, I…it’s just been a long time since Lofty jumped me so hard.” *Or so well prepared.* Silver scowled up at Fair’s pathetic face hovering above them. *Easy guess who tipped her off.* “Fair Weather, don’t you have someplace to be?”

Fair Weather fluffed her feathers for warmth. She’d left so fast, she didn’t even get her coat. “Why would I, Silver Spoon? I haven’t seen you since you moved out. The penthouse is so boring these days and Wonder hardly talks to me anymore. I, uh...” Her ears drooped a little at Silver’s scowl. “How’s Ponyville? Is the country air as nice as they say?”

Silver picked up the pace, but the tightness of her gown wouldn’t let her run. “Weather’s alright. But you know what the best thing about Ponyville is?” She fixed Fair Weather with a corrosive stare. “No panhandlers.”

“Silver, I really didn’t mean—”

“I know what you meant, Fair Weather.” Silver nodded to the fountains. “If you’ll excuse us, we’ve got places to be. Enjoy the rest of the gala.”

Fair Weather drifted away without so much as a half-hearted farewell. A gust of air and a little sigh was the only sign she’d left at all.

The fountains splashed up ahead, backlit by a soft, green light. Diamond ran ahead to meet the mare and filly sitting by the edge.

“A-ha, there they are! The fillies of the hour.” Golden Glitter snapped her pocket mirror shut and stepped up to meet them. Pot Luck hid behind her and gave a little wave.

The mare had cheekbones sharp enough to cut gems and the brightest teeth Silver had ever seen. A pony couldn’t quite guess her age under all the makeup and the moussed power hair, but she looked a little younger than Mr. Rich (and much younger than Di’s stepmother). A little pair of green sunglasses rested on her nose despite it being well after dark.
Golden Glitter was a patchwork of locales: Applewood smile, hungry Manehattan posture, Trottingham fashion, and an accent that twisted somewhere between east-Fillydelphia and Canterlot. If somepony told Silver that Golden Glitter came from Ponyville, she’d have never believed it. Never.

Silver Spoon curtsied. “Good evening, Miss Golden.”

“Shush, Miss Golden is my mother.” She bent to shake Silver’s hoof, lowering her little green sunglasses to wink at her. She smelled of new carriages and hollyhock perfume. “Call me Goldie, hon.”

That didn’t seem like a proper way to address an adult, but Silver nodded anyway.

She nodded to the red filly behind her. “I assume you already know my client?”

“Of course, we go way back.” Silver had barely known what the kid looked like until tonight. “Evening, Pot Luck.”

The scholarship student blinked, confused. It might have been the first time somepony in Silver’s class ever really talked to her. “Good evening, Miss Silver.” She bit her lip, struggling to remember the proper greeting for special guests. “Um, it’s…an honor to…”

Diamond Tiara rolled her eyes. “We’re off the clock, kid. Relax.”

Pot Luck looked to Silver to be sure. When Silver nodded, she sighed and smiled. “Okay, good. You got a killer ballroom, Silver. Toola Roola an’ I really dig it.”

Silver hardly understood half of that. “Um, thank you.”

“Yes, congratulations, hon.” Golden Glitter smoothed out the frills on Diamond’s collar and readjusted the tiara. “I’d like to get Diamond’s name on a sign one of these days.” The Applewood smile strained under a flat chuckle. “Of course, it might have happened already if Filthy hadn’t chained her to that podunk little—”

“Mom?” Diamond’s ears gave a nervous little twitch. “No Dad talk, remember? You promised.”

“Just thinking out loud, princess.” Golden peered over her sunglasses, watching Fair Weather retreat into the ballroom. “How’d you make out in the shark tank? You wow the judges?”

Diamond puffed her chest. “Ten out of ten.”

Golden Glitter kissed the top of Di’s head. “That’s my champion! But no slacking off like that next time, okay? You can’t let ponies push you around that way.” She gave Di’s withers a little jostle. “No losers in this family, right?”

“Right.”

“Good. Oh, Silver Spoon?” Golden pointed to Brass Tacks, who’d followed at a gracious distance since Silver and Diamond left the ballroom. “That’s your escort, isn’t it?”

“He is, ma—” Silver frowned. If Diamond’s mom didn’t want to be ”miss”, then she’d certainly not want to be “ma’am”. She just waved Tacks over so she wouldn’t have to finish the sentence. “Brass Tacks, this is Golden Glitter. She’s Diamond Tiara’s mom. …The other one.”

The slender unicorn bowed his head, but never took his eyes off the mare. “A pleasure.”
“Pleasure’s all mine.” Golden smiled at the assortment of fillies at her hooves. “Say, you’re all going to catch the train back to Ponyville soon, right?”

“Late tomorrow, yes.” He frowned at Diamond’s grin, sensing an unexpected change in schedule. “Why?”

“Why don’t you skip the train and let me give you a lift instead?”

Before Brass Tacks could question it, Diamond popped up at his shoulder and practically screamed, “She’s got a blimp!” She bounced on her hooves and giggled. “It’s huge and it’s got its own pilot and we won’t have to deal with crowds and it’s, like, way faster!”

Silver Spoon lifted her eyebrows. “A blimp? Like…an air-ship blimp?”

“Technically,” Pot Luck said, “it’s the theater’s blimp. It’s for advertising.”

“And what better way to advertise than to spread word across the kingdom? Plus, you get to arrive in style.” Golden smirked and pushed her glasses high on her nose. “Bet nopony else in Ponyville is rocking a blimp.”

Little snowflake flurries drifted in the air as the group made their way off school grounds. The cab had already arrived.

“I think Cherry Berry’s got a hot air balloon,” said Silver Spoon. “Though, I’m not sure that counts.”

Diamond stuck her nose in the air. “It doesn’t.”

Brass Tacks flicked his tail thoughtfully. “Mm. It’s safe, I trust?”

“Oh, safest outside teleportation!” Golden Glitter put Toplofty’s grin to shame.

Silver gently tugged her butler’s coattails. “Please, Tacks?”

Outnumbered three to one and too tired to argue, Brass Tacks sighed. “I suppose it couldn’t do any harm. Though I expect Madam Perfect might become alarmed at the sight of an airship in the yard.”

Golden pricked her ears. “Oh? You mean they didn’t come to…?” She glanced at Silver Spoon and frowned. “Hmm, I guess they wouldn’t, would they?”

The cab waited for them. Silver clutched her shawl, watching the tall gates of Wisteria Academy pass over her for certainly the last time. It didn’t hurt as bad as it did last year, at least. When she looked up again, she found Diamond’s mom watching her.

“Yeah, I know. Back to Ponyville after all this? Just like going into a bathtub after swimming the ocean.” Golden patted Silver’s shoulder. “It’s rough, but I think you’ll get through it. I mean, you can’t go wrong when Diamond Tiara’s with you.”

Diamond smiled at the praise, but her tail dragged as she climbed into the cab. “I don’t know. Ponyville’s not that bad.”

“I didn’t say it was, princess. It’s just a bit…humbler.” Golden shrugged and popped her jacket collar. The snow had picked up. “I’ll see you all bright and early, alright?”

“Okay, see you tomorrow, Mom.” Diamond scooted over to make room for Silver Spoon, who had to clutch the edges of her dress to keep the slush from the fabric. “Hey, Silvie, there’s something I’ve been wondering about.”
Silver tugged the last of her dress safely inside before the valet closed the door on it. “Yes?”

“That thing Toplofty said. About the money, I mean. Is that true?”

Silver Spoon paused, one hoof still on the door as the cab lurched into motion. “Of course it is. I mean, we’re not, like, broke broke. We’ve still got more money than everypony in Ponyville besides you and Princess Twilight. But we used to be the fourth richest family in Manehattan, and now…” She gestured to the cab roof overhead.

“Oh.” Diamond let her back legs dangle off the seat and poked at a coffee cup somepony left behind. “Um. Sorry about that, I guess.”

Silver flattened her ears, not at all in the mood to be made fun of. “Like you already didn’t know.”

“I didn’t, Silver Spoon.” Diamond Tiara tilted her head with a perplexed little frown. “Why would I?”

“I guess I don’t know.” Silver rested her back against the seat and wondered what time it was. It felt like they might have been out anywhere between two and twelve hours. She watched the bright lights of Manehattan’s nightlife skim across the window, smeared by snow and ice. “Doesn’t really matter now, anyway.”
Diamond Tiara smushed her cheek against the blimp window. Her breath fogged on the thick, chilled glass as she struggled to catch a good angle. “Ooh, Silver Spoon, look! Look, you can see all of Ponyville from up here!” She pointed to an ominous dark green splotch on the white landscape that sucked in the sunlight. “There’s the Everfree Forest, so that must be Fluttershy’s house.”

“Ooh.” Silver Spoon cradled her cup of morning tea and peered at the miniature cottage. Tiny animals mulled by a coin-sized pond and stared at the strange shadow at their paws.

Farther out lay Ponyville: a branchwork of icy streets lined with tiny roofs peeking out from snowy blankets. Needlepoint hoofprints crisscrossed the lumpy sheets of snow. Silver held her teacup to the window. At this distance, all of Ponyville fit inside of it, with Fluttershy’s cottage at the handle and the road to Canterlot skimming the outer rim.

“It’s all so tiny from up here,” Silver said. “Even though we’re coming in to land.” The lights of Manehattan had chased them for hours, even after they’d climbed miles into the atmosphere. Fillydelphia’s sprawl had lingered from dinner to bedtime.

At full height and speed, the blimp would have passed Ponyville before Silver finished her tea.

“It’s kinda like seeing a toy town, isn’t it, Di?”

“I know, right? It’s, like, so weird. Like a whole different place.” Diamond squinted at a golden weathervane winking in the pink sunlight. “Oh hey, there’s my house! See the pool?”

Golden Glitter sat up in her lounge chair. “It’s the same size it always is, Diamond.” She left her Iron Will self-help book on the table and joined her daughter at the window. The mansion’s little reflection skimed across her sunglasses. “But sometimes, you need distance to see things the way they really are. That’s called perspective, Diamond Tiara. Remember that.”

“I will, Mom.” Diamond smiled up at Golden a moment and glanced away from her house in search of some other point of interest. “I bet you could see your house from here too, Silver.”

A white house in the middle of a snow laden town? Silver doubted it. “Yeah, maybe. It’s not far from here.”

Wholly uninterested in the likelihoods of sighting the Silver house, Golden tilted her head at the black and gold behemoth resting on the Rich property. “What in…” She leaned over Diamond’s head for a better view. “Is that a boat? He bought her a boat?”

“Um, Dad…” Diamond Tiara tiptoed around the syllables, weighing the consequences of her words before she spoke them. “Dad called it a yacht. He got it for all of us.” A safe, neutral statement.

Golden’s frown soured. Not safe enough, apparently.

“He bought it for—it’s for the summer, when we go to the bay, but… Um.” She licked her lips, running out of safe ways to lead the conversation.

Silver bumped Diamond’s leg and nodded towards Sweetshine Lake.

“But we might test-run it on the lake after the ice melts in a couple weeks!” Diamond watched the tension unwind from Golden’s expression and her words eased into the regular tempo. “We’re gonna
take it around a couple of laps and maybe have my next Summer Sun Sleepover on the deck. Right, Silver Spoon?"

"Yep!" A boat party actually sounded like a nice idea, provided Diamond could actually convince Spoiled to let her do it.

"Mm. You still do Winter Wrap Up by hoof, don’t you?" Golden Glitter gave Ponyville’s icy roads a mild sneer and returned to her seat. She cracked her book back open, but didn’t read it.

"Uh-huh, just like every year.” Diamond Tiara waved to Sassaflash, Cloud Kicker, and Tornado Bolt as the pegasi flew past the window. She grinned and stuck her tongue out at Tornado’s astonished face.

Tornado Bolt flattened her ears and banked higher.

Silver Spoon smiled politely and lifted her cup to the flock. “Don’t you mean the pegasus ponies and the Winter Wrap Up Crew do it by hoof?”

“Right. And that Wrap Up Crew is Ponyville. Dad’s running the seed bank again, like he does every year.” Diamond flicked her tail with a snort. “Ugh, and we’re still on Junior Wrap-Up Brigade, what’s with that? We’ve got our cutie marks, we should be on the grown-up teams by n—oh! Hey Silvie, what team did you sign up for? Maybe we can work together.”

Silver stared at Diamond over the lip of her teacup while her mind backtracked to somewhere coherent. “Your dad’s doing the seed bank?” She took a hearty gulp of white-blackberry tea. “So when you say Ponyville cleans up winter, you…you literally mean the Ponyville ponies clean up winter? Like, as in, us?”

“Uh, yeah?” Maybe the high altitude was messing with Diamond’s head. She quirked an eyebrow and stared back as if Silver was the pony not talking any sense. “Who else would?”

“I don’t know, like…a crew or whatever?”

Admittedly, Silver didn’t entirely know who cleaned up Manehattan’s winter, only which streets closed down when they did it. Half the time she hardly noticed it happen at all. Silver would enter Wisteria on a crisp winter morning and walk home in the spring afternoon sunshine.

Sure, wrapping up winter by hoof made sense for some ponies—the weather pegasi, the farmers, and so forth—but ponies like Mother and Father and Mr. Rich surely had better things to do than break icicles and cart snow. "Why not use magic or machines? Or hire somepony else to do it? Cloudsdale brought winter, they should take it back."

Diamond shrugged. “I dunno. We just don’t.”

“I don’t get it, Di.” Silver shook her head and sipped her tea. “How does Ponyville get anything done if everypony’s busy with winter? Who runs the banks and stuff?”

“Nopony does, dear.” Golden Glitter’s voice rose from behind her book. She flipped a page. “Whole town shuts down all day to fuss over when to wake the bunnies and how to cut ice.” A gnarled sound rumpled at the back of her throat, something like a gagging laugh. “All day…more like three days. Three if you’re lucky. It’s just something Ponyville does, hon.”

Silver frowned. “Okay, but why?”

“Because they always have, Silver Spoon.” Golden flipped up her sunglasses. Dark rings sagged
under her hard, violet eyes. She smiled at them like she shared a secret. “That’s just the way of it, girls. Towns are like flowerpots. Some give plenty of room for the roots and the flowers to get lots of sunlight. Some places expand, they change.” Golden let the sunglasses fall back on her muzzle. “Others don’t.”

Diamond Tiara whipped her tail and drew her lips into a tight little line. She glanced between the windows and Silver Spoon, but she kept whatever she thought to herself. “We’re gonna land soon. Better get our coats.” Her shoulder jostled Silver’s as she went.

For a moment, Silver considered following her. She sucked her teeth and turned back to the window. *It’s always something with her.*

The dollhouse town grew to life-size with the blimp’s gradual descent. Rows of black, naked trees grasped for them with crooked talons for branches. They scraped against the windows and bounced off the balloon’s fat sides, as if eager to get at the little ponies within.

Ponyville, fully awake and bustling already, went about its business. Silver Spoon noticed Thunderlane eating breakfast with Rumble and Blossomforth. Further up the street, Berry Pinch’s mom walked the dog. Time Turner took a nap on a bench. Snails rolled a massive snowball under his hooves, probably waiting for Snips. Lyra strolled past him, in no hurry to be anywhere.

Now that Silver thought about it, none of them were in a hurry. Why would they be? They’d nowhere to be, nopony expecting them, nowhere to go. No rush.

*If old money walks, and new money runs…*

Silver Spoon’s eyes fell upon Mother and Father awaiting her arrival in the town square. Gawkers and bored commuters stopped to watch with them, their necks stretched back to see the blimp and their mouths hanging open like caught trout.

*What about the ponies who never move at all?*

Rainbow Dash hovered above the crowd, scowling up at the sky and complaining about something. According to Cotton Cloudy, Rainbow Dash used to live in Cloudsdale and could make the Wonderbolts without breaking a sweat. Tornado Bolt said Rainbow knew so much about weather patterns and cloud control that she could trailblaze a top-tier weather team in Cloudsdale or Los Pegasus if she wanted.

But if Rainbow had that kind of potential, what was she still doing here?

The carpet rumbled under their hooves as the blimp touched down. Silver finished her tea and went to fetch her coat. Not far away, Golden Glitter ran through a bullet-point pep talk about drive and diligence and “remember to practice your routine Diamond. Regionals start in March and we don’t want another Van Hoofer incident, do we? No, we don’t.”

Diamond nodded and mumbled something back from behind her fluffy scarf.

The door cracked open and Ponyville’s chilly wind swept through the cabin. Golden didn’t set hoof outside the blimp, but she saw them off at the door.

“It was nice to meet you, Golden Glitter.” Leaving out the “miss” still left a weird feeling in Silver’s mouth.

“Until next time, Silver Spoon.” She shook Silver’s hoof the way adults shook hooves with each other. “You keep that good head on your shoulders, okay?” Golden clicked her tongue and adjusted
Diamond’s tiara. “Like roses growing in a paint can. It’s a blasted shame.”

Ponyville didn’t have a lot going on. Silver Spoon understood that. That’s why the town threw parades every month and held celebrations every other week. But some things she just couldn’t follow.

Diamond’s mom explained the whys of it. Miss Cheerilee explained the histories and hows of it. Though a newcomer herself, Mother did her best to explain the reasoning for it, that all places had their own special way to welcome spring. None of it stuck.

But even if Silver didn’t understand the reasons for a rule, she at least understood the pomp and circumstance of tradition—even an obtuse, silly one—thus, here she stood: knee deep in the snow instead of studying in a warm schoolhouse.

Silver side-eyed the crowd of foals popping around her with squeals and excited murmurs. Like they’d all just die if they had to wait another second to snap icicles and shovel snow. Several of them were ready to go since last week. A few actually wore their team sashes to class yesterday.

The crowd fell quiet when Amethyst Star stepped up with her clipboard. “Okay, ears up, Junior Wrap-Up Teams!”

In the boughs of an oak tree, a flock of pegasus foals stood to attention, climbing to the edges of branches and readjusting the blue sashes on their chests.

“Air weather team, you’re with Sassaflash. She’ll be here in a few minutes to tell you where you need to be.” The purple unicorn nodded to the foals at the foot of the oak. “Ground weather team?”

Beside a fat tree root, Scootaloo shouldered her pair of filthy hockey skates and looked up. Diamond Tiara sat on the root’s opposite side, shining the new skates she bought last week. An unspoken out-of-sight-out-of-mind truce kept them civil.

“We don’t need to score the ice for another few hours, but I want you guys to move out now, anyway. You’re all on pond duty with Pinkie Pie and will be moving through a lot of locations, so you need to stay with the group.” Amethyst pointed at the pair of giggling, whispering fillies next to Scootaloo. “That means you, Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie. Got it?”

The Junior Weather Team nodded.

“Oh, Junior Plant Team One, raise your hooves…”

Silver Spoon curled her tail around her haunch and rubbed her sash-less shoulder. She watched Amethyst pluck out the Plant Team and sort them into their subsections: seeds, fertilizer, markers, messengers, flag ponies, and refreshment crew. All the Teams had foal refreshment crews, the only spot Silver actually wanted. Truffle and Twist signed up for it back in September, and refreshments only had two spots.

She watched the disorganized herd of little bodies siphon into their proper places: matching sashes in circles within circles. Silver’s little patch of snow widened to an empty field. She searched for somepony else sitting without a sash.
Snips and Snails kicked up a spray of snow on their way to Hibernation Team B, the bug team. Dinky Doo marched a few lengths behind them, in their general vicinity but not in their group. She trotted past the other teams in wide figure-eights, winding out in a random new direction before she could fall into a group’s circle. Her worn black trench coat trailed behind and swept up her hoofprints.

Silver tilted her head and watched the unicorn pass by. “What are you doing?”

The Dink paused mid-step. “Classified.” She waved to Berry Pinch, who waved back as Cleaning Team A moved out. Turning back to Silver, she grinned. “Hey, Spoons! I didn’t think I’d see you out here with Team X. Nice.”

Silver Spoon raised her eyebrows. “Team X?”

“That’s us.” The Dink poked Silver’s sashless barrel and winked. “Me and you, we’re special ops. The only ponies with the guts to venture into the wild unknown. I mean, that’s what spring’s all about, Spoons!” She wrapped a strong foreleg around Silver’s withers and took a deep breath. “Adventure! Can’t you just smell it?”

“N…Yes?” Silver just smelled frozen earth and The Dink’s musty old coat. Close enough? “Is anypony besides us on Team X?”

The Dink nodded to Amethyst Star approaching across the empty field. “Guess it’s just me and you this year.”

“So, it’s the leftovers team.”

“Pretty much, yeah.” She reached up to hoof-bump Amethyst up high and down low. “Heya, Cuz. What’s the assignment? Are you finally gonna give us the snake burrows?”

Amethyst shook her head. “Sorry. Not for a couple more years.” She skimmed down the clipboard and nodded. “Now, let’s see…Silver Spoon and Dinky Doo….”

The littler unicorn flattened her ears and frowned.

A teasing smirk broke through Amethyst’s professionalism. “Codename: The Dink. You guys have bell duty in the southeast warrens.” She levitated a pair of tan Animal Team sashes and dropped them into the fillies’ waiting hooves. “That’s the entry point by Fluttershy’s and The Everfree Forest.”

Silver raised a hoof as she wiggled into her sash. “It’s marked off for us, right?”

“Right, Silver Spoon. And Dink?” Amethyst Star crouched down to eye level and frowned. “I want this by the books. No surprises, no séances, no monster hunts.”

The Dink placed a shocked hoof upon her chest. “My dear cousin! Why, I would nev—”

“Hearth’s Warming, 98. The Krampus incident.”

“Okay, so maybe that one time.”

“Uh-huh. And the calamari episode? The contradiction creature sighting?” Amethyst raised an eyebrow. She could go on all morning and then some. “That one time you said Auntie got possessed by—”
“Technically, it only counts as a possession if it’s an ectoplasmic or infernal creature. Also, I was right about that one.”

“Not the point.” Amethyst bopped The Dink’s nose with the pencil eraser. “By the books, Dink. I mean it. Your gear’s ready and waiting for you with Fluttershy, so be sure to ask her if you’ve got questions.”

The fillies set off at a brisk pace. The Dink plowed through the snow as if on her way to fight a changeling army, looking over her shoulders and humming Firefly’s Battle Hymn of the Storm.

“Wish I’d worn a different coat...” The tan sash didn’t match Silver’s nice blue parka at all. She should have taken skating lessons so she could score the ice with Diamond. Even if they had to share the ice with Scootaloser, at least she’d have stuff to talk about instead of getting stuck with...

Silver flicked an ear in thought. “Dink? What exactly is bell duty?”

Dinky Doo gave Silver Spoon a weird look.

“Hey, I never wrapped up winter before, give me a break.”

“Bell duty’s awesome, Spoons. Almost better than Hibernation Team B.” The Dink pounced upon a snow pile and frowned at the disappointing splat. “It’s one of the new jobs; we gotta string up all the bells for when the main Animal Team rings them to wake up the hibernating critters.”

Sounds easy enough. Silver smiled. Fast, too. With luck, she’d be finished well before teatime.

Fluttershy met them behind her cottage beside a massive and gaping hole in the earth. Two bags of strung brass bells waited by her hooves. “Good morning, Dinky.” She brought her head up and blinked. “Oh, and Silver Spoon, too! What a nice surprise. Are you all ready for Winter Wrap Up?”

“Good morning, Miss Fluttershy.” Silver squinted at the upturned earth and faded paw prints scattered around the entrance. “Why is it a surprise? We’re only hanging a few bells, right?”

“Oh.” Fluttershy stretched a wing to them and smiled reassuringly. “Oh, no, I don’t really mean it’s a surprise. It’s only that not everypony wants to go down into the warren tunnels, and you’re such little fillies. Even though there’s nothing but sleeping little animals down there, some ponies still think it’s too dark and scary.”

“Yeah, but this is nothin’ for Spoons. I know she might look like a prissy tea nerd, but under the designer clothes and fussy...fussiness, she’s totally hardcore.” The Dink laughed and nudged Silver’s barrel. “Didn’t even flinch when she found out we’re on bell duty in the tunnels, didja Spoons?”

Silver Spoon felt blood drain from her face. She stared into the gaping hole with new eyes. “You mean we’re actually going in the tunnels? Like, underground? Can’t we ring the bell out here? In the sun?”

“We do that for the shallow burrows and dens,” said Fluttershy, “but some of the animals hibernate deep, deep underground and they can’t hear the bells from that far away. It would be like putting an alarm clock in the hall instead of in your room.” Fluttershy knelt down to Silver’s eye level and rested a wingtip on her shoulder. Together, they stared into the black depths of the tunnel. “That’s why it’s such an important job; none of the animals can be left out.”

Dinky puffed out her chest. “Toldja we’re special ops.”
“That’s right.” Fluttershy’s wing patted Silver’s tense withers. “But of course, there’s lots of other important jobs ponies still need help with.”

An out. Fluttershy never said it outright, but Silver recognized a merciful hoof. No shame in rejecting a scary job, especially if somepony didn’t know what they’d signed up for.

Silver flicked her tail. On the other hoof, Fluttershy’s not scared of the tunnels, and she literally runs away from her own shadow. Gingerly, she took an equipment bag. “How will we know where we’re going if we’re in the dark?”

The Dink lifted a flashlight out of her own bag. “We’ve got my horn and these.” She crossed her eyes trying to see her own forehead. “It doesn’t count as using magic if I just use my horn for light, right?”

“I think it’s okay. But please, not too bright, Dinky. Everyone’s still sleeping.” Fluttershy hovered to a metal pipe poking out of the snow. “Remember, if you need any help, call out near one of these and we’ll hear you.”

“Yeah, they mark the path and make it so we can’t suffocate to death down there. We hang the hooks from them and—well, you’ll see in a second.” The Dink tested her footing and skidded into the hole. When she glanced back to find Silver Spoon still hesitating by the entrance, she narrowed her eyes. “You’re not thinking of backing out on Team X, are you? Spring’s counting on us, Spoons.”

“I’m not backing out.” At least, not after Dinky called her out on it. She took a few cautious steps, and then a few more until the light got dim. “But I still don’t get why we need to do it. This seems more like a job for an adult.”

“When you find a grown-up small enough to squeeze in these tunnels, you can tell ‘em that.” The golden light from The Dink’s horn flashed so bright that Silver’s eyes watered. Dinky stuck out her tongue and whittled the light to a dim glow. It shone bright enough to see worms wriggling in the walls but not the path ahead. “Oh, there’s the first mark.”

A white metal hook shimmered in the hornlight, a chilly draft wafting through the hollow tip. Fluttershy’s whisper hissed into the tunnel. “Are you alright down there?”

“We’re cool, Flutters,” The Dink stage whispered back. She shot a confident grin at Silver. “If baby bunnies can handle it, so can we.”

Silver Spoon slung the first bell upon the hook and let the string roll out. “Mm-hm. Simple as instant tea.”

Ten bells into the excursion, once Silver accustomed herself to the dim light and the claustrophobic press of peat and soil, she decided she didn’t hate belling the tunnels. She didn’t love it either, but she’d take it over Hibernation Team B any day.

Creepy environment notwithstanding, the job itself was straightforward and idiot-proof: find a hook, bell it, and trace the wire to the next hook. Several yards stretched between each hook, so the hardest part was making sure the wire didn’t get tangled up between them.
“The wire’s gotta stay smooth and straight,” The Dink said, “cause when Animal Team pulls the string, it’ll go all the way down to the deepest parts of the tunnel. We get ‘em all at once that way. I think Twilight came up with it.”

“Probably. She’s pretty organized.” Silver Spoon stopped short of tripping over a pair of sleeping ground squirrels. The hibernating animals started popping up somewhere after the third hook. Most of them curled themselves into a burrow dug into the sides, but a few had sprawled themselves out in the open.

“Hmm.” The Dink tilted her ears forward, watching their shadows creep and swell along the dirt walls. “Know what this reminds me of?” She didn’t wait for Silver to answer. “Diamond Dog tunnels. You know about the Diamond Dogs, right?”

Carefully, Silver Spoon stepped over the ground squirrels. She kept a hoof pressed against her bag, in case the jingling woke them up. “Of course. Who hasn’t?” Silver rolled her eyes at Dinky’s grin and the creepy Diamond Dog story lurking behind it. “I already know the story about Dogs stealing horns and hooves—that didn’t happen, by the way—so don’t bother.”

“Shows what you know. That’s not even the story I was gonna tell. This one really happened like a year ago, when Rarity—”

“ Heard that one, too.”

The yellow light flashed and swung into Silver’s eyes, The Dink a silhouette against the glow of her horn. “Okay, Miss Heard-It-All, why don’t you tell a story?”

Silver Spoon flattened her ears. “No. We’re working, not telling ghost stories.” She slung another bell and lowered her voice to a harsh whisper. “And we’re supposed to be quiet.”

“Nah, we’re fine if we don’t shout. These little dudes sleep like rocks, see?” Dinky nudged a comatose hedgehog with her hoof. She scratched the back of her neck, considering a new angle. “So, Diamond Tiara says you guys visited your old Manehattan school. Real old place, like four hundred years old?”

“Four hundred and sixty-one.” No more hooks for several paces. Silver cantered up to Dinky’s shoulder. “What about it?”

The cramped tunnel breathed out wider and the fillies could move at a trot instead of a crawl. The Dink flowed back into a march, her coat fluttering at her fetlocks. “A place that old’s gotta have a ghost or ten. Ever seen one?”

Silver rolled her eyes again. “Don’t be silly, of course I haven’t.” Fair Weather once swore she’d seen the spirit of Royal Blue crying on the balcony, but Fair said a lot of things. Silver flipped her mane and tipped her muzzle in the air. “There’s no such thing as ghosts, Dink. Everypony knows that.”

For a second, that seemed to shut her up. The Dink clicked her tongue and bunched her shoulders up, but cool ponies never let little jibes get under their fur—not openly—so she shrugged with a nonchalant little chuckle. She belled the next hook and put her hoof in her coat pocket.

“Yeah, sure.” A sly little smirk twisted the edge of her mouth. “Just like Nightmare Moon’s not real, huh?”

Silver Spoon cleared her throat and pushed ahead. “I’m sure I have no idea what you mean, Miss Dinky Doo.” The next hook waited a few paces ahead, but as Silver reached in for the next bell, she
paused. She frowned and twitched her ears.

“...could see the wreck from a block away...” A voice hissed through the tunnel, rubbing against Silver’s ears in echoey whispers, fading in and out like bad radio reception.

“...awful accident...hope her family’s doing alright. We just buried her father last month, poor thing...”

The breath hitched in Silver’s throat as she bit back a squeal. No screaming. No running, either. It’d risk waking every animal in the tunnel. Besides, Silver had no intention of breaking in front of The Dink. I bet she’s faking that stupid voice, anyway. How Dinky learned to imitate a grown mare’s voice, Silver didn’t know and elected not to care.

“...have the headstone by Tuesday, if you can...”

“Whoa.” The Dink stopped mid-step and stared with wide, yellow eyes. “Spoons, you hear that?”

Before she’d finished speaking, another voice—older and distinctly male—cut in, louder that the first: “Thank goodness little Rites is going into the business soon, or we’d be plumb out of luck...”

Silver Spoon hugged the saddlebag to her chest. Unless she’d learned how to cast voice-throwing spells, those voices couldn’t be The Dink.

The saddlebag slipped off Dinky’s shoulder as she rummaged through her coat pockets. She tugged out a chewed up pencil and a battered, stained notebook already turned to a fresh page. “Wow, I gotta take you on some monster hunts, Spoons. You attract this stuff like ants on candy.”

“No I don’t, because that is not a ghost.” Silver stamped her hoof and ignored the slight tremor in her voice.

“I didn’t say it was. Could be a lot of stuff...but probably a ghost.” With her magic, she scribbled lines of notes down the page, folded it down, and flipped to another section. The Dink tapped her chin with the pencil eraser. “Maybe legendary creatures get mad when they’re not believed in? Quick—say you don’t believe in ghosts again and see what happens!” She patted her pocket. “Don’t worry, I’ve got salt and garlic if something goes wrong.”

That explained why The Dink smelled like a cheap pasta restaurant. Silver followed the voices down the path, twitching her ears. “There’s two voices down here. Maybe three?”

The male voice spoke up again, in clear, complete sentences this time. The words had an arthritic shake to them; this pony sounded even older than Granddad. “Oh, she’s not so little anymore, Shoe. Why, my Last Rites is just about Pinkie Pie’s age now. You’ll see for yourself, soon as she comes back from Whinnypeg.

Since when did ghosts know Pinkie Pie? Silver’s eyes fell upon the white hook awaiting them and nodded to herself. “Hm. That’s no ghost.” She weaved around a snoring raccoon and put her ear to the hollow metal. “That’s only the funeral director, Mister...um...”

“Waddle.” The Dink strung the bell and clicked her tongue, disappointed. “Just old Mr. Waddle and Shoeshine, still alive and kicking. Oh well.”

“Remember the first party Pinkie threw for Ponyville? I never saw so many...” The voices faded into the dark and the fillies pressed on.

The white thread skimmed behind them, glimmering and easy to see even without much light. Silver
edged closer to The Dink, eyeing the tunnel networks around them. What began as a straight and simple path branched into a winding tangle of underground trails. The hooks marked their way, but it took just one wrong turn to get lost. Possibly forever.

Silver’s heart thudded in her chest. One mistake, one wrong hoof in the wrong direction, and she might never be heard from again.

Ahead, voices dripped from the next hook like water from stalactites. Nothing of real coherence, just shards of memories and small talk.

“...feels like we held a baby shower for the twins just las...”

“—hen are you finally gonna pop the question to Matilda?”

“...hooves simply can’t take another...”

A chill settled in the marrow of Silver Spoon’s bones. She shivered.

“You shoulda brought a scarf.” Ahead, The Dink looked up from belling a hook and patted the hoof-knit scarf around her neck. She’d systematically folded it under her coat to hide the duckies waddling down the sides. It hadn’t worked.

“I’m not cold,” Silver said. “Just thinking about something.”

Dinky’s pattered march slowed to a walk. “Hm. ’Bout what?”

“Nothing, really.” The saddlebag felt lighter. Silver moved the bag into the hornlight. Six left; almost done. “Just that there’s scarier things underground than ghosts and Diamond Dogs.”

In a great snap of oilskin and dust, The Dink spun on her hoof. “Yeah?” The little unicorn practically salivated at the thought.

A story introduction hadn’t been Silver’s intention, but they were already here, and Dinky wouldn’t let it go without a fight, so… “Have you ever heard of the Gem Wizard?”

The Dink flicked her tail and ran it through her mental catalogs. Squinting, she hummed and ran through it again. “Doesn’t ring a bell.” She glanced at their cargo. “No pun intended. What’s a Gem Wizard? Is it a pony? A monster? A pony that turned into a monster?! What’s it do? Is it real?”

“Shush!” Silver’s tail swept across Dinky’s mouth. She glared and bobbed her head towards the skunks sleeping in an adjacent den. “No, the Wizard isn’t a pony, and he’s a ‘he’, not an ‘it’. And I...don’t know if he’s real. I hope not.”

The next hook came into view. Before Silver could reach for a bell, Dinky snagged it, along with the string. “I got the last few. You keep going.”

“I saw him in the tapestries in the pre-classical wing of Father’s old art museum. They all hung together and made a story, like comic panels.” Silver double checked the reflective white nylon trailing behind them. “Nopony seems to know what kind of creature he is. He’s kind of like...a skinny minotaur, but with a flatter face and a bushy beard. No hooves, either. He wore a robe and had these freaky little monkey paws. Father says the unicorn artists liked to exaggerate, so the tapestry’s probably not accurate. If he’s real, I mean.”

That didn’t stop The Dink from drawing a composite sketch. She strung the bell with her mouth while her magic ran a pen over paper. The glow pulsed steady without the wobbles or fizzes that
plagued other unicorn foals. Why Dinky still hadn’t earned a cutie mark yet, Silver had no idea.

“The Gem Wizard never came out in daylight. When the sun set, he’d reach out with long, nasty arms and capture ponies on the street—get them alone, walking home late from the market or lost in the mountains, you know?—and drag them down into his underground kingdom. Then, he’d force them to mine for jewels.”

The Dink examined her composite sketch (it looked like a sickly baboon in a bathrobe) and tilted her head. “How’s that any different from a Dog?”

“He wasn’t an idiot and had magic; I think that’s different enough. In the dark, he made ponies work night and day, every day, every hour. No sleep or food or anything, just work until they dropped. And when they dropped?” Cringing, Silver Spoon flattened her ears. She always used to close her eyes and walk quickly past this part of the tapestry. “The Wizard plucked their eyes out and crammed gemstones in the sockets. Enchanted gems, so they didn’t need to eat or sleep. They couldn’t die, but still felt hungry and tired. All the time. I don’t know if the gems let them see or not.”

“Probably did.” Dinky nodded to herself. “If they’re enchanted, some sort of healing’s involved, I bet. But then again, I guess there’s no point if it’s dark all the time. Maybe the gems gave ‘em night vision?”

Silver shrugged. “Maybe. The tapestries ended with a new recruit leading a pony rebellion and bucking the Gem Wizard into a huge chasm. Father says he got kicked all the way to Tartarus.”

“Huh. Interesting.” The Dink flipped her notebook closed and slipped it back in her pockets. “So, the Gem Wizard plucking your eyes out is the scariest thing?”

Memories of silk blood spilling from the tapestry ponies’ bejeweled eyes made Silver shudder. “That’s awful, but…no.” She lowered her voice, as if her words might stick to the wall and follow them. “It’s what comes after. Withering away in the darkness forever and nopony ever knowing what became of you.”

The Dink tilted her ears and crept to the lip of a side tunnel. She muttered something under her breath that Silver couldn’t hear. Probably something about creepy junk, as if the tunnels weren’t creepy enough.

Hard packed walls made for good acoustics in this section of the warren. Streams of voices from farther tunnels met and flowed down here in a river of sound. Conversations bled in and out of each other until Silver Spoon couldn’t tell the voices apart. The undulating pitches, volumes, and cadences coalesced in a quagmire of small-town concerns:

—ast Tuesday should do it. How’s it? Oh, you know. Don’t ask me. Work is fine. Work is a slog. You
Silver Spoon flattened her ears flat as she could. Voices bounced off the walls, trapped in an echo chamber. She stared at the piles of slumbering animals in disbelief. How could they possibly sleep through this? How could anything sleep through this?

Come on, work’s not that bad. Who’ll run the stand while you’re on vacation? I think our son’s a better mailpony than anypony else in our family. Oh honey, why don’t we have another foal? I miss Mom. When’s Auntie coming back?

The hook, bone-white and cacophonous, hung inches above Silver’s head. No others awaited them down the path. Her hoof reached into her saddlebag, nearly empty, save for the flashlight. “Okay. Last one.”

Don’t be silly, we can’t have another foal now. Do these feathers go with my coat? No it doesn’t. Yes it does. Those aren’t fashion accessories, put those back! I hope we can finish these nests before lunch...

Voice upon voice churned together, rising and crashing in great waves until Silver’s ears drowned in empty banter. She tried to ignore it. "Get the job done. Go back to bed."

Gritting her teeth, Silver slipped the last bell on. Finished. She turned to go find Dinky.

“Pitch Perfect, that ribbon work is phenomenal! The toile is going to lead the jays right into it.”

Mother’s name crested the ocean of voices. Silver paused in midturn. “You think so, Bumblesweet? I’ve never made a bird’s nest before, but I do know how funny singers can be with…” Mother’s voice shimmered in the flotsam, a proud old schooner in the sea. “…not the same thing, but I did once work in my aunt’s hat boutique…”

And gone again. Perhaps something attracted Mother’s attention and she’d stopped speaking. Perhaps the ocean of other voices swallowed it back up. It was impossible to tell.

The Junior Wrap Up sash squeezed against Silver’s ribs. I want to go home, she thought. Yet at the same time, another new (yet, not that new) thought buried it: This is your home.

A hoof touched Silver’s flank. “Hey, Spoons?” The Dink’s voice broke through the waves. “You alright? You’ve been staring at that last bell for a while.”

“Oh. No, I’m fine, Dink.” Silver took a deep breath and stepped away. The voices faded to a dull roar. “Just got a little distracted.”

The unicorn followed her line of sight and chuckled, brushing back her dirty yellow mane. “Isn’t it ‘improper’ for young ladies to eavesdrop, or some junk?”

“It is. And I wasn’t.” Young ladies didn’t go spelunking in filthy rabbit warrens, either. Did Silver fully qualify as a young lady anymore? She still had her good name, after all, and names had value.

However, there was such a thing as diminishing value. Diamond said that’s what happened when new things stopped being new or became damaged. The more time went by, the less valuable something became.
“We should go, Dink. I think I need some air, it’s getting…cramped down here.”

“Oh! I’ve got just the thing for that!” Dinky grabbed Silver’s hoof and tugged her down the tunnel. “See, while you were busy being a snoop, I poked around and found something really killer a couple tunnels ahead, but I’m not super sure what—”

Silver wrenched her hoof out of the unicorn’s grip and turned away with a lash of her tail. “Not in the mood for a creepy cave adventure, Dinky.”

“It’s not! It’s just this thing I found, like a…an ancient relic or something. You like historical stuff, right? Your dad’s a museum guy.” Dinky reached for Silver again, but she’d already started down the tunnel. “Maybe you can help me figure it out.”

Silver didn’t look back. “The only thing I have to figure out is how soon I can get out of here.”

“Well, okaaaay…” Something suspicious lurked in her tone. When Silver turned, a wily look flashed in The Dink’s eyes. “But we’re supposed to stay together. If you leave me down here, that’d be breaking the rules. You don’t wanna break any rules, right?”

“That’s playing dirty, Dink.” If Silver Spoon came from a different neighborhood, she’d have half a mind to bop that toothy grin off Dink’s face. “And going off to explore weird stuff isn’t following the rules either. Amethyst told you to do this by the books.”

The yellow light of The Dink’s horn angled down the warren tunnel, lighting a little path of sparkling bells. “Right. We strung the goods, just like the bosslady said.” She leaned against Silver Spoon’s shoulder and waggled her eyebrows. “But nopony said anything about what happens after.”

Nothing about this was legit, but The Dink had Silver on a technicality. The kid would probably grow up to be one of those annoying mares that got in the Mayor’s mane all the time and used red tape as jump rope. Silver felt something like respect spark up in her, but kept it to herself. A filly still had standards.

Silver Spoon wrinkled her nose and tugged out a flashlight. “You’re almost as annoying as Berry Pinch, you know that?”

“I choose to take that as a compliment. C’mon, it’s right around this corner.” The Dink jumped over a chipmunk nest and skimmed through the winding tunnel. The coat flared and flapped behind her like a battered grey flag.

Silver tailed her at a tiptoed clip. The tunnel walls squeezed in and fanned out around them, as if the earth took great heaving breaths. A gentle slope in the dirt and some residual earth pony instinct told her they delved deeper underground.

The walls sighed wider and wider until the shadows swelled and Silver realized they no longer walked through a tunnel at all. No compacted soil at her sides or above her, only open air.

“You’ve found a cavern,” whispered Silver Spoon. No, that didn’t seem quite right. “An underground chamber.”

“A secret chamber.” The Dink tilted her head upwards. The light of her horn scraped a domed roof gripped by winding tree roots. Encircling the chamber, roots wormed down the walls in fat rolls and slithering veins. “It looks kind of like a heart chamber, huh? The Heart of Ponyville.” She grinned wide at the sound of it and whispered the name to herself again. The little unicorn wiggled in an excited little jig. “Aaaaah, this is so cool!”
“Wonder where we are.” Silver Spoon mentally skimmed a shortlist of Ponyville’s large old trees. A cavern and tree this large couldn’t exist under farm fields, save maybe Sweet Apple Acres, and that lay too far away. So did Everfree.

Silver adjusted her glasses and prodded a knotted root. “You think we could be under the library?”

“Town square’s not far, so…yeah, this’d be the right spot for it.” Dinky stepped closer and squinted at the wall. “What’s that under your hoof?”

“The root?” Silver stepped back to see if anything weird had rubbed off on her.

“No, there’s something else.” The Dink brought her horn closer.

Indeed, there was some sort of shape imprinted on the wood. Something structured and inorganic. It looked a little like a drawing.

“I think…” Dinky Doo squinted, wrinkling her nose in concentration. “I think somepony carved this.” Her tail brushed away some of the dirt. She clicked her tongue and frowned. “Shoulda brought my excavation kit. Spoons, can you give us more light?”

Silver flicked the flashlight on and let the light skim over the ground and up to the tree roots branching above them. The chamber stretched taller than she thought; Princess Celestia could stand up in here without a problem. She could even jog a few laps. Ancient scratches and indentations scarred the fat roots, and faded ink markings crawled along the dirt walls—many too filthy or faded to make out.

“I think somepony found this place before us, Dink.”

“Yeah. Lots of someponies.” The Dink waved her hoof over the markings. “I don’t think these are runes or spells.” She leaned in close to highlight a carved hourglass symbol. A pair of linked horseshoes hovered next to it. “Could be a code? Hm, but not many of the symbols repeat. Don’t think they’re letters…words, maybe? What do you think, Spoons?”

“If it’s a code, it’s not a very good one. They’re not in any order—look; they’re all in random places.” Silver pointed to the etchings on the ceiling. “They’re not in lines or circles or patterns or anything.”

All these little carvings had something in common, though. Silver Spoon just couldn’t put her hoof on what. “I feel like I’ve seen these before.”

The Dink’s head bobbed up with a gasp. “Cutie marks!” She tapped the hourglass with her pen. “This one is Doc Turner’s and that one up there’s Shoeshine’s. Oh! Over there, it’s Cheerilee’s! And Bon Bon’s!”

Lifting her forehoof, Silver discovered three money bags painted on a flat skipping stone. “Here’s Mr. Rich.” She shone her light over it, tilting her head curiously at the letters next to it. Written in marker, dirt and time eroded it to near illegibility. “I think these are initials. ‘B.F.F.’ and ‘G.A.’. I guess ‘B.F.F.’ still means Best Friend Forever, but I have no idea what G.A. could be.”

“Doesn’t have to be name initials; maybe it stands for something else, like ‘Groovy Abomination’.” Before Silver could point out there was literally zero reason Filthy Rich would initial something that stupid, The Dink shook her head. “No, wait, they’re names after all. Here’s W.S. and C.T. for Aunt Harvest and Uncle Script, and up there on the ceiling’s S.M. for Medley. Wonder why some are cutie marks and some aren’t…”
“Well, blank flanks had to let ponies know they were here somehow.” If Silver were a blank flank down here with other ponies, that’s what she’d do. “Foals are the only ponies small enough to fit the tunnels that lead down here. Everypony must have come down here as kids. Can’t imagine why. You didn’t string bells down here before last year, right?”

“Nope.” The Dink nodded over her shoulder at the warren tunnels full of hibernating hedgehogs and ground squirrels. “I bet critters didn’t sleep down here before Flutters took over the cottage. That or everypony came down in the summer. Doesn’t explain why, though.”

Silver shrugged. “Bored foals with nothing to do?”

“Nah.” The Dink stood on her hind legs and tipped her neck back to get the full scope of the chamber. She rubbed at the lining of her coat, dropped back to all fours, and turned in a circle, trying to see all the angles of the place at once. “I bet it was, like, an ancient test of bravery to see if you could come down all by yourself. Or maybe a secret meeting spot where all our teachers and parents came down to hide their treasure and perform forbidden blood rituals!”

“Come on, Dink.” Silver Spoon blinked and shied from Pinkie Pie’s carved cutie mark with a frown. “Blood rituals? In Ponyville?”

“Hey, it’s not impossible. Maybe it’s part of why we have a parade every other week. Ooh, or—OR!” Her mouth fell open with a little gasp. The sort of gasp one only gasped upon discovering something ponykind was never meant to know, some existential nightmare to haunted souls through the ages. “Or. They came down here…to kiss!”

Cold dirt and twisted tree roots didn’t exactly scream “romance” to Silver Spoon. It seemed more likely than blood rituals or hidden gold, though.

Dinky’s pen scribbled off a list of chicken scratch notes and checkmarks. She cross-referenced a lopsided chart on the notebook cover and ran her flashlight over a cluster of apple cutie marks. “Jeepers. Looks like almost everypony who grew up here’s on this wall. Even Mr. Waddle’s down here and he’s a jillion and ten moons old. It must be a tradition.”

“A lost tradition.” Silver blew dust off Flitter and Rarity’s cutie marks. “I can’t find anypony younger than Pinkie Pie down here. I think you were right, Dink. I bet they stopped coming when Fluttershy started taking care of the animals.”

Metal clinked against glass and stones as Dinky rumbled through her enormous pockets. “Then, let’s restart it!” She struck a pose and brandished a permanent marker like a sword.

And I thought Diamond Tiara was dramatic… Silver raised an eyebrow. “Uh. Why?”

“It’s an ancient, sacred Ponyville tradition, Silver Spoon. It literally goes back generations! We can’t let a tradition go un…traditioned.” With a flick of her head, The Dink tossed something from her pocket. “Heads up.”

A fluorescent blue marker plopped into Silver’s hooves; the glittery, glow-in-the-dark kind for writing on black paper. Silver held the object at a distance and stared at it.

“It’s like our duty, Spoons. We’re Ponyville foals, right?”

Dirt and grime caked Silver’s horseshoes. They had no shine at all anymore, not even on the sides. The marker rolled over them with a soft clacking sound, like the clack of a train in the distance. “…Right.”
The marker bobbed in Dinky’s teeth as she chewed on the cap. She paced a few laps around the chamber—clockwise, counterclockwise, and some sort of spiral pattern—in search of the perfect spot to leave her mark.

For a time, she studied an open spot upon the ceiling, but in the end, she decided against it. “A-ha!” The unicorn attacked a jagged gap between the lower roots in three hard, swift swings of her horn. **THE DINK** cut the dark in slime-green glow-in-the-dark marker, the letters slanted and capitalized like a vigilante’s calling card.

The Dink stepped back to admire it. “You know, I think I like that even better than a cutie mark.”

Silver picked a (mostly) dirtless spot that was more stone than earth. Her tongue ran along the edge of Dink’s marker. It tasted the way the coat smelled; of smoky fabric, and stale hayfries. It had probably been in that pocket since last winter.

Slowly, the fluorescent blue marker tip touched the rock. Silver’s shoulders tensed. She hadn’t made a mark yet; she could still turn tail and pretend she’d never seen the place. After all, they’d only Dink’s guess—correctness notwithstanding—that it was a tradition. Even if it was, Silver couldn’t be obliged to it. Nopony even did it anymore. Nopony would know.

Nopony except The Dink. If she told everypony what had happened, then everypony else would want to know the reason why, or worse, make up reasons of their own. If Dinky kept it to herself, then it became a secret. Secrets had power. Silver only trusted two ponies with that kind of power, and Dink—though a nice kid—didn’t stand among them.

Silver couldn’t see The Dink, but she felt her watching. “Hey, can you not? I’m trying to concentrate.”

“What’s to concentrate about? You’re just drawing your cutie mark; you sign it all the time.” The Dink turned away with a theatrical sigh. “Perfectionists.”

*Let’s get this over with. Three swipes and you’re out of here.* Silver breathed deep and let the marker tip slide over the rock: a little heart handle, the long, elegant stem, and one smooth loop for the spoon’s bowl.

She stepped back and shone her flashlight to see her handiwork. The mark of Sterling Silver Spoon sat adjacent to Mayor Mare’s and a few inches below Pinny Lane’s. A spoon among the clutter of clouds, scrolls, apples, berries, quills, hourglasses, feathers, and peaches. A tea maker amongst shopkeeps, schoolmarms, and weatherponies. A permanent mark etched in stone.

The fluorescent sky blue gleamed in the flashlight beam, fresh and new. Yet, Silver knew in a matter of weeks or months or years—Celestia, she’d been here almost a whole year!—the dust and sediment would crust over it. It’d lose the shine first, then the color. By the time somepony found this place again, the spoon would be a dull, lifeless blue; wholly unremarkable in the cloud of other cutie marks.

Silver Spoon felt her breath get shallow. She stared at the ceiling and tried to force images of roses wilting in paint cans out of her head.

“I’m never getting out of here,” she said to the roots.

The Dink pricked her ears and looked up from analyzing the G.A. “Yeah, alright. We can go now. They’re probably wondering about us.”

“You don’t think we held anything up, do you?” That’d be all Silver needed now: derailing spring.
“Nah, we made awesome time. See?” The Dink held up her glow-in-the-dark pocket watch. It had a spider web cover and little black skulls instead of numbers. “We’ve been down here two hours and our max time was two and a half.”

“Oh.” Silver smiled, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Well, that’s good. Good job, Team X?”

Dinky lifted her head with a grin. “More like great job, Team X!” When she looked a little closer at Silver, her ears waved thoughtfully. The smile shrank a little bit. “You know,” she kindly said, “You’re pretty good at this kind of stuff, Spoons. We oughta hang out more often.”

Silver Spoon turned her back on the chamber. Her eyes lingered on the reflective string trailing their path out of the tunnel and into the town small enough to fit in her teacup. “Thanks, Dink. Maybe I’ll keep that in mind.”

The fillies kept a decent pace through the tunnels. Not slow, but certainly not what one could call fast. It was a stroll, an amble. When she finally saw sunlight, Silver didn’t bother picking up the pace.

No need to run. After all, she had nowhere to go.
The Luxury of Failure

“Did you see Princess Twilight’s dress? She still had it on when she came back from the coronation.” Diamond Tiara bit into her raspberry tart, smacking her lips. “Too bad it happened on a school day.”

Her expression never faltered and she said nothing of it, but Diamond’s eyes traced the trajectory of the Crusaders playing freeze-tag outside. Apple Bloom chased down Sweetie Belle while Scootaloo, long frozen, watched the pegasus foals’ skyball game above their heads. All three had been absent on coronation day and returned to show-and-tell bearing Canterlot souvenirs.

“Yes, too bad.” Silver Spoon leaned against the open schoolhouse window and let the humid breeze brush through her mane. Good thing Diamond suggested tea indoors; it smelled like rain. Peering up at the cloudy skies, she stirred her tea and tried to recall the current month. It still felt like late March…or it could be mid-April?

Months into the new year, Silver’s day planner still looked brand new. The dawdling parade of days and weeks had passed by her without fanfare. A tea party here, a birthday bash there, the odd collaboration with a classmate now and again…after a time, it all blended together.

“Anyway, I saw it. Princess Twilight had a very nice dress.” Some neo-classical pink number that, in Silver’s opinion, didn’t suit Twilight at all and hung weird on the flanks. Silver’s opinion didn’t count for much though, so she elected to keep it to herself.

Diamond slugged back the last of her cinnamon chai and set the teacup down with a hard clink. “Okay, I give up. What’s the matter, Silvie?”

“Nothing.” Silver Spoon turned away from the window, blinking curiously. “Why would something be wrong?”

“You’ve been stirring your tea for, like, half an hour. Recess is almost over and you didn’t even touch it.”

Silver took a small sip of rose tea. Stone cold. “Oh.” She shrugged. “Guess I feel a little out of it today.”

Diamond humphed. “Try ‘out of it all month’, Silver Spoon. You’ve been weird ever since we wrapped up winter.”

April after all, then. “Well, I don’t feel weird.” Outside, Miss Cheerilee called the pegasi down from the clouds before the lightning started. Wincing a bit, Silver poured out the cold tea and shut the window before first raindrops fell. “I don’t really feel much of anything. Just bored, I guess.”

Rolls of thunder grumbled above their heads. Diamond went to work packing up her half of the tea set and as soon as Silver put down her cup, she packed that too. Not a rush job, either; she neatly arranged them in Silver’s travel kit just the way they’d been packed. Brass Tacks couldn’t have done a better job.

Come to think of it, Diamond had held the door open for Silver Spoon this morning too. And covered for Silver when Cheerilee caught her off guard with a math question. And hadn’t it been Di’s idea to have tea indoors in the first place?

Silver Spoon raised an eyebrow. “Okay, what do you want, Di?”
“Wh-what?” Diamond rolled her eyes to the rafters with an innocent little eye flutter. “Pff, that’s crazy. I don’t want anything, what’re you—”

Not in the mood for games, Silver crossed her hooves.

“Oh, fine! I was thinking…” Diamond fidgeted in her seat. She glanced towards the back of the room, watching rain pat against the stained glass window of herself. “Do you want to help me build a routine for the regionals? You could come along and see me in Baltimare.”

Foals filtered back inside, dripping rainwater and complaining about recess being cut short. Diamond would have to go back to her regular seat at the front, soon.

“If you don’t want to, it’s whatever—I usually do most of this stuff by myself, anyway.” She tossed her mane and rolled her shoulders, watching The Dink take her regular seat on Silver’s opposite side. “But you’re pretty good at planning stuff, so…whatever, figured I’d throw it out there.”

Odd. The other horseshoe should have dropped by now. Silver fished for it. “When’s the pageant?”

“About two weeks, but I already have a couple routine ideas thrown together. I just gotta figure out which one to pick.” She pursed her lips. “Taffeta Twirl crowned Supreme at semi-regionals, and she is not beating me again.”

“Huh.” And that’s all? No weird provisos or scheduling fiascos? It still seemed too simple. She checked for Diamond’s tells—a fidgety tail, tiara adjustments, darting eyes—but found none of them. “Sounds fine to me.”

“Okay.” Diamond grew quiet and tapped her hooves together, probably calculating how much time she had before Pip reclaimed his desk. In a rush of breath, she leaned over the desk and whispered, “Are you mad at me?”

Silver looked up. That last statement might have sounded harsher than she meant. She wondered if her decorum had been slipping. “I’m not mad, Di. I told you, I’ve just felt out of it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” A lie, and they both knew it. “So, you said you already had routine ideas?”

Not at all fooled by that misdirection, Diamond flicked an ear. “Yeah,” she said. The tone underneath warned that this wasn’t over yet. “I just need to pick one that fits the theme best. Regionals isn’t the biggest, but Coach Razzle says it’s most important.” She rested her cheek against her hoof. “Usually she’s the one who comes down and helps with this stuff. For some reason, she only shows up close to showtime now.”

“Sounds easy enough, but I don’t know much about pageants, Diamond. I have no clue who’ll be there, or what sort of prep—”

Diamond Tiara held up a hoof. “Don’t have to. I got most of it covered.”

“So, why do you need me, then?”

“Duh. You’ve got good judgement, Silvie.” She absently rubbed the back of her neck. “And since Coach Razz isn’t gonna be here and Mom’s at Bridleway, I don’t have anypony for a second opinion.”

It sounded easy enough. A project might be the thing to get her out of this funk; at the least, it’d be
something to do. Silver folded her hooves and flashed a prim, professional smile. “When do we start?”

The game plan for pageants ran similar to talent show prep, but with stricter guidelines, stiffer competition, more glitter, and better prizes. Practice was scheduled after school (two hours minimum) and on weekends (four hours minimum), with additional planning at recess and before school, provided they had time (Diamond always ensured they did).

Silver Spoon had watched Diamond push through the solo version of this process last month—what little she’d managed to see of her—and gathered a reasonable expectation of what awaited her.

One step into the Rich trophy room, and those expectations vanished.

Spotlights lit the windowless room, throwing shadows of winners’ cups along the walls. Brass, silver, gold, and platinum trophies of all sizes and shapes towered over the shelved rainbows of rosettes. Nothing Silver hadn’t seen before, but only through cracks in the door and brief glances from the hall. Stepping inside, she couldn’t gauge the size of the place. At once, it seemed the shimmering walls of prizes pressed in to smother them, or else went on forever. It might have been bigger than the living room for all she knew.

“Wow.” She tilted her head up to see the banners and sashes looped along the ceiling. If Silver squinted, she could see sunlight peeping through the satin and velvet; there must have been a skylight under all those accolades.

“I know. I’m pretty amazing.” In perfect dressage form, Diamond Tiara lifted her head high and marched to the center of the room, spreading her hoof to the display. “Welcome to The War Room, Silver Spoon.”

Silver nodded, though it hadn’t been the trophies that had impressed her.

Nine circles of folders blossomed over the dark carpet, each labeled by year and location. A veritable resume of Diamond’s pageant career lay at her hooves. Each folder circle had a different color. Each color brightened from the soft pastels of the outer circles that marked regionals to a single vivid folder in the bullseye: Nationals.

Together, the folders spiraled across the War Room, leading to the metal table awaiting them in the center, complete with cushions.

The quasi-organized chaos that hallmarked Diamond’s usual escapades aligned into a precise machine. Whatever system Silver Spoon just stepped into had been running for years.

Silver nosed open a pale pink folder and blinked at the sheets of dance steps, rule sheets, and music lyrics. The folder beside it popped open with a light touch, filled to bursting with the stapled profiles of other ponies. Foals on one side and adults on the other; competitors and judges, it seemed. In marker, a young hoof had written Van Hoofer Semi-Finals: ‘97 on the bottom pockets.

“Oh, good year,” Diamond said over Silver’s shoulder. She opened the center’s red folder paperclipped with a glossy of herself at…six? Under the makeup, hairspray, and glitter, Silver couldn’t tell. Pictures of the runners-up beamed in the folder’s side pocket.
Diamond examined a callous in the soft frog of her hoof. “Not easy, though. That’s the year I told you about before.”

“When somepony stole your music, right?” Silver pricked her ears and leaned in for a better look at Diamond’s hoof.

It might have been a trick of the light, or a flaw in the polish, but she didn’t think so. A hairline crack sliced through the hoof. Not a chip or a scuff from roughhousing or tripping, a full-on crack.

Silver bit her lip with a sympathetic wince. “Di, how’d—”

Diamond pulled her hoof back with a huff. “It’s no big deal, just some old practice accident. It’s already healed up, anyway.” She rolled her eyes at Silver Spoon’s uncertain hum. “Like I told you, if winning was easy, everypony would do it.”

Quite ready to move ahead, Diamond flicked her tail against Silver’s withers. “C’mon, we can’t get anything from stuff that old. I just want to keep this stuff around so I don’t repeat anything.”

Silver’s reflection wobbled along a line of winner’s cups. They all pressed so close together, she couldn’t read the bases. “Are all these really yours?”

“Pretty much. The ones up there that look like golf clubs are Dad’s, and that crystal thingy over there is my stepmom’s.”

Four pale yellow folders awaited them on the steel table. Diamond flipped them open one by one. “Okay, we’ve got competitors, routine options, style options, and the last one’s for, like, budgeting and travel junk.” She pushed the last folder aside, along with the competitors folder. “We can worry about the competition later; regionals are mostly amateurs and half of ‘em won’t even be serious enough to show up.”

They reviewed this year’s rules, regulations, and theme. Theme, Silver already knew, could make or break a routine. Theoretically, a pony could bend the rules until they nearly broke, so long as they kept the theme intact. The name of the game this year: Heritage.

“Only problem is,” said Diamond, “in the regional sets, everypony’s from the same area and there’s a lot of overlap. I sent a couple of telegrams to Coach Razzle and she told me it’d be a good idea to make it local. Like, really local.”

“So, about Ponyville. Good plan.” The roster had nopony from town, so keeping it within the borders guaranteed it’d be unique.

Silver Spoon considered one of the concept sketches for a possible dress: a cute little a-line in Ponyville’s flag colors, all ruffles and ribbons. Beautiful, though a bit simple. It’d work well for a finale, but not much else. Her ears tilted forward as she examined an alternate sketch with a bonnet and petticoat. “What’s this one?”

“I wanted to do an old timey outfit.” Diamond pushed the bonnet outfit aside for an uncolored tailcoat sketch, complete with top hat. A swing dress and a loud ensemble straight out of Cheerilee’s yearbook followed it. “I can’t pick one I like enough to use, though. I don’t think any of ‘em have enough flash.”

They didn’t. Not compared to any of Diamond’s past ensembles. Silver steepled her hooves. The competition would be flashier than Trot Square, too. Maybe they could use that. “I think you should use them anyway.”
“Which one?”

“All of them.” Silver spread the retro ensembles across the table so they that made a little fashion timeline. “It’ll be like a little history lesson, see? You can use one for—”

“For each category! Yeah, and I can, like, get an old timey professional outfit for the Q-and-A section and start off with the bonnet…” Diamond grinned as the concept took shape. “I like it. But wouldn’t that be kinda boring?”

“Di, I don’t think you even know how to be boring, first of all. And no, it adds sincerity to it and adults love when foals try to teach stuff.” Silver Spoon gave Diamond a confident nod. “Everypony else will be all flash, but you’ll have flash and smarts.”

“It’s still weird. I dunno if pageant dress code even allows dresses without sequins…but then again, looks are only half the battle. If I can pull it off with the routine itself—and I will—it won’t matter.” She shoved the wardrobe section aside in favor of song lists and music sheets. “So that’s what’s next.”

As they pored over the music list, debating old standards versus new remixes and the tastefulness of dubstep, Silver felt that old familiar project rhythm fall into place. She cleaned her lenses, cracked her neck, and pulled out her trusty fountain pen. Time to get to work.

*Today’s Friday, right?* That meant a weekend onslaught of dances, music, choreography, and ego boosting. Hours and hours of work every single day, schooldays included. *Busy, busy, busy…* So busy, her head surely couldn’t find the time to fret on…well, it didn’t matter. Diamond had a pageant to win.

Gazing at the floor’s orderly mandalas of past conquests, orderly and colorful as rosette ribbons, Silver smiled. Yes, this felt better.

It seemed they’d barely begun when they heard a knock and the door creaked open.

Diamond’s eyes darted up for a second before refocusing on the music sheet. “Hi, Daddy.”

“Hey, darlin’.” Mr. Rich sounded even more tired than he looked. It must have been a long day. As his gaze swept across the folders and trophies of the War Room, his shoulders sagged, though his cheerful tone never faltered. “Pageant season’s in full swing, I see.”

Silver offered a respectful nod. “Good afternoon, Mr. Rich.”

“It’s a little past afternoon, Silver Spoon. Aren’t your folks expecting you home by now?”

“Why? It’s only—” Silver squinted at the skylight behind the sashes and banners. Nearly twilight; she must have lost track of time. The War Room had an hourglass, she noticed, but no clocks. “Yeah, I should probably go. Bright and early tomorrow, Di?”

“Yeah. I’ll meet you for breakfast.”

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The chill of dried sweat clung to Silver’s neck and the pillow felt damp on her cheek. Silver Spoon’s eyes popped open to find her room pitch black, save for the bright blue rectangle of the fish tank.
Her hooves trembled when she reached for her glasses, though she couldn’t say why. A dream, probably. Shards of it cluttered in the back of Silver’s head (ivy walls and roses and wisteria…she’d been in Silver Estate for some reason?) but they faded before she could grasp them.

Just as well. Judging from her shaking hooves, it hadn’t been dream worth remembering.

Silver drew back her lace curtains. She couldn’t find the moon, and a sliver of pale light curved over the horizon. Not quite dawn, only the overture. There’d be little point in going back to sleep; in about two hours, Diamond would show up for their walk to school.

Young ladies, of course, knew the benefits of extra time. Besides, when did she ever have that time all to herself? Not even Tacks would be awake yet.

After a quick shower and currying her coat, Silver fed her fish—Ferdinand always seemed to be awake—and checked her day planner. She blinked at it, her hooves busy braiding her mane. Interesting.

Silver glanced up at her betta fish. “The Baltimore pageant’s this weekend, Ferdinand. We’re ahead of schedule.”

Well ahead. All they had left were voice exercises and regular practice, but even then, practice seemed less of necessity and more of superstitious habit. Diamond had all but mastered the routine last Friday, and Silver Spoon told her so all weekend.

Diamond had just shaken her head and “patiently” explained that Silver was too new to pageants to know a perfect routine. Watching the same steps got boring after the eightieth time, but it did seem to make Diamond feel better about the whole thing.

“It’s still something to do, anyway.” Silver flicked her tail, watching Ferdinand nip at his gourmet fish flakes. “Not that it matters.”

Ferdinand’s nose bumped against Silver’s reflection on the glass. His blue fins waved in the water and he stared back at her with blank amber eyes.

“I mean, yeah, it matters to Diamond Tiara, but she’s fine. Better than fine, probably.” New money had nowhere to go but up. In a generation or two, her family would be old money. As far as Ponyville was concerned, it already was.

In the corner of Silver’s eye, the closet door hung wide open to show off her downsized, though impressive, wardrobe. How long had it been since she’d worn her Hoity Toity lace saddle? The silk Prim Hemline dress? The velvet cape with the jeweled clasp that Gran Jeté made for her? How long since she’d had a reason to?

Silver’s ears drooped. “Toplofty was right, Ferdinand. They invited me out of pity. I know Mother said it’s important to keep up appearances, but…”

But who’d even look?

Silver Spoon sniffed and rubbed her eyes before any tears had a chance to mess up her coat. She lashed her tail, furious with herself. “It’s stupid, crying like this.” What right did she have to complain when she still lived in one of the best houses in town?

Other families had borne far worse luck. They could all be crammed in some leaky tenement, Mother and Father working their hooves to the bone and forgotten entirely by polite society.
The whisperings at Wisteria proved that the Silvers remained worth talking about, at the very least. Now that she thought on it, most of her former classmates seemed impressed at how little she’d changed and how well she’d maintained her airs, despite everything. Palanquin had never been Silver Spoon’s friend, but she’d always upheld a modest respect throughout their rivalry. That hadn’t gone away, either.

Silver turned back to Ferdinand, who seemed more interested in the ferns than her crises. “It’s not like we’re ruined, right?” She swallowed the knot in her throat with a resolute nod. “I know we’re not. Granddad said so.” He’d laughed at the very idea and said if Father had been ruined, Silver Spoon wouldn’t have asked that question, because she’d already know.

Something occurred to her, then. Silver Spoon frowned and tilted her head at Ferdinand, trying to keep an eye on him as he navigated his castle. “Wait, you don’t really know Granddad Silver Tongue, do you? You had to stay behind when we all left for my cuteceañera.”

That wouldn’t do at all! Even if Ferdinand wasn’t a pony, Father introduced him into their home, and that made him family. It meant Ferdinand was a Silver. Yes, a smaller, scalier Silver with gills who didn’t talk much, but a Silver all the same.

The task became clear. Silver Spoon reached behind the tank stand and pulled out a crystal bowl set on wheels for travel. She’d promised to only use it for visits to the vet or Fluttershy’s house, show-and-tell demonstrations, and emergencies. This counted as an emergency.

She filled the travel bowl with tank water, double checked the ph. balance and temperature, and dipped in the net. Ferdinand tried to make a break for Spoon Castle, but Silver’s net blocked him off and swept him up.

“Relax,” Silver mumbled around the handle. “No pony likes a drama king, Ferdie.”

Gently, she released him in the travel bowl. The betta’s long, elegant fins snapped through the water indignantly. Clearly, this hadn’t been how he imagined his morning to go, but he’d just have to deal with it.

“We must adapt to our circumstances like gentlefish, Ferdinand. There’s something I need to show you.”

With care, Silver Spoon closed the door behind her and wheeled the fishbowl down the hall. Around the corner, she could hear Father’s soft snores. He must have left the master bedroom door open again.

A tiny spark of anger flared in Silver’s chest. She couldn’t understand how he could have let it happen. Had Father only been more careful with the finances and more watchful of his allies, they wouldn’t be in this position in the first place. Hadn’t he known how his decisions would affect everypony around him?

She looked down with a sigh. Of course he had. More than anypony. He’d done his best, surely; a pony could do little more. Still, Silver couldn’t help but be a little angry at him, and at the same time, ashamed for feeling so.

The clocks struck six. Everypony’d wake up in half an hour, and Silver had no desire to explain the fishbowl in her hooves. “C’mon, Ferdinand.”

They cut through the open foyer, shadows of the balcony trailing close behind them. Past the century-old vases, paintings, and opera awards, the dark of the house brightened when they
approached the main hall.

Along the walls, twelve little lights lit a path down the burgundy carpet. Each one illuminated a portrait. “Ten generations of Silvers.” Silver Spoon’s whisper filled the hallway. She pointed to the cherrywood frame with a little spoon fastened to the bottom. “Eleven, counting me, but you already know me.”

Silver rotated the fish bowl rotated to the opposite wall. A cheerful grey pegasus with clouds of curly white mane beamed down at Ferdinand, ready to reach out and shake his fin. A gold pin shone on the lapel of his blue blazer.

“She’s Auntie Frames’ son, see?” Father and Silver Frames looked so bizarre without their hats, and in that sequined party dress, Auntie seemed another pony altogether. “She’s got an art gallery too, in Canterlot. It’s smaller than the one in Manehattan, but Father says hers is more prestigious.”

Ferdinand stared at it for a few moments, then turned back to Silver Spoon, bubbling. He seemed impatient, but that only meant Silver knew how to do a proper build up. Time for the moment he’d been waiting for.

Balancing carefully on her rear hooves, Silver lifted the bowl to her chest so he could get the best view possible. “There he is: Granddad Silver Tongue.”

The patriarch of the Silver clan stared with pale, severe eyes that reminded Silver Spoon of detention slips. A green ribbon, bright against his storm-grey coat, tied back his white mane and matched his ascot pin.

“Granddad’s nice, even if he doesn’t smile a lot. He’s got one of the oldest law firms in Equestria and he’s never lost a case, Ferdinand. Not one, ever. I think he’s been a lawyer almost as long as Ponyville’s been a town, and Silver Estate’s almost as big as Sweet Apple Acres. He inherited it, you know.”

That posed an interesting question. When Granddad passed on, the Estate went to Auntie Frames, but who would get it after her? “Silver Lining should get it, but he’s so fond of his cloud house, I can’t imagine him giving it up. Plus, he always says the estate creeps him out.” Silver Spoon flicked an ear in thought and hummed. “So…does that mean it’d be mine?”

Technically speaking, another pony ought to be in line before all of them, but…

Silver Spoon set Ferdinand’s bowl back on the carpet and turned him towards the parlor entrance, and the portrait watching over it. “Great Uncle Silver Chalice is Granddad’s brother. He knows more about earth pony magic than almost any scholar in Equestria. Smart Cookie University even named a grant after him.”

She grew quiet again, swishing her tail as she considered the small oval frame. Once, not very long ago, another portrait hung in their penthouse. One of a pale, younger stallion with thick glasses and a slight underbite. He’d snuck Silver Spoon extra slices of cake at weddings and liked to sing.

Silver looked over her shoulder at the long lines of ancestors, pawing the rug uncertainly. She really shouldn’t, but…maybe it’d be okay if she said it just this once. For educational purposes.
over the lip of the fishbowl, she whispered, “Cous—um… Silver Shill used to be Silver Chalice’s heir, but then he did something and now he’s not part of the family anymore.”

Ferdinand swam a semi-circle around the bowl, waving his long, fanned tail.

“No, I don’t know what he did. It must have been really bad, though.” Whatever ruined looked like, it probably looked a lot like Silver Shill right now. “We’re not really supposed to talk about him.”

Ferdinand and Silver Spoon moved on to more respectable members of the Silver family, each one marked with prestige and honor: Silver Screen, the film director; Silver Swift, renowned ornithologist; Silver Platter, master chef and infamous playboy; the composer, Silver Song; marathon runner, Silver Medal; and Great-Great-Great-Great Grandmare Silver Jubilee, savior of the family history.

At the end of the hallway hung the forbearer to them all, a mare older than Equestria itself.

“Ferdinand, this is Silver Sword.”

The only pony in the hall without a portrait, nor a painting, but a full scene upon a tapestry. Silver Sword reared back, caught in the midst of battle with a rapier between her teeth and timberwolves gnashing at her hooves. A reproduction, of course—the real thing hung in Silver Estate—but a copy still did the trick.

Ferdinand bubbled, surely impressed.

Silver Spoon nodded, satisfied. “She used to be a swordsmith for the Unicorn Kingdom, but one day she decided to teach other earth ponies how to forge swords for themselves. She taught them how to swordfight, too. Father says she even trained Princess Luna.” Auntie Frames argued that claim hadn’t been verified and only appeared in family legend, but that was beside the point.

Staring up at the tapestry, Silver Spoon sank to her haunches beside the fishbowl. “So, that’s it. That’s our legacy.”

Ten generations and over ten centuries of Silvers; a family tree with dozens of branching aunts, uncles, cousins, grandmothers, and in-laws. All ending at Silver Spoon’s new, thin branch.

“Ferdinand, I’ve been thinking about something Mrs. Rich told me.” Silver hugged the bowl close and stared into the betta’s flat, amber eyes. Eyes not unlike Father’s, actually. “Father made a mistake, but he did his best to fix it. Nothing’s happened to me, though. I’m in the clear. So far, I’ve…well, I think I’ve done everything right.”

The cool wall pressed against Silver’s neck as she sat back. At the far end of the hall, rays of sunlight slid through the windows and over the carpet. In the daylight, the portraits’ lights dimmed, but didn’t turn out. They never did.

“A rose is still a rose, whether it grows in a vase or a paint can, right?”

Ferdinand tried to nibble at a stray strand of hair dangling over his bowl. He didn’t really get garden metaphors.

She angled her head back and stared. Silver Sword’s rapier slashed through the air, a finishing blow frozen in time. A fighter.

Silver Sword never let herself fall into despair, not in unicorn dungeons, or elegant courtyards, or battlefields. Ten generations didn’t crumble from one bad financial move; the Silvers were made of
sterner stuff.

The heavy, wilting feeling that had lingered in Silver Spoon’s chest didn’t go away, but she felt it harden into something else. Something she could use.

“We’re not ruined, Ferdinand. Just tarnished.” Silver Spoon narrowed her eyes and rose to her hooves. “And I’m the one holding the polish.”

Yes. A new day, a new chance to honor the family name with all the nobility and refinement that befitted a Silver. Time to turn it all around!

Glancing back at her beta fish, Silver’s shoulders sagged with a groan. “Now if only I knew how.”

…but in the south, dwindling supplies in the Earth Pony Nation would eventually lead to more tension with the Unicorn Kingdom.” Miss Cheerilee glanced at the clock and smiled. “Alright, I think that’s enough for now, my little ponies. Tomorrow, we’ll pick up on page three-hundred-ninety-four, so try and read ahead!”

Silver Spoon double checked the clock as the classroom already began to fidget. Twenty minutes before the bell. She frowned. “Strange. Cheerilee almost never ends class early.” Not without a reason.

Whispers of an early skyball game flitted between Rumble, Cotton Cloudy, and Featherweight, already picking out the teams.

A row down, Scootaloo watched them out of the corner of her eye, one ear tilted towards the conversation and the other toward Sweetie blabbing about some stupid crusading junk. She’d done it during class, too. The featherbrain didn’t even notice that Cheerilee obviously wasn’t done yet. She probably hadn’t heard a single word of the lecture at all.

I still don’t get why Scootaloser sits up front. Silver tapped her pen upon her notebook cover irritably. If she’s not gonna even try to get good grades, she should just sit in back with the other failures and make room for ponies who actually want to learn.

Diamond Tiara, who’d been oddly quiet today, turned in her seat and shot Silver a look. She, at least, knew something was up.

Miss Cheerilee had more spring in her step than usual today. She’d grin and bounce in place every now and then, or hum little songs while she wrote on the chalkboard. Like somepony with a fun secret.

But Silver’s knowledge of the situation ended there, so she nodded and parried back with a wait-and-see shrug. They’d know in a few minutes.

Sure enough, Cheerilee made a motion for the class to settle. “Now, before we leave, there’s just ooooone more thing.”

A third of the class groaned, while the more perceptive foals sat up, curious. The Goofsaders finally caught on and exchanged excited, curious whispers.
“Today we have two very special guests with a very special announcement!” Cheerilee practically squealed with excitement. “Everypony, welcome the head of the Equestria Games, Ms. Harshwhinny!”

The door opened and a familiar jolt of alarm shot up Silver Spoon’s back. On instinct, she smoothed the frays in her braid and readjusted her glasses.

Ms. Harshwhinny carried herself with all the stringency of a Wisterian instructor, maybe more. She reviewed the purpose of the Games with hard pristine diction could even make Miss Sugarcoat flinch.

Finally, she got to the point. “Now you littlest ones will have the chance to compete for a weighty responsibility of your very own.”

At the word “compete”, Diamond shot up in her chair. Her eyes narrowed with a hungry focus, and she beat a little rhythm on her desk with anxious hooves. Whatever cards Harshwhinny held, Di seemed to call them.

“Oh come on!” A voice in jarring contrast to the game master’s rang out near the back of the room. “Tell ‘em the fun part!”

Berry Pinch ducked a second before Rainbow Dash zoomed through the back window, soaring inches above her horn tip. The pegasus banked left and spun into a sharp landing to cheers and whoops from the classroom.

The Dink laughed and nodded to Silver and Berry Pinch. “Whoa, nice!”

Silver smoothed her tousled mane back into place. “Yeah, but she could have just walked through the door.” Now she’d have to suffer Scootaloser ranting about it all month.

“All you gotta do is show Ms. Harshwhinny the coolest, most spectacular, most rocking routine and you’re goin’ to the Games!” Miss Rainbow Dash’s enthusiasm caught the classroom like wildfire. “So who’s gonna be the lucky ponies?!”

With a confident flip of her mane, Diamond smirked as if it were a trick question. She played it cool, but Silver felt the ravenous zeal from back row. “It’s gotta be me.”

*By which she means “us”*. Silver Spoon frowned, idly observing Snips and Snails make fools of themselves. She didn’t quite know how she felt about that, yet. *Helping Di shine onstage is one thing, but…*

“You ponies,” Harshwhinny continued, “Will form teams.”

A team of two, no doubt. *If we’re carrying the flag, no way Di’s gonna trust anypony else to let them on our team. Not after losing the talent show, and definitely not after that burn from The Foal Free Press.*

While Diamond Tiara still held no qualm about attracting or leading a crowd, Silver noticed that she rarely hung out with anypony else these days. Besides Silver, only Berry Pinch met up with her outside school. She still seemed willing to hang out with The Dink and Cotton—they pulled enough social rank to hang out, no matter what—but Cotton usually split off with Tornado Bolt and Rumble for company. Likewise, The Dink had her posse of would-be supernatural sleuths.

In any case, it’d be just Diamond and Silver this time. No safety nets, no fall-ponies. Silver took quick detailed notes on Harshwhinny’s lecture about the scoring system. She made a mental note to
personally ask about more details later, if possible.

A whistle shriek pierced Silver’s concentration. Her pen careened off course, smearing an ugly ink trail across her orderly notes. She huffed, brushing off her alarm while Rainbow Dash waxed nostalgic about her own flag carrying experience.

Silver understood that an experienced pony ought to coach the teams, but this hardly seemed the time or place to fly down memory lane. She flipped her tail. And did Rainbow need to be so loud about it? *No wonder Scootaloo likes her.*

Thankfully, the game master knew how to rope in overenthusiasm, and Silver could refocus on her notes. *So, Harshwhinny’s on the judges’ table. That’s doable.* If Diamond didn’t know how to handle her type, Silver Spoon definitely did. No skirting on charm or flair here, it’d need to be all routine.

A routine of two ponies and an audience of…goodness knew how many ponies from all over Equestria. All to represent Ponyville.

The wilting feeling returned. Silver looked around. Eager little faces surrounded her, all of whom knew and loved their hometown like their own kin. She sighed.

*Style, grace, and originality? No problem. But the theme?* The flag dangled at the front of the room accusingly. *That needs some work.*

Rainbow Dash adjusted her cap, suddenly serious. Almost professional. “In the meantime, get ready to train, and train hard because I know this opening ceremony is the single most important thing that will ever happen in your young lives!”

Silver’s ears swiveled forward. Surely, that had to be exaggeration. Right?

A glance around the room told her otherwise. Featherweight tensed, more solemn than he’d been all semester. Berry Pinch nodded while Tornado Bolt whispered in her ear. Scootaloo actually looked ready to faint.

Diamond Tiara glanced back at Silver Spoon with a severe nod.

Glancing away, Silver nodded in return.

Though perhaps overexcited, Rainbow didn’t exactly seem to exaggerate. She *did* carry the flag for Cloudsdale. If anypony here would know, it’d be her.

Harshwhinny didn’t seem disagree, either. “The important thing is to show what Ponyville means to you.” Silver Spoon swore she zeroed in on her at that part. “So do Ponyville proud. Work hard. Be bold.” The judge allowed herself a little smirk. “Wow me.”

And that was all. The classroom emptied out around Silver’s desk, alive with discussion, strategies, and bragging. Silver reviewed the notes and stayed in her seat.

Clever young ladies knew how to read between the lines. Ms. Harshwhinny and Rainbow Dash never mentioned prize money, trophies, or ribbons. The real prizes were the most valuable things in the world: Honor. Pride. Renown. Glory. There would be no runner ups, just winners and losers.

Silver couldn’t remember much of the last Games, but she remembered Manehattan turning itself inside out anticipating its arrival. She’d be too old to carry the flag by the time they rolled around again; a one-time offer.
With a deep breath, Silver Spoon steadied herself. Feeling eyes upon her, she lifted her head, unsurprised to discover Diamond Tiara.

The pink filly stood a desk away in the empty classroom, stone faced and silent.

“This is big,” whispered Silver. “Isn’t it?”

“The biggest.” Diamond stepped forward, sizing up her partner to see if she’d blink. “Silvie, I need you to be all in with this. Like, I mean, really in on this. Okay?”

The stillness of the classroom made Silver’s skin itch under her coat. She slid her books into her saddlebag and met Diamond face to face. “Yeah, I know. And I am.”

Hadn’t this been exactly what she wanted? Fillies young as Silver Spoon held a short list of opportunities to redeem their family name. This couldn’t rebuild it, nor get their money back, but a significant checkpoint on their legacy nonetheless. Plus, it looked good on resumes.

“I’m all in, Di.” She held out her hoof. “Bump?”

Diamond grinned. “Bump.”

They sugarlump-rumped and went into town. If Sugarcube Corner wasn’t crowded, they could map out initial strategy plans and get a sugar boost. With no need for the scenic route, Diamond decided to cut through the train station for time.

Luckily, today had slow traffic and the next train seemed to be late. They’d a reasonably smooth path, aside from the crowd of grumbling ponies waiting for the Three-Fifteen.

Weaving around a mountain of ugly luggage, Di looked over her shoulder. “She said our time limit’s two minutes, right?”

“Excuse me, sir!” Silver squeezed between a pole and a particularly rotund stallion, clutching her notebook close to her chest. “Three, max. We’ll need to keep it tight.” Her green highlighter circled the time limit and date. ...Wait a second. She thought back to her planner and frowned. “Hey, you know the pageant’s still in four days, right?”

“Sure,” Diamond said a little too quickly. “What about it?”

“We’re going to the Crystal Empire in three. I don’t think we’ve got time for—”

“I know how to multitask.” Diamond dismissed her with a flick of the tail. “You said I nailed down the pageant routine, right?”

Oh, so now she decides to believe me. “Okay, but regionals start at nine in the morning and the flag contest doesn’t even end until three.” She struggled to see over an ocean of shoulders as Diamond began pulling away from her. “It’s in Baltimare, Di! That’s halfway across—”

“I said I’ve got it, Silver Spoon! You just worry about our flag.” Diamond rose to her back hooves and pointed at a bench. “Hey, isn’t that your dad?”

“Don’t change the subject, we need...” Silver squinted through the throng of bodies. That did kind of look like Father’s brown waistcoat and good hat. “We need a plan.”

She finally managed to weave through the commuters and, indeed, found herself facing her father.

“Told you,” sniffed Diamond Tiara.
Silver knitted her eyebrows at Father’s canvas bag. “Father, you’re not going to Canterlot already? You said you had the whole week off.”

“Oh, hello, Brightness.” Father smiled and shook his head. “No, I’m waiting for somepony. Travelogue’s bringing me some itinerary materials. You remember my old assistant, don’t you?” He adjusted his monocle, amused. “Good afternoon, Miss Diamond Tiara. Don’t you look serious today!”

“Afternoon, Silver Laurel. Sorry, but we’re a little busy right now.” Diamond glanced between him and Silver Spoon. She smiled too innocently. “We’re planning our flag routine for the Games.”

“The Equestria Games?” Father’s pale eyebrows lifted to the brim of his hat. “You’re representing Ponyville, Silver Spoon?”

Silver shot Diamond a look and stepped back. “Um. Yes?”

“Why, that’s wonderful, Brightness!” Entirely forgetting the agreed upon decorum, Father kissed Silver Spoon’s nose in front of the whole station. “I’m so glad you’re finally adjusting! I knew the place would grow on you eventually.”

“Oh, uh…” Silver Spoon rubbed the back of her neck with an awkward little laugh. Ponies had stopped to look at them. “Yes, I guess I am.”

In the corner of her eye, Diamond Tiara watched with a quiet, thoughtful smile.

“Travelogue!” Father waved down the museum associate stepping down from the train. “My little girl’s going to carry the flag in the Games!”

“Really?” The tan mare beamed as she magically sorted through her bag for the proper envelope. With a spare hoof, she gave Silver Spoon a pat on the head. “Gosh, she’s getting so big, Laurel! Last time I saw her she didn’t even reach the reception desk, and now flag carrying.” She giggled and gave Diamond a wink. “I bet you two are a team, huh?”

Diamond grinned and winked back. “We sure are, ma’am!”

Travelogue practically melted at Diamond’s prize-winning smile. “Ohhh, that’s so sweet. Laurel, you just have to tell Madame Frames! You could all go to the Empire and watch.”

Silver Spoon paled. “I don’t know if we need to go through that much trou—”

“Wonderful idea, Travelogue.” Father rubbed his chin, nodding at the idea. “We might even invite Dad along too. Heavens know he needs the fresh air.”

Silver stepped out of range before anypony moved in for another hug. She couldn’t be sure if the smiling crowd around them had more to do with the train arrival or this awful spectacle of family affection. Either way, all these eyes made her teeth clench.

“We’ve still got a lot of work to do, we’d better go. I’ll see you at home, Father.” She bowed her head and deftly slipped back into the crowd. “Nice meeting you again, Miss Travelogue.”

She spied an opening and bolted from the station as quickly as good taste allowed. In the distance, father enthusiastically shared the news with Roseluck. Great, now the fifth biggest gossip in town knew. In less than a day, so would everypony in a ten mile radius.

Not looking up at the hoofsteps approaching from behind, Silver flattened her ears. “You did that on
purpose.”

“Sure I did. Networking and promotion’s good for us. Better they hear it from somepony on our side, right?” Diamond observed the clouds, twirled a lavender strand of her hair, breezy and casual. Too casual. “Mm. Dunno what the issue is.”

The other shoe dangled by a thread. Silver Spoon braced herself and waited for it.

Two seconds.

Ten seconds.

“I mean…” Diamond stopped twirling her hair and stared Silver in the eye. “It’s not like you’re ashamed of Ponyville or anything. Right?”

Silver curled her tail around her haunches. “Um. Well, I—”

Diamond Tiara dropped her smile. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I…” There’d be no deterring a determined Diamond. She took a breath. “I’m not sure how I feel, okay?” She felt her voice threatening to break, but Silver held it back. “It’s just that after all the stuff at Wisteria and…Di, I’m not ashamed of it, I do like Ponyville. It’s nice.”

The steel eased out of Diamond’s stance, though she still frowned. The tip of her tail gave an impatient twitch. “But?”

Silver met her eyes and sighed. “Di, we’re supposed to put a routine together about what makes Ponyville great and what it means to us and stuff, but I don’t even really know what that is, and now that everypony knows, everypony’s watching and expects us to win—”

“Silver.”

“And now Father’s inviting Auntie Silver Frames and Granddad Silver Tongue, so I just know they’ll invite Silver Lining too and then he’s going to tell all of his—”

“Silver Spoon!” Diamond Tiara gripped Silver’s shoulders hard. “Lookit me. Are you a loser?”

Blindsided, Silver blinked and took step back, ears flattened. “Of course not.”

“Good. Me neither. You and me, we’re winners. Winners win. That’s what we’re gonna do.” Diamond looped a foreleg over Silver’s withers and gave her an encouraging squeeze. “You said it yourself: we’re the best fillies this little town has to offer.”

Silver offered a slight nod. True, she did say that last year. It was no less true now, right? “Right. We’ve got reputations to uphold. Appearances to keep.”

“There you go, then.” With another shoulder pat, the two of them moved on through town. Diamond smoothed into her practiced show mare’s trot, waving to choice passersby. One would think she’d won the right to bear the flag weeks ago.

“Try looking at it this way, Silvie: you can tell the value of a company by the quality of its product. Like, less than half the ponies in town don’t even know who Bleu Rondo is, but everypony knows a good saddlebag when they see it, so they know it’s a good brand.”

“That does make sense,” Silver admitted. After all, the entire point of carrying the flag was to represent her hometown. A hometown could do no less than put its best fillies forward. “It can’t be a
one-horse town if ponies like us come out of it, right?"

“Exactly. There’s nothing wrong with Ponyville, it’s just kinda small. It’s maybe a third Canterlot’s size, but here’s the thing about that: Canterlot’s also a jillion years old.” Diamond kicked aside an acorn and watched a squirrel snatch it up. Chittering, the squirrel whisked its fluffy tail and skittered across the road. “Ponyville’s still pretty young, like us, so it’s still on the shrimpy side. It’s growing, though. It used to be a bunch of zap apples and tents, but now—”

“Now it’s got a lot more.” Silver’s eyes followed the squirrel as it zipped up the trunk of an oak tree and ricocheted off a swing sign. The sign for Golden Oak Library’s daytime hours. Slowly, an idea knitted together in Silver’s head. “And we have something almost no other place has.” Slowly, a grin spread across her face. “We’ve got—”

“A princess!” Diamond Tiara threw back her head with a triumphant bark of laughter. She took up another acorn in the frog of her hoof. “I think we just found our theme.”

“And we have a plan.” They had direction. Order. Finesse. The last of the tension eased out of Silver’s chest. With solid footing underhoof, she could finally move forward.

The sunlight glinted off Silver Spoon’s glasses. “So. Who do we have to beat?” She should have taken notes on their competition before everypony scattered into town. It couldn’t be too hard to suss out the serious threats among classmates, though.

Diamond Tiara chewed her bottom lip, considering it. “You sit next to The Dink, right? Is she still trying to catch that…what is it this week?”

“Still after a chat with old lady Root Work.” She’d been nagging Silver to spare thyme and cinnamon for the past three days so she could waste it on a luck spell. “I don’t think she’ll drop it for the flag.”

“Meaning she either won’t do it at all, or go halfway and drop out. Snips and Snails are…well, Snips and Snails.” Diamond glanced up at Tornado Bolt passing over head. Rumble and Cotton fluttered a few wingbeats behind, laughing about something. “We’ll keep an eye on who Cotton teams with.”

Good idea. That pegasus had a tendency to sneak up on ponies. “She’s got talent, but I don’t think she’s too creative.” On a good day, Tornado could be, but only when she managed to focus. If they teamed up again, it could be trouble. “Twist said that Dinky said that Golden Harvest said Peachy Pie’s going to a fair this weekend. Some kinda farming thing.”

“If Peachy’s not doing it, neither is Sunny Daze. Featherweight’s busy with the newspaper.” For a split second, Diamond gritted her teeth in a snarl. “So he’s in the same boat as The Dink. Truffle and Twist are in—I heard ‘em talking after class—but I don’t think we need to worry there.”

“Probably not.” They’d do it for fun, not to win. Button didn’t care about anything without joysticks and Shady Daze was still mooning after The Dink. “What about Pinch?” Silver had never actually seen her compete for anything, but the kid had an irritating amount of spunk.

Diamond shrugged. “She’s probably in, but who knows who her team’s gonna be. Let’s keep an eye out for her, too.” She pricked her ears and glared over her shoulder. “That just leaves one more group.”

Not far away, a trio of familiar voices sang together in all the loud and boisterous harmony of somepony banging pots together. Two of them sounded halfway decent, but the third’s awful claws-on-chalkboard pitch made Silver’s tail frizz.
For the love of Tea Leaf, don’t they ever give it a break? Silver Spoon rolled her eyes at the blank flanks parading over the hillside, prouder than phoenix fledglings. They stepped with an unfounded and unearned confidence, and their intent couldn’t be clearer.

Their competition had arrived. “Ugh.” Silver’s coat rumpled at the very thought of it. Indeed, she’d have laughed off the very concept a year ago—but thirteen months and several wins later, it wasn’t funny.

“We gotta nip that in the bud.” A sneer rippled across Diamond’s muzzle. “Now.” She glanced at Silver Spoon, daring her to say differently.

Silver flicked her tail and had to point out, “We also agreed to lay off them, Diamond. They’re nothing but trouble.” Little monkey wrenches with hooves and bad hair, all of them. Silver suspected it was bad luck even standing this close.

“Different game, Silver Spoon. This isn’t like that small stuff, this is business.”

The filly had a point. Besides, those careless, self-satisfied grins had been biting at Silver’s skin all week.

“And we have the most divine routine planned.” Technically not true, but it may as well have been. Either of them could cough up a routine in their sleep and it’d still be leagues ahead of whatever tawdry song-and-dance number the Goofsaders slapped together.

“It’s absolutely sure to crush the competition.” Diamond Tiara’s little smile swelled into a ferocious grin. She smashed her hooves together with a take-no-prisoners clack, staring straight into the eyes of their enemies. “And I mean crush!”

Sadly, such an admirable throw down seemed lost on the audience. Scootaloo’s grating optimism didn’t dim a watt. “But we’re winners!” Her voice climbed an octave with a bizarre warble, almost as if she was about to— “And we have hearrrts!”
Silver Spoon gritted her teeth and recoiled. She ought to petition the Mayor about noise violations; singing with that voice could *not* be legal. On the other hand, it did give her a prime opening.

“Sure,” Silver purred. She signaled to Diamond for a unified hit as her voice coiled sweetly to strike. “But you know what you don’t have?”

“Your cutie marks!” The pair pounced upon their rivals, beautifully united in a rapid-fire assault. “Blank flanks!” They emptied out the artillery and attacked without mercy. “Blank flanks!” Every shot hit the mark, no room for recovery, no place to breathe. Every syllable stomped these irritating nobodies back into their place. “Blank flanks!”

Not a scratch. Apple Bloom blinked, unimpressed. “What does that have to do with flag carryin’?”

That was…unexpected.

Silver Spoon frowned. *It’s one thing to let yourself look bad, but your entire town? Your families? How selfish can you get?* Apparently she’d just have to spell it out for them. “Having cutie markless ponies represent Ponyville would be *unthinkable*!”

“And we already have our cutie marks,” Diamond added. Together, they displayed the marks of fillies who actually knew themselves, fillies going places. The only fillies worthy to bear the flag. “So we know who’s going to be in the winner’s circle.”

Scootaloo had none of it. None of them did.

“Listen, you two!” In a whirl of feathers, the ratty pegasus got in Diamond’s face. For a moment, Silver thought Di actually flinched. Surely, she’d imagined it. “Cutie marks or no cutie marks, you’ll see! The Crusaders are gonna carry that flag at the games!”

Silver twitched her ears and took a small step closer to Diamond, watching closely. She saw none of the typical burning rage so common to Diamond’s past Crusader campaigns. The fires in her eyes cooled into the iron stare of a competitor and it honed in on Scootaloo. At least for now, she respected this kid. Indeed, this was business.

*Okay, so we’re doing this.* Silver Spoon buried any remaining hesitation under a superior smile and said what one always says to ponies about to lose. “May the best ponies win.”

“Game on!” Nopony could mistake the tension in Scootaloo’s spine, nor the flare of her little wings, or the fire in her voice. Not to mention the fact that she’d done almost all of the talking.

Silver adjusted her glasses with a quiet hum. Apple Bloom was not the pony to look out for this time. Scootaloo wanted this as much as Silver and Diamond did. Maybe more. Too bad she wouldn’t get it.

The parties split without further exchange.

A small twinge of doubt fluttered in Silver’s stomach. She still didn’t know what they’d do for a routine—an entire new routine in two days!—nor what Di’s further plans of attack could be. Still, nopony knew bottom lines the way Diamond did. Silver could trust her plan, whatever it was.

A lady had her duties. Nopony worth their good name could fall to these charlatans. No matter what happened between now and the Games, *nothing* came between them and that flag.

As if sensing Silver’s thoughts, Diamond Tiara locked eyes with her. Together, they nodded.
Failure was a luxury neither of them could afford. The Cutie Mark Crusaders could not, under any circumstances, be allowed to win.
In the center of the War Room, Diamond Tiara perched upon the edge of the metal table, deep in thought and chewing a laurel stalk. At her hooves rested the spreadsheet of competitor teams, a train schedule, Silver Spoon’s planner, and an official listing of The Equestria Games Flagbearer Rules and Regulations.

Silver’s dinner party smile hadn’t swayed Ms. Harshwhinny when she’d requested a thorough rundown of the rules, available alternate methodologies, and what could constitute a disqualification. It may or may not have had something to do with asking her in the middle of the gamemaster’s breakfast. Even so, Ms. Harshwhinny seemed to approve of Silver’s efforts in the end.

“I still don’t see why we can’t bring our own music. I’ve always set my routines to music.” The laurel stalk bobbed between Diamond’s pursed lips. She glanced up at Silver Spoon. “What if we made our own? You play an instrument, right?”

“Harshwhinny said it’s all got to be what we make ourselves, so it’d probably be fine.” Silver’s gaze bounced between Diamond Tiara, the planner, and the train schedule. “The problem is we’d also have to move everything ourselves, and I play harpsichord. Kind of hard to drag into a stadium.”

“And no pyrotechnics? What’s even with that?”

“Apparently a colt tried it this one time and got hospitalized; now they only allow sparklers and even that needs three approvals from judges, parents, and a local affiliate. I don’t think pyro fits our routine, anyway.” Not that Silver even knew what comprised said routine. Or costumes. Or how they’d perfect it all in under three days.

However, Diamond Tiara had assured her that she’d managed far more in less time—with the trophies to prove it—and Silver Spoon suspected from the start that the time limit functioned to keep acts economical and compact. Silver closed her eyes and took a breath. *We’re on the same schedule everypony else is. We have the advantage of experience. We are going to win. Relax.*

Now if only Spoiled Rich could stop checking in on them every five minutes, they might get some actual work done.

Silver’s tail flicked anxiously and she tried not to look at the pointy muzzle sticking out of the door frame. Monitoring progress was fine, but Silver had never been especially fond of ponies breathing over her shoulder. *Maybe she’ll go away if I keep my eyes on my work.*

No such luck. “How are we doing, ladies?” Mrs. Rich stepped into the War Room, frowning at the rainbows of folders she had to step around. “Any progress on the rout—Diamond, what did I say about sitting on that table?”

Diamond Tiara lowered herself back onto her stool and wrapped her tail around her hooves. “Sorry, Mother. No, not yet. We’re still sorting out some other stuff first.”

“Stuff?” Mrs. Rich squinted as if she’d stepped in something gross. “What kind of ‘stuff’ could possibly come before the routine? That’s the foundation of the whole thing, isn’t it? You really shouldn’t waste your time on fluff, Diamond.”
Fidgeting on the seat, Diamond’s jaw tightened. “I’m not wasting it.” Mrs. Rich frowned at the edge in Diamond’s tone, and the filly dialed it back a few notches. “Besides, we’re almost done. And we’re still on schedule, right, Silver Spoon?”

Silver quadruple-checked her calendar. “Ahead, actually. We finished theme and budgeting early, and can’t move to the competitor section until everypony officially signs up on Friday.”

“See? We’re fine.” Diamond leaned on the table, showing off her most casual smile to prove it.

Mrs. Rich eyed the cups and ribbons and banners lining the walls; she didn’t seem overly impressed. Almost a little sad, actually. The light of a trophy cup reflected off her coat. The base read *Golden Glitter & Diamond Tiara: 1st Place, Boogie Blast ’96.*

“I do hope so, Diamond Tiara.”

“I know.”

“Remember, carrying the flag isn’t all about you. It isn’t something you can rush at the last second. You need to take this seriously.”

“I know, Mother, and I’m not.” One hoof guarding the prep material, Diamond edged closer to Silver. Her lashing tail slapped the bottom of the metal table and her lips pressed together, holding back whatever she wanted to add to that statement. “Really. I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you?” Stepping forward, Mrs. Rich’s eyes narrowed and her voice grew dangerously quiet. “Because sometimes I have to wonder, Diamond. I have to wonder why you waited until today to start planning your routine when I remember your father mentioning it at dinner almost a month ago.”

Silver Spoon looked up in surprise. A *month?* That had to be well before Di even mentioned pageant prep to her. *Maybe it slipped her mind?* From the way Diamond flinched at Silver’s expression, that seemed likely.

The frown festered into a scowl. Mrs. Rich dragged her eyes over the bright folders strewn about the carpet. “And I also have to wonder what could have distracted you and squandered so much of your time.”

No good answer for that. Diamond changed the subject and doubled down on defense. “We’re still way ahead of everypony else,” she reminded her. “With our advantage, I think we have it in the bag.”

“You ‘think’?” Mrs. Rich clucked her tongue. “It’s better to know.” She peered over Silver’s head to see the diagrams and spreadsheets and schedules. In a softer voice, she added, “Are you *really* sure you don’t want any help?”

Silver ducked to the side; Mrs. Rich’s necklace kept bumping her ear tips. Politely, she indicated the rules and regulations sheet. “We’ll get disqualified if we have outside help, ma’am.” The look Diamond’s stepmother shot back made Silver flatten her ears. *Sheesh, it’s not like I made that rule.* “It’s very kind of you to offer,” she quickly added, “but Ms. Harshwhinny made that part very clear.”

Diamond clapped Silver on the withers. “Besides, I’ve got Silver Spoon for my partner. Nopony can keep it together like she can.”

“Oh? Well, that’s good to hear.” A thin smile eased across Mrs. Rich’s muzzle. “I hope you keep up
the good work, Silver Spoon.” Not a threat, but a warning: *I’m watching you.*

“I will, ma’am.” She must have done something to arouse suspicion of character, though Silver couldn’t imagine what it could be.

Mother rarely spoke of Spoiled Rich in a favorable light; Silver wondered if she’d caught shrapnel from some sideline skirmish between adults. That hardly seemed to justify it, though. Perhaps she’d made some other mistake?

Silver looked up and tried another smile. She considered complimenting her new earrings, but that might sound like kissing up (which it was) so she simply said, “I’ll do my best, Mrs. Rich. We both will.”

That, at least, seemed to be satisfactory for the moment.

Mrs. Rich left them to their work and Silver Spoon searched for the train schedules. They had to get transportation sorted out and thus far, she didn’t like the look of it. The best option she could find was a connecting train to a Baltimare suburb that departed ten minutes after the flag competition. That could work, if not for the two hour wait for a connecting train in Conneticolt. Two hours they did not have.

But before Silver’s hoof touched the train schedules, Diamond brushed them aside for the competitors list.

“So, Berry Pinch teamed up with Tornado Bolt? Weird. I’d think Bolt would join Cotton for a flying routine.” Diamond Tiara pointedly ignored Silver’s huff. “Wonder what that’s about. Did you dig up any dirt on them, Silver Spoon?”

Silver shook her head. “Only that it’s a two-mare team. I dug for more when I had tea with Bolt yesterday—*not* easy to schedule, just so you know—but she wouldn’t talk about anything besides cloud trails and the *Power Ponies* cliffhanger. I think Pinch warned her ahead of time.”

Not that it mattered. They’d see all the performances on Friday anyway. It’d be better to wait and make adjustments then.

“Measuring the competition can wait. Di, I still don’t know how we’re gonna get all the way to Baltimare in under eighteen hours.”

“Hmm.” Diamond closed her eyes and nodded to herself. “Know what? We’ve been working too hard. I think I’m gonna get a soda.” She hit the floor at a canter, only glancing behind to add, “You want a soda, Silvie?”

She didn’t, but it’d be rude to decline. “Only if it doesn’t have caffeine, I don’t want to mess up my sleep schedule.” Silver met Diamond at the shoulder and cleared her throat. “And speaking of schedules…”

“We can go over it in a sec, sheesh.”

Silver rolled her eyes. *Two bits say that sec ends up an hour.*

They cut through the rec room and into the secondary dining room. A place for eating, not hosting, it provided a casual alternative to its chandeliered twin across the kitchen. The checkered tile and shocks of neon accents in the walls kept a light and fun atmosphere.

Mr. Rich sat at the far end of the table with a steaming cup of coffee—an east Zebrician blend,
according to Silver’s nose—and a dog-eared copy of *Lonesome Phoenix*.

“Hi, Daddy.” Diamond nodded to him on her way to the kitchen door.

“Mm. Hello, girls,” he mumbled absently. Mr. Rich flicked his ears up and lifted his head. “Oh! Hold on there, Diamond. Come here a second.” He patted an adjacent spot on the bench.

The two fillies shared a cautious glance. As far as worrying phrases went, *Come here a second* sat a couple of rungs under *We need to talk*.

Diamond hesitated, perhaps conjuring up a preemptive alibi or decent excuse. “Yeah, Dad?”

“We got a telegram from Coach Razzle Dazzle this morning. She wanted to know when and where to meet for the Baltimore pageant rehearsals.” Mr. Rich sipped his coffee, waiting as his daughter took a seat across from him.

After some consideration, Silver took a seat at the farther end of Diamond’s bench, marginally included without intruding. She watched Mr. Rich’s posture, frowning.

He leaned on the table with a sort of faux-informality Silver had seen in Granddad’s business lunches. The kind used to placate skittish colleagues. The kind used to break bad news.

“I said that I’d talk it over with you first, then wire back tonight.” Out of the novel, Mr. Rich pulled out the train schedule he’d been using as a bookmark. “So, what are we going to tell her?”

“We…could…” Diamond looked to Silver Spoon, who’d no more schedule solutions than she had two minutes ago. She squinted in thought. “We could tell her I’ve been keeping up with everything and I’m ready to go. We can meet her in Baltimore for last minute rehearsals.”

Filthy Rich arched an eyebrow. “When?”

“When we get there? About…when did you say the train arrived, Silvie?”

“Half past eight,” said Silver Spoon. Barely time to set up and sign in, much less rehearse. “Maybe a quarter-past, if the train’s early.”

Diamond considered this, twirling her mane in her hoof. “‘Kay, maybe not. We could ask her to meet us at the Crystal Empire and rehearse on the train. Oh, or even better! Coach Razz can meet us in Ponyville and come along for the whole ride to the Empire and Baltimore!” She sat up and grinned, quite pleased with the solution. “That way, we economize our time—it’s what, ten hours of travel time, altogether? More than enough.”

“Hm. You’re right, that might work.” Mr. Rich rubbed his chin and nodded thoughtfully. “And when do you plan to sleep? Or eat? Or rest?”

Diamond waved him off. “I’ll squeeze it in somewhere.”

Wrong answer. Mr. Rich shook his head. “I’m sorry, but facts are facts; the logistics don’t work. Diamond Tiara, darlin’, you can’t do both the pageant and the flag.” Gently, he laid out the bottom line. “You’re going to have to choose.”

“But we can make it work!” Di’s little pink hoof banged the linoleum table. “We don’t need to go by train; we’ll hire an airship or ask somepony to teleport us. Princess Twilight is nice, I bet she’d do it if we offered to reimburse.”
Diamond topped the offer off with an adorable smile. When that didn’t break ground, she tried wilted ears and pouty lips.

Mr. Rich didn’t budge.

“Daddy, please!” As negotiations broke down, Diamond Tiara climbed into minor panic. “We can work something out, we could—we could hire extra help or something! Dad, I can pull it off! I can do this!”

He frowned—a hairline crack in Mr. Rich’s poker face. He gently sipped his coffee and sighed. “I know you can, honey. But you shouldn’t. Diamond, you’re not even eleven and I’ve seen you put more hours into your work than adults four times your age.”

“What’s the matter with that? It’s good to work hard.” Braced against the wall, Diamond switched gears and went on the offence. “You told me to work hard.”

In her wildest fancies, Silver Spoon couldn’t imagine herself ever firing back at any adult this way, much less her own parents. Then again, she also wasn’t Diamond Tiara.

With the right motivation and enough preparation, Diamond Tiara’s persuasions could shatter egos and coax cookies out of wardens’ hooves.

Certainly, she had more than enough motivation, but only Mr. Rich had come to this discussion prepared. “I didn’t tell you to run yourself into the ground.” He narrowed his eyes at his daughter’s pout. “Maybe you think you can keep this pace up, but burning a candle at both ends every night means pretty soon you’ve got no candle left. It’s not healthy for a filly your—”

“This is because you don’t like my pageants, isn’t it?” Diamond bit her shaky bottom lip. She held her cracked hoof close to herself and glared. “You haven’t liked them since Van Hoofer and it’s not even fair because I told you that was just an accident, Dad! It wasn’t Mom’s fault. It could have happened to anypony!”

“But it didn’t happen to anypony,” said Mr. Rich. “It happened to you.” It sounded like he wanted to add something else, but kept it to himself.

Silver Spoon squirmed on the bench, more than a little uncomfortable. She turned towards the kitchen, wondering if she ought to get those sodas and let Diamond and her father have some privacy.

Spoiled Rich stood at the back of the dining room, the neon piping throwing green highlights across her mane. She must have just walked in, and keeping to the sidelines, nopony seemed to have noticed her yet.

Quickly, Silver gauged the distance between Mrs. Rich and the door. Before their eyes could meet, she averted her eyes to the checkered floor to weigh the benefits of leaving the room versus the potential awkwardness thereof. Not worth it.

“You’re right, Diamond. I don’t like it.” Mr. Rich folded his hooves, frowning at the crack that split Diamond’s hoof polish. “But this isn’t about what I like or don’t like. I’m not saying you have to drop Baltimare. We had an agreement on your pageants, and I’m still making good on it.”

He sat back on the bench, acknowledged his wife with a glance, and circled back to the bottom line. “However, you do have to drop one of them. We all have to make choices we don’t like sometimes. This is one of those times.”
Even Diamond knew a loss when it sat in front of her face. Halfheartedly, she tossed out the last argument in her arsenal. “You already put nine hundred bits into the finale dress. It’s a sunk cost, Dad.”

“Well, if you choose to carry the flag, I’ll learn to deal with it.” He shrugged. “Either way, it sounds more like deadweight loss to me.”

Silver Spoon pricked her ears and tapped in. “Um. The finale dress is in Ponyville’s colors, right? Maybe you could use it in the flag routine.”

Filthy Rich smiled at that. Diamond Tiara did not. Silver went back to studying the checkers in the floor.

“In the end, it’s your choice, Diamond,” Spoiled Rich put in. She took a small step towards the table. “It’s a matter of priorities. Ask yourself: which one is worth more to you? Which one has real benefit?”

Diamond tapped her forehooves together. “If I miss the Baltimare Regionals, I can’t go to Nationals this year.”

Gently as she could, Silver pointed out, “For us, the Equestria Games only come once at all.” The Riches’ business really ought not to be Silver’s business, but Diamond had practically invited Father and Auntie and Granddad Silver Tongue. She’d be darned if they showed up to the Crystal Empire with nopony to watch. “There’s always next year.”

Mr. Rich took a long sip from his coffee cup. He’d said his piece and seemed in no rush for a decision, so long as a decision was made. Negotiations had ended.

Diamond Tiara squeezed her eyes shut as if anticipating a doctor’s needle. “The flag,” she croaked. Lifting her head, she cleared her throat and finalized it. “I want to carry the flag for Ponyville.”

The Riches looked at each other. They seemed surprised.

Mr. Rich did his best to maintain a professional, neutral stance, but he couldn’t stop the proud glint in his eyes. “You’re sure about this?”

Bracing her shoulders, Diamond opened her eyes and nodded. “I’m sure, Daddy. Tempus pecunia.”

Silver rubbed her chin and struggled through a translation. Time is money. Sounded like a motto.

The poker face broke and Mr. Rich exchanged a small grin with his wife. He reached over the table to clasp hooves with Diamond. They shook on it.

“Perdere ea stultitia.”

Waste neither.

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The bad news: In addition to bowing out of the Baltimare Regionals, Mr. Rich—who’d been reading up on his healthy sleeping literature—cut weeknight practice time to an hour and a half.

The good news: Diamond and Silver had already ironed out the finale for the Baltimare pageant
weeks ago, and it converted to a flag bearing routine with little trouble. Not only that, Silver Spoon already knew the choreography by heart from watching Di perform it a thousand times.

Silver only had to distill the finale from nine minutes to three and add in another pony. Easy enough, with slightly altered choreography. Over lunch (so it technically didn’t count as practice time) Diamond rearranged it to properly incorporate the flag and better fit their theme.

A bite-size history lesson in dance form, the steps flowed from a pastoral waltz to a lively foxtrot to a modern, up-tempo tap. All the while, the Ponyville flag swirled and followed them on golden strings until Diamond hoisted it from the pole: a flag raising to triumph the same way their town did.

Brass Tacks and Randolph gave standing ovations during dress rehearsal. Father complimented their enthusiasm. Mrs. Rich smiled and nodded, which Diamond counted as a raving review.

Come Friday afternoon, Silver believed they’d crafted something to be proud of and she showed it in full fervor.

Diamond Tiara plopped upon the school lawn, still cradling the flagpole in her hooves as she caught her breath. Beside her, Silver caught the flag’s tassels before they touched the ground. They both stared up at Rainbow Dash with big, eager eyes.

Rainbow Dash marked something on her clipboard, nodding to herself.

“We did good. The wind threw us off a little bit, and the tempo’s…” Diamond took another deep breath. “The tempo’s a little too fast. But we still did good, right?” She hugged the flagpole hard. “Right?”

“You did great, guys! The interpretive tree dance thingy’s pretty cool. Nice job keeping in sync the whole time.” Rainbow adjusted her hat and swooped down to eye level. She lifted an eyebrow and fixed them with a discerning look. “There’s still one thing you guys need to work on.”

“I knew we needed pyrotechnics!” Diamond kicked the grass with a snort.

Silver’s hopeful smile shriveled. “Did we forget something?”

“Darn right you did.” Rainbow grinned and winked at them. “You forgot to have fun with it! I mean seriously, lighten up, you guys. It’s a flag, not a coffin.”

Silver Spoon tilted her head. “Aren’t we supposed to take this seriously?”

“It’s just early jitters, Coach. Won’t happen again.” Diamond nodded to Silver, affirming it wouldn’t. “But we did do good?”

“You did really good.” Rainbow smiled at her clipboard and climbed higher into the sky, on her way to check on the other acts. It sounded like somepony had started setting up on the stage. “Keep it up, you guys. And remember, loosen up—have fun!”

Oddly quiet, Diamond Tiara watched her go. She folded up the flag, set it back in the box, and after a couple rounds of pacing back and forth, sat down again. “She’s right. We pulled a music box.”

Silver looked up from cleaning the grass out of her horseshoe. “A what?”

“It’s when your act is good, but there’s no life in it—like, all stiff and mechanical and junk. Coach Razzle Dazzle calls that music boxing. We’re too tense.” Diamond’s eyes hadn’t left Rainbow. “Audiences can smell fear. We need to relax.”
Giggles flickered overhead. Silver Spoon traced the sound to Tornado Bolt doing loop-de-loops around Berry Pinch. Featherweight sat in an oak tree, keeping them company and snapping photos of the goings on. His dinner plate ears cocked in Silver’s direction and he turned his camera.

“Di! Paparazzo at ten-o’clock.”

In unison, they drew themselves up for a quick victory pose. Shady Daze probably lurked somewhere around here, too. No doubt something from today would end up in the paper. Silver wondered if they should prepare a statement.

“We’re winners, Silvie.” Diamond tossed her mane in time for a dynamic snapshot. “We’ve got nothing to worry about.”

According to Silver’s network of intelligence, eightysix percent of the competition had barely passed the concept stage, Crusaders included. “We’d be stupid not to be at least a little worried, but…” She thought of the hours they’d shoveled into perfecting the act.

Brass Tacks’ applause still rang happily in her memory, as did Mrs. Spoiled Rich’s grin. That had been the first time Silver actually saw her genuinely excited or happy. If even she liked their flag routine, everypony else would too. “No, I don’t think we’ve got anything to worry about. Break for ten?”

Diamond shook her head. “Let’s break for the afternoon.”

“The whole afternoon?” Silver flipped open her saddlebag to get her planner. “But we’ve still got practice tonight.”

“Yeah, and that’s when we’ll fix the tempo. It’s too fast for you. We can also do last-minute dress rehearsals tomorrow, but for now, I think—” Di nodded to herself with a smile. “No, I know we’ve got this.”

So now what? Silver felt hard knots in her shoulders when she shifted them. “I wouldn’t mind the spa. Plus, it’s not far from Carousel Boutique; we can grab our outfits afterward.” Or rather, grab Silver’s duplicate of Diamond’s finished dress.

With Silver at her heels, Diamond Tiara stretched and trotted across the field, taking brief note of the other foals practicing their routines around them. “Yeah, that sounds good. Mother does always say a steam and a massage is the best way to relax, so—” She stopped at a hedge, her ears twitching.

On the opposite side, Rainbow Dash touched down, ready for something. Another rehearsal? “Show me what you got, Cutie Mark Crusaders. And make it good!”

On the other hoof, they could always squeeze in a quick comedy act. Silver chuckled under her breath. Good? This ought to be hysterical.

Scootaloo and her dumb ugly haircut poked through the patchy curtain. “Don’t worry, we will!”

Already on the same page, Diamond Tiara grinned. “First, let’s watch The Cutie Mark Goofsaders’ sad little routine.”

It hadn’t even started yet, and Silver could hardly hold back her giggles. “They’re gonna be a hot mess!”

She made herself as comfortable as a young lady could manage behind a leafy shrubbery. With her tail curled around herself, she tucked her hooves in and held her head high, as if attending an opera.
The threadbare curtain rustled. Show time. A prim, satisfied smirk curled her lips. Silver Spoon watched.

And watched.

…And watched.

No. Silver Spoon’s smile withered. Her heart splashed into the depths of her stomach. Her stomach double-knotted itself.

No, I’m mistaken. A perfectly reasonable explanation. Silver had been wrong before and now was no different. It’s like Di said before. I’m no showpony, no pageant filly. What do I know about the stage? I’m wrong.

She wanted to look away, but couldn’t drag her eyes away from the ghastly, glorious image of Scootaloo and the streaming flag bursting through the hoop—oh, Celestia, a perfect maneuver—and the flag kept going with the scooter…

The timing was impeccable! ...But only in Silver’s opinion, the opinion of a laymare. An expert’s eye would catch all the little faults in the routine. There were always faults in a routine. Diamond could point them all out.

Silver reached for Di’s hoof.

Diamond held it. Tight. Her teeth softly ground together.

Oh, no. But…but the coach! Silver craned her neck to see Rainbow’s reaction. After all, nopony’s opinion mattered more than hers.

“That…was…!” Rainbow’s outstretched wings hid her face, but an explosion of excitement boiled under the feathers. It lasted a quarter of a second, and Coach Dash buried it under a mask of neutrality, but Silver still saw it.

The coach loved it. No, she adored it. There might be a slight chance it had only been a matter of bias—rumors of Miss Dash acting as a surrogate big sister swarmed the grapevine last November—but even with that chance, it couldn’t outweigh the evidence.

“Did you see that?” It looked like Diamond didn’t know whether to stomp or scream or sink her teeth into somepony’s neck. “I can’t believe I’m saying this. They could win.”

How dare they. Silver turned away; she couldn’t bear the sight of those three anymore. She couldn’t allow this. The universe couldn’t allow this. It’s not right. It’s not fair!

Forlorn and scrambling, she stared at Diamond Tiara. If they’d already played their best card, what could possibly be left? “But how do we stop them? We already called them blank flanks.”

The tip of Diamond’s tail tapped against the leaves. She didn’t look scared at all, and it lit a lantern in Silver Spoon’s heart. Diamond had an idea.

“Then we’ll just need to find a new way to get under their skin.” Diamond’s narrowed eyes gleamed like the edge of a sword. “Or maybe…” She had teeth in her smile. “Under their wings.”

Silver Spoon blinked. “I don’t get it.”

Diamond Tiara blinked back slowly. “Put it together, nerd.”
Glancing back at Scootaloo and her stupid ugly sweaty stupid face, Silver backtracked to last week. Scootalooser on the playground, tagged and frozen, watching Rumble and Featherweight play skyball.

Her eyes trailed to the cracked, crooked primaries in Scootaloo’s wings. Wings scarcely half the size of Cotton Cloudy’s. Wings that propelled that trashy old scooter…but when was the last time they’d propelled Scootaloo through the air?

When was the last time Silver saw Scootaloo fly? Never.

“Oh.” Her eyes grew wide. “…oh.”

“Yeah, there you go.” A chuckle broke Diamond’s game face. “Seriously? You never noticed?”

Silver wrinkled her nose. “The less I see of that loser, the better. Never looked close enough to notice. Or care.” She really should have. Silver Spoon had underestimated the raggedy feather duster, and that had been a mistake. No more.

Memories of Scootaloo staring pathetically at the Junior Air Team during Winter Wrap Up popped into focus. Silver’s mouth thinned into a grim slash of contempt. “So we attack the wings.”

“Hard.” Diamond gave a short, brisk nod. “We hit hard enough, and the whole thing collapses like Griffonstone’s economy.”

“So hard they won’t get up again.”

Silver’s eye fell upon the Crusaders’ hoop: the crux of the routine and the ruination of all she’d worked for. A furious bile built in the back of Silver’s throat at the sight of Scootalooser’s insipid little smile. That smile needed to go. You don’t deserve it.

“What’s the plan?”

Testing the waters, Diamond lowered her voice and watched her, already forming counter arguments. “It’s against the rules, you know.”

No, this was against several rules. And dishonorable, to boot. This, Silver Spoon realized, did not bother her at all. She’d tried being honorable, and where had it gotten her?

The sunlight skimmed over Silver’s glasses. In the corner of her eye, the ratty, flightless miscreant smiled without a clue. I’m going to make you hurt. No. More than that. Silver flattened her ears. I’m going to ruin you.

“Like I said.” Her voice frosted over. “What’s the plan?”

Diamond raised her eyebrows, a little taken aback, though not displeased. She scooted close and wrapped her tail around Silver’s hoof. “Okay. We wait until Rainbow Dash and Miss Cheerilee go home…”

Silver’s freshly washed mane streamed over her shoulders, smelling of blackcurrant and vanilla. She lightly bounced in the center of the giant waterbed in the Rich’s guest room (practically a second
bedroom, as much as she slept here). “The train leaves at eight, so we’re getting up at…five?”

“Five-thirty.” Diamond sat Lady Mimic on the bedside table, next to Silver’s planner and glasses case.

So five, then. Silver wound her alarm clock and shoved off the bed to draw the curtains. She had to give it to the Riches; this guest room had a magnificent view. She could see the schoolyard from here, if she went on tip hoof.

Diamond Tiara squinted through the late sunlight, no doubt trying to see the school stage. “Hey, did you ever get a chance to check up on the Goofsaders?” Lowering her voice, she checked behind them. Lights out was supposed to be at seven, and the clock marked seven-thirty. “Nopony saw you, right?”

“No, but I don’t think they would’ve, even if I walked onstage. Scootaloser’s still trying to fly through that hoop.” A wry little smile flicked at the end of Silver’s muzzle. “She’s actually getting better at it.”

Diamond took a step closer, worried and hiding it badly. “Wait, what?”

“Yeah. This morning she flew like a brick. Now she flies like a brick wall.”

The two of them shared a laugh, trying (and failing) to keep it quiet.

“That doesn’t sound like sleeping, ladies,” a maid’s voice called down the hall.

“Oh, and Bloom is like, so done with Scootaloo’s fly-fail junk. She’s gonna snap any minute, if she hasn’t already. They might even kick her out.” Silver chuckled under her breath, though the vindication didn’t warm her like she expected.

Probably just tired. It’d been a long day, and they’d still squeezed in a couple of last-second rehearsals after the spa. Silver grabbed the pulley in her teeth and tugged the heavy curtain until not a sliver of sunlight remained. “We’d better turn in.”

The flowers smell all wrong. That’s the first thing she realizes.

Silver stands in her family’s little garden (she cannot presently recall why, but it doesn’t matter) with her watering can. It’s in the middle of watering the roses that Silver realizes they don’t have a rose’s aroma at all, but the oppressive candy-sweet scent of mountain laurel.

And it’s not only the roses. Stepping along the ten-foot picket fence and sloshing her watering can full of espresso, it strikes her that the hemlock smells of honeysuckle. The dahlias possess the distinct scent of columbine. And come to think of it, since when did they have a darnel grass lawn?

It’s all a little odd. She ought to speak with Brass Tacks about this; gardening is supposed to be his job. Where is he? He’s not in the yard and it’s not his day off. Outside, maybe?

Silver peers between the bars of the twenty-foot wrought iron fence, but she can’t see him on the Manehattan street. The churning mass of socialites and business ponies stroll past the yard with their parasols and petticoats. One of them may know something.
There’s her homeroom professor. “Pardon me, Mister Marting—”

He’s gone before she can finish the sentence. Didn’t he hear her? Silver waves to Mother’s dinner party friend. “Hello? Missus Valencia?”

Valencia Orange hails a cab and rushes in without a backward glance.

Coach Waterfire doesn’t hear her either. Nor does Headmistress Avalonia. Nopony does, even though they stand less than a yard away. They don’t ignore her; it’s as if they don’t know she’s there.

Surely, they must have someplace very important to be, or else they’d not be so rude. Silver cannot recall an event listing in the society pages, but whatever is happening must be grand. A band is playing a block away, just past Canterlot Castle. The event of the season, from the look of the spotlights and confetti. A place where…

Silver’s ears fly up with a gasp. “A place where I should be!”

Right behind her—or beyond the fence?—Father clicks his tongue in disapproval. “You’re late, Silver Spoon.”

“Father?” She cannot see him and when she tries to look through the bars of the—wait. Silver frowns at the mile-high pickets of her fence. “Wait, but…” Her hoof presses against the soft metal bars…the wrought iron bordering Silver Estate.

This…this seems wrong—no.

No, focus.

Silver shakes her head to get it straight. Priorities. She’s got somewhere to be.

The flowers blow gently in a sour milk breeze, suddenly limp and wilted and browning. Their stems crumble at the touch of her hoof, as if nopony’s watered them in ages, but she’d just watered them a second ago. Right?

There’s no time to save the dahlias. Silver Spoon grasps the watering can in her teeth and tears along the ten mile long fence—was this yard always so long?—to save the roses. Maybe they’re still salvageable.

She gently brushes the pink and gray petals of one. The leaves are browning at the edges, and it’s lost some petals, but watering seems to perk it up. Silver Spoon tries to arrange the paint can so the rose can get more light, but the overcast sky hangs bitter and dark.

Something wet crunches underhoof. Silver makes a face, shakes a weird orange leaf off her forehoof, and goes back to her roses. Eight blocks away, in the middle of Manehattan’s famous Trot Square, the sunlight smiles upon Canterlot Castle. She can still get there, once she finishes watering this and—

A whistle slices through the air. “You are late, Miss Silver!” thunders Granddad Silver Tongue.

Silver Spoon jumps back. “I’m sorry!” She’s not sure what she’s even sorry for, but young ladies know apologies come first. “I—I’m so sorry, I’m coming.”

“Humph! We do not apologize for our mistakes, Miss Silver. We correct them.” The snarl in Great Uncle Silver Chalice’s voice makes her drop the can and run for the front gate.
She runs and runs and runs even though it’s impolite to run, but the field of darnel grass stretches longer with every step. Something’s itchy and biting at her hocks, digging into her hooves, but there’s no time to look.

The piercing whistle screams louder and doesn’t stop.

And then Silver Spoon’s back with the roses. “Where…is…the gate?” The scent of mountain laurel burns her nose. Her heart skips a beat. This isn’t right.

“Okay. Maybe…maybe I’m remembering wrong. I’ll cut through the house and take the front gate instead.” She grits her teeth against that awful whistle and shakes the scratchy orange leaves from her hocks. “Maybe get that tea kettle, while I’m at it.”

The doors to Silver Spoon’s cozy white split-level house creak open. She blinks in the weak light of Silver Estate’s vast foyer. Sconces light the violet wallpaper patterned in Wisteria’s emblem. Trotting along the halls, the periwinkle carpeting feels springy underhoof…much like the carpet of Diamond Tiara’s living room.

Silver Screen’s voice drifts down from the balcony, soft and ghostly. “You’re expected on set, Silver Spoon. Where are you?”

Leaves scratch Silver’s pastern. She kicks them off and grinds them into the carpet, sneering at their red edges. Stupid things must have made her bleed.

Silver blinks. The leaves are back. There’s more of them now.

The hair along her spine rises. Her fluttering heart drags itself into her throat and lodges there and that stupid kettle won’t stop screaming!

Through the skylight, she sees the iron fence climb above the roof, and the sharp points of the fence curve inward in to meet. Like the top of a birdcage. Or the bottom side of tree roots.

The kettle screams louder.

“I…” Tears brim in the corners of Silver’s eyes. “I don’t like this…”

“No pony cares!” Silver Platter’s whip crack voice peels the wallpaper. Underneath it, wood rots.

The oil portrait of Silver Jubilee stares down impassively. “Young lady, you are late.”

“But I can’t find the door!”

“No excuses!” snap Silver Medal and Silver Swift in tandem.

Maybe she can try for the back gate again. Silver Spoon turns around to go back and bumps her nose against hard glass. “What on…?”

A silver mirror hangs on a wall where a hallway used to be. Silver Spoon steps closer to the mirror, frowning. It’s not her reflection inside.

Scootaloo’s mangled wing drags across the carpet, twisted at an impossible angle. Glimpses of white bone poke out from bloodied, featherless skin. She speaks to Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle.

Confused, Silver Spoon reaches for the mirror.

Cracks spiderweb across the glass. Apple Bloom says something back. The mirror shatters without a
sound.

Silver Spoon screams and she can’t even hear it under the shriek of the kettle. She turns and runs. The periwinkle carpet shifts to hard parlor rugs. She doesn’t stop running until her hooves clack against hard marble flooring and Silver sees where she stands.

Wisteria Dining Hall echoes with her hoofsteps as Silver gasps for breath. Cobwebs thread between empty chairs at empty tables. It seems like nopony’s polished the chandelier in decades. Silver doesn’t know how she ended up here. She doesn’t care. She just wants to go.

A pallid bust of Silver Sword sadly blinks at her from the mantle. “Sterling Silver Spoon. You—”

“I know!” Silver Spoon flattens her ears to keep out the screaming tea kettle. “I know, I know! I’m late!”

“No, child,” Silver Sword whispers. “You disappoint me. Where has your honor gone?”

The world falls silent. “I…” Silver’s ears wilt. She opens her mouth, but the words turn to dust. “I… I…”

A new voice laughs, too lively for the room. “Oh, what nonsense! Silver Spoon, don’t you listen to a word of it.”

In the center of the dining hall, Palanquin sits at the only clean table. It’s set for tea for two, yet the bowls and cups and saucers are empty. Palanquin’s green eyes have the half-lidded stare from literature class, but sits with tight etiquette class posture. She fluffs her auburn mane and gestures for Silver to take a seat.

Palanquin smiles. Not a Wisteria smile, a Pinkie Pie smile. “I, for one, think you’ve done remarkably.” A compliment without asterisks or daggers. She means it.

The hair along Silver’s spine rises against the back of a wooden chair she doesn’t remember sitting in. Licking her dry lips, she places her hooves at the edge of the tablecloth and asks, “What do you mean?”

Palanquin’s rich laugh ripples throughout the empty room, the empty building, the empty streets. “Your success, of course. Amazing for an underclassmare! It’s such a pity nopony could be there to see it. I know Toplofty would have conniptions if she knew you’d bested her again.”

The kettle—Silver’s favorite silver kettle…has it always been at this table?—screams so loud Silver Spoon has to cover her ears.

Palanquin turns up her nose, a little offended. “Well, if you wanted a cup, you only had to ask.” She takes the screeching kettle and pours an odd sort of jet-black beverage. It doesn’t look like tea.

“‘Quin, I really don’t know what you’re talking about.” Silver’s trembling hoof reaches for her cup. She pauses. Wet, sticky feathers coat her hoof from frog to fetlock, and a thick coppery scent overpowers the writhing…tea?

No. Not tea. The black liquid undulates against the porcelain. One tiny leg reaches over the tip of the cup. Then another. Another.

Spiders. Thousands of tiny black spiders.

With a shriek, Silver drops the teacup, shattering it to pieces. The spiders burst free and she
scrambles to get her back hooves up in the chair. She can’t get traction with the wet feathers covering her hooves. They keep slipping.

Palanquin casually sips from her own teacup. “I thought nopony could outdo the Foxglove Maneuver Toplofty pulled on your unicorn friend, but once again, you’ve impressed me.”

With a flick of her hoof, Palanquin’s fan pops open. A fan made from hundreds of little orange feathers. The quills drip red.

“Oh, and by the way, Silver Spoon…” Tilting her head towards the moonlit window, Palanquin chuckles. A spider crawls over her eye. “You’re still late.”

A firm voice rings from the window. “On the contrary.”

In a brilliant flash of moonlight, the cobwebs melt and the spiders evaporate. The walls give a collective sigh, as if exhausted, and the Wisteria dining hall eased back into its normal proportions.

Where Palanquin once sat, Princess Luna now held a steaming cup of milk tea. With a smile, she levitated a glowing silver watch. She examined it carefully and nodded, satisfied. “You are right on time, Miss Silver Spoon.”

An air of serenity fell over the room like a warm blanket and the air took the smell of winter nights, despite it being near summer. At ease, though thoroughly confused, Silver sniffed her own cup of milk tea: a blend of chamomile, honey and lavender. A blend she knew all too well.

“Princess Luna, I…” Thousands of questions bubbled in her head (about a quarter of them concerning the proper etiquette of greeting royalty) but she settled on, “You know how to make emergency tea?”

“I don’t. You do. It is your dream, after all.” Her Highness took a sip and smiled. The starlight in her mane twinkled bright against the silver teacup. “A fine blend, by the way. I will remember to recommend it.”

“Thank you, Princess. So, um…this is a dream?” Silver Spoon glanced at the Silver Estate architecture and Wisteria décor. Yeah, that explained a lot. Recalling the spiders and the screaming kettle, she cringed. “Actually, I think that might have been a nightmare.”

“That sounds about right, yes. Nightmares often arise when we cannot—or will not—confront something that’s been troubling us.” Princess Luna refilled her cup and eyed an orange feather twisting through the air. “Do you suppose that’s what’s happened here tonight?”

“Yes, but…” Silver thought about it and frowned. “That doesn’t add up to me.”

The Princess hummed curiously. “It doesn’t? Why not?”

“Because I fixed it already. The thing that’s been bothering me most is my family’s reputation and how to fix it, but I already found a way to do that. Or, I did.” Under Silver’s nose, the emergency tea bubbled to a furious boil. “Until Scootaloo and her friends’ stupid little routine came in and tried to ruin everything, so I—well, Diamond and I…”

Princess Luna lifted her elegant neck and waited with an appraising stare.

Silver shrank behind her teacup. “…made it so she couldn’t this time.” The orange feather settled in Silver Spoon’s lap. The quill was still red, as if dipped in red ink. Or been plucked. “Okay, sure, it might have been—”
A cracked mirror flashed in her memory. The foundations of her argument melted in the moonlight and Silver’s tongue fumbled to hold them. “It might have been a little mean, but I only…”

Wanted to hit her so hard she couldn’t get up again. Make her hurt.

The Princess blinked slowly at her. Could Luna read thoughts? It might not have mattered; Silver felt it written across her face.

Silver Spoon cradled her tea close. “I have to carry Ponyville’s flag at the games. It’s not like I have a lot of options here—I can’t do anything very big yet, but I still need to make the Silvers proud. That’s not such a bad thing, is it?”

Princess Luna set down the teacup and stayed quiet for a little while. To Silver’s relief, Her Highness didn’t appear to be angry or disappointed with her. In fact (though she wasn’t entirely certain) it actually seemed like Luna might understand.

“Legacy can be a difficult burden to bear,” the Princess said. “Especially when one must also answer for past mistakes. However, legacies are built upon deeds; they are only as good as their ponies. Thus, I ask you now, Silver Spoon.”

An orange feather alighted upon the bust of Silver Sword. Another twirled about Luna’s tapered horn, drifting down, down, down to her nose. Gently, she blew it away.

“Have you added anything to your legacy today that is worthy of pride?”

“Morning. How’re you feeling, Silver Spoon?”

“Same as always, Di. Like a winner.”

“Good. Then let’s go win.”

Dreams were not real. Maybe they signified real things or real problems, but they still weren’t real. Silver Spoon reminded herself of this through currying her coat, eating breakfast, and last-minute rehearsal.

Besides, she couldn’t very well change the past, could she? Of course not. What happened had happened, and Silver had a flag to carry. She could feel guilty when she’d the time and luxury to do so. Silver Spoon reminded herself of this and did her best not to look back at Scootaloo when the train pulled away without her.

“Sorry you can’t make it! We’ll take a picture for you from the winner’s circle.”

And again when Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle abandoned their chance at the flag to go back for Scootaloo.

“Auntie Silver Frames, you made it! Where’s Granddad?”

“I’m afraid he couldn’t quite make it, dearest. Don’t worry, he’s already bought a box for the Games. He’ll see you there instead.”

“I understand, Auntie. He’s very busy.”
“We’re so proud of you, Silver Spoon. No matter what happens.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Ah, Laurel, she really has grown into an honorable young lady, hasn’t she?”

“Thank you, Auntie.”

Reputations must be upheld, lest they crumble and drag generations down with them. That was simply the way of things, and a little filly could hardly be expected to upend an entire system simply due to some dumb old feelings.

Silver Spoon reminded herself of these things so she would not forget. She felt like forgetting a great deal. Still, she kept firm. Dreams were only dreams; only reality mattered.

Even so, when Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon retired backstage after their performance, only to see the Crusaders signing in at the registration desk—dusty, tired, smelly, but still smiling and unbroken—she couldn’t help but smile. Just a little.

“What are you smiling at?” Diamond’s irritation fought to override her panic. “They can’t follow us! They weren’t even supposed to—”

“Relax, it doesn’t matter,” Silver said. Right now, riling herself up helped no pony, least of all her. “We’ve got this won either way, right?” Technically, if she made it a question, it couldn’t be a lie.

*May the best ponies win.* That had been a poor choice of words.

Diamond Tiara stepped back and took in Silver’s placid smile. The rattled edge dialed back to something Silver couldn’t quite read. “Yeah.”

Fidgeting in the seven-hundred-bit dress, Diamond twitched her ears and glanced at an overhead window. They could see a washed out rainbow of shifting legs and coats outside. The crystal walls trembled with the dull roar of cheers and stomps.

“…yeah, Silvie. We’ve totally got it won.”

“Right.” Silver nodded, sporting her best everything-is-okay-and-nothing-can-go-wrong smile. Her muscles braced in anticipation. She smelled hurricanes on the horizon.

Outside, something moved on the hotel balcony. A winged shadow—too big for a bird and too close to be a passing pegasus—lurked behind the frosted glass door. With a quick glance to see if Diamond was still asleep, Silver set her book down and quietly slid the door open.

“Hey, Silver Spoon!” Tornado Bolt spiraled down from the air to perch upon the twelfth story rail. Her gray hooves pranced on the rough crystal, fighting for steady footing. “You guys are staying in this hotel too, huh?” She sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes. “Wait, dumb question. Of course you are, so’s everypony else. But I thought you had to leave early for a thing.”

“Hello, Tornado Bolt.” Now really wasn’t the best time. Silver glanced back at the room, uncertain. On the other hoof, she wouldn’t mind some company to talk to. “We did, but… a logistics problems came up.” She pointed at the velvet collar around Tornado’s throat. “Cranberry’s a good color on
you, Bolt. Is that new?"

"Mmhm! My Daddy gave me an advance on my allowance—so I could have it in time for the tryouts, right?—but then Rarity ended up giving me a discount anyway. And it looks so cool with this thing!" A leafy laurel pin twitched in the breeze of her excited wingbeats: a conciliatory memento, courtesy of the Equestria Games delegations.

In other words, a glorified participation ribbon.

Tornado leaned over the railing, spreading her wings and lifting her purple tail for balance. "Where’s your leaf crown thingy? Didn’t you get one?"

"I gave it to my Aunt for the Silvers’ trophy case." Where it’d be far away from Diamond’s hooves. Di had stomped her own as soon as they’d left the stadium.

Silver Spoon counted her blessings, grateful Di hadn’t broken anything else. Or yelled. Or even fumed under her breath. Not that she could with so many ponies around. Especially not after Mr. Rich complimented what a fine job she and Silver had done, kindly emphasizing how glad he was to see them “handle a loss maturely”.

The evening wind brushed Silver’s mane. Shy little stars already sprinkled across the lavender sky. "We were gonna check out the after party, but we felt kinda tired."

"Ooh, right." Tornado angled her bony shoulders to peer through the crack in the balcony door. Diamond’s tail lashed and flopped over the bedspread, the room eerily silent. The pegasus lowered her ears and inched farther down the rail. "How’s Diamond Tiara taking it?" she whispered. "I saw her after the winner announcement and…gosh, she looked like Saddle Rager on a bad day."

Silver Spoon eased the door shut and stepped out to peer over the crystal balcony. Twelve stories down, the courtyard teemed with the happy chattering of flag entrants and their families. She recognized a clutch of foals in Merrylegs East uniforms rippling through the crowd and wondered who’d won the Manehattan flag. Near the buffet table, Mr. Rich exchanged pleasantries with Auntie Frames and Rainbow Dash.

"Well…" Silver let her chin rest on the rail and flicked her eyes up to Tornado. "She’s been better, I can tell you that." Of course, Diamond could potentially be much worse.

Behind them, the door banged back open with a sharp crack. Shadowed by the awning, the vanishing sun cut a bright streak across Diamond Tiara’s eyes. Corkscrews of hair clung to her cheek, the back of her mane frizzy and tangled. She’d left her tiara on the nightstand.

"Actually," she said in voice like a flat balloon, "I’m totally fine. Or I was before you killed my nap before it even got started."

A brittle smile squirmed across Tornado Bolt’s muzzle. "Oh! Oh, uh…sorry about that?" Her fluffed out wings unfolded and quivered. She exchanged a worried glance with Silver Spoon. "I saw you guys’ flag routine, Diamond. I liked it a lot."

Diamond smoothed her mane with a snort. "And if you were somepony that mattered, maybe I’d care."

Tornado’s face fell. Again, she looked to Silver, silently begging for a helpful hoof.

Silver Spoon broke eye contact and decided to go back to observing the courtyard party. She could make out Berry Pinch sitting upon a bench. The pink unicorn stared in their direction, watching
them. Something about that stare unsteadied Silver, but not enough to make her turn around.

Minefields of silence littered the balcony.

Diamond barreled through them. “Bolt, did you just come up here to talk about me behind my back, or do you actually have a point?” Silver could hear the sneer in her voice.

“I. Uh…B-Berry…wanted to know if you’re coming down to the party.” Tornado Bolt took a breath. “She’s worried about you.”

“Tell Berry Pinch to worry about herself and keep her nose in her own business. I told you, I’m fine!” Diamond’s kick sent vibrations through the crystal balcony.

Tornado slipped off the railing. She yelped and fumbled into the air in a rush of feathers, breathing hard. A hurt little whine squeezed out of her, and the balcony went quiet again.

When Silver Spoon brought her head up, Tornado Bolt had flown out of sight. Another social spill to clean up. The first of many, if history had anything to say about it. Silver turned back, eying the gray feathers the filly had left behind.

“Di, you really didn’t have to do that. She only wanted—”

“Maybe you need that pathetic nerd’s pity, but I don’t. What was she doing here anyway? I locked the doors for a reason, Silver Spoon.” Diamond turned on her heel and stomped back inside. The storm officially broke.

Silver followed her in, closing the balcony door behind them. “Can’t lock a railing, Di. She came in through the back, and she’d already seen me inside. I didn’t want to be rude.”

“Oh, okay, so anypony with wings can just waltz right in, then! Why stop at pegasi? Open the window and let in every dove in the empire so they can poop all over the bed. I mean, you don’t wanna be rude to the birds. I can’t believe you sometimes, Silver Spoon.”

Diamond snatched her hairbrush and ripped through her tangles in hard little strokes. If tearing through the knots hurt, she didn’t show it or else was too distracted to notice. “I wanted a nap. I don’t think I’m asking a lot, here. If I can’t even rely on you to keep the door closed, how am I supposed to—”

The doorknob rattled. Outside, somepony knocked twice. “Diamond Tiara?”

Silver never thought she’d be so relieved to hear Spoiled Rich’s voice.

One look at Diamond’s face, and she regretted it. All of Diamond Tiara’s bluster and firestorms and rolling thunder imploded in a blink. Unlocking the door, she’d never looked so small. “Hello, Mother.”

Before anypony said anything else, Silver Spoon hopped over an ottoman and into the conversation. “Good evening, Mrs. Rich. We were actually about to turn in for the night, that’s why the door was locked.”

No sell. The mare didn’t so much as glance at her, and Silver couldn’t read her expression—Angry? Frustrated? Sad? Frightened? All four?—to adjust for conditions. She’d have better luck sweet talking a statue.

Silver pressed on anyway. “It’s been a long day, you see, so—”
“Don’t worry, Silver Spoon, I won’t be long.” Mrs. Rich examined the thin tatters of a banner still clinging to the wall as if someone had torn it down in a rush. Discreetly, she watched Silver out of the corner of her eye. She frowned.

Silver Spoon knew that expression now. Disappointment: the regretful variety.

“Diamond? A word, please.” After a small pause, Mrs. Rich added, “I’m not mad, sweetheart. You can come right back when we’re done.”

“Yeah. Alright.” Her tail dragging behind her, Diamond followed Spoiled into the hall.

The door shut with a quiet click. Silver stood in the center of the room, studying the intricate crystal and obsidian inlay of the walls. The clock ticked the seconds upon the nightstand.

She gave Mrs. Rich a two-minute head start (and ample plausible deniability for herself) before she followed them.

Soft green light from crystal sconces lit the hallway. Against the blue mosaic walls and emerald ewe-wool carpet, it felt something like walking underwater.

On Silver’s left: a flock of giggling tourists and their yappy dog. To her right: a bubbling water tank, a maid wheeling some towels…and a purple tail dipping around the corner. Bingo.

Pressed against the cool stone of the wall, Silver stuck to the shadows and kept her head low. If she hid behind the crystal berry shrubs, maybe she could get close enough to hear. Twitching her ears, she peered around a pot.

Diamond Tiara and Mrs. Rich stood at the end of the hall. Behind them stretched a massive window framed by velvet curtains and overlooking the crystal city sparkling in the moonlight.

Still too far away to hear anything, though. When she had an opening, Silver beelined five feet of carpet to the next shrub. The leaves dappled her coat and hardly rustled when she moved. She still couldn’t hear very clearly, but Silver didn’t dare come any closer.

Mrs. Rich’s tone fell in firm, precise syllables, and when the volume sparked—though she never yelled—Silver caught the words “worried” and “effort” and “mistake”. Indeed, Diamond’s stepmom didn’t sound angry, though nopony could call her happy, either.

A nervous twinge ran up Silver’s backbone.

Diamond Tiara had her back turned, but from her angle, Silver could see her reflection in the glass. She stared out the window, silent and hollow-eyed. Not ignoring Mrs. Rich, not blocking her out, and not daydreaming. Blank. Like Diamond had gone somewhere else and left the lights on.

“Diamond?” Mrs. Rich leaned down, frowning. “Are you listening to me?”

The filly winced. Without looking up, Diamond said something, and her shoulders sagged. She turned away from the window, leaning her back against the sill. One hoof nervously batted at a curtain tassel.

Di brought her head up.

Mrs. Rich stopped in mid-lecture. A frown wormed across the mare’s face. Her sigh seemed to let out all the air inside of her. She stepped closer and laid a gentle hoof upon her stepdaughter’s shoulder.
Diamond Tiara buried her face in Spoiled Rich’s pashmina scarf and began to cry.

Somewhere in the hall, a door clicked open, but Silver Spoon hardly heard it. Suddenly, she couldn’t help but feel invasive. Probably because she was. They’d gone off in private for a reason; obviously, this had been a moment to keep to themselves. *Maybe I should go...*

Mrs. Rich smoothed Diamond’s mane, brushing back the loose ends, and topping it off with the tiara. She pulled her close, kissed the top of Di’s head, and said something.

Diamond sniffed and nodded. She smiled back.

And then Spoiled Rich said something else.

Diamond Tiara’s head jerked up, her blue eyes wide with shock. Wrenching out of the mare’s grip, she glared and fiercely whispered something back. Silver couldn’t make out any words, but it sounded like Di bordered on the verge of tears again.

Mrs. Rich only watched her, shaking her head with another sigh. “Oh, sweetheart.”

*Yeah, I should go.* Silver Spoon backed out from under the berry shrub and started back down the hall.

Then Silver heard her family name. Twice. Both times from Mrs. Rich. She couldn’t be certain, but she thought she’d heard something about…. Granddad? One of her uncles? One of the Silvers, without a doubt.

She pivoted to go back for more information and found herself nose to nose with Scootaloo. She jumped back, bumping her head against the wall.

A door across the hall opened to reveal Sweetie Belle. She held a basket of little pies and sparkling cranberry juice from the mini fridge and appeared almost as surprised as Silver did. “Silver Spoon?”

“Great. *Now* what’re you up to?” Scootaloo buzzed her shrimpy wings (still feathered and unbloodied, thank goodness), all fluffed up like an angry rooster. Her eyes skirted between Silver and their hotel room. “Are you spying on us?”

Flattening her ears, Silver pressed herself closer to the wall. “I—*pfft*—no!” She glanced over her shoulder. Diamond was looking in their direction. “And will you *please* keep your stupid voice down? Ponies are trying to sleep in here.”

Scootaloo didn’t appear convinced.

Whatever. Like Silver even cared. She wrinkled her nose and drew herself back up. “Believe what you want. I’ve got better things to do than worry about what a couple of blank flank losers are up to.”

Sweetie set the basket down and tilted her head. “Okay, then what *are* you do—”

“Sheesh, I was taking a walk, *okay?* You’re not the only ponies staying in this hotel. Mind your own business.”

Scootaloo rolled her eyes. “Gladly! C’mon, Sweetie Belle, Apple Bloom’s waiting on us downstairs.” She stomped down the hall, snorting like a miniature bull. Her wings gave an annoyed little flap, shedding a couple of feathers.
The orange primaries settled at Silver’s hooves. She stared at them. At the far end of the hall, the moon hung full and fat in a circular window. The moonlight crept along the walls and made the walls shimmer.

*Darn it.* Silver stamped the carpet and rushed to catch up. “Hey! Scootaloo.”

Sweetie Belle turned back, but Scootaloo picked up her pace.

“You did a good job out there.”

Scootaloo pricked her ears and stopped. She shot Silver a bitter glance. “Yeah, sure.”

“It’s a good routine, Scootaloo.” Silver adjusted her glasses with a nonchalant shrug. “Even though a bunch of dorks with no manners performed it.”

The two Crusaders stared at each other, trying to parse out whether or not that had been an actual compliment.

“Th...anks?” Sweetie rubbed the back of her neck and frowned. “I think.”

Silver Spoon shifted uncomfortably. Diamond was heading back their way. “Don’t mention it.” She narrowed her eyes. “Ever.”

“Fine by me.” With one last lash of her tail, Scootaloo left.

It’d be pointless to duck out now that she’d been spotted. Silver took a seat in the middle of the hall and let Diamond come to her. “Hey, Di. Feeling okay?” She tried not to notice the red rims of her friend’s eyes.

Diamond shrugged. “I guess. Silver, what are you doing out here? And with *them*?” She jerked her head in Sweetie’s direction.

Silver shrugged back. “Followed the Scootaloser to the room she’s staying in. I thought I might find out something useful, but I didn’t get much. You know they’ve got a mini-snack bar in there? I hope she’s enjoying it; probably the classiest place she’ll see in her life.”

“Yeah. Pathetic, right?” Di gave a lukewarm chuckle. “This place is a real step down from the Manefair suites, but Dad always says you get what you pay for. The crystal stuff’s kinda nice, I guess.”

Diamond plucked a crystal berry from the bush and rolled it in her hoof. It wobbled on the edge of her horseshoe and plopped into the carpet without a sound. She took in the three-star hotel hallway, the reflective ceiling, the humble little berry shrubs. “I gave up Baltimare for this.”

“I know.” Silver put the berry into the pot where nopony could step on it and wrapped a hoof around Diamond’s withers. “What do you say we hit the banquet and get some fresh air?”

Diamond didn’t seem to care either way, but she still followed Silver’s lead down the hall and to the elevator.

“So, what’s next on the agenda?”

“Whatever comes up, I guess.” The white light of the elevator buttons reflected off the steel tiara. Not looking away from the elevator sliding down the translucent wall, she asked, “Silver Spoon?”

Silver Spoon turned with an encouraging little smile. “Yes?”
“We’re friends, right?”

Silver blinked and stared at her. “Of course we are.” The smile wavered. “Why do you ask?”


Chapter End Notes

Silver Spoon's translation for the second half of Riches' Pretentious Latin Motto is off. The whole thing actually translates more to "Time is money; to waste them is foolishness".

But give the kid a break, she's like, ten.
“This can’t be legal.” Silver Spoon turned over the envelope in her hooves, as if inspecting an apple for spots. In case everypony didn’t hear her, she smacked her desk for emphasis and repeated, “Miss Cheerilee, this can-not be legal! I want my lawyer.”

Berry Pinch flipped her tail with a scoff. “You don’t have a lawyer, you’re ten.”

Alright, technically Silver didn’t have a lawyer at present, but it only took a couple of telegrams to get one. Probably. She wouldn’t let Pinch bog her down with semantics. “Just because you can’t afford legal representation doesn’t mean nopony else can, Pinch. I can have one down here by Wednesday.”

At the top corner of the classroom, Diamond Tiara stood atop her chair, pumping her little pink hoof in righteous indignation. “Silver’s right! This is cruel and unusual punishment!” She scoured the faces of her classmates, all of whom frowned at envelopes of their own. “I mean like, come on! Who’s with me?”

“It’s not fair,” mumbled Cotton Cloudy.

Next to her, Tornado Bolt frowned at her envelope and nodded in agreement. “It’s not right.”

Rumbles of similar dissent rolled through the classroom.

“Yeah, Miss Cheerilee,” called out Apple Bloom, “you never did anythin’ like this before. How come you’re doing it now?”

“Rainbow Dash is supposed to give me flying lessons this summer,” sighed Scootaloo.

Sunny Daze (who hadn’t even received an envelope yet) pounded on her notebook. “I want a lawyer, too!”

“Oh, oh!” Peachy Pie waved to her over the far distance of the third row. “I’ll be your lawyer, Sun-Sun!”

Truffle Shuffle held his envelope close, flicking his stubby tail in annoyance. “Guys, it’s not that big a deal. It’s only homework.”

Silver Spoon dismissed him with a toss of her hair. “You would say that.”

Miss Cheerilee’s back hoof rapped the floorboards for silence. She narrowed her eyes and waited for the class to settle down into silence. With a cool, neutral expression, she laid an envelope on Diamond’s desk. “No revolutions before the last bell, Diamond Tiara. Sit back down, please.”

Diamond dropped back into her seat and wrinkled her nose.

Next to her, Pipsqueak sighed, nosing his own envelope. “This has got to be against the Guano Convention.”

“That’s the Guanaco Convention, Pipsqueak. Summer homework is not listed there as a war crime, trust me.” Miss Cheerilee chuckled to herself and glanced back at Silver Spoon. “And I’ll take my chances in court.”

Perhaps these demands weren’t illegal, but that didn’t make them any less unreasonable. When Miss
Cheerilee mentioned a special surprise for the last day of school, this had not been what Silver expected. Extra homework she could understand, but an entire project? Outrageous!

“We already only get one summer a year, this is insane!” Silver swung towards Dinky Doo, who hadn’t voiced a word of protest at all. “And why aren’t you more upset about this?”

The Dink’s black envelope hovered above her horn, rotating in the amber glow of her magic. She levitated it high to the light, squinting. “Spoons, lemme answer that question with another question: since when do we get our homework in envelopes? Secret sealed envelopes?”

“…Hm. That is a little weird,” Silver admitted.

“More like a lot weird—check it out: this envelope paper’s all thick and glossy. And you see that seal?” Dinky’s voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper. “That’s from the government. My dad gets mail just like it.”

No such seal on Silver’s envelope, only a vague scent of cake frosting and cotton candy. When she shook it, the envelope… squeaked.

Sweetie Belle waved her pretty, monogrammed envelope in the air. “What kind of homework is this, Miss Cheerilee?”

Apparently, those had been the magic words. Cheerilee trotted down the aisles, all smiles and purpose. “Class, this summer you’re all going to participate in…” She took a breath and paused for effect. “A work study project!”

The classroom bounced confused stares back at her. Twist wondered what that even meant. Peachy sighed with the relief that it hadn’t been math homework. Silver arched an eyebrow and exchanged a long-distance frown with Diamond Tiara.

“Ponies from all over Ponyville have agreed to be a mentor for each and every one of you for two weeks. You’ll learn all about their careers, their special talents, and all sorts of other things.”

At “special talent,” Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo jolted up in their chairs, suddenly a lot more interested in summer homework. So much for a united classroom front against injustice.

Diamond’s hoof shot into the air. “Okay, but that makes no sense. Why should I learn about somepony else’s career? I already have my cutie mark.”

“Yeah,” added Cotton Cloudy. “Almost everypony with cutie marks already has a mentor. Cloud Kicker’s teaching me to be a weather pony; we’re starting on stratus formations next week.”

The Dink stared wide-eyed at her government envelope. Cautiously, she nibbled a corner. “Hmm. Tastes like brimstone.”

“Very true, but there’s so much more to a career than a cutie mark, Cotton. And more to a cutie mark than a career.” Cheerilee shared a smile with Truffle Shuffle, who already looked excited about the whole idea. “Ponies don’t always get jobs specially tailored to their talent, and besides, special talents can manifest in all sorts of ways you may have never even thought of.”

Maybe for other ponies. More than anything, this assignment sounded like a boost for blank flanks who didn’t know what to do with their lives yet, or for ponies confused about their marks. Silver Spoon couldn’t be more sure about the meaning of hers.

“For those of you who haven’t found your talents yet, this will be an excellent opportunity to
discover one.” With that, Miss Cheerilee finally nodded the “ok” for the class to open their envelopes. “Some mentors I picked out myself, but many sought some of you out specifically.”

“Alright!” cried Apple Bloom. “I got Zecora!”

“I’m with Featherweight’s big brother, Bulk.” Scootaloo shrugged, no doubt disappointed she hadn’t gotten Rainbow Dash. “How about you, Sweetie Belle?”

The stationery in Sweetie’s hooves looked familiar: creamy white with red lettering. Silver flicked her ears and leaned forward in her seat, ignoring Snails’s loud confusion at having been assigned Fluttershy.

Sweetie Belle opened her envelope and frowned. “Pitch Perfect? Isn’t that Silver Spoon’s mom?” She turned to see the rows behind her, avoiding direct eye contact with anypony in Silver’s row. The frown deepened.

Silver Spoon frowned back. Hopefully Mother would be tutoring in Sweetie’s house, not theirs.

“Aww, darn it!” The Dink’s desk rattled with her kick. “DARN it! Of all the stupid luck.”


“Nah.” With a sigh, Dinky flipped the letter forward so everypony could see the starry watermark. “Princess Twilight.”

An impressed gasp rippled from the center row out to the far corners of the classroom. Twist applauded. Featherweight, Truffle, and Peachy Pie called out their congratulations while Diamond Tiara and Sweetie Belle tried to hide their jealousy.

“Dinkster, you hit the jackpot!” Berry reached over Silver’s desk for a hoofbump, ignoring the dirty looks Silver Spoon shot her. “Bet she’s gonna teach you all sorts of sweet magic stuff and crazy secret spells.”

The Dink met the hoofbump with considerably less enthusiasm. “Yeah, I guess.”

Silver elbowed Berry off her desk with a snort. “What’s your problem, Dinky? Anypony’d cut their tail off to hang out with a princess. Like, a princess, Dink!” To drive it home, Silver pantomimed the shape of a crown in the air. “Who else in town could possibly be better?”

The Dink crossed her forelegs and stuck out her lip in an uncharacteristically uncool pout. “Bon Bon.”

“The candy maker? Dink, you can’t be serious.”

“Yeah, Spoons. A candy maker.” Back in form, Dinky Doo raised a cool eyebrow and let a condescending smirk slide across her face. “You just keep thinking that.”

“And I’m gonna be with…” Pinch squinted at her letter. “Cranky Doodle Donkey?”

Silver Spoon looked away with a derisive giggle.

Berry Pinch flattened her ears. “So what about you, Silver Snob? Some dumb, boring desk job at the mayor’s office with some dumb...dumb boring guy? Or another stuck up fancy-schmancy pony
like…like, uh…”

“Octavia?” offered Snips.

Actually, Octavia would be rather nice. A few weeks ago, she’d moved in with that one unicorn who wore headphones all the time. Silver knew nothing about double bass, but she did play harpsichord and read music. Or perhaps Octavia could tutor her in the art of fine composure and moving through social circles.

Silver shook the envelope again. It jingled this time.

On the other hoof, it felt far too obvious of a match. Nopony else had gotten who they’d expected or wanted. She stretched her neck to see Sweetie Belle pondering the additional pages in her envelope. Could Cheerilee have paired Silver with Rarity in some kind of convoluted friendship scheme?

Only one way to find out. Silver cracked the envelope’s sticker seal.

FWEEEET!

Confetti blasted through the middle row. A bell curve of confectionary glitter stretched all the way to the windows.

The class stared.

Truffle Shuffle coughed.

The stack of confetti in Silver Spoon’s seat adjusted its glasses and spat out a shiny yellow streamer. “I got Pinkie Pie.”

Unexpected homework had a way of dampening everything around it. Even worse, Silver couldn’t get it over with in the first days of vacation. Everypony had been scheduled a specific time span for their work study assignment, so as not to clash with family vacations or work schedules.

That, Diamond said, was why she didn’t start until mid July, after she’d come back from Horseshoe Bay. Filthy Rich was dead set on family togetherness and giving their new boat its sea legs. Or something.

Thankfully, Pinkie wanted to start soon, when Diamond would be out of town, so it might not hamper their hanging out time too much. Might being the key word.

On the sunny restaurant patio, Silver shifted in her chair and reviewed her letter. She skimmed through the introductions, pleasantries, and non sequiturs to the date posted in the middle:

JUNE 26—??? ( :

“I just wish she told me when it ended.” It might last a day or all summer for all she knew. Or maybe Pinkie would decide to show up whenever she felt like it. Silver’s coat rumpled with discomfort.
“Ugh, and no times listed anywhere, either. How am I supposed to schedule this? This is…this is savagery!”

Diamond Tiara shrugged behind a dessert menu. “So ask her about it when you meet her. It’s no big deal.”

Easy for Diamond to say; she could jump into a project at the word “go”. Silver rubbed her temples, longingly staring across the toadstool table at Diamond’s saddlebag. “I wish I had your mentor, Di. I bet Tall Order would never pull this sort of thing.”

A pair of pink ears swiveled at the top of the dessert menu. “Who?” The menu lowered a few inches to show Diamond’s eyes. “Silvie, what’s good at this place? This menu’s all in French.”

_Didn’t be a problem if you’d let me read it to you._

“It’s all pretty good, but I personally like _le lait fouetté au chocolat_. You’d like it in raspberry, I bet.”

“But it’s the cheapest thing on the menu. Isn’t this supposed to be one of the fanciest places in town?”

“Yeah, but it’s also a more grown-up place. It works a little different.”

“Still fancy, though, and high-class places always make the best stuff the most expensive, right?”

Diamond smirked as if she’d caught Silver in a gambit and pointed at the menu. “Like this?”

Silver blinked. “I guess?” She followed Di’s hoof down the menu to _la petite joie de vivre_, a dessert priced the same amount as a mid-class saddlebag. “Like I said, everything’s good, but I really think you’d like—”

“I think I know what I like, Silver Spoon.” A little wrinkle creased across Diamond’s muzzle. “I don’t need you to hold my hoof.” She reached up to wave down Savoir Faire. “Hello? We’re ready to order.”

“Ah, oui, Mademoiselle Tiara.” The cream earth pony’s eyes lit in recognition as he approached the table. “And Mademoiselle Silver, how did ze student council haute cuisine—how do you say—work out?”

“Very well, thank you.” Silver puffed her chest. “Sold out and matched our goal. I’ll have the usual, _s’il vous plait._”

Diamond tipped her nose in the air and gave the menus back. “_La petite joie de vivre._”

Savoir Faire blinked in surprise, though clearly pleased. “Excellent choice. I vill ‘ave it right out, mademoiselles.”

“So,” said Silver Spoon, “About Tall Order…”

“Oh, right. The homework thing.” Diamond sat back in her chair, one hoof tracing the spots on the table. “Yeah, I don’t get why I got stuck with some bureaucrat from the mayor’s office. Mayor Mare I’d get, but not a council pony in…what’s he do again? Legislation?” She rolled her eyes with a scoff. “That’s your style, not mine.”

True enough, but something in the dismissive flick of Diamond Tiara’s tail rubbed Silver Spoon the wrong way. “It’s still an important job, Di. Ponyville can’t run without him.”

“Guess you’d know; you’ve been on the student council.” Her ears idly flicked in the direction of
some minor commotion in the streets. Ponyville seemed giddy in preparation for something, though
neither filly knew what. “By the way, how come you never mentioned that?”

“I did.” Silver filed down the rising edge in her voice. Di always got a little cranky after a big loss.
Biting back helped nopony. “You might have forgotten in the middle of your newspaper duties.”

Wait. That’s dangerous territory. Silver searched the happy buzz of ponies for a subject change.

Two blocks away, something pink ricocheted off of Pipsqueak’s roof and slid down a storefront tent
to come in for a bouncy landing on the awning. Silver’s future mentor in action.

“It’s so weird. I asked Cheerilee if maybe our letters got mixed up, but she told me that Pinkie asked
for me.” According to Cheerilee, Pinkie had been “quite insistent” on the matter. “I can’t imagine
why. If anything, she ought to be teaching you, Di.”

In a passing shadow and a soft clink, Diamond’s order slid onto the table. La petite joie de vivre sat
in a pretty crystal bowl a little bigger than a shot glass—barely a mouthful, but likely an amazing
one. Diamond Tiara gave it a disappointed squint and sniffed at it.

A proper young lady did not partake in I-Told-You-Sos, thus Silver continued, “After all, you’re
both pink and popular and every year you throw parties of the season. Maybe not this season, cause
you’ll be too busy swimming in the bay, but you know what I mean.” Silver stepped up a moment to
take her lait fouetté au chocolat from the waiter; he seemed to struggle balancing it with another
table’s order.

“Yeah. I guess I can see that.” Diamond sat up to watch Pinkie and her bouncing, bulging
saddlebags pass by. “She did plan my cuteceañera—like, Dad made me do it, but you know.”

Her eyes flicked between her microscopic joie de vivre and Silver’s le lait fouetté—essentially a
fancy milkshake with chocolate and caramel crumbles on top. “We don’t settle for anything less than
the best, of course.” Leaning forward to make her point, Diamond’s hoof “slipped” and the 50 bit
dessert crashed into the grass.

Silver began to note Pinkie Pie’s commitment and wondered when the upcoming party would drop
—it looked like a big one—but stopped at the sight of her milkshake in Diamond’s hooves.

The stony look Silver shot Diamond went completely unnoticed. “I suppose she passed the test.”

Disappointment Silver could understand, but for peat’s sake, Di didn’t even try her ice cream. And it
wasn’t like Silver couldn’t have been persuaded to share the shake, had Di only asked. She could
still get a straw and they could split, or…

Silver Spoon scowled at the ice cream melting on the table leg. You know what? No. She snatched
the milkshake back and took a massive sip. Nothing’s wrong with Diamond’s voice. She can ask.

“Even when Apple Bloom tried to sabotage it, Pinkie didn’t let my cuteceañera fall apart on me.”
Thinking it over, Diamond Tiara nodded with a little smile. “It turned out pretty okay.”

Halfway down the block, Pinkie Pie smiled back at them. “Thanks!” She paused and stared into
space with an odd little frown. “…I guess?”

No one in Equestria could deny the mare did superb work, not even a post-disaster Diamond Tiara.
However, no amount of party skills could override the sheer amount of… eccentricities attached to
Pinkie Pie. Listening to her felt like hearing somepony speak Neighponese backwards.
Whatever; that was next week’s problem. Silver closed her eyes and savored her first rich moment of chocolatey goodness. The straw scraped the sides of the glass to get the full flavor. She opened one eye to find Diamond frowning at her.

Silver’s tongue swiped up spare flecks of crumbled caramel on the side of her mouth. She offered an innocent smile. “What?”

The dawn of June twenty-sixth broke in a haze of thick pink clouds. The pegasus ponies swam through cotton candy skies, prepping for the scheduled rainstorm. Trapped behind the clouds, the sunlight couldn’t breach the window to wake anypony. Additionally, in her eagerness to begin vacation, Silver had banished her alarm clock to the dresser drawer last week.

Therefore, Miss Sterling Silver Spoon did not awake until half past nine with the sudden knowledge that she’d woken up late for her work study. This she quickly assessed from shadows on the wall, an impeccable internal clock, and the pink pony whispering to Ferdinand in the corner.

“…and they know how to sing every single song that ever existed in the whole wide universe, even the ones nopony remembers anymore, like “We’re Not Gonna Freeze” and “Filly, Play Your Mandolin” and that one song about the apple tree.” Pinkie Pie cocked her head at the betta fish’s burble. “No, no, the other one about apple trees, but the little seaponies probably know that one t— SILVER SPOON!”

Silver let out a startled little squeak. In the fumble to put her glasses on, she ended up half falling, half jumping out of bed.

In an instant, Pinkie hovered over Silver’s face, mouth hung open in a gasp of joy or shock or both. Probably both. “You’re awake! You’re finally awake!” With a flick of her tail, she set Silver’s glasses on the filly’s nose, perfectly balanced and ready to go.

“Thanks. Um, good morning, Miss Pinkie Pie.” She glanced at a basket of long-cold bagels and bowed her head. “Sorry I made you wait. I woke up late.”

“On the contradictory, Miss Spoon: It is I who is not on time.”

With the snap of a scrunchie, Pinkie tied back her mane and set a pair of brass pince-nez upon her nose. She wore a tweed jacket, complete with elbow patches. With the mushroom cloud of pink curls sprouting at the back of her head, she looked something like an odd parody of a university professor.

“I mean, how can you be late to your own house?” The dignified diction of her professory voice unraveled back into her usual Pinkie patter. “It’s just like I told Ferdie: if I’m here and you’re still all snoozy-dozy, then I’ve got to be the one who’s early. See?”

“Not really,” Silver Spoon said. “I usually wake up around seven, so I should’ve already been awake when…” She looked at the bagels again. They couldn’t get that stale in only two hours. “When did you get here?”

“Last night!”

“…Oh.” Yeah, maybe Pinkie was early after all.
Pinkie leaned on the edge of the tea table and pulled out a handkerchief to clean her glasses. It went right through the empty frames.

“Yeah, I thought I got here this morning—because the clock said it was the morning, silly clock—but then when I got here Pitch Perfect was all, ‘What are you doing here’ and ‘It’s the middle of the night’ and ‘Get out of my breadbox’, so I guess it must have still been nighttime. Whups!” She slipped the glasses back into her pocket and giggled to herself. “Did you know your mom can scream really, really loud?”

That explained Silver’s weird dream with the screaming ponies. “Maybe,” Silver gently suggested, “this wouldn’t have happened if I’d gotten a schedule from you?”

“But you did! At least, I think you did. Cheerilee gave you my letter, right?” Pinkie Pie nodded to herself and pointed at the calendar. “June twenty-sixth, like I said.”

The gears in Silver’s head turned. “You got here at midnight.” Literally the moment the date shifted. “Was Mother upset?”

“A little bit at first, so I made her some bagels to apologize ‘cause I know how much they like bagels in Manehattan. I think she liked them, but she kept reminding me: ‘No silly shenanigans, Pinkie’. Hee, right! When am I ever silly?” Pinkie’s nose met Silver Spoon’s and her eyes narrowed into a severe squint. “I’m taking this very, VERY seriously.”

Silver Spoon—properly raised to never contend elders, teachers, or betters—kept her skepticisms to herself. “I can see that, Miss Pie.” She cleared her throat and offered a curtsey. “It’s a pleasure to be learning…er, whatever I’m supposed to be learning from you.”

Pinkie grinned and bowed back. “Thanks, Silver.” Giggling, she gave her student’s chest a little poke. “Nice joke! You’re already on your way. I knew I picked the right foal. Do you want some breakfast?”

“What? Sure, o—” In the space between the beginning and the end of Silver’s blink, a platter of fresh scones, grapefruits, and steaming oatmeal appeared upon the tea table. Not a bad setup, actually. “—kay.”

Sometimes, if Silver went slow, she could untangle Pinkie’s sentences and follow them back to reason. Sadly, this was not one of those times. “I didn’t tell you a joke, Miss Pie.” Or should it be Professor Pie? “I really don’t know.”

Pinkie Pie twitched her ears. “Wait, seriously?” She gripped the tablecloth and zoomed in, examining Silver’s really-not-kidding face. “SERIOUSLY?”

Silver swallowed a mouthful of hot scone. “Super seriously.”

“How could you not know? It’s so obvious!”

“What is?!”

A grave, solemn expression passed over Pinkie’s face. She closed her eyes, and a nonexistent breeze rippled through the curtains. The fluff of her tail twitched. The bouncy curls of her mane tossed and snapped and fizzed. An odd light seemed to radiate off her cutie mark, all scattered and bright and bouncy, as if from a disco ball. A light not seen, but felt. Silver Spoon’s own cutie mark tickled and it made her laugh.

“You’re a party pony, Silver Spoon.”
“…What.” Silver glanced at her strangely warm cutie mark, then at Pinkie’s knowing smile.

It almost added up on paper, but… “Miss Pinkie Pie, that can’t be right. I hold tea parties, not…” She made a vague gesture with the tea kettle before pouring a cup for Pinkie, then another cup for herself. “…whatever it is you do. And no offense, but I already have Tealove to mentor me for tea parties.”

“Right! She’s the tea and I’m—” A cloudburst of confetti showered the table. “—the party! When Cheerilee said she needed tutors for her class, I knew right away who I had to teach. I mean, who else is there?”

Pinkie’s right hoof stroked her chin while her left hoof held out her tea cup so Silver could add five lumps of sugar.

“Well, I guess you could always ask Cheese Sandwich, but he’s already halfway across Equestria to see the biggest ball of twine in Whinnysota and I don’t think you want to go all the way there for the summer. That’s too big a trip for an itty bitty filly like you.” She shook her head and sipped her yerba mate tea. “I’m sorry, Silver Spoon, you should have asked Cheese while he was still here last week. Right, Boneless?”

Silver blinked at the rubber chicken propped up in a doll chair. He wore a tiny top hat and monocle. “Look, it’s not the same sort of party, Pinkie. Tea parties are different. Especially high tea.”

“It is?” Pinkie frowned and tilted her head. “How?”

“Tea parties are polite. They’re formal and they’re quiet. There’s rules everypony has to follow.”

“Why?” asked Pinkie Pie.

Oh, for goodness sake, did Silver have to hold her own mentor’s hoof and walk her through this? “Because rules are there to make sure everypony feels comfortable with each other’s company. So we can all have pleasant, polite conversation and a nice time.”

“Soooooooo…” The smile on Pinkie’s face stretched to her ears. “Would you say tea parties are supposed to make ponies…smile?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be much of a tea party if everypony is too busy being miserable, would i—” Silver paused and frowned at Pinkie’s knowing grin. “Fine, you’ve got me there. But I’m not the only pony in town who throws parties. Mother still throws a dinner party every Hearth’s Warming.”

“She sure does!” piped Pinkie Pie.

“And Mrs. Rich organizes and plans weddings. Those are basically huge parties, right?”

“Yep-a-roony, Silver Spoon!” Pinkie winked. “You’re sharp.”

“Right, and last January, Shady Daze held an ice skating party on the pond. Does that make any of them party ponies?” She had her now. Silver flipped her hair, sitting up prim and confident in her chair.

“Nope!” Pinkie offered Boneless some grapefruit.

Boneless flopped over the table. He squeaked.

“Manners, Boneless. We’re in proper company.”

Silver Spoon rolled her eyes.
“The thing is, there’s a difference between a party pony and ponies that throw a party.” With Pinkie’s help, Boneless was propped back up in his chair, though the monocle had rolled off someplace. She shrugged and popped the grapefruit in her mouth. “I mean, they can throw a great party, don’t get me wrong—Cherry Berry’s new year party last year, are you kidding me?—but a true blue party pony, they’re different.” Pinkie Pie pressed her hoof against her gut and it made a funny gurgling noise. “It’s in here. You know?”

Silver stared over the steaming teacup in her hooves. “No?”

“How do I explain this? Oh!” The chair squeaked across the floor as Pinkie scooted close. She cradled her cup of tea over her legs, bunched up to fit her hooves under the child-sized table. “Silver, lemme ask you something. You’ve never had tea with me, so how’d you know I like this kind of tea? I’ve never had it before. I don’t even know what it’s called.”

A bit unsure what this had to do with anything, Silver sniffed Pinkie’s tea and said, “No, but it’s pretty obvious. You’re Pinkie Pie, so you’d like something that’s sweet and has lots of caffeine in it.” The caffeine might have been unwise, now that she thought about it. “It’s yerba maté. I don’t have a custom blend for you, and I didn’t have time to make one, so I guessed.”

“Too good for just a guess, if you ask me. This is some of the best tea I ever had!” Before Silver could respond, Miss Pie lifted the teapot, indicating the pairs of tea cups and saucers before them. “So, what about these? I didn’t bring any tea stuff with me.”

“Duh, Pinkie Pie. It’s my bedroom, so it’s my reserve tea set. It’s always here.” If not at tea, Silver might have snorted at that smug smile creeping on Pinkie’s face. She settled for a dignified huff instead. “Please. I’m not going to serve a guest breakfast without tea. That’s common courtesy; it means nothing.”

“Uh-huh.” Pinkie took a small sip of yerba maté, waggling her eyebrows. “What about the other reserves? Like the ones at school?” The knowing smile edged into a grin. “Or in your saddlebag? Or the garden? The living room?”

How did Pinkie know about those? Cheerilee could have told her about the school tea set, but hardly anypony noticed the set in her saddlebag. “I like being prepared, that’s all…in case there’s—”

“A tea emergency?” offered Pinkie Pie. “I dunno, Silver Spoon, that sure sounds like standard party pony preparedness to me.”

“But there’s nothing special about that. It’s just what I’ve always done, ever since…” Ever since she’d earned her cutie mark. “Huh.”

Silver Spoon thought back to Diamond’s sleepover: the prevailing misery and chaos before, as well as the serenity, harmony, and yes, smiles once she’d started the tea party. The warmth she felt when cozy conversation kicked up around saucers and cakes. She recalled dozens of friendships and alliances crafted over lumps of sugar.

It didn’t happen often, but every now and then, Silver could feel an odd itch in her hooves, accompanied by the uncanny feeling that somepony somewhere needed to impress their boss with a luncheon and had no idea how to set the forks. She’d always dismissed it as indigestion or tiredness or something. Could it be something else?

Silver examined the little pink heart in her cutie mark and flicked her ears. “This is one of those weird and hard to explain earth pony magic things, isn’t it?”
The scrunchie popped off in an explosion of wild pink curls. A shower of crumbs sprayed across the carpet as Pinkie Pie leapt up cheering. “Eeeeeee! I can’t hold it in anymore!”

Somehow, she managed to land on the table without disturbing any of the plates or cups. This did nothing to stop Silver Spoon’s minor conniption at the sight of hooves on the tablecloth. “Fetlocks belong on the floor, Miss Pinkie Pie.”

“I can’t believe there’s a brand new little party pony in Ponyville! That’s twice the parties! Twice the smiles! TWICE THE CAKE!” Pinkie’s volume officially breached acceptable levels. The mare practically vibrated with excess excitement. “And not only that—I get to teach her! ME! Pinkie Pie!”

“Inside voice!” cried Silver Spoon in what was not at all an inside voice. The protest couldn’t hold against Pinkie’s infectious joy, and her grouchy little frown crumbled into a giggle. “But I’m a little excited, too—whoo!”

The ground swished out from under Silver’s hooves and suddenly she could only see pink and pink and more pink as her mentor squashed her up in a mighty bear hug. Ragdolled in mid-air, Silver Spoon stared into the impenetrable jungle of Pinkie mane. Why did it smell like cheese and oysters in here?

A purple pair of eyes blinked at her out of synch.

“Uhhh, Miss Pinkie Pie?”

Pinkie only cuddled her tighter. “I can be like your professor! You’re gonna be my faithful student and learn all about parties and party invitations and decorations and friendship and the candy-to-cake ratios—” It felt like they were…flying? Bouncing? “—and how to make sure nopony throws up on the floor and you can write me all sorts of letters about the party lessons you learned until one day you don’t have a letter to write and have a great big freak-out about it!”

Yes, definitely moving. Good thing Silver did her hair during breakfast. She frowned at the purple eyes. “Uh, Pin—Professor Pie? I think there might be something living in your hair?” The eyes made a burbling noise. “Like, maybe a monster?” Silver tapped where she guessed Pinkie’s shoulder was. “It smells in here and I’m a little scared for my life?”

Silver’s ears pricked at the sound of somepony’s horn lighting up and her pink world took a blue tinge. Magic gently pulled her out of Pinkie’s mane and floated her into the foyer. She shook her head, looking down to discover a rather displeased Brass Tacks. “Oh, good morning.”

“Good morning, Miss Silver. Are you quite alright?” Tacks set Silver Spoon on the floor with an appraising gaze. He readjusted her glasses and tied her mane into its usual tidy braid.

“I’m okay.” Silver pointed to the mare rocking back to count all the lights in the chandelier. “My mentor’s just a bit enthusiastic. We had tea.”

“Hiya, Tacksy! Remember me? I’m Pinkie Pie!” said Pinkie Pie.

Brass Tacks lashed his tail, scowling. “…Quite.”

Pinkie Pie smiled and waved at him.

Brass Tacks gritted his teeth.

Professor Pinkie Pie slowly reached up and booped his nose.
“Excuse me, but I think I saw something living in your mane?” Silver gave Pinkie’s tail a little tug. “Is that normal?”

Pinkie smiled up at the rustling activity in the back of her hair. “Hm? Oh, that’s Gummy.” The head of a baby alligator slid out of the pink curls. It squeaked. “He’s excited to see us get started, too!”

“Again, Miss Silver, I must emphasize my concerns. Must you start the work assignment today?” Brass Tacks shot a glance at Pinkie’s dangerous proximity to a priceless vase. “Madame Perfect stepped out for work an hour ago and won’t be back for some time.”

“But that…that’s an alligator,” Silver pointed at the gaping, toothless maw squeaking at her. “That is literally an alligator.”

Pinkie slung a hoof around Brass Tacks’ shoulder with a comforting pat. “Don’t worry your butlery head; Silver’s in great hooves. I promise.”

“Nonetheless.” Gently, Tacks levitated Pinkie’s hoof back to the ground. “I do not think you ought to remain here unsupervised while Miss Silver’s mother is out.”

For a quiet moment, Pinkie Pie considered that. She examined the tall ceiling, the glowing chandelier, and her thoughtful face reflected in the ebony hardwood floor. Rubbing the sleeves of her tweed jacket, she nodded in agreement. “You know what, Tacksy? You’re absolutely right.”

“I am happy you see reason, Miss Pinkie Pie.”

“Why am I the only one concerned about the alligator?” said Silver Spoon.

“We shouldn’t be cooped up inside; we need to be out there!” Pinkie flung the drapes open in a dramatic flourish. A helpfully dramatic stormy wind battered wet leaves and rain against the window. “The great wide open world—that’s where the real fun is!”

Tacks raised a hoof. “That isn’t exactly what I mean—”

“Are you ready for your first lesson, Silver Spoon?”

Okay, apparently nopony cared about the alligator. That didn’t sound especially sanitary or…sane, but whatever. Moving on. “But Professor Pie, it’s raining. We’ll get all wet.”

“That’s what these are for, silly.” Pinkie nodded at a doubles-sized umbrella and Silver’s designer plaid raincoat ensemble waiting beside the door. She stared down the dark rainclouds like Daring Do stared down ancient temples. “Now is when ponies need smiles more than ever. Think of all your friends, Silver Spoon. All of them waited all year for summer to come, and now they have to spend it inside! Even though the sun isn’t sunny, it’s up to us to show them there’s still fun to be had.”

Buttoning up her raincoat, Silver looked up from under the wide brim of her rain hat. “Fun that’s funny?”

Pinkie Pie lifted an eyebrow. “Um, no. Fun is serious business, Silver Spoon.” She lifted her head, dusting off the lapels of her tweed jacket. “We’re professionals.”

Brass Tacks slowly blinked at the alligator crawling out of Pinkie’s hair and the rubber chicken under her arm. “…Indeed.”
Hi, Diamond Tiara!

I think you might not get this until you’re already on your way back, because Post Haste says the mail takes a while (he also says there’s a tropical storm coming in, be careful!) but maybe it’ll give you something to read on the trip back.

How are things in Horseshoe Bay? I got your pictures in the mail on Tuesday, and the view of the water looks totally amazing! I bet that beach is awesome when the sun gets hot. Did you ever convince Spoiled to let you try surfing? When Pinkie and I dropped by the library, I asked Twilight Sparkle about the stuff your stepmom was worried about for you. She seems pretty sure there aren’t any giant squids or sharks in that part of Equestria, so I don’t think you have anything to worry about.

I hope you’re having more fun over there, now. Still sorry to hear it didn’t work out with that diver filly…Strawberry Reef, was it? You’re way too good for her, anyway.

As for me, I think I might finally be getting the hang of this party pony stuff (and it only took a week, four days, and eight musical numbers). At least, I think I am. It can be hard to tell sometimes.

Even though I keep asking, Pinkie Pie still won’t give me a written schedule (I tried making one, but that didn’t go so good) but she at least adjusted for mine, and I’ve gotten used to her…specialness. She’s not as random as she looks, Di. Pinkie’s got a different rhythm—it’s weird and keeps changing and improvising, but it comes together in the end. Like jazz.

I don’t really know how to dance to jazz, though. I don’t think I ever will. Pinkie says that’s alright, and my party pony style just doesn’t work that way. She told me that there’s lots of different kinds of parties, and those parties aren’t always for everypony. As long as I remember to pay attention and try to learn while we’re working together, she’ll be happy.

Speaking of parties, we’ve been to a lot of them. No wonder Ponyville has two party ponies, it feels like there’s celebrations every week! Not everything we do is about parties though—here’s what we did yesterday:

- Planned Junebug’s family reunion/garden party. That one’s my favorite so far.
- Made lemonade & blew up balloons for a concert
- Baked ginger cookies with the Cakes (I saved you some!)
- Saw Pinkie’s basement. It’s not polite to blab about somepony’s trade secrets, so I won’t…but take my word on this: It. Is. Amazing. SO JEALOUS.
- Said hello to at least fifty different ponies
- Helped Mayor Mare plan her black-tie gala for next fall (that’s my second favorite)
- Helped Mayor Mare choose a new color for her living room. We settled on turtle green, even though Pinkie really wanted chartreuse.
- Played fetch with Applejack’s dog
- Gave Applejack’s dog a bath after she jumped into a mud puddle and scared a skunk
- Went to the spa to give OURSELVES a bath
- Drank ice cream floats
- Met Big Macintosh and Cheerilee by the gazebos and talked about apprenticeship stuff and what we’ve been doing all summer
- Got a ride home on Big Macintosh’s back (he felt bad about us getting skunked). Fell asleep halfway there. I still don’t know how somepony that reserved and mannerly can be related to Apple Bloom.
Yeah, that’s a lot for one day, huh? It doesn’t feel like that much when you’re in the middle of it. I’m having a good time learning from Pinkie, but I’ve been a little worried. Pinkie Pie keeps hinting at some kind of test that’s coming up. I don’t know if I should be prepping or taking note—

“Hellooooo, Faithful Student!”

Silver Spoon set down her pen and looked out of the garden gazebo. A fluffy shadow bobbed over the lawn’s rosebushes. Twisting her head, she smiled at the pink pony perched on the gazebo roof.

“Good afternoon, Professor Pie.” She laughed at the shadow fidgeting hoof to hoof in a fidgety little dance. “What are we doing today? It looks exciting.”

“You know it, Silver! Today’s an extra super special day, and I know you’re gonna just love it! … Also, this roof is very hot.” In one smooth motion, Pinkie Pie swung into the gazebo to sit on the railing, her tail flicking over the edge. “What’re you doing? Writing to Diamond Tiara?”

Silver folded the letter into her saddlebag and got ready to leave. “Mm-hmm. She’s still out at the Bay.” For at least another week, according to Di’s last letter. It was supposed to only be two weeks, but it stretched to three between Spoiled’s infatuation with the sunsets and Filthy’s desire to squeeze mileage out of the vacation home they’d barely touched in a decade. Not that it seemed to bother Diamond any. “Probably having lots of fun sunbathing and swimming and looking at dolphins,” she sighed.

Pinkie Pie and Silver Spoon waved to Mother watching them from the window, and made their way out of the garden and into the street. “Probably—hiya Medley, nice hat! There’s all kinds of fun you can have on a boat, and even more fun things on the beach. Know what, though?” Not a step out of her bouncy trot, Pinkie gave Silver a side-hug and a nuzzle. “I bet that’ll be nothing compared to the fun times you’ll spend together.”

Silver lifted her droopy ears and smiled back. By the time Di would get back, her bad mood would have blown over, too. Maybe taking a small break from each other would end up good for them. Her hoofbeats slipped into a smooth, clipped trot to match Pinkie’s bounce. “Yeah. Thanks, Pinkie.”

Mud squelched on the opposite side of the path. A gangly colt dripping in mud and slime walked backwards up the hill, dragging a huge red bucket behind him. Filth covered his cutie mark and most of his coat, but only one colt in Ponyville had that build and loved gross stuff that much. Silver Spoon turned up her nose and moved to Pinkie’s opposite side.

“Hi Snails, what’re you up to?” Entirely ignoring Silver’s negative signals, Pinkie strode across the street to stare into his disgusting muddy bucket. Bits of grass and dirt poked out of a thick layer of mud coating the bottom. “Need any help with that?”

“Naw, I got it, Pinkie Pie. There’s a buncha mud daubers living in Applejack’s pigpen, so me and Fluttershy are gonna go and move ‘em to a nicer place.” Never one to keep his big nose in his own business, Snails peeked over Pinkie’s shoulder to see who the second shadow belonged to. He broke eye contact when he did. “Oh, h-hi, Silver Spoon. I didn’t see you there.”

Pinkie Pie’s tail pushed Silver out into the open before she could think of an excuse not to talk to him. Silver Spoon flicked her own tail with a sigh and offered Snails a minor nod of acknowledgement. She looked back up at Pinkie Pie. Can we go now?

Pinkie took a seat and stared back, waiting. She seemed prepared to wait as long as it took. In case Silver needed a hint, she inclined her head toward the filthy, smelly colt.
No getting around it, then. Silver Spoon took a breath, swallowed down the indignity of it all, and smiled at him. “Good afternoon, Snails. I hope you enjoy your…” What was it again? “Mud daubers. Tell Fluttershy hello for us, okay?”

Surprise flickered over Snails’s face. Silver prayed the red creeping over his face came from the hot weather and nothing more. “Oh! Yeah, okay! I will, Silver Spoon. Bye, Pinkie!” He left standing taller and laughing that weird croaky laugh of his.

Silver bit back a cringe as they moved on. “Professor Pie, did I really have to do that?” *Bet he thinks I like him now. Or worse: he thinks I like-like him.* She couldn’t bear the thought.

Pinkie Pie tilted her head. “Well, why wouldn’t you? Snails is nice.”

“I guess, but Pinkie, he’s *Snails*. Have you *seen* Snails?”

“Of course I saw him, silly,” said Pinkie. “That’s why I went to say hi. Snails deserves to have a nice day like anypony else, right? Look how happy you made him!”

Almost over the hill, Snails hummed a tune to himself, happily flicking his paintbrush tail behind him. Why couldn’t they have run into Shady Daze or Featherweight instead? One wouldn’t know it from a glance, but Snails had one of the best memories in class—he’d hold onto this forever. That wouldn’t be so bad, but the colt had no concept of subtlety at all. Two bits said he’d blab this incident to everypony. Hopefully Fluttershy and the mud daubers could take his mind off it.

Silver pushed Snails out of her head. Time to get back on track. “What’s our agenda for today, Professor Pie?”

A wild white grin flashed across Pinkie’s muzzle. The puffiest part of her tail fluffed up like a cloud full of lightning. She wiggled her shoulders and bit her lip. “Ooohhh, you know. Just some *stuuuuff.*”

“Ooh.” Silver Spoon didn’t know any of the specialized Pinkie Sense signals yet, but she could hazard some darn good guesses. “Is it a surprise? Is my test today?” She put a hoof to her mouth with a gasp. “Do you think I’m ready?”

All Pinkie said was, “Yep!” No hint of worry or teasing in her voice, which could only mean… anything between delivering balloons and the literal apocalypse.

Silver sighed, supposing she ought to be grateful. Under Miss Pinkie Pie’s tutelage, a pony only needed to do one thing: ride it out and hope nothing exploded.

The certified party pony and her refined apprentice took a series of connected detours through *Ponyville’s* side roads, front yards, backyards, and a bowling alley. Finally, they arrived at a ragged gate latticed in vines.

The breeze carried the sweetness of grapes and honey in it. Glossy blackberry clusters shadowed Silver Spoon’s shoulders as they entered. Around the corner, she could see a shed behind the rows and rows of red grapes. She’d never been in this yard before, but remembered the rusty fence. The roof of the large split-level house had been patched with fresh wheat instead of rye; the stark color difference marked it as an amateur fix.

Silver Spoon frowned. *I know whose house this is.*

“We’re heeeere!” sang Professor Pinkie Pie.
Berry Pinch’s mom stepped out of the shed, her bushy tail something of a mess. At a glance, she appeared to be the same age as Dinky’s mom, yet she carried herself in a slower, nuanced sort of way. Father would call her a mare who had seen a lot. Her face lit up when she saw them.

“There you are, Pinkie Pie! When one rolled around and you still weren’t here, I started to worry. There’s still so much to do—I haven’t even put in the catering orders yet!” The remains of smooshed grapes stained her fetlocks and her fetlocks stained her forehead when she wiped it. “Good thing Pinchy’s still out with Dinky and Bulk’s little brother today. They’ll keep her busy on the other side of town until tonight.”

Silver’s mouth fell open with a little gasp. One hoof held to her mouth, she tapped Pinkie’s hoof. “Pinkie Pie? Are we…” She had to whisper for the shame of it. “Late?”

“Ah, my sweet naïve faithful student. Still so much for you to learn.” Pinkie sagely nodded to herself and patted the top of Silver’s head. “A party pony is never early or late. We arrive exactly when we mean to.” She glanced at their client’s unamused expression and smiled sheepishly. “But yeah, we’re a teensy bit late.”

“Doesn’t matter, you’re here now.” Pinch’s mom wiped her hooves with a rag, nodding to Silver. “Hello, there. The illustrious Silver Spoon, right? I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She’d never been called illustrious before. Silver smiled, bowing politely.

“We meet at last. I’m Berry Pinch’s mother, Berryshine, but you can call me Berry Punch.” A touch of dry amusement tinted her voice. “Everypony else does.”

That explained the “Berryshine’s” sign over the door. Silver shook her hoof and took scope of the yard. The vineyard dominated the patch of land—surprisingly big for a backyard—with hardly room for five ponies to stand, much less party.

“We’re celebrating inside, right? Otherwise, the Cakes would have mentioned shutting down Sugarcube Corner, and Ponyville likes to have personal parties in their homes.” Silver eyed the patched roof. Plus, it’s cheaper.

Pinkie Pie nodded. “You got it, faithful student. It’s little Pinchy’s birthday tomorrow, but we’re gonna have the party tonight so she’ll be extra surprised.” She did a little bounce dance. “She’s gonna be so excited!”

“I wish it didn’t come in the middle of wine season,” sighed Miss Punch. “Always so busy this time of year…at least I can count on you to cover the party, Pinkie Pie.”

“But wait? I mean, ‘Me?’” Pinkie pointed a hoof at herself and shook her head. “No-no-no, I’m here to get supplies and supervise. I’m not your party pony today…”

The nape of Silver’s neck prickled. Ponyfeathers.

“Silver Spoon is!” A minor shower of confetti rained down with Professor Pinkie Pie’s applause. “Congratulations! It’s time for you to plan your very first party all by yourself!”

Ladies did not panic. Party ponies did not panic. Here was Silver Spoon not panicking at the concept of headlining a custom party for the third worst foal in all of Ponyville with absolutely no idea where to even start. No, Silver Spoon kept her head high and her stance stoic and her voice professional.

“W-wonderful, Professor Pie!” Sweat slid down her shoulder blades. “I can’t wait to get started.”
“Aw, look at her.” Pinkie Pie dabbed her eye with a handkerchief and sniffed. The corners of her mouth began to wobble. “I promised myself I wasn’t going to cry.” That didn’t stop a perfectly round saltwater tear from sliding down her cheek.

Miss Berry Punch did not share Pinkie’s enthusiasm. “Hold on. A ten-year-old is planning this party?” Worry creased across her brow and in a softer voice, she asked, “Are you sure about this, Pinkie? I don’t think Silver and Pinch are exactly the best of friends.”

Pinkie Pie tilted her head until it hung sideways on her neck. “Really? Huh, that’s funny—don’t you guys go to the same school? I would’ve thought they got along great.”

Silver sighed. Although Pinkie understood foals far better than many adults, that didn’t make her any less of an adult, and there were some things adults just didn’t get. Silver Spoon could never understand why everypony thought two foals occupying the same space automatically had to be friends. Nopony thought the same of grown ponies, why did they think small ponies were any different?

To be fair, this was Pinkie Friends-With-Every-Single-Creature-In-Equestria Pie. Silver couldn’t really blame her. She curled her tail around her hooves as her mentor went into another ramble.

Birthday party for Berry Pinch. Can’t be too hard. A smaller obstacle course of social niceties to navigate compared to high tea, and she’d already helped set up an adult’s birthday party last week. Silver nodded to herself. Attack this like any other project: categorize necessities, calculate schedules, coordinate entertainment, and conceptualize theme.

She rocked back on her hooves, watching a dragonfly skim over the grapevines. Okay. So, birthday means a party hoof-crafted for the birthday filly. It needs to revolve around things Pinch likes, and Berry Pinch likes… Silver Spoon frowned. Uh, she likes…being an annoying stupid jerk with a stupid face? Not a very solid theme.

A million miles away, Pinkie’s voice derailed Silver’s train of thought. “…’cause I mean after all, Berry Pinch and Diamond Tiara are best friends and Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon are super bestest friends, so all three should be super bestest-best friends forever.”

Silver Spoon twitched her ears. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I know, right?” Pinkie Pie chuckled to herself and shrugged. “It’s so weird. But now, you get to do something even better—plan a party and make a new friend for the very first time!”

“Maybe,” put in Berry Punch, “we should just focus on the party part for now?”

“Good idea, Miss Punch.” Silver Spoon pulled out her clipboard, already flipped to a fresh page. This would be much easier if Professor Pie kept her schedules in a book instead of in her head. Party’s today, and we got here late, but not late enough for Miss Punch to get mad or yell at us. That means we still have time. And it’s a foal’s party, so it can’t run too late. “Doors open at six, right?”

“Oh—yeah. Yeah, that’s right.” Berry Punch glanced at Pinkie Pie, who’d apparently decided to stomp the rest of the grapes for her. “I thought you sprang this on her last minute. Heh, thank goodness you didn’t—”

“Nope, I didn’t. Total surprise.” Knee deep in squashed grapes, Pinkie winked at the both of them. “Party pony. Told you.”

“Hm. So you’re my party planner.” Though a bit skeptical, Miss Berry Punch seemed to be warming
up to the idea. “Okay then, I’ll show you where we’re setting up. How many parties did you help Pinkie with before this one, Silver?”

“Five, ma’am. This is my first one for other foals, though.” Stepping out of the bright sunshine, Silver blinked her eyes to adjust to Berryshine’s dim interior. Oil lamps and lightning bug lanterns lit the bar and tables with a relaxed amber glow. A karaoke setup, complete with multiple mics and speakers, sat in the far corner. Bottle green windows let them see the silhouettes of passersby.

The scent of oak mingling with wine and hops reminded her a little of their old penthouse’s parlor. A nicer place than Silver remembered. Funny how cozy a place felt when one wasn’t covered in mud.

“Can we move these tables? That’ll give us more floor space than a Sugarcube Corner event.” Silver hopped on a bar stool to get a better view. At Punch’s nod, she grinned and jotted down a couple of notes.

On the other side of the bar, rows upon rows of bottles too old for Silver Spoon to touch glistened along the wall. “Miss Berry Punch, won’t ponies be grouchy the bar’s closed? It’s going to be closed all night, right?”

“They’ll live. A dry night never killed anypony.” Berry Punch reached up to help Silver onto the floor. She hung back, watching Silver scout the rest of the area and take more notes. “Still don’t know why Pinkie needed to test you on this party,” she sighed.

Silver’s ears pricked at that worried tone. “Is there something special about this one, Miss Punch?” Quickly, she added, “Not that birthdays aren’t always special, but it kind of sounds like this one is more special than usual?”

The mare nodded but didn’t elaborate.

“It might help me if I knew why?” The speakers and mic from the karaoke setup could be useful for the entertainment, but Silver couldn’t push forward without a theme. For a theme, she needed more information. She eyed the stairwell behind the bar. “I’d like a look around upstairs, too, if that’s okay.”

“Silver Spoon, this is for the party, right?” Miss Punch’s penetrating stare could give Cheerilee a run for her money. She angled her neck down to meet the filly’s eyes. For a young mare, she had a lot of crow’s feet. “Nothing else?”

Silver blinked back at her dumbly. “No? What else would there be?” She frowned. What’s Pinch been saying about me?

“I was once a filly, too, you know.” Berry Punch spoke gently, but firmly. “And I remember how sometimes foals aren’t always very nice. Sometimes they would use personal information to hurt each other. I do not want this to be one of those times, Silver Spoon.”

Maybe some adults understood this kind of thing after all. “It won’t, Miss Punch.” Though now that she mentioned it, that did sound like a slick idea. Pity Silver was still on the clock. “Personal drama is like, so off the table right now. I’m Berry Pinch’s party pony and I’m here to prepare her party perfectly.” She tipped it with a professional nod. “Period.”

“So, no funny business.” Miss Punch began to offer a hoofshake, but thought better of it. One ear swiveled toward Pinkie’s grape-squishing song in the backyard. “Pinkie Promise me.”

Did this mare moonlight as a contract litigator? Sheesh. “Nothing from today comes back to hurt Berry Pinch; no funny business.” Silver held up a hoof. “Pinkie Promise.”
The grape squishing song went silent. So did the grape squishing. A low thunder rumbled through the bottles and bar stools. The air went deathly still, and a voice eerily like Pinkie Pie’s whispered like an ominous breeze. “The contract is sealed.”

Silver Spoon frowned again. “Did you hear that?”

Berry Punch looked up from opening the bar. She nodded toward the open stairwell. “Hear what?”

“...Nothing.”

At the top of the stairs, a weenie dog stared down at them with a long pink tongue hanging out of its mouth. At the sight of Silver Spoon and Berry Punch, it barked and wriggled, smacking the wood with its little doggie claws.

Before it got too jumpy, Miss Punch tapped a hoof. “Down, Mr. Dog.” She glanced down at Silver. “Don’t worry; he only bites burglars and ex-coltfriends.”

Just in case, Silver pulled close to Miss Punch’s hocks as she followed her up. “So, what’s so special about this party?”

“Nothing huge in particular, but…” She rubbed her foreleg with a sigh, eyeing the patch in the roof. “It’s been a while since Pinchy’s had a real birthday party. I tried the past couple of years, but things kept coming up.”

Money things, most likely. Silver Spoon glanced at the cracked spines of the *Home Businesses for Beginners* series lining a bottom bookshelf. This much floor space cost a healthy number of bits, and unlike the Cakes, Berryshine’s seemed to be a one mare show. “I understand, Miss Punch. I’ll do my best.”

Berry Punch smiled down at her. “Glad to hear it, honey.”

Yellow caution tape crisscrossed the second door to the right, all splattered with pseudo street signs and badly drawn monster faces. Silver restrained the urge to roll her eyes. No prizes guessing which room belonged to Pinch.

Berry Punch pulled rank on the **NO SNOBS ALLOWED** sign and opened the door for Silver Spoon. “Look, but don’t touch.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Silver wrinkled her nose at the smell of old pizza and mothballs and dog. *Like I’d even want to.*

She looked back at Miss Punch’s tight expression and sighed. *Even if it’s true, that’s not how a party pony’s supposed to think. Let’s get to work.* Silver adjusted her glasses and flipped on a light. *Okay, Berry Pinch. What makes you smile?*

Memories of a smiling Pinch ran few and far between, but that’s what research was for. Silver stepped around a half organized pile of collectible cards of masked ponies to skim through a box of vinyl records. No bands she’d ever heard of—and judging from the drippy blood fonts, skulls, knackermancers, and griffon vocalists, nothing she’d be allowed to listen to.

Silver marked down all the albums without advisory stickers and moved on to the action figures posing on a bookshelf. More masked ponies. Interesting. It was also one of the few places in the room not covered in dust.

“Are these guys from comic books?” She’d suffered enough lectures from Tornado Bolt to know
they weren’t Power Ponies. Their masks covered the entire face, not just the eyes. Not all of them wore bodysuits, either, nor were all of them ponies. A couple of minotaurs, griffons, and even a dragon lurked in the crowd. Many of them had missing ears, horns, or teeth.

“That’s Pinchy’s E.E.W. collection.” At Silver Spoon’s utter bafflement, Berry Punch explained, “Equestrian Entertainment Wrestling.” She pointed at the rearing pony in the center: a blood red mare dressed in black and white, frothing at the mouth with a long braided mane bannering behind her. “Whip Warrior’s her favorite.”

Now that she’d been pointed out, Silver suddenly noticed the braided pony everywhere. Warrior appeared countless times in the pile of collector cards. A replica of her mask hung from the bedpost. Notebooks, shirts, and cups, all marked by a W.W. made of braids. In poster after overlapping poster, she pounced off the top rope to tackle opponents—especially one particular white mare dressed in gold. An archrival, Silver guessed.

Silver’s eyes trailed across the wrestling posters to a tackboard by the messy desk. She rose to her hind legs for a better look. Nothing particularly interesting: ticket stubs, hoof drawn comic strips, and overlapping reminder notices…and a corner of a photograph poking out from under a report card. “Hm.”

Little claws tapped against the wood floor. “Hey, hey—no! No, Mr. Dog. Out!” In the corner of Silver’s eye, Miss Punch fought to shove the weenie dog out of the room. “Go lay down.”

Silver’s instructions had been clear: look, don’t touch. But if one had to touch in order to look, that sort of cancelled it out, right? It couldn’t hurt too much. Gently, Silver Spoon flipped up the report card and lifted her eyebrows.

In a sun-faded photograph, a younger Berry Pinch and Diamond Tiara gave Mr. Dog (more like Mr. Puppy) a bath. In another, they laughed and blew raspberries in the Riches’ living room. Silver couldn’t tell if they’d just been through a tornado or a tickle fight.

Wait. *A fight.*

The papers fell back into place before Miss Punch turned back around. Silver scanned the room one last time and nodded to herself. The pen scribbled fast across the clipboard. Silver Spoon had her theme.

Silver cupped her hooves around her mouth. “Pinkie Pie!”

“Woop!” Pinkie’s grape-stained face poked through the round window. How she got to the second story so fast, Silver didn’t even want to know. She smiled with violet teeth. “Hi again! Got everything ya need, Silvy-wilvy?”

Silver nodded and showed her the notes, supply list, and rough sketches. “We’ll need to borrow some mats from the gym—the big ones—and some colored rope. Go for the heavy duty streamers we used last week. Then we need a bell, a size five tux, and a cake that looks like…” Quickly, she flipped to the last page. “This.”


“Please. The correct question is, Professor Pie…” Silver’s designer glasses flashed in the light. A toothy but tastefully sized smile curled her lips. “Is the party ready for me?”

Pinkie elbowed Berry Punch in the ribs and winked. “Ooooh, she’s good.”
Miss Punch chuckled. “I’m curious. How long did it take you to come up with that line?”

“About twenty minutes,” said Silver Spoon. “Thirty, counting the tea break.”

“Fillies and gentlecolts, I cannot be-LIEVE what I’m seeing right now! It’s astounding! It’s abominable! Is this even allowed?” Pinkie Pie bent backwards over the ropes, rumpling her tux as she clambered over the makeshift wrestling ring. She covered her eyes with a hoof so she wouldn’t have to see Berry Pinch drag the lassoed cake to the center of the ring. “I can barely look, folks!”

A cluster of foals bounced on the gym mats coating Berryshine’s floor, struggling to see over each other’s shoulders. Scootaloo buzzed her wings to get some air over The Dink’s shoulder, beating little wafts of air over the white and gold cake. Apple Bloom snatched her tail and dragged Scootaloo down before she accidentally blew out a candle. They both said something, but Silver couldn’t hear them over the thumping music and Pinkie’s amplified commentary.

Berry Pinch stuck out her tongue in concentration. The cake knife beside her hooves slowly rose into the air, wobbling in the flimsy green light of her horn. Behind her Whip Warrior mask, the merciless filly grinned. An effigy cake decked out in the colors of Warrior’s greatest rival lay helpless beneath her hooves.

Pinkie gasped so hard she almost swallowed the microphone. “Knives in the ring?! Where is the ref? I know The Whip Warrior and Golden Guerilla have had their differences, but this is going too far! But—wait! WAIT! Is that? Yes!” A wild hoof swung in The Dink’s direction. “It’s The Knacker on the sidelines!”

The Dink tipped her huge black top hat (not an exact match for The Knacker, but close enough) over her eyes and shook her head.

Berry Pinch met “The Knacker’s” gaze and seemed to think it over. She nodded, put down the knife, and took a breath over the candles.

“Nope, she’s doing it legit, folks! I think it’s lights out for Golden Guerilla.” Pinkie wriggled through the black and red ropes, mane dragging along the mat and the mic half in her mouth.

Eleven candles went up in smoke. The theme music went wild. The crowd screamed. Blood-red streamers rained down from the rafters.

“That’s all she wrote, folks! Time to call it—ready? Three…two…one…”

A mighty cry erupted from the pits of the bloodthirsty crowd. “HAPPY BIRTHDAY, BERRY PINCH!”

Silver Spoon peered over one of the many chairs that framed the borders of the ring and applauded politely. She stalked the sidelines, observing the happy buzz of partygoers. Another impressed gasp rose from the crowd as Berry swung her head up, mouth full of the great chunk bitten out of the cake. Red velvet had been a good call.

Berry Pinch’s grin hadn’t left her face since the party started. Silver nodded to herself. “Looks like an A-plus to me.” That called for a celebration tea.
Ladies never cut through wrestling rings (especially not when everypony was muzzle-deep in cake) so she detoured around the long way. Not by coincidence, it also served as an easy way to listen in on the crowd.

“—not one of Pinkie’s this time,” said Shady Daze. The message slipped through the crowd and voices bubbled over each other in confusion.

“Not Pinkie?”

“No way, she does all the parties. And besides, she’s right there, she must have!”

“Nuh-uh, that’s not what I heard.”

“Then you heard wrong.” That one sounded like Rumble. “Who else could it be?”

“Nope, I asked Pinks myself,” muffled Dinky around a mouthful of cake. “She says it’s—get this—Spoons!”

“Shut up.”

“ Seriously?” squeaked Sweetie Belle. “She did this? Silver Spoon?”

“Don’t tell me to shut up, Cloudy. YOU shut up.”

“I can’t believe it,” said Apple Bloom. “Was it like just the decorations or—”

“She told me Silver planned the whole thing. Even the wrestling stuff.”

Pinkie Pie stepped in with plates and drinks. “Especially the wrestling stuff!” She caught sight of Silver passing by and mouthed “nailed it”.

Silver humbly waved back and capped off her victory lap. A table awaited her in a faraway corner of the bar, complete with a simple kettle of Earl Grey. She nodded to Miss Punch, who watched from the bar in case anypony needed anything.

Far from the ring, Silver mixed in her sugar and observed Shady and Snails’s impromptu game of battle tag. Planner or not, nobody had directly invited her, and today wasn’t the day to become a party crasher. She’d live. Pounding drums and squealing guitars did not need to be near Silver Spoon’s ears, thank you.

*The satisfaction of a job well done is enough.* That’s what Mother always told her. Silver’s ears twitched at the sound of her name being spoken of kindly. *Well, a job well done and an improved reputation.*

So when the birthday girl showed up at her table twenty minutes later, Silver Spoon couldn’t help but be concerned. “Hi, Berry Pinch. Happy birthday.” She studied the less than ecstatic body language of the pink unicorn and felt her own smile falter. “Everything alright with the party?”

A smile did come to Pinch’s face, but not the sort Silver wanted: not happy, but placating. “Nah, it’s not that. Party’s awesome, Silver Spoon.” The smile got a bit brighter. “No, I mean it’s really awesome. I’ve never had anything like this before.” Her magic picked at the red doily under Silver’s black saucer. “You even got all the colors right. Thanks.”

“Oh.” Well, that wasn’t so bad. “You’re welcome.”

“So, you really did this? Like, all of…” Pinch bobbed her head, indicating the throat-scream music,
wrestling ring, and blood red streamers. “Doesn’t really seem like your kind of party.”

“Trust me, it’s not. At all.” Silver sipped her tea and shrugged. “But this one’s not mine—it’s yours. I don’t do bad work and you needed a party. That’s all there is to it.”

“Yeah. Guess that makes sense.” Pinch took a seat and removed her wrestler mask. “So. Okay, today when I went out exploring with the guys, I had a talk with Featherweight. He told me lots of stuff about how you helped him with his photographs a few months ago.”

Red flag. Slowly, Silver put down her cup. “Oh, he did? What else did he say?”

“Stuff. A lot of stuff.” She rubbed the back of her sweaty ears, glancing back at the ring. “We also all went into that big cave under the library today. With all the cutie marks and names and stuff? The Dink says you and her were the ones who found it first. She also says you’re pretty cool when you want to be.”

“She does?” Nopony had ever called Silver Spoon cool before. Elegant, intimidating, and (just today) illustrious, but not cool. Never cool.

“Uh-huh. The Dink says I should give you the benefit of the doubt, so that’s what I’m gonna do. I’m just gonna ask you upfront—don’t do that thing you do and try to weasel out it, okay?” Berry Pinch had inherited her mom’s awful, steely gaze.

“I…” Was there even anything else to say to that? “Okay.”

In a low voice, she asked, “Silver, did you mess up Diamond’s gig at the paper?”
A Severe Lack of Sugar

“Silver, did you mess up Diamond’s gig at the paper?”

Silver Spoon’s stomach dropped. A light flush colored her ears and she felt a cold, neutral expression wash over her face. Her mind scrambled double time. Not fast enough.

*I need time.* The silent seconds slipped away, and each and every one cemented her guilt. *Buy more time. You’ll be fine. Just buy time. Pace. Breathe.*

“E-excuse me?” She aimed for righteous indignation, but landed on squeaky disbelief.

Berry Pinch repeated the question.

“I don’t understand what you mean, Pinch. What are you talking about?”

The little unicorn narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

Bolt-holes hid in every sentence—misdirections, red herrings, plausible doubts. Silver only had to find one. “What? I can’t give you an answer when I don’t even understand the question.” Find technicalities. Ask specifics. “Since when do I have anything to do with *The Foal Free Press*?”

“Well…nothing,” admitted Berry Pinch. “Nothing directly. But I know you were on the student council with Truffle that week, and I remember Truffle worrying about how mean Gabby Gums was getting. He spilled his guts to anypony who’d listen. I also remember how nervous and jumpy everypony got when all their secrets started getting out, and I know you like keeping your secrets, Silver Spoon.” She shrugged at Silver’s raised eyebrows. “I dunno what they are, but I know you got ‘em. I mean, everypony does.”

“Yeah. Everypony keeps secrets.” Silver braced her hooves against the table, her mouth pinched tight. “So out of all the ponies in Ponyville, you think *I*’m the one who somehow sabotaged the Gabby Gums articles? Me. Diamond Tiara’s best friend in the whole world.”

A familiar oily, black feeling crinkled under Silver’s coat. Her flank itched and her chest tightened around her ribs. She took a breath and a small sip of tea. Before Berry Pinch could counter, Silver went on the attack.

“You know, you’ve got a really funny way of thanking somepony who put your birthday party together, Pinch. Like, I don’t expect a parade or anything, but at the very least, I didn’t think you’d corner and attack me with these—these baseless accusations!”

That got her. The birthday filly looked away and shuffled her hooves. “Yeah, okay… maybe that was kinda messed up—”

“Try a lot messed up.”

“—and I guess I’m sorry about that, Silver.” Berry Pinch clicked her tongue and flicked her eyes back up. “This whole thing’s been bugging me for a while, though. Part of it always felt weird to me, like the blackmailing stuff.”

Silver Spoon pricked her ears and blinked.

That’s right. In the midst of the paper scandal’s fallout, Apple Bloom exposed the blackmail. In fact,
that had been the final blow to Diamond’s editor position; she’d ranted about it for weeks. In her haste to bury the whole thing and move on, Silver never stopped to truly appreciate the implications.

“And here’s the other thing: if Diamond Tiara had those embarrassing pictures of Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, and Apple Bloom, then why’d she wait so long to use ‘em?”

Implications like that.

“I’ve known Diamond a long time, Silver Spoon. She ain’t patient. At all. If she was gonna do it, she’d have done it after that lame Spike article.” Berry Pinch crossed her forelegs, one hoof thoughtfully tapping the table. It rattled Silver’s tea saucer. “But Scootaloo says Diamond only sprung those pictures on ’em after they tried to walk away. The pics you suggested to Featherweight, Silver. I just think it’s kind of a weird coincidence, you know?”

Silver Spoon recalled the beginning of their conversation. “I should give you the benefit of the doubt.” The tea cup pressed hard against the soft undersides of her hooves. She was going to tell.

Pinch must have put it together during the summer and planned to tell Diamond as soon as she got back from vacation. But she decided to ask me about it first. The stereo cycled back to the top of the playlist. Whip Warrior’s theme thumped the floorboards under Silver’s shoes. Because I’m not as bad as she thought. The slimy, crinkly feeling got worse.

“Berry Pinch, I can’t control what Diamond does. She’s her own pony, you know that.” Silver shrugged. “Featherweight felt bad about the pictures he took, so I helped him pick out some good ones.”

A beat of silence passed between them. Slowly, Berry’s green eyes narrowed. “You’re doing it again.”

“What thing?”

“Weaseling. The exact thing I asked you not to do.” Caught red-hooved. If Pinch harbored any speculation of Silver’s innocence earlier, then she didn’t anymore. “I’m not stupid, Silver Spoon. I see you do it all the time when Cheerilee catches you passing notes and now you’re doing it to me. Look, I’m not accusing you, okay?”

Liar.

“Did you screw up Diamond’s editor job or not? It’s a yes or no question.”

Silver adjusted her glasses and took an acute interest in the bar’s wallpaper. Her silence lingered on long enough to answer the question for her, assuming everything else hadn’t done so already.

Berry Pinch didn’t seem too surprised. “Okay, then lemme ask you something else. Did you do it on purpose? I mean, did you tell Featherweight to use those pictures knowing that…that, I dunno, something bad would happen?”

Any lie Silver told now had a turkey’s chance in Tartarus. Even Twist would be able to see through it. Yet, the truth…

Silver Spoon slowly took another sip of tea, wishing she’d brewed something gentler. It needed more sugar. In her first year as a tea party pony, she’d learned a near-universal fact: nopony wanted straight tea. It needed milk, honey, or sugar added to it. Tea had a bitter taste on its own. The truth was very much the same.
She didn’t have the sugar to sweeten this one. Silver’s gaze still hadn’t left the wallpaper. “What happens if I say yes?”

The unicorn shrugged her thin shoulders. “Shoots if I know. I’m not a fortune teller.” She thought deeper into the statement. “Oh. You mean, am I gonna tell Diamond?”

Slowly, Silver dragged her eyes back to Berry’s. “Yes.”

“Oh, sure. Now I get a straight answer.” Pinch almost smiled at that.

Back in the ring, the main attraction’s absence had been noted. Dinky and Pinkie and Snails watched them from beyond the ropes. Shady Daze looked as if he wanted to come to their table.

Berry Pinch glanced back at them, nodded to assure them she’d come back soon, and turned back to the table. The conversation had timed out. She chewed the inside of her cheek. “Maybe I am gonna tell her. I don’t know yet.”

Okay, so Pinch felt conflicted and needed this talk to end. You and me both, kid. Now to talk reason. They could find a solution that suited them both and ended comfortably, and then Silver could rebury this newspaper debacle and move on.

“When you think about it, it still worked out fine in the end.” Silver moved her saucer aside to clear a path between them on the table. Her hoof reached across the tablecloth and centimeters from Pinch’s fetlock. “In the long run, everypony’s glad Gabby Gums is gone, right?”

“Yeah,” Berry Pinch had to admit. “They are.”

“And the whole thing would have gotten worse before it got better, right?”

“Right.”

Silver attempted a smile. “So in a way, it’s a good thing, isn’t it? Diamond would’ve ended up doing something harsh, something worse. It would have hurt her just as much as everypony else. Maybe more.”

“Probably.”

“Alright, so there’s no real reason to tell—”

“Did you talk to her about it?” A red streamer fluttered down from the rafters and settled across Berry’s hooves. She absently toyed with it. “About whatever you thought Gums was gonna bust you on?”

Silver rolled her eyes with a sour chuckle. “Right. Like anypony could even get a hold of her that week.” She humphed under her breath. “Much less me.”

“‘Kay, but did you even try, Silver Spoon? Yeah, Diamond might have been too busy being a sack of snake butts to listen, but she might not have.”

Keyword “might”. With the Silvers’ reputation on the line, “might” wouldn’t have been enough. Even if Silver hadn’t been strapped for time and…acted decisively, “might” still wouldn’t have been enough. If an appeal hadn’t worked, then she’d have been sunk either way, because that would mean she’d have incriminated herself. It had to happen the way it did. It had to.

In the midst of Silver wondering how much of her reasoning she wanted to share, Berry Pinch broke
in again. “Listen. Diamond’s a colossal butt trumpet most of the time, but she’s still my friend. Friends tell each other the truth, Silver.”

The wrestling mask stretched back over Berry’s face. One green eye looked back at Silver as Berry tied back the straps. “And I’m gonna tell you something else. Diamond made me type up those stupid Gums articles until I got blisters in my hooves, and you know what? I didn’t see your name come up once. The way Featherweight was snapping his camera all over the place, he must’ve gotten at least one picture of you or your mom or somepony that Diamond coulda used. But she didn’t.”

The red lace doily twisted in Silver’s hooves. She took a shaky breath. “So…um, does that mean your ‘maybe’ turned into a ’yes’?”

“I really think Diamond Tiara deserves to know why she’s not editor anymore, Silver. If anypony oughta tell her, it’s you.” Berry Pinch tucked her mane under the mask and pushed away from the table. “But if you don’t, I’m gonna.”

The moving wagons arrived the same day Diamond Tiara returned to Ponyville. The fifth set of movers that summer, by Silver’s count, and the fourth with foals (unless the swing set she’d seen earlier belonged to eccentric adults). Thankfully, that didn’t mean five sets of welcome parties to arrange. After the birthday party’s success, Pinkie Pie seemed satisfied with Silver’s initial two weeks of work study.

“But Pinkie says being a party pony lasts for the rest of your life anyway, so it doesn’t really matter when the work study ends.” Silver Spoon rechecked her horseshoes for dirt before stepping out upon the Riches’ yacht deck to join Diamond Tiara. Bobbing in the middle of Sweetshine Lake, the boat stood tall enough to boast an impressive view of the neighborhood.

Some steps ahead, Diamond watched the street lamps light up the darkening shore. The muggy July evening air fluffed ends of her mane into dandelion puffs. “In that case, what are you supposed to do now?”

“My usual tea parties, I guess. Maybe help Pinkie out sometimes? It’s a weird position, since Ponyville’s not that big on fancy parties.” Silver Spoon took in the idle chatter of the idle rich ponies that crowded the deck. They towered around her shoulders, knocking back cocktails and complimenting the loveliness of the evening, the weather, and each other’s outfits. “…I mean, not usually.”

Granted, a “party” didn’t quite fit this event. Counting themselves, the crowd capped out at seven and there’d been no events or celebrations, only a small get-together for the hoofful of Ponyville’s well-to-do.

“You could still do more birthday parties,” Diamond said. “You already threw a good one for…” She flicked her tail thoughtfully. “Wait, who’d you say that party was for?”

Silver hadn’t. “Berry Pinch. I did a wrestling theme.” Sounding more casual than she felt, she trotted down the deck of the Laissez Faire, observing the tiny crowd.

Outside the cabin, Father bowed his head in concentration over a chess board. Spoiled Rich sat opposite of him, gently swirling her brandy glass and awaiting his next move. Both stayed quiet as
the fillies passed and neither seemed to notice them. Must have been a good game.

Meanwhile, Mother engaged in conversation with Rarity beside the railing. Apparently, she greatly appreciated Sweetie Belle’s enthusiasm for music, but wondered why the filly didn’t project it more. “…somewhat frustrating when I know there’s so much untapped potential in her.”

“Mm. I suppose she might still be a little shy, Pitch. She’s not quite used to—oh! Hello there, ladies.” Miss Rarity’s chandelier earrings swung as she knelt to admire Diamond Tiara’s blue sailor suit. “Oh my, aren’t you just adorable in that ensemble! It brings out the streaks in your mane—and the little shoes!” Enamored, she clasped a hoof against her black gown.

“What? Oh, thanks, Rarity.” Diamond looked back to Silver. “I’m guessing you did a Whip Warrior thing for Pinchy, then? She’s like, totally mental about that mare.”

“Oh-huh.” Silver Spoon steered the conversation back into Rarity’s harbor. She batted her eyelashes with a sweet little giggle. “Excuse me Miss Rarity, but weren’t you the pony who designed that outfit?”

Rarity shot a small wink that travelled the room. “Of course! That’s how I know it’s good, darling.” It earned a polite chuckle from the partygoers. “By the way, Silver Spoon, a little pink birdie tells me your first big party was quite the hit. Congratulations.”

Not quite the direction Silver hoped for. “Thank you.” She shrugged and glanced towards Father’s chess game. “I guess it did okay.”

Mother smiled and placed a hoof on Silver’s withers, cutting off an easy escape. “Don’t be so modest, Silver Spoon! It didn’t just do ‘okay’, it did magnificently. Pinkie hasn’t stopped talking about it for days.”

“Believe me, I know,” laughed Rarity. “Two party ponies in the same town? I don’t know how we’ll manage.”

Diamond pricked her ears and extended the amber spyglass hanging from her neck. Apparently she’d spied something interesting. “Competition’s healthy for business, Miss Rarity. It makes ‘em better because then they have to try harder.”

Mr. Rich pulled up to join them and smiled at his daughter. “Couldn’t have said it better myself.” He leaned on the rail, brushing back his captain’s hat to let his mane get some air. A swish of his tail indicated the chess game a few steps away. “Your husband’s managed a turnaround, Pitch Perfect. I think Spoiled’s getting nervous.”

“I told you not to count him out, Rich. Silvers have their way of surprising ponies. We like to play the long game.” Mother’s light Manehattan accent thickened; she must have been having a good time. “When word got out where we’d be moving, you should’ve heard ponies talk. ‘The poor Silvers,’ they said. ‘Whoever heard of Ponyville?’ Ha!” Her white teeth flashed in a contagious smile and she nodded at the Golden Oak Library’s silhouette in the east. “Who indeed?”

“Mm-hmm. A new princess does do wonders for real estate,” Mr. Rich mused, “but I’ve got to wonder about the economic ramifications of…”

While Filthy Rich launched into economic theory, Diamond’s spyglass followed a brightly colored wagon ambling down the road. Lights twinkled along its edges and the brass wheel spokes glistened. “Check it out, Silvie.” Without looking away, she passed the spyglass into Silver’s hooves. “Doesn’t look like a moving wagon to me.”
Indeed, nothing about the wagon suggested a new family moving in. Not unless they were circus ponies. The thing seemed big enough to live in, big enough for a mansion’s worth of supplies. If Silver strained her ears, she could hear bells in the far, far distance. “Do you think it’s a circus? Maybe they’re headed for Canterlot.”

“Then they’re doing it wrong.” Diamond’s hoof traced the path the wagon had taken out of the Everfree, straight on through town and past all of Ponyville’s major landmarks and neighborhoods. “I’ve been watching that thing for like, fifteen minutes. They should have taken a side road and cut that time in half. At first I thought maybe the wagon got lost, but they don’t act lost to me.”

Silver Spoon gave the spyglass back. The tip of her tail flicked thoughtfully. “So, whoever it is wanted to be seen.”

“Yes. They’re advertising.”

“But what? I can’t read what’s written on the side from here.”

Diamond tapped Mr. Rich’s flank. “Daddy, what do you think it is?”

The traveling wagon had finally stopped for the night. Taking momentary pause in the discussion of market elasticity in political overhauls, Mr. Rich squinted at the shore. “Hmm. Well, there’s only one wagon, so it can’t be circus folk…not stoppin’ in the square, can’t be a traveling show…” He nodded to himself. “Salesponies, I think.”

Rarity peered out over the water, lightly fluttering her pocket fan. “Don’t be absurd, that location is terrible! They’re setting up miles away from any of the shopping areas. Who’d know where to find them?”

“They’re near Golden Harvest’s place and Sweet Apple Acres, aren’t they? I suppose it’d be a decent spot to sell farm equipment,” said Mother. She tilted her head at the flashing lights. “Though it is a bit…extravagant for farmers.”

“It is, isn’t it, Mrs. Perfect?” The smile lines in Mr. Rich’s face strained, more serious than his voice let on. Whatever the wagon implied, he didn’t like it. “Good eye, Diamond.”

Diamond Tiara grinned and adjusted the lapels of her sailor dress. “Thanks.”

Silver Spoon fought down a yawn. She didn’t have a watch, but it felt as if the party edged close to bedtime. “Di, you start working with Tall Order tomorrow, don’t you? Why don’t you ask about it then? Whoever it is has to have a permit or some junk.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Diamond rested her chin on the railing, yawning the yawn Silver had tried to suppress. “I’m only at Town Hall until noonish, so we can check it out tomorrow, okay?”

“Tomorrow?”

Diamond rolled her eyes. “No, a year from now. Why? Something wrong with tomorrow?”

The pearls of Silver’s necklace clacked against the brass railing as she leaned her neck out over the water. Diamond Tiara still didn’t seem super enthusiastic about working with a city legislator, but surely she’d like it better once she got used to it.

“If you don’t tell her, I will.”

The ultimatum never specified a date. She didn’t have to tell her tonight. Not after Diamond just got
back in town. Not after impressing Mr. Rich in front of Ponyville’s elite. Throwing down bombshells tonight wouldn’t be proper, and unlike certain pink unicorns, Silver Spoon knew these things required finesse.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, she’d tell her.

“No, it’s fine, Di. Who knows, maybe it’ll turn out to be a carnival and we can play some games.”

Then again, telling her tomorrow might ruin Diamond’s first day with Tall Order. The day after tomorrow. Yes, that would be better.

Mr. Rich nodded to them with a light chuckle. “Or the carnival games’ll play you instead. You keep sharp in places like that, now. They’re crawling with con artists.”

“I can’t bear the thought of you sweet girls running around amongst untrustworthy ponies. Those types are so dangerous, you know.” Spoiled Rich parted the tiny crowd like a swan on the water. Father trailed a few steps behind her, examining his pocket watch. Neither seemed put out by the results of the chess game.

Rarity dismissed the thought with a wave of her hoof. “Dangerous? Oh, come now, Mrs. Rich. There isn’t a town in Equestria safer than Ponyville.”

A sardonic smile skirted Father’s face. “Yes, only three monster attacks this year. Well, give or take the odd plunder vine calamity, mirror pool disaster, and tyrannical regime.” It earned him a round of laughter from the crowd and a charitable, conceding nod from Rarity.

“They’re smart little ladies, Spoils,” Mr. Rich said. He gave Diamond’s curls a friendly ruffle. “They know who to trust.”

Mrs. Rich tittered under her breath—an airy sound that made Silver edge closer to Father—and gently swirled the brandy in her glass. “Of course, dear. Just thinking out loud.”

Silver Spoon watched the lapping waters break the moon’s reflection in the lake and tried not to think of anything at all.

In the Silvers’ foyer, the grandfather clock sounded twelve times. With her back pressed against the glass casing, every chime vibrated against Silver Spoon’s backbone. The ticking tickled the back of her head.

One hour until she met up with Diamond Tiara. Possibly five hours of fun before they went back home. Twenty five hours before she ran out of excuses to procrastinate. Twenty five hours to figure out what to say. Twenty five hours to find a way to break the news painlessly.

Fat chance of that.

“By the way, Di, I knowingly and willfully sabotaged one of the greatest successes you’ve ever had. I know your parents were both really proud of you and you put hundreds of hours of work into it, but hey, it’s only the most successful school paper publication in Ponyville’s history. Oh, but I had a good reason to ruin everything: I’m a paranoid jerk who thought you’d ruin my family. We’re still cool, right?”
Not that Silver necessarily had to confess to sabotage. She could twist the fact to suit her, but that option hardly seemed better. *Hey, I went over your head and tried to help you because I don’t think you can handle your own business. It all blew up in your face, but whatever! Forgive and forget?*

Silver let her empty notebook fall to the floor. It landed next to the paper mountain of crumpled apologies, excuses, and explanations.

“Incompetence or backstabbing. What a choice.” Silver’s tail curled over her cutie mark. “Or, the third option…”

Deny.

In the end, Berry Pinch only had her word against Silver Spoon’s and Silver’s held more weight. Even if Featherweight admitted she’d helped him choose the Crusader pictures, nopony could prove intent. It wouldn’t be hard to shift Featherweight’s story either; dreamboat or not, the colt barely remembered what he ate for breakfast.

On paper, option three worked best. A year ago, she’d have done the same as any sensible Wisteria alum and thrown Berry Pinch under the carriage. After all, Pinch wouldn’t hesitate to do the same. Except…

“You deserve the benefit of the doubt.”

Except…she had. She’d been trying to be nice when she gave Silver time to confess on her own.

All this, presuming Berry Pinch would even carry out her threat. Perhaps she’d had second thoughts, or only wanted to appeal to Silver’s conscience. A bluff. Perhaps Silver had nothing to worry about at all.

“Y-Yeah.” Silver chewed her pencil eraser and let her head rest against the clock, staring up at the chandelier’s exquisite architecture. “She’s bluffing, that’s all.”

“Who’s bluffing?” Sweetie Belle—without invitation or a proper hello—trotted into the foyer, carrying a purple binder. She stepped around the pile of rough drafts and reached out with a curious hoof. “What are you doing with all this paper?”

Silver Spoon’s tail whipped the hoof away and swiped the paper ball out of Sweetie’s reach. “None of your business, blank flank. Keep your hooves to yourself and quit being so nosy!”

Sweetie gave the paper mound some space and rubbed her hoof. Not the least bit ashamed or affronted, she stepped closer. “You’re one to talk. You dig for dirt every time you pour a cup of tea, Silver Spoon.”

“It’s called ‘making conversation’, ever heard of it?” Silver glanced back at the clock. Fifty five minutes to go. *Ugh, I so don’t need this right now. “What are you even doing here, Sweetie Belle?”*

“I invited her here,” said Mother’s voice. A moment later, she stood in the doorway, armed with a metronome, a designer attaché case, and a scowl to crumble mountains. Her silky orange tail lashed over the ebony hardwood. “You see, I thought we might try voice practice here instead of the music hall. I thought perhaps a home environment may feel more inviting, for I presumed, Sterling Silver Spoon, that we knew how to treat guests in this house.”

Silver flinched.

Sweetie Belle rocked back on her heels and rolled her eyes toward the chandelier. She didn’t smile,
but it seemed to be a struggle.

Mother stepped forward, green eyes narrowed. “Am I mistaken, young lady?”

“But she—I... No, ma’am.” Silver Spoon didn’t have a leg to stand on. Poor manners of guests didn’t excuse such a rude introduction to the house. She sighed and put on a polite face. “I’m sorry, Sweetie Belle. You caught me at a bad time; I didn’t mean to snap at you. Did you need me for anything?”

“It’s fine,” said Sweetie Belle, though she now appeared more suspicious of Silver’s mountain of crumpled paper.

Before the blank flank started getting crazy ideas, Silver met her halfway. “I’m trying to think of something fun to do when I meet Diamond this afternoon. Today’s the first day of her work study assignment.” Mostly true. Planning out a fun day today might cushion bad news tomorrow. “I’ve got less than an hour to decide.”

Mother’s disapproval waned, but the slight twitch in her tail warned that Silver wasn’t out of the woods yet. “Why not decide when you meet her? It will be like an adventure.” Never one for adventures, that could only mean she thought Silver Spoon’s time better spent with something else. “In the meantime, my love, what do you think of accompanying Sweetie Belle and I on harpsichord today?”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea, Mother.” Not that she had much choice.

Intrigued, Sweetie Belle turned from the paper mound. “Ooh, I didn’t know you played, Silver Spoon.”

Silver shrugged. “Yes, but a little out of practice.” She wasn’t, but humility was an admirable quality in young ladies. Plus, it offered a good excuse for flubbed notes. “Good chance to catch up on it now, I guess.”

Mother nodded with a smile. “My thoughts exactly. Now—to the drawing room, ladies. Let’s begin.”

An hour of The Queen & Ewe’s signature numbers and two shortcuts later, a panting, mildly sweaty Silver Spoon finally reached Town Hall.

Diamond Tiara sat up on the steps and waved. “Wow, did you seriously run all the way here? You must have been running really late.” She chuckled, thankfully more amused than annoyed. “Usually you’re five minutes early for everything.”

Silver braced herself against a wooden column, trying to catch her breath. “My mother’s... teaching...Sweetie Belle, and I’m—” Silver took one last gasp of air and swept her mane back into place. “I’m her musician, 'cause she sings better with music and we only had sheet music for show tunes.”

Two years ago, Mother would have balked at the very idea of opera’s half-baked cousin in their house. It should’ve gotten somepony kicked out, not invited in.

Diamond hissed sympathetically. “Gross.”

“You’re telling me.” Gross, but bearable. To Sweetie’s credit, the filly did know how to carry a tune.

They cut through the market on their way to the Apples’ place. In the bustle of the crowd, Silver
noticed somepony with a raspberry coat approaching them. Swiftly, she moved to Diamond’s opposite side. A small opening appeared in the crowd, and Silver jumped into a canter—too slow to catch major attention, but fast enough to get out of sight.

Caught by surprise, it took Diamond Tiara a second to catch up. “Hey! Everything okay, Silver?”

“Oh, course,” said Silver Spoon. She licked her dry lips. “Why?”

“Oh, ’cause you started running ahead like somepony lit your tail on fire? Also, the back of your neck’s still all prickly and sweaty. Maybe you should get some water.”

Water did sound nice, but it would mean going back into the marketplace. “I don’t like crowds holding me up. It’s fine.” Now would be a good time for a subject change. Silver glanced down at Diamond’s white pinstriped vest. “Nice outfit, by the way. Is that new?”

“Oh, my business vest? I usually wear it when I go to the office with Dad, but Spoiled thought I’d make a good impression if I wore it for my work study, too. And it did!” Diamond adjusted the silk cravat—a perfect match for her eye color—and grinned. “This is new, though. Rarity gave it to me for good luck.”

Silver dared a glance over her shoulder. In the thick of the crowd, the pony with the raspberry coat lifted her head.

Cheerilee. Only Miss Cheerilee, licking a popsicle. She smiled and waved at them.

Relax. You’re getting paranoid. Silver waved back. “Did it work?”

“It didn’t hurt. Tall Order says he likes my drive and I’ve got a good eye for management.” Ever humble, Diamond fluffed her hair with a satisfied smirk. “Old news, of course, but it’s always nice when ponies recognize raw talent.”

Silver Spoon nodded solemnly. “Totally. Did you ask about the weird wagon from last night?”

Diamond Tiara fell into a hard, determined trot, the sort for making war upon blood rivals, Crusaders, and unfair homework distribution. She edged close to Silver’s shoulder, as if there might be ears listening.

“Yeah, and get this: there’s no record of a traveling sales wagon, a circus, or a carnival, or anything. I told Tall Order about it and he’d never heard of it. So, I went with him to see the mayor about it, right? Mayor Mare hadn’t heard anything about it either. Not a word!”

The branches above their heads shifted from oak, elm, and spruce to apple branches and more apple branches. The air smelled of fruit and fertilizer, and if Silver craned her neck, she could spot the Apples’ barn in the distance. No pony in the fields, and no sign of activity in the orchard. Short workday, maybe?

It felt eerie without any Apples running around. Silver Spoon stayed close to Diamond’s shoulder. “I thought you needed a permit to set up in Ponyville.”

“Exactly! No way that wagon’s not selling something.” Righteous purpose flashed in Diamond’s eyes. “Daddy’s right—they are, like, so up to something crooked. Whoever they are.”

“We don’t know that for sure, Di. They might only be passing…” The end of Silver’s sentence trailed off as they passed out of Sweet Apple Acres. “…or maybe not.”
Lines of ponies stretched from the shallow hills down into the valley where a striped tent strung with flashing lights and a sales booth awaited them. A merry calliope chirped out a catchy tune, presumably to butter up the crowd and kill time.

Silver Spoon sized up the stallion at the end of the line, a skinny, thin-tailed fellow with his jaw wired shut. She wondered if he ought to be walking around like this. Many of the others ran the same: they bore eyepatches, bandages, slings, coughs, sniffles, and swollen hooves. She counted at least six with (hopefully un-contagious) illnesses. One poor mare struggled in a shabby wheelchair.

“Since when did Ponyville have this many messed up ponies?” Diamond gave a wide berth to a mare with patchy fur. “Shouldn’t they be in a hospital and not, like…in public?”

A colt Silver had never seen before smiled at them with freakishly large, uneven teeth. He must have been from one of the new families in town. “Oh, we’ve got something way better than a hospital! Hospitals give shots and make you stay in bed for weeks, but the tonic fixes you up in no time.” The colt’s horrific smile widened. “I was on the waiting list for braces, but I won’t even need ’em after this.”

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon exchanged confused glances.

“My left eye hasn’t worked right since a plunder vine poked it,” said a mare with an eyepatch. She nodded towards the mangled and sick ponies around them. “The vines got a lot of us. Lingering chaos magic or somesuch, they say. Me, I see colors all wrong and when I blink I get headaches. Nurse Redheart told me to keep a poultice on it for four weeks, but the tonic can cut that time in half.”

Teeth and eyes? Those were two different things entirely, how could a tonic cure both? Silver Spoon adjusted her glasses, squinting through the bright sunlight to read the sign above the tent.

Disdain rumpled at the back of Diamond’s throat. “Pretty cheap miracle.” She jutted her head at Pinny Lane, a teenage unicorn in the picture of health. Not even a pimple. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, I really don’t know yet. Might be nothing, but my bowling tournament’s this Saturday and I’m not taking any chances.” Pinny Lane’s blue ponytail flopped to the side as she leaned down. “What’s it to you, Diamond Tiara?”

Silver glanced between Pinny’s squint and Diamond’s souring frown. If ponies felt this convinced...
about the tonic, an abrasive approach wouldn’t get them far. “Easy, we’re not here to fight the audience,” she whispered.

“But they’re getting suckered!” Diamond shot back, barely whispering at all. When the colt with weird teeth glared at them, she stuck her nose in the air. “Well, you are.”

“At least hear this thing out first. We barely even know what it does or who—”

Silver paused. She’d noticed a stallion entering the tent, dragging crutches behind him. When he paused to adjust his raggedy fedora and overalls, she caught a clear look at his pale grey coat and dark grey mane. Not unlike the colors of a Silver.

Granted, the Silver family didn’t own a monopoly on grey coats—fairly common in Equestrian earth ponies—and if any relatives had come to town, they would’ve sent word ahead of time. It had to be a coincidence...but Silver’s gut didn’t feel so sure.

“…or who’s selling it,” she finished.

Diamond rolled her eyes and jabbed her hoof at a fine print list of curable ailments. “Anypony with half a brain can tell this tonic junk’s a bunch of horse apples. Curing hay fever, sure, but a broken hoof and Clydesdale fur blight? Come on!”

The line of waiting customers began to shift into a surrounding circle. Much to Diamond’s satisfaction, she’d won the crowd’s full attention. She pushed into showtime mode, lifting her head so her voice carried loud and clear. “Bottom line: this is a scam. You’ve been hoodwinked! Bamboozled! Taken for a ride by con artists!”

“Wha—con artists?! A voice in the crowd gasped, full of shock and mock-hurt. “Dear brother, did you hear what she called us?”

“Why, I most certainly did, brother! What an awful thing to say.”

From the thick of the crowd came a pair of unicorn twins—nearly identical, save for their cutie marks and the left stallion’s mustache. Their pale yellow coats ran over a lean, hungry build, and they wore handsome blue-and-white stripes to complement their red and white manes.

The mustached one dabbed his eye with a handkerchief and sniffed wetly. “And on our first day, too. Children are so cruel, Flim.”

“Oh, there, there. They don’t know any better, Flam.” The one called Flim patted his brother’s shoulder and tisked at Silver Spoon in a tone so belittling the filly fought back a snarl. He warmly smiled down at their icy little stares. “Why else would they accuse us of something so awful without any proof?”

Diamond lashed her tail with a snort. “Ponyfeathers.”

Silver took shelter behind Diamond Tiara and pointed out, “There’s no proof that it works, either.”

“It was good enough for Granny Smith,” said the mare in the wheelchair. “She bought four bottles this morning.”

“And it helped a stallion walk again!” cried the stallion with the eyepatch. “I saw it with my one good eye.”

“Then you obviously saw a trick.” Diamond pawed the dirt, never taking her eyes off Flim and Flam.
“I know you guys. You’re pinned up on The List. You’re worse than just liars, you’re swindlers, and my daddy says there’s nothing worse than a swindler.”

The unicorns exchanged glances. Flam twirled his mustache thoughtfully. “Your daddy, little girl? Have me met him, Flim?”

“Ooh, I do think we have! Now, if I remember right, he’s the running president and C.E.O. of that big place in town…Barnyard Bargains, is it? Fellow never did seem too keen on our humble products—”

“Because they didn’t work!” Diamond’s protest didn’t even break his flow.

“—so I suppose it’s only natural he’d get a little nervous about some competition.” Flim’s muzzle sagged with a frown, but the light in his eyes danced. “But I never thought he’d stoop so low as to sic his only daughter on us to do his dirty work.”

Diamond Tiara gaped, too incensed to speak.


Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara drew closer. The tone of the crowd had shifted. Whatever good favor Di had drummed up before was crumbling at her hooves and Silver saw no quick way to fix it.

*Darn it, Diamond. We shouldn’t have antagonized them.* Playing the innocent, put-upon youngsters would’ve turned the crowd’s favor in a second. When all else failed, young ladies could always rely on tears. Even now, it might plausibly work. Silver’s eye flicked up to Flam’s phony sympathetic frown. *But that would only play into their manipulated-silly-little-filly angle.*

In the meantime, Silver laid a hoof on Diamond’s withers—the filly looked ready to tear off Flam’s mustache and force feed it to him—and tersely thanked both brothers for their concern.

Diamond caught on and continued, “Nopony put us up to this, *sirs.*” She spat the word like acid. “We’re perfectly capable of thinking for ourselves.”

Silver nodded sagely and yawned. “Even little fillies know when somepony’s pulling our legs.”

“And we also know that nopony sells a miracle for two bits a bottle. Nopony *smart.*”

Flim flicked up his straw hat and smiled. “Maybe not in the cold, cutthroat world of business tycoons and robber barons, little girl, but the Flim Flam Brothers believe in prices *every* pony can afford.”

“Ponies before profits!” crowed Flam. The crowd murmured its approval.

Diamond stamped her hoof. “But the hospital is *free!*”

“So is, you know, actual medicine.” Silver Spoon puffed her chest and took great effort not to snort.

Flim took the opportunity for a sales pitch. “Ah, but The Flim Flam Brothers’ Miracle Curative Tonic can do what the overworked, overtaxed hospitals can’t!”

“And from the comfort of your own home folks, that’s right, the comfort of your very own home! No nurses! No hospital food! Why, anypony can see the sensible choice, here.” Flam chuckled and levitated a green bottle in front of Silver Spoon’s nose. “Well, almost anypony. You know, some tonic could clear up your vision problems, young lady.”

Flim winked. “Think of it: no more glasses. The little colts will think you’re pretty.”
Silver flinched, one hoof guarding the designer frames upon her nose. Colts didn’t really think there was anything wrong with glasses, did they? No, of course not. …Probably not. She swept her tail over her cutie mark and frowned.

“Hm. Nice try, but everypony knows Silver Spoon’s already pretty.” Diamond tossed Silver a nod and brushed a bit of dust off the pinstriped vest. The sidewinder swish of her tail underscored the steel gleam in her eye. She clicked her tongue and wondered aloud, “What I can’t understand is why ‘honest salesponies’ would set up an illegal operation.”

“Illegal?” Pinny Lane looked to the eyepatched stallion on her left. “I don’t think I want to deal with anything illegal.”

“Me neither,” muttered several others.

“I happen to know for a fact that Ponyville law requires any and all traveling businesses to get a permit before they set up shop.” Diamond Tiara drew herself up to play her trump card. “And I also know that you don’t have one.”

The tent flap opened. The pale grey stallion— in a different outfit and a shaggy beard, but surely the same pony—crept out and hovered on the edge of the crowd. Silver Spoon kept her eye on him.

Flim hissed, pulling at his shirt collar. “Ooooh, the little tycoon’s got us there, brother. Or, she would, but you see—”

“Technically, we’re not in Ponyville,” continued Flam. “If you and your generous Mayor Mare care to take a closer look, you’ll find my honest brother and mine’s establishment lies—”

“Precisely two inches outside Ponyville’s border,” both unicorns said together.

The pale stallion’s face peeped over Flam’s shoulder and slipped something into his pocket. Silver Spoon caught a clear look at his face. She couldn’t see his eyes behind the thick glasses, but she’d know that crooked jawline anywhere.

Silver’s eyes grew wide. Cousin Silver Shill?

The stallion turned to her, flicking his ears. For a moment, it seemed as if he might approach or say something, but he didn’t. He averted his eyes and sank back into the anonymity of the crowd.

“Silver Spoon!” Diamond’s voice sliced through Silver’s trance. “Hey, wanna join us back in Equestria?”

“What? Oh, sorry.” Silver glanced around them. The Flim Flam Brothers had left. “Are we leaving?”

With a flourished sweep of her mane, Diamond Tiara marched away. “Yeah, but this isn’t over yet. I’m telling Dad and Tall Order and Mayor Mare about this; one of them has gotta know what to do about these rip-off artists.”

Somewhere past the thick of the apple trees, something splashed in the swimming hole. Apple Bloom’s hiccupping laughter echoed through the branches while Applejack yelled about something. Probably scolding Bloom for doing dumb stuff.

Silver strained her ears. She thought she could hear Granny Smith too, but couldn’t tell for certain. “Sounds like the Apples took the day off.”

“Yeah, it does.” Diamond watched flashes of sparkling water through the trees as if weighing the
value of a confrontation.

One couldn’t blame her. The Flim Flam brothers would have spun the situation no matter what
Diamond said, but Granny Smith’s endorsement did no favors for Di’s argument. Still, time and
place.

Silver Spoon cleared her throat. “I wouldn’t.”

Diamond Tiara flattened her ears. “I wasn’r; I’m just thinking, okay?” The silky threads of her tail
swatted an errant fly. “Micromanaging, sheesh.”

Both fillies fell quiet for the rest of the walk. Now would be the worst time to admit to the paper
fiasco. Silver didn’t think tomorrow boded any better. No need to stress Diamond out yet. It could
wait until the weekend.

A few minutes after they’d reached town, Diamond broke the silence. “By the way, what was so
interesting back there? You looked like you’d seen the Headless Horse.”

“Oh,” Silver said, “I…thought I saw somepony I knew hanging around the tent.”

“Hm. Doesn’t sound like anypony worth knowing if they hang around with scammers and cheats.”

“Yeah. Probably not.”

Silver Spoon lingered outside the parlor door, staring into the brushstrokes of Great Uncle Silver
Chalice’s portrait.

In the long hall of silver, grey, and white, Chalice’s verdigris green coat and bronze mane stood out
more than Silver Lining’s wings. Neither had passed down to Shill (he’d inherited his grandmother’s
looks) but if Silver Spoon remembered right, he’d inherited Chalice’s blue eyes.

If she remembered right.

This would be so much easier if we still had one of the old photo albums. Technically they did, but
Silver would need the key to the attic for that, and she didn’t fancy explaining why she needed it.

The last time Silver saw Shill, he’d worn a plaid bow tie and sweater vest at Granddad’s Hearth’s
Warming party. He’d joined Silver Spoon at the foals’ table and sung carols, because she’d had no
foals her age to sit with. Soft spoken in crowds, but a clown behind closed doors, he’d been a master
of snowball fights and bubble blowing. He’d given Silver Spoon The Clandestine Commons that
year and possibly loved the book even more than she did.

How could such an upstanding scion of the Silver clan have gone so wrong? What in Equestria had
he done?

In the drawing room across the hall, Sweetie Belle practiced her scales in D-major. Break time would
be over soon.

While Mother arranged the music sheets, Silver quietly slipped back in the room. She hopped on the
harpsichord bench and listened to Sweetie’s scales while mulling her options.
She had to see the stallion alone to know for certain. She had to confront him. But how? Diamond Tiara wouldn’t let Silver wander off without asking questions, and Silver still didn’t want to answer those questions. She could double back after they’d both gone home, but that would almost certainly break curfew.

That left one option. “Mother? Would it be alright if I finished a little early today?”

Mother didn’t turn away from the music sheets. “Tempo, Miss Sweetie Belle! We are not practicing dirges. And Silver Spoon, you know better than to wait until the last minute to ask something like that. Young ladies are punctual with their scheduling.”

“Well, it’s not exactly a scheduled event, ma’am. I didn’t think of it until now.” For good measure, Silver began practicing scales of her own, matching Sweetie’s key and tempo. “I, um…thought I saw a Silver in town yesterday. I don’t know how long they’ll be here, and I wanted to say hello.”

“Here in town, you say?” Mother selected the sheets for today’s lesson and placed them in her daughter’s and Sweetie Belle’s stands. The metronome clicked to life with a nudge of her nose. The flick her ears followed the steady rhythm. “Odd. Silver Lining’s the only one who’d drop in unannounced, but I think The Wonderbolts are still at Rainbow Falls. Who was it that you saw?”

The practiced scales shifted into D-minor, a dissonant match for Silver’s light and casual tone. “Oh, just Cousin Silver Shill.”

A small pause. Slowly, Mother turned to regard her. As if correcting a grammatical error, she smiled and said, “My love, don’t be silly. You don’t have a Cousin Silver Shill.”

“…Right. Sorry, my mistake.”

“That’s quite alright, Silver Spoon. Everypony makes them.” Mother considered the music assignments and clicked her tongue in thought. “However, I don’t see the harm in leaving a little early today—that is, if Miss Sweetie Belle doesn’t mind?”

Sweetie Belle grinned at them both. “No, ma’am! It’s totally fine with me.”

“Alright then. We’ll end in twenty minutes. After that…” One green eye glanced back at Silver Spoon. “Whatever you decide to do and whomever you decide to see is your own business.” Mother clapped her hooves to clear the air. “Alright, then! Let us begin again with Star Song’s Lunar Abdication.”

Diamond Tiara sat back on the sports stand, idly watching a swimmer climb the diving board ladder. “…so Tall Order said keeping an eye on them is still a good idea, even if they’re clean on a technicality.”

The Annual Ponyville Swim Meet attracted double the crowds this year. Sources said Granny Smith’s surprise entry—breaking a sixty year sabbatical from aquatics—had something to do with it. The aquapony performance acting as key endorsement for Miracle Curative Tonic didn’t hurt either.

Silver lay her head on her hooves, watching Flim work the crowd from a miniature sales stand (technically too small for an “establishment” and therefore under peddler laws, not sales laws). No sign of the pale grey stallion yet. Maybe he’d stayed behind after all, or gone into town.
Diamond gave Silver’s withers a pat. “Good call checking up on them early, Silver Spoon.”

“Thanks.”

Even with her head start, Silver had arrived to Flim and Flam’s tent only to find the place empty. Combing the backstage area for clues, she’d discovered nothing useful: an unmarked trunk full of costumes and a locket with a pretty unicorn’s picture inside.

Diamond’s eyes followed Apple Bloom trotting outside the stands. “I mentioned the tonic to Dad when he came home last night, but he says that sometimes we just need to let ponies make their own decisions and mistakes.” She raised her voice loud enough to carry. “Like, it’s so obvious the tonic’s a big fat scam, but I suppose some ponies need to learn the hard way.”

Painfully obvious bait. Silver Spoon rolled her eyes as Apple Bloom stopped in her tracks and glared at them. So of course she snaps it up like a trout.

“You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, Diamond Tiara!” Apple Bloom got on her hind-hooves and clung to the edge of the stands. “The miracle tonic works right as rain; I seen it with my own two eyes. Three times!”

Six seats up in the stands, Diamond didn’t even have to sit up for a height advantage. She lazily rolled her head back and smirked. “Ha. More like you got suckered three times, sucker. That junk doesn’t even have a patent. I’ll bet you don’t even know how it works, right?”

Bloom hesitated. “Well, not exact—”

“Thought so.” Diamond reached back for a hoofbump.

Silver Spoon returned it, but she focused on something else. A pale grey pony in a striped shirt weaved through Rows C and D. When Silver sat up for a better view, he stiffened and shuffled away.

“Yeah, well, you’ll see! Applejack says it works, an’ that’s the only thing that matters and you’re gonna see the proof for yourself pretty soon. Granny Smith an’ me are gonna win this here swimmin’ competition with flyin’ colors!” Without waiting for a response, Apple Bloom turned tail on them to join her grandmother.

Curious whispers murmured in the stands. The spat with Apple Bloom had attracted a gathering of foals, including a certain unicorn Silver pretended not to notice.

Diamond stretched out, arching her back like a cat. Not addressing anypony in particular, she looked back and said, “Well, I tried. If somepony’s so determined to get conned, you can’t really stop them. You can’t shortcut success; that takes hard work and skill.” She fluffed her mane with a little sigh. “Though for me, it’s mostly skill.”

Rumble side-eyed Cotton Cloudy, who shrugged.

Berry Pinch curled next to Tornado Bolt, the tip of her pink tail lashing the air. Her expression could have given Silver Spoon frostbite. “Yeah? And what skill is that? Being a stupid show off know-it-all?”

Silver, meanwhile, decided that now might be an optimal time to track down the mystery stallion. She gently excused herself and crept down the stairs, determined not to look back as Pinch’s voice followed her.
“And by the way, Diamond Tiara, you oughta know that it’s always the ponies who don’t think they can get conned who are always the suckers.” It sounded nothing like Pinch’s normal ribbing: not teasing, not annoyed, just mad.

A beat of silence, broken only by a splash of water and the audience’s applause. Diamond spoke again. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

Silver walked faster and ducked behind the stands. The musty, sweet scent of dust and centuries-old bubble gum wrinkled her nose. Was running really the best option here? Left alone, heavens knew what havoc a filly in Berry Pinch’s state could wreak. Pinch didn’t seem the type to air dirty laundry in front of crowds, but angry fillies did foolish things.

However, she also had no way of defusing the situation without potentially worsening it. Could be better to stay out of range…discretion, the better part of valor, and stuff. Hm.

A new set of hooves rustling in the grass solved the dilemma for her.

The pale grey stallion and Silver Spoon stared at each other. Thick glasses or not, up close there could be no doubt of it. Here stood Silver Shill.

Slowly, he put down the tray of tonic bottles hanging around his neck. The way he twitched and fidgeted, it almost felt as if he were the foal and Silver Spoon the grown, elder cousin. “Uh. H-hiya, Silver Spoon.”

“Hello.” Because she couldn’t think of anything else to say, Silver Spoon asked, “Since when do you need glasses?”


He tucked the glasses into his front pocket and blinked at her with Silver Chalice’s clear blue eyes. “These are just for…” Shill blinked rapidly and examined a mustard stain on the wall. “…for work.”

“Oh. Okay. Are the disguises for work too, or are you trying to hide from somepony?” What sort of “work” had he been in before this job, anyway? Silver Spoon’s eyes widened at the possibilities. “Are you on the run from the mob? Were you in the mob? Did…did you hurt anypony?”

“What?! No, I—of course not!” Silver Shill frowned. “Why? Is that what they’ve been saying about me?”

Silver Spoon walked closer to him, her ears drooping a little bit. “No. I mean…nopony’s said anything about you. At all.” She paused. How was she supposed to address him now? “Is Silver Shill even your name anymore?”

“Oh, of course it is. My name is mine, and I’ll be gosh darned if anyone can stop me from using it.” His hooves flew to his muzzle, remembering present company. “Pardon my potty mouth; life on the road will do that to a pony. I’m sorry, I’ll start over: Good afternoon, Miss Silver Spoon. You look well.”

She obliged him with a curtsey. “Good afternoon, Mr. Silver Shill. You look…like a referee.”

Silver Shill laughed at that. “Well, can’t argue with you, there.” Finally, he resembled the cousin Silver remembered. “Gosh, you’re so big now—and with a cutie mark! Is it already engraved in the tree?”

“Yeah, at my cuteceañera last year, and I had my portrait painted. It’s a teaspoon for tea parties,
“Congratulations. I bet Uncle Laurel’s really proud of you.” Silver Shill patted her withers, but a perplexed expression crossed his face. “By the way, Spooners, what are you doing in a place like Ponyville? Is Pitch Perfect touring or…no, that can’t be it. She’s retired, right?”

“Mm-hm. She gives voice lessons in town. I—that is, we—live here now. The spring before Luna came back, we had to move because…” Silver Spoon pawed at the grass and felt the tips of her ears flush. “Well…you know.”

Shill curled on his knees to meet her at eye level. He tilted his head and spoke very gently. “No, Silver Spoon, I don’t. What happened?”

“Fath…” The flush spread from her ears to her cheeks. Silver’s throat clenched around the words. She’d never actually said them out loud before. “Father made a…mistake, and trusted some ponies he shouldn’t have. We lost, like, half the fortune and couldn’t live in Manehattan anymore. I think it might’ve been even worse if Granddad hadn’t stepped in.”

Above their heads, the crowd stomped and cheered a dive. Silver Shill glanced up, concerned, one ear tilted towards his former cousin. He appeared a bit conflicted, but shook it off a moment later. “Stepped in how?”

Silver Spoon rubbed her shoulder and shrugged. “I don’t know the details. I didn’t even know it was happening when it happened. But I do remember Granddad Silver Tongue and a herd of lawyers from his firm coming to our penthouse in the middle of the night. They stayed in Manehattan until winter got wrapped up.”

She remembered that time well. Brass Tacks and the serving staff wouldn’t stop fussing over her and became notably paranoid about strangers hovering near their residence. The entire family would be absent for days—sometimes weeks—and nopony would explain what was happening.

“You really didn’t hear about it? I thought it’d be in all the papers.” The Manehattan Post and Stall Street Journal stopped coming to the Silvers’ penthouse for months.

Silver Shill shook his head. “None that I saw, and I check the society pages whenever I can. That’s how I knew Aunt Perfect retired.” He rubbed his uneven jawline thoughtfully. “I’m not surprised, though. Silver Tongue has a lot of influence.”

It clicked. He kept us out of the national papers. In fact, official word likely never left Manehattan at all. That couldn’t stop rumors—especially not in Canterlot and not with the move—but still.

Silver Spoon decided to focus on brighter things. “Father works for the Canterlot antiquities museum now, but at the moment he’s helping Aunt Silver Frames curate her new modern art gallery. He’s also driving her crazy, because she says he’s got no appreciation for truly modern art.” She made a face. “I don’t blame him. I didn’t like Coltlock’s stuff, but at least I got it. But what’s there to get about some mare’s messy bed? Literally, it’s just a messy bed in a gallery.”

However, Shill wasn’t in the mood to discuss Coltlock, messy beds, or the artistic merit thereof. “So, Laurel’s working in Canterlot. Hm. I’ll bet he’s staying in the Manor, then.” He clicked his tongue and laughed a humorless laugh. “Loses half the fortune and still gets to sleep in Silver Manor. Boy, I tell you.”

Indeed, the situation did strike Silver Spoon as a bit strange. Granddad certainly hadn’t been pleased with Father at all, but never hesitated to help him. Nopony spoke Father’s name in hushed whispers;
if anything, they became too sympathetic.

Another cheer from the stands. Silver Shill stood up, put the thick glasses back on, and looped the case of tonic bottles around his neck. “Listen, Spooners, I gotta get back to work, but my break’s coming up soon. You can wait a little, if you want.” He fished out a baseball cap covered in ugly pins and fit it snugly on his head. “It’s okay if you don’t want to; I bet your friend’s waiting for you. The pink one with the tiara?”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind waiting.” Silver Spoon’s eyes trailed up to the stands. Celestia-knew-what the foals were saying about her, and she didn’t feel keen to find out. Besides, she didn’t feel up to crafting an excuse for why she’d left, and might not be able to slip away again.

She lurked by the side of the stands to watch the Apples’ swim meet performance. Their synchronized swimming routine was…actually pretty impressive, especially considering Bloom normally had the grace of a potato. Why couldn’t she be that graceful everywhere else?

Way out on the sidelines, she spotted Shill talking with Applejack. The crowd stirred into a mild tizzy. Something else seemed to be going on, something big. Whatever happened must have shaken poor Silver Shill badly, because he returned looking pensive.

“Hi again, Silver Spoon.”

“Hello.”

A question burned the tip of Silver Spoon’s tongue. A question Shill surely didn’t want to answer in his current mood. Even under the best circumstances, it’d still be highly inappropriate to approach the subject with an elder Silver at all.

On the other hoof, he technically wasn’t a Silver at all anymore, so…

“Silver Shill?”

“Yes?”

“What did you do to make Great Uncle Chalice so angry with you?” In ten years, she’d never seen so much as a scowl from the chuckling old wizard. Silver Spoon accidentally broke his favorite potion bowl once, and he’d just laughed it off, happy for an excuse to get a new one. “I mean, what mistake could ever be that b—?”

“It was not a mistake, Silver Spoon.” The tremble in Shill’s voice completely vanished. He sat so fast, the tonic bottles clinked like a xylophone. “You really wanna know what I did?” He pulled back his shirt collar to reveal a thin gold band around his neck. “I got married.”

Silver Spoon blinked at the paint brush engraved on the necklace, up at Shill, then back at the necklace. She raised an eyebrow, frowning. “To who? Discord?”

The shirt collar snapped back into place. “Worse. The unicorn who painted our house.”

“Oh.” The mare in the locket. “Was it because she’s a house painter or because she’s a unicorn?”

“Both. I don’t think he would have liked Fresh Coat either way, but if she didn’t have a horn, we might still be in the Hearth’s Warming cards.” Silver Shill rolled his eyes with a grin. A genuine grin. “It’s his loss. Let him be mad.”

Silver Spoon opened her mouth, and then closed it.
She struggled to comprehend how Uncle Chalice could disown his son on such grounds, but it also sounded like one of those things she’d understand when she got older. But that part, though confusing and disappointing, was easy. A struggle, yes, but she could still comprehend it.

But how? *How*, in the precious name of Luna’s twinkling sky, could Silver Shill—the only scion of the grandest living master of earth pony magic since the Sixth Celestial Era, heir to a dynasty centuries old, only to fall broke and peddling tonic for a living—actually *smile* about it?

“But…” she said in a small voice, “why not just do what Uncle Chalice wanted? He wants what’s best for you, doesn’t he?”

Shill sighed, scratching the ring of sweat forming under his hat. “Spooners, older ponies know more, but it doesn’t always make them right. He wanted what was best for the family, not for me. Two very different things.”

Silver Spoon frowned. “That sounds really selfish, Silver Shill.”

“Maybe,” he said, “but it’s honest. If I’d have done anything besides what I knew was right, well—gosh, that’d be just like lying, wouldn’t it?”

That stupid, oily feeling wriggled under Silver’s coat again. She tried to ignore it.

“Is that really so bad, though? Like, what about lying for the greater good? What about when ponies don’t *want* to believe the truth?” Silver Spoon peered at her former cousin’s cargo, watching her reflection skim over the green glass. “Like, this tonic stuff can’t work the way Flim and Flam say, but you don’t seem to mind letting ponies believe that it does.”

Silver Shill fished a shiny new bit out of his pocket. He stared at it, and didn’t respond.

Maybe that had been a cheap shot. Poor Shill probably didn’t have a lot of business prospects, and a stallion had to take what bits he could find. Still, the point remained.

“Being totally honest got you kicked into the streets. The truth *hurt* you, Shill. It hurt ponies around you, and if…” Silver Spoon curled in on herself and glanced back at the stands. Her voice shrunk. “…if everypony’s happier not knowing the truth, it can’t be that bad.”

Out of sight but well within hearing range, Flim crowed the miraculous benefits of his tonic. The audience rumbled and murmured. Cameras snapped and hooves applauded. Flam wound up for a backup spiel, but stopped short at some sort of protest from Applejack.

Silver Shill followed the commotion to the poolside. He scowled. “Even if they are, that still doesn’t make it right, Silver Spoon.” Blue eyes glared over the rims of his thick, useless glasses. “Especially when it ends up hurting somepony else. Do you understand?”

“I think so.” That didn’t mean Silver liked it. She trotted ahead of Shill to see the crowd surrounding the Apples while Applejack spoke to her little sister.

“…takes a little extra confidence to remember that it was inside of you all along.” Nice mare and all, but wow, Applejack got schmaltzy sometimes. She hugged Granny Smith and turned on the unicorn twins. “But tellin’ ponies your tonic can do things it can’t is just wrong!”

Silver Spoon stared up, watching Silver Shill prick his ears. She wondered why he looked so serious, but now didn’t seem the time to ask.

Not missing a beat, Flim took the opening and flipped it. “But you just said it boosts confidence!”
Silver Shill flattened his ears. “Cousin Spoon, there’s something I gotta do. Give my best to Laurel, alright?”

“Okay, Cousin Shill.”

They nuzzled and parted ways. On her way back up the stairs, Silver Spoon heard Shill cut off Flam in mid-spiel. She glanced back at him a moment, then returned to her old seat.

In the meantime, Diamond Tiara had assembled herself a healthy sized crowd of her own, including a couple of adults. Half kept their eyes on the little filly with the steel tiara while the other half watched the goings on below. Silver Spoon slipped in beside her as if she’d been there the whole time.

Rumble shrugged his wings. “Huh. Guess you were right about those dudes after all, Diamond. Sorry we didn’t really believe you.”

Diamond offered her audience a brief, but gracious nod. “Apology accepted.”

“She did say that she spent all summer learning surfing and acrobatics.” One of the new kids hopped down the stands, trying to see over Silver Spoon’s shoulder. The filly sported a blackberry cutie mark and long purple pigtails, and knew to back off when she breathed too hard on Silver’s neck. “Guess she’d know about what works and what doesn’t when it comes to being good at stuff.”

Silver Spoon scooted closer and slung a hoof over her friend’s withers. “Naturally. Di’s won dozens and dozens of trophies. I’ve seen them myself.”

“Can you show us some of your cool acrobatic skills sometime?” asked the colt with bad teeth.

For a split second, Diamond frowned. She flicked her tail and played it off as thinking it over. “I’ll try and fit it into my schedule. Oh, but you’ll have to excuse me. I’ve got lots of important work to do in Town Hall tomorrow—you understand.” With Silver in tow, Diamond rose and trotted down the stairs for a victory lap around the stands.

Apple Bloom sat on the edge of the pool, cooling her hooves in the water. She angled her head back, warily watching Diamond pass.

“See you around, Apple Bloom.” Diamond’s tone radiated I-Told-You-Sos. She winked. “Glad everything worked out.”

At the sound of Di’s voice, Silver Shill—who’d abandoned the glasses entirely—looked up from across the pool, smiling. “Headed home already, Silver Spoon?”

Silver Spoon waved back. “Yeah, Diamond Tiara’s got an early day tomorrow. Bye, Silver Shill. I’ll tell Father you’re doing okay.”

“Bye, Spooners! I’ll try and write you after I get home.” Shill pulled out a bit and rushed to flag down with Neon Lights. “Sir! Sir! I’ve got something to give you.”

Diamond Tiara’s eyes traveled between the two grey ponies curiously. A lantern flicked on in her head. “That’s where you ran off to! You know, you could say something to ponies before disappearing like that.”

The two of them took a shortcut through Golden Harvest’s carrot farm on their way back into town. Before long, the busy chatter and background music of the swim meet faded into birdsong and rustling leaves.
“Sorry, but you were busy. I didn’t want to interrupt.” Silver Spoon waved at the carrot farmer as they passed, and took care not to tread on any carrots.

“So is that Silver Shill guy a relative, or…?” The sentence trailed off, dragging another unasked question behind it: Why didn’t you say anything?

At least both questions had an easy answer. Still not comfortable, but easy. “He used to be my cousin.” Silver Spoon bunched her shoulders. “Not anymore, though.”

Dread slowly crept across her face as it registered. “Oh. I…didn’t know you could do that to blood relatives.” Diamond Tiara’s light trot slowed to a walk. “Is he, like, just not invited to weddings or is he gone gone?”

Not sure of the difference, Silver shrugged. “It’s awful, Di. After it happened, it almost felt like Silver Shill died, but…worse. At least ponies get funerals when they die. Dead ponies have their pictures saved, not thrown away.”

“Yeah. Once the pictures come down, there’s no going back.” Grass and dead leaves tangled in Diamond’s tail as it dragged behind her. “It’s like that pony doesn’t exist anymore. Like they never existed at all.” She swept her tail close. “What happened to your cousin? Did he do something?”

In the sleepy, late afternoon, Ponyville’s main road didn’t feel quite real. Except for a few scattered pegasi in the clouds and Mr. Breezy napping on a bench, the main square lay empty and abandoned. The morning and lunch rushes died hours ago, and the nightlife wouldn’t pick up until the streetlights came on.

“My great uncle really didn’t like the mare Shill decided to marry.” Silver Spoon looked back, wondering what would become of Shill now that he’d assuredly lost his job. Honesty might satisfy his conscience, but not his stomach. “I hope he’ll be okay.”

Diamond clicked her tongue sympathetically. “No kidding. He must have had it really bad if he started hanging out with stallions like them.” Her nose wrinkled at the thought. “I’ll bet your cousin knows better now: never associate with lowlifes. They’ll only drag you down into the tar pits with them, and I’d know.” She punctuated it with a crisp nod.

Lowlifes? In Ponyville, of all places? Tasting gossip in the air, Silver pressed closer. “Really? How?”

“Well, this might sound kind of weird…” Diamond fidgeted with her mane, watching a pegasus land on a patch of cumulus. “…but a long time ago, Berry Pinch used to be my best friend. I mean, we were still friends afterwards, but she used to be my best one.”

Were. Silver swallowed a growing lump in her throat. “What happened?”

“Nothing ‘happened’, exactly. We more…ended up going in different directions, that’s all. A few months after Dad got married again, Spoiled told me not to hang out with Berry Pinch so much, because it matters who a pony’s seen with.”

“Oh. I suppose that makes sense. A-and—” Silver Spoon cleared her throat to shake the rattle from her voice. “And that’s all?”

After a moment of consideration, Diamond added, “She also called Pinch a ‘lowlife type’.” She watched a line of ants weave around her hoof to reach a melted popsicle. “And you know, for a really long time I thought Mother wasn’t being fair about that. Berry Pinch might not have a lot of money, and her house needs to be repaired all the time, and her daddy’s in—well, he’s not around—but that stuff’s not Pinch’s fault. She can’t help that.”
A block ahead, music and laughter rumbled behind Berryshine’s glowing windows. Minuette’s cackles curled out of the door and echoed down the street. Happy Hour must have started. Silver couldn’t help but notice that none of the upstairs lights had come on yet.

Diamond Tiara snorted at the place and moved to the opposite side of the road. “But she can sure help being a mean, jealous jerk.” At Silver’s confused glance, Diamond shook her head with disgust. “Berry Pinch told the meanest lie about you this morning, Silver Spoon.”
Sweetie Belle pressed her nose against the fish tank. “Ooh!” The fog of her breath crawled across the glass as her eyes trailed up the underwater castle’s elegant spires. Glowing crystals lit the miniature windows and shimmered across the betta fish’s scales.

Ferdinand’s head poked out from the drawbridge and peered back at the strange unicorn ogling him. Perhaps he wondered (as Silver did) why this squeaky voiced filly with split ends dared besmirch the sanctity of this room with her presence.

“Wow, even the little chandelier inside the castle lights up and the drawbridge goes over the mossy moat—oh! There’s the fish! She’s really beautiful, Silver Spoon.”

“Yes,” said Silver Spoon. “I know.” Her coat rumpled at the sound of a hoof tapping against the glass. Through great effort, she kept her eyes on her work and her voice neutral. “His name is Ferdinand and he doesn’t appreciate it when ponies hit the side of his house. I thought I asked you nicely not to touch anything.”

Sweetie Belle curbed her enthusiasm to a mumble. “Oh, right. Sorry.”

“Just don’t do it again, please.”

Silver Spoon turned her attention back to her schedule book. Speaking of Ferdinand, he’s due for a visit to Miss Fluttershy’s in a couple of weeks for a checkup. He’ll like seeing her more than seeing the vet; Fluttershy keeps those fancy mealworms for treats. Chewing her pen cap, she considered the rainbow of listed dates and times. A gold star marked tomorrow, the first day of school, along with other important dates and appointments.

Moving up a grade, plus an influx of new foals—all of whom Silver had yet to know beyond coat color and cutie mark—had forced a drastic schedule shift at Ponyville Schoolhouse. Miss Cheerilee now split the day between older and younger students. They’d all spend mornings together, but everypony Silver’s age left in the early afternoon to focus on apprenticeships, homework, and other commitments.

The summer’s work study project, Silver now realized, had been purposely timed for this very reason and she couldn’t help but admire Miss Cheerilee’s foresight.

Silver’s eyes rolled up from the schedule book to squint at Sweetie Belle. The unicorn rocked back on her haunches trying to see the top of the bookshelves. Apparently, she took a strong interest in Silver’s Equestrian Filly doll collection.

Admirable foresight or not, Silver still couldn’t forgive Cheerilee for indirectly imposing this blank flanked menace upon her house. The work study project ended a week ago, but it hadn’t stopped the voice lessons. She’d stalled it for as long as possible, but politeness (and Mother) dictated that eventually Silver Spoon had to bite the bridle and open up her room.

After all, polite young ladies are courteous and welcoming, even to the unwelcome.

The schedule book’s pages fluttered under Sweetie Belle’s pepperminty breath.

I really hate being a polite young lady, sometimes.

Silver Spoon flicked an ear. “Do you need something?”
“Oh. Uh, not exactly.” Sweetie Belle spoke softly, as if in a library or a museum, and seemed to choose her words carefully. “You looked like you were concentrating on something and I…was wondering if you’re still working on the homework?”

“Sweetie Belle, don’t tell me you waited until the last minute to write your essay. We had all summer.” Actually, Mother started the voice lessons sometime around early July, so Sweetie had more like two months. Close enough. “And no, I’m not. I finished my homework two months ago.”

“No, I finished mine, too…” Under her breath, Sweetie Belle grumbled, “Sheesh, it’s not a race.” Which meant she had finished it last week at the latest. “I saw all that stuff on your desk, and thought there might be extra stuff I forgot about.”

Flicking her ears, Sweetie Belle tilted her head at the five page essay on top of Silver’s binder. Not at Silver’s own Perfecting the Practice of Partying Properly, but the essay poking out from under it: Litigation, Liars, and Dirty Rotten Swindlers: My Summer at City Hall. A duplicate essay with red marks crawling through the sentences and margins sat at the edge of the desk.

Sweetie Belle frowned.

Silver Spoon locked eyes and lobbed a colder frown back. “What?”

“Why is Diamond Tiara’s essay in your mouthwriting, Silver Spoon?”

“Diamond has better things to do today than edit. I moved a couple of words around so she can rewrite it tonight, if you must know.”

By which, she’d taken the scramble of bullet point notes and journal entries and recomposed them into a linear essay. Diamond still did the bulk of the work; Silver had only…sophisticated it.

Silver Spoon also should have gotten the redone essay to Di an hour ago, so she could look it over and type it up. Yet, somepony simply had to openly wonder what Silver’s room looked like, and here they were. “I did her a favor. She’s got a lot to do today.”

“Yeah, sure. Doing what, eating cookies by the pool? School hasn’t even started yet.” Sweetie Belle swished her short tail and pretended to admire the framed Manehattan Ballet poster behind Silver’s head. “What’s she got to be busy with? If you ask me—”

“And I didn’t.”

“—she just made you do her homework ’cause she didn’t wanna write it.”

Silver’s head snapped up. “Diamond Tiara is busy, I told you. Besides lots of mark-related stuff, she’s painstakingly planning out tomorrow’s acrobatic exhibition. The one she promised to perform for the whole school, including you, so you could show a little gratitude, thanks.”

It was also the exhibition Silver Spoon should have helped prep, if not for Mother’s insistence that Silver’s harpsichord practice coincide with Sweetie Belle’s voice work. Why did Mother suddenly care about the harpsichord anyway? Last year, Silver went weeks without practicing a note, and nopony said anything to her at all. It wasn’t fair.

How had Di’s acrobatics practice gone, anyhow? Silver tapped her hooves together, still unsure how the hype machine ballooned from “I took gymnastics lessons on vacation” to “I’m a world class gymnast and my gold-medalist teacher was so impressed she cried”.

Diamond Tiara could indeed do a nice cartwheel flip, and she could pose one-hooved on the balance
beam, but Silver Spoon didn’t know if that could match the hype. Should she prepare for damage control?

Meanwhile, Sweetie Belle had gone back to frowning at Diamond’s city legislation essay. “I don’t get it, Silver. If she’s your friend, why does she make you do her homework all the time?”

“She doesn’t!” Silver took good notes and sometimes let Di look at her homework. Totally different. “I just help her out sometimes.” She crinkled her nose at Sweetie’s skeptical glance. “You’re not the only pony who can help out her friends, you know.”

_Besides, it’s the least I can do after the…awkwardness with Berry Pinch._ Silver felt her stomach sag with the weight of her lunch. _Not that I really have to._

Everything worked out in Silver’s favor in the end. Her good reputation topped Pinch’s claim. That was what reputations were for. They protected and supported one’s credibility.

Silver ran her hoof through her mane and sighed. _You won, Silver Spoon. You should enjoy it._ The churn of her stomach disagreed. It would go away, though. With time and enough good karma, it would all go away.

_What happened isn’t even my fault. It would have happened either way. A friendship between a scruffy unicorn and a high society earth pony couldn’t last anyway, right?_

_It’s got nothing to do with me at all._

Silver hadn’t even been there. She’d stayed home, recounting the family history and minding her own darn business. As young ladies ought to.

“Well, okay.” Sweetie Belle shrugged halfheartedly. “If you say so.”

“I do say so. You don’t know the first thing about it, Sweetie Belle.” Silver inclined her head towards the spoon on her flank. “Ponies who’ve actually made something of themselves—important ponies, _worthwhile_ ponies—have busy schedules to keep.”

The schedule book snapped shut a few inches from Sweetie’s nose. Silver rose from her chair, tail twisting and lashing behind her. She sneered at Sweetie Belle’s bare flank over the rim of her glasses. “But don’t worry; I’m sure you’ll understand what that's like.” Venom laced Silver’s delicate smile. “Eventually.”

“I—” The little unicorn flattened her reddening ears. She twisted up her lips and huffed under her breath and ground her hoof into Silver’s expensive rug, but she didn’t do more than that. Of course she didn’t. “I…think maybe I’m gonna head home,” she finally said. “Early day tomorrow.”

Silver Spoon settled back in her chair and nosed through Di’s essay for a fourth read-through. She didn’t look up when the door opened. “You do that.”

Silver Spoon watched Cheerilee’s expression through the schoolhouse window. The teacher nodded and smiled to herself when she reached Diamond’s essay—easy to spot, as the only typed essay in the class—before she slipped it into her folder. No signs of suspicion, yet. So far so good, but…
“I’m not grading until the weekend, Silver Spoon.” Miss Cheerilee didn’t even look up. “You’ll have to wait until next Monday like everypony else.”

“Yeah, c’mon, Silvie.” Diamond Tiara tugged Silver’s tail. “We’ve got stuff to do.”

The two of them passed into the playground, but Silver still kept looking over her shoulder every few seconds.

“What are you so worried about, anyway? I told you she wouldn’t think a typed paper’s weird and I was right. My house has, like, five typewriters in it.”

“I know, but still. I’m one of the only other foals with a typewriter.” Cheerilee might notice a similar writing style or different vocabulary or something else Silver didn’t take into account. “It stands out.”

Clusters of classmates cut themselves down the middle to make room for the pair. Ears pricked and heads turned. Whispers blossomed into excited murmurs and pointing. A filly with a hedgehog cutie mark waved. Cotton Cloudy and Tornado Bolt said hello.

“So? That’s a good thing, Silver Spoon.” Tresses of curls fluttered around Diamond’s shoulders with a practiced head toss. She winked at the filly with the hedgehog mark. “How’s it going, kid? Having a good first day?” Before the filly had a chance to answer, Diamond turned back to Silver. “The best essay in class should stand out. It’s supposed to do that.”

Silver Spoon shrugged. “I know, but I still should have made it to your house so you could copy it yourself. Plus, I missed all the prep work for—”

In the tetherball courts, Berry Pinch looked up from her game with The Dink. She scowled at the sight of them and smacked the ball so hard Dinky had to duck out of the way.

“...for the acrobatics demonstration today. I really should’ve—”

“For the millionth time, Silver, it’s fine.” Diamond Tiara paused a brief moment to sneer at the Goofsaders playing four-square with the shrimpy Trottinghammer. “I handled the whole thing before lunchtime. I didn’t need you.”

Somehow, that didn’t bolster Silver Spoon’s confidence. “Alright, Di.”

At the far end of the playground, Silver noticed Diamond’s butler, Randolph. He stood in the shade of a beech tree, reading a magazine. A gymnastics ball and a box of bowling pins sat beside his hooves.

“What’s Randolph doing here?”

Diamond only smiled and rescanned her surroundings. “Everypony’s here, right?”

Six minutes after the bell, and twenty minutes before the next. Too early for the older foals to have left yet, and plenty of time before the younger foals’ afternoon class. They didn’t quite have everypony—no sign of that colt with the stupid propeller hat—but they had everypony that mattered. “Yep. Call it.”

The wide expanse of the field carried Diamond’s voice all the way to the sandbox. “Yoo-hooo, gather ‘round! It’s ti-iiime.”

As their classmates assembled, Silver felt her coat prickle between her shoulder blades. An unconscious barrier kept everypony a good distance away, but they still felt too close. She’d never
fully realized how many ponies now went to this school. If Diamond flubbed this, it’d be in front of everypony.

Diamond graced the audience with her prizewinning smile. “As you all know, I had promised to put on an amazing first-time-ever acrobatic display for you today!” While the crowd cheered, she gently inclined her head towards Silver. *Follow my lead.*

Silver Spoon nodded.

“I know; it’s so exciting.” The cheers died down around her. Diamond let the excitement simmer in the air a second. “But…” Her face fell into a heartbreaking pout. With watery, regretful eyes, she admitted, “I’m tired.”

*I’m tired?* Silver blinked. *That’s really the best cover story she can come up with?*

“Awwwww!” The audience sagged with disappointment. A couple of “oh nos” and “poor Diamonds” peppered the sighs and moans. One colt looked ready to cry.

*Then again, if it works, it works.* Silver saw it now: a windup of disappointment before the pitch. A smaller compromise to cover the larger one. The fur between Silver’s shoulders lay flat again.

Yes, nopony worked a crowd quite like Diamond Tiara. Ever altruistic, she smiled to sell her alternative. “But I did not want to disappoint you all, so I brought my butler, Randolph to do them for me.”

Silver Spoon’s supportive smile wavered. Her gaze flicked between Randolph’s trembling legs and knobbed knees. The stallion knew how to save a slumber party, sure, but come on. The poor fellow barely looked like he could even make the walk home without collapsing.

She could literally hear the creak of his bones as Randolph crouched low to the ground, squinted his rheumy eyes, and…performed a perfect somersault.

Then four back flips. And then a cartwheel. And a flawless pirouette on his front hooves.

The crowd erupted in deafening cheers and whistles. Necks craned and twisted as butler’s shadow sailed over the crowd in a five-foot jump.

On cue, Silver stepped in. “That was amazing, Diamond Tiara!” Truly, it was. Between the mile-high stakes, the hundreds of ways it could have gone wrong, and tightrope walking an unhappy crowd, it could have been disastrous. Still, she’d stuck the landing without a hitch.

She hadn’t lied at all. Diamond Tiara’s social gymnastics really were a marvel to behold.

“I know.” Diamond chuckled under her breath. “I don’t know *how* I do it. Like I said: no problem.” She nodded towards the backflipping butler. “Dad says Randolph used to tour with the Royal Canterlot Circus a long time ago. In, like…college or something? I dunno, it’s whatever, but I knew he’d pull it off.” She flicked her tail and took her victory lap around the playground, Silver close behind. “He can pull anything off.”

Indeed, Randolph’s performance engrossed the playground to the point where nopony noticed when Diamond left the field altogether. Silver adjusted her glasses and frowned. Almost nopony.

The Cutie Markless Goofsaders watched them from the four square field, muttering to themselves. Likely muttering about Diamond Tiara, and by the look of it, muttering nothing good. Bloom actually had the nerve to roll her eyes at them.
Diamond Tiara followed her gaze. Slowly, the triumph drained from her face.

Under different circumstances, Silver Spoon might have suggested they let it go. She might have told Diamond that it didn’t matter what a bunch of jealous losers thought of them.

After all, biased judges sat on panels all the time. It didn’t matter how well one performed; if the judges hated you, forget that ten out of ten. Still, Diamond’s perfect score had whittled down to a nine out of ten: almost perfect. An A-minus.

More than anypony, Silver Spoon understood the humiliation of an A-minus.

The tip of Diamond’s tail curled thoughtfully. “Squeaky Belle held you up again yesterday, didn’t she?”

“I had to show her my room. Ugh, she kept touching my stuff.” Silver flattened her ears and scowled. “There’s a nose print on my fish tank. And like, if this was a one-time thing, it’d be fine, but it’s like every time she comes over, Mother finds some reason for the blank flank to stick around the house. Last week, she mentioned how Rarity got into Fashion Week in Manehattan, so naturally we had to hear all about it.” She allowed herself a snort. “Like we really needed a second-hoof account of the fashion district from some loser who’s never even been there.”

Scootaloo’s head snapped up. Finally, one of them had noticed their approach. She signaled Apple Bloom, who stepped back warily, but Sweetie Belle stared into space and didn’t seem to notice at all. What a ditz.

“Now, dearest Silver Spoon, you’re not being fair.” Close enough to be heard, Diamond’s voice thickened, syrupy and sweet. A honey trap. “You don’t know for certain; maybe our little Sweetie Belle’s moving up in the world. Who knows? Maybe Rarity’s planning on introducing her to all the VIPs on her next Manehattan trip.”

“Well…” Silver clicked her tongue. “I suppose it’s possible.”

“Oh, more than possible, I’m sure. Tell her all about it, Sweetie B—” Diamond frowned. The unicorn snickered to herself at some private joke. She hadn’t noticed them.

“Hey.” Diamond clapped her hooves. When that didn’t work, she tried rapping on Sweetie’s thick skull. “Hey! Can you hear me?”

“Huh? What?” Sweetie Belle snapped back into Equestria, blinking at Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon as if they’d grown another tail.

Maybe she didn’t have Apple Bloom’s obnoxious volume, or Scootaloo’s terrible…everything, but something about Sweetie’s oblivious cheer set Silver’s teeth on edge.

A smile curled Silver’s lips. I’m going to enjoy this.

“I was asking,” said Diamond, who rarely repeated herself and did not appreciate doing so, “if your sister Rarity’s taking you to Manehattan anytime soon.”

“Because if she is, maybe you can meet up with us while we hang out with a bunch of famous celebrities.” Silver Spoon wondered if Pot Luck counted as a celebrity. With all the commercial success and critical buzz for Hinny of the Hills, she probably did. Sweetie Belle ate up that Bridleway stuff like fresh hay. In fact, Diamond could even snag a meet-and-greet with the cast, complete with photo-ops. The grin widened. That’ll drive them all crazy.
“Wow, that’s…” Apple Bloom hesitated, confused and still a little wary. “…actually pretty nice of you guys.”

Sweetie Belle took a few steps back, eying her fellow Goofsaders for support. “Actually…”

For two seconds, it almost seemed like she might say yes. Silver paled. Would that mean they’d actually have to honor that offer? **A young lady keeps her word, but I did say “maybe,” so that could loophole us. Not if she mentions it to Mother, though.**

“My sister hasn’t offered to take me to Manehattan anytime soon.”

*Oh, thank Luna.* That was a scary two seconds.

“Yeah.” Diamond’s grin turned wicked. “We figured.”

Silver Spoon’s high-pitched laugh jittered with relief. Maybe Di had a point about her overthinking things too much. They were fine.

Diamond clacked hooves with Silver. “Bump.”

“Bump!”

“Sugar lump rump!”

Much better. Silver laughed again, confident and victorious. She nudged Diamond’s hoof. “Oooh, watch out, Di. I think the marshmallow’s mad at us.”

Diamond bit back a snicker. “Maybe she’s roasting.”

A furious blush colored Sweetie Belle’s pale coat, and her squeaky voice pitched into an angry squeal. “Oh yeah?! W-well, I don’t have to go all the way to Manehattan to hang out with super cool ponies!”

Yeah, sure.

Silver rolled her eyes. *Let me guess: the “real” cool ponies are the friends you made along the way or some other D-list cliché.*

“Me and my friends hang out with Princess Twilight all the time!”

*Or... Or not.*

As the full scope of that sentence processed, the seconds slowed to a molasses crawl. In slow motion, Sweetie Belle stamped her hoof, turned, and stormed off in a huff.

Silver’s mouth worked wordlessly, deconstructing and reconstructing what she’d just heard.

**Item One:** “Princess Twilight.” Specific example. A provable specific example. A BIG provable specific example. One that anypony could fact check. Not an example to lie about.

Silver’s hoof rubbed the bottom of her chin.

**Item Two:** “Hang Out.” Not “see”. Not “meet with,” not “visit,” not “tutor under,” and not “talk to”. Hang out. As in, we-are-on-a-first-name-basis “hang out”.

Silver Spoon paled again.

**Item Three:** Not a Lie (probably). Ponies spat out random stuff in a crisis. More often, they spat the
truth. Silver had witnessed enough of Diamond’s tirades to recognize a genuine outburst. And Sweetie’s outburst was too emotional. Too specific. Too real.

Slowly, Silver turned and saw her expression reflected on Diamond’s face. Silently, they arrived at the same terrible conclusion.

*We have made a horrible mistake.*

Diamond Tiara snapped out of it first. “Damage control.” She tore off before Silver Spoon could agree. “H-hey! Wait up!”

The rapture of Actual-Princess-Twilight-Sparkle-An-Actual-Alicorn-Is-Actually-Talking-To-Me-And-Oh-My-Gosh-I’m-In-Her-House sent Silver Spoon swooning on her hooves and squealing like a foal.

Rainbows burst from the clouds. Silver walked on air. A heavenly chorus sang from the rooftops. Everything was perfect and beautiful and good and Silver Spoon’s shoes looked great and nothing could go wrong ever, ever again.

It didn’t last. Euphoria never did.

Stunned, she sat engulfed by towers of bookshelves and the scent of aged paper and glue and jasmine incense. Golden Oaks Library, Silver realized, still looked and felt…exactly like the same library. The same sign hung outside. The same tasteful upper middle class décor decorated the walls.

Indeed, the folded wings upon Princess Twilight Sparkle’s back and the tiara upon the display shelf (between the autobiographies and graphic novels) were the only sign royalty lived here at all.

Nothing had changed. Everything had changed.

And in the thick of it all, Scootaloo—trashy, boorish, chipped-hoof Scootaloo—giggled and chatted with a Princess as if Twilight Sparkle were still an ordinary librarian.

Once the euphoria evaporated, Silver found herself with the unshakeable feeling—that something, somewhere, had gone terribly awry.

Silver Spoon pressed her hoof to her temple. Her heart hadn’t stopped pounding from the minute the door opened and she didn’t know how to make it stop. Overwhelmed by the surreality of it all, she felt faint again.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Something sharp poked Silver’s shoulder and she nearly jumped out of her skin.

A purple dragon staggered back, his slitted pupils stretched wide. He jerked his claws back like he’d been burned. “Oop-sorry! Didn’t mean to scare you.”

Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Princess Twilight Sparkle all turned from their tasks to stare at them. Scootaloo remained hunched over her disassembled unicycle, but Silver saw a smile wind along the side of her mouth.
Diamond rested her hoof upon Silver’s trembling withers. “It’s fine. She’s just really, really excited to be here.” The hoof patted hard. “Right, Silver Spoon?”

“Uh-huh.” Silver’s unfocused stare hovered over Scootaloo. The smile had become a smirk. “I’ve never been in a princess’s house before. It is very exciting.”

The dragon—stars curse it, knew she’d heard his name before…Spiff? Sprat?—lifted a skeptical eyebrow. “If you say so. Can I get you guys anything? Water or tea, maybe? Oh—I’m Spike, by the way.” He held out his claws to shake and grinned hopefully. “And you know, I can also make a mean plate of nachos.” For good measure, he winked.

Silver tried to smile and gently shook Spike’s claws. “Tea would be lovely, thank you.” Her eye trailed back to Scootaloo’s smirk. It had widened into a grin. “Do you have any jasmine or lavender?”

“Oh, you bet! Jasmine’s one of Twilight’s favorites.” Spike went on tiptoe and called, “Hey, Twi, I’m gonna brew up some jasmine. You want some?”

So Ponyville’s Princess Twilight Sparkle favored jasmine tea. Good to know.

“And I’ll have some of those nachos.” Diamond Tiara spared Spike a nod. “Thanks.” Without looking back or dropping her stiff smile, she hissed out of the side of her mouth, “You wanna pull yourself together? In case you didn’t notice, we’re in an alicorn princess’s house.”

“Sorry, I’m…it’s a shock, is all. I didn’t really think all that stuff about being buddy-buddy with a princess could be true.” Silver peeked over her shoulder. Scootaloo’s grin had spread to Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle. Were they mocking them? Simply having a good time? Having a good time mocking them? Silver couldn’t tell.

Her ears drooped. “Everything’s upside down, Di.”

Memories of the past twenty minutes churned her stomach. The out of nowhere trump card. All that kissing up to shove their hooves in the door. The mad scramble to sweep a year of bitter rivalry and loathing under the rug. Practically pleading to get into the good graces of those grubby Crusaders.

All standard procedure for creating good connections, yes, but this felt several steps below cuddling up to Palanquin for a party invitation. That was just business. This was just humiliating.

“They’re holding all the cards, Diamond.” Silver pressed herself against the coffee table. “I don’t like it.”

“Hey, you gotta do what you gotta do.” Diamond Tiara tossed her mane back with a noncommittal hum. “Sometimes a filly needs to clench her teeth and own up to their screw-ups.” She examined a sketchbook sitting at the edge of the table. In blue ink, somepony had sketched a weird hexagonal box and a pointy tree. Smaller scribbles and notes and labels ate up the rest of the page, but Silver Spoon couldn’t parse out the words.

“You know about that more than anypony.” Slowly, Diamond looked up from the notebook. “Right, Silver Spoon?”

Silver tilted her ears, trying to decode Diamond’s tone. It didn’t have the honeyed lilt preceding a trap, but sounded too firm for genuine calm. That could imply any number of things. She tread lightly. “Excuse me?”

Flicking her tail, Diamond narrowed her eyes and whispered, “We wouldn’t have had to scramble if
you didn’t provoke Sweetie Belle like that.”

Silver Spoon drew back with a disbelieving huff. “Excuse me?!“ She ducked her head down, nose to nose with Diamond under the coffee table. “I beg your pardon, Miss Diamond Dazzle Tiara, but I am not the one who took the first shot.”

“Yeah, the first shot you backed me up on. Really, this was all your idea.” She blinked impassively at Silver’s scowl. “What, you’re gonna tell me you’re not the one who’s been glaring daggers at the squeaky marshmallow all day?”

Unbelievable. “I’m also the one who said we needed to lay off the Goofsaders, Diamond. I’ve been saying that. Since. November!” Tiny stomps punctuated Silver’s every word. “I told you over and over and over those three are nothing but trouble. I told you like a million times!”

“Oh yeah,” said Diamond. “I remember: ‘Leave it alone, Di.’ ‘They’re not worth it, Di.’ Funny how all of that suddenly slipped your mind this afternoon, huh?” Slowly, she arched an eyebrow. A cold chuckle rippled under her breath. “Weird how it’s suddenly worth it when the Goofsaders step on your turf.”

“That…” Thrown off course, Silver paused. “That’s not—”

Princess Twilight Sparkle’s hooves clicked upon the wooden floor.

They froze.

“Hello, girls?” Kneeling down, the princess poked her head under the table. The tips of her mane brushed the floor. “Everything alright down here?”

Diamond’s head jerked up and banged the bottom of the table. “Ow! O-of course, Princess Twilight!” A stiff—but gorgeous—smile flashed across her face. “We’re totally, okay. We wanted to —”

“—check out this beautiful décor,” finished Silver Spoon. She rubbed the coffee table’s tree roots before she came out from under it. “Like this amazing coffee table! Trees as part of the architecture, that’s an earth pony neo-classical style, right?”

Princess Twilight Sparkle rubbed the back of her neck, blinking at the circular, unobtrusive structure of the room. “That sounds about right, I think. The table came with the library, so I don’t really know.”

A teapot, two cups and saucers, and a bowl of gooey nachos awaited them in the center of the table. Strings of cheese stretched and snapped in the princess’s aura as she ate a couple of nachos. The crumbs on her muzzle didn’t diminish her regal smile one bit. “You don’t need to be so nervous, you know. I might be an alicorn, but I’m still just a pony the same as you are.”

Together, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon nodded and chimed, “Yes, Princess Twilight.” Once the princess went back to supervising Apple Bloom’s potions and pot of dirt, they let go of the breath they’d been holding.

Diamond took a seat on one of the cushions and grabbed a hoofful of nachos. “Anyway, the point is, we got our hooves in the door.”

She brushed their argument under the rug, or else quietly decided she’d already won it. “For now, that’s good enough, but we gotta do better than that, Silver. We’re only here by the skin of our teeth and all my persuasive skills turned up to eleven.” Diamond glanced down at the tiara upon her flank.
“Beads of sweat shone along her damp hairline. “But here’s the good news: The Crusaders are thinking about the individual, not the market.”

“Mm. It’s still all about the schoolyard for them.” Silver Spoon cradled a warm tea cup in her hooves and inhaled. The jasmine tea steeped into her before the first sip. Much better. “I don’t think they know the market even exists.”

Even as she said it, Silver couldn’t imagine it. The potential influence of a connection like Princess Twilight Sparkle boggled the mind. All three blank flanks hit the societal jackpot and acted like they’d won pennywhistles at the fair.

*What would that even be like? Skipping up to a princess’s doorstep to pal around with royalty…no thoughts about what it could mean for your future. Your daughters’ futures. None at all.*

The Cutie Mark Crusaders lived in the Today and the Now. What a strange place to live.

Over the ridge of her teacup, Silver Spoon watched Sweetie Belle’s broom struggle into the air. The broom lifted several inches before clattering to the floor. Sweetie Belle squinted her eyes and tried again. Perhaps sensing eyes upon her, Apple Bloom glanced up from her potion and stared back at Silver, fretful and frowning. Scootaloo bent over her unicycle wheel, barely aware any of them were there at all.

Although she couldn’t quite pinpoint why, Silver felt an odd twinge of…sadness? Jealousy? Jealousy made more sense. Anypony would feel a little jealous of fillies who’d become friends with a princess.

Silver folded her hooves and considered the bookshelves arching over them. She spotted Silver Chalice’s *Ancient Magic & the Modern Earth* wedged between Sky Dancer’s *Essential Stormsmith Grimoire* and a collection of Star Swirl the Bearded’s essays.

Gently, she said, “We know they hold all the cards, but they don’t. Not yet, anyway.” Her eyes fell back to Diamond Tiara. “I think we can use that.”

Diamond nodded. “So before they figure it out, we need to turn this Crusader truce into a merger.”

“A merger?” Building bridges was one thing, but an actual joining of the cliques? Had they truly become that desperate?

“Okay, maybe not a full merger, but at least an alliance.” Diamond Tiara scooped up the last of the nachos, one eye on Silver Spoon and one eye watching the Crusaders. “And we need it soon. Like, tomorrow soon. We’ve got a week before the next Twilight Time, so we’ve gotta seal the deal before then. Let’s hook ‘em with a fun weekend. Sweetie Belle’s lessons are Sunday afternoons, right?”

Silver Spoon considered it. “I could invite her to dinner. No, invite her whole family for dinner.” Mother would like that, too. She hadn’t thrown a proper dinner party since the move, and a small one wouldn’t stress her out much.

“Right, and I’ll buy Scootaloo an arcade visit on Saturday, and then on Sunday I’ll…I dunno, take Apple Bloom on a hayride or whatever.”

“So, what do we do in the meantime, Di?”

Diamond licked a spot of cheese off her fetlock. “Hate to say it, but we’re gonna have to cut our princess visit short.” She held up a hoof before Silver could protest. “Can’t help it, Silvie, we need all the time we can get. We’ll also need to split up to rope in everypony.”
What in Celestia’s name are you up to, Diamond? Silver Spoon set down her teacup. “When you say ‘everypony’, you don’t mean...?”

“EVERYpony.” A wry, clever light gleamed in Diamond’s eyes. “It’s simple supply and demand. The marshmallow wants to be a big shot?” She lifted her teacup and grinned. “Let’s make her one.”

“Supply so that later we can demand. I love it.” They toasted to their future success.

Silver frowned. And yet...

And yet, the prickling at her neck still hadn’t gone away. Silver couldn’t help the feeling that she’d missed something. Perhaps something even bigger than schmoozing with a princess.

Praise the sun, moon, and stars for the power of princess popularity.

The majority of Ponyville’s foals wouldn’t need more than their presence, a namedrop, and hints of a possible—but not promised—opportunity to get up close and personal with Equestria’s brand new alicorn princess.

Obviously, Diamond and Silver couldn’t cover all of Ponyville in half an afternoon, but that didn’t matter. If they snagged the blabbermouths and the popular foals, they snagged the school. Peer pressure and the schoolyard grapevine could handle it from there. Tomorrow, they could assess who’d picked up on Twilight Time and corral the stragglers.

Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara charted their respective courses and split up at Town Hall.

Diamond took the west side, where most of the new families had moved in. There, she’d acquaint herself with the newbies, along with any major players who could be potential tough cases.

She’d catch Rumble first—big with the pegasus crowd, but still sore at Diamond because the colt seriously could not take a joke. He also lived a block away from the graveyard where Dinky did ghost research.

Of all the foals, The Dink needed legitimate persuasion, not just breadcrumbs. She’d already worked with Princess Twilight over the summer; the novelty would be gone. Dink had massive pull, and they couldn’t afford to lose that support.

According to Pinkie Pie (who heard it from White Lightning), Pipsqueak—a rising star in the colt circuit—and Cotton Cloudy (the other top pegasus) had gone for a swim in the lake, so Diamond could get both of them on her way home.

That left Silver Spoon on the west side, rounding up notable ponies and major gossips in the lower rungs. None of them could shake the world, but all of them had integrity coming out of their ears. Their good word stretched an inch wide, but miles deep.

In Sugar Cube Corner, Silver Spoon shared a Ultra Mega Banana Split Surprise with Twist and Truffle Shuffle, both of them eager to ask about Twilight’s adventures.

After that, Silver played a quick game of Old Mare with Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie, who swooned at the idea of meeting a real princess (Sunny quickly assured Peachy that she’d always be
In record time, Silver convinced Featherweight (and his darling ears) that Twilight Sparkle would be perfect subject for the Foal Free Press’s first issue of the year.

Tornado Bolt couldn’t wait for Twilight Time after Silver pointed out certain similarities between the princess and the Masked Matterhorn.

That left Silver Spoon with the last member of the schoolyard elite. The only one Diamond hadn’t met on the east side. The second most popular unicorn in class, and The Dink’s current best friend: Berry Pinch.

Notably, Diamond Tiara left Pinch off her list of important foals, and Silver suspected that it didn’t matter if she reeled the unicorn in or not. Personal opinions and falling outs didn’t change the popularity ranks, however, and snubbing The Dink’s bestie was unwise.

Besides, the two of them had more than Twilight Time to discuss.

Silver Spoon found Berry Pinch in her backyard, harvesting grapes with one of the new fillies—the yellow one with the purple pigtails who talked too much. She peered over the Berrys’ gate, watching them comb through the vines, and waited to be noticed.

Berry Pinch’s right ear twitched in Silver’s direction. Gently, she levitated a grape bunch and snipped the vine with her teeth. The ear swiveled back into place.

Silver sighed. Yeah, didn’t think it’d be that easy. “Hello, Berry Pinch. Um…what are you up to?”

“Dragon slaying.” Grapes plopped into a collection basket. Berry Pinch’s horn lit and grabbed more. “What’s it look like?”

The new filly’s head bobbed up with wide, curious eyes. “Oh, hi there, Silver Spoon. Did you come to visit us?”

“Sure didn’t come to help harvest grapes,” muttered Pinch. “It’d mess up her coat.”

Silver slung a foreleg over the gate, eying the dark stains around the fillies’ legs. Grape juice and dirt and little bits of vine leaves crawled all the way to their gaskins. From a distance, it looked like they wore purple socks.

“Well… Not my original plan, no, but now that you mention it Berry Pinch, I—” She grit her teeth and tried forget last Saturday’s sixty-bit hooficure. “—would love to help. If you need any, I mean.”

Another bunch of grapes plopped into the basket. Berry Pinch rolled her neck back, rubbing her stiff withers. “If you wanna. No shine off my horn. Just be sure to bite the stems, not the grapes. They’re really ripe and fall off if you get too rough.” She clicked her tongue as Silver made her way over. “Must be real big.”

“What is?” A loose grape squished under Silver’s hoof. So much for new horseshoes.

“Whatever you’re willing to get all gross and dirty for.” Finally, Berry Pinch looked at her. “Lemme guess: Diamond Tiara sent you, right?” She flicked grape juice off her hooves with a snort. “Figures. Won’t even own up to her own acrobatic act; of course she sends somepony else to talk to the broke lowlife.”

The yellow filly’s head ducked between the vines. She curled her braided tail around her haunch
uncomfortably and counted the full baskets under her breath. Judging how soon she could escape.

It still felt too soon to appraise the newbies, but Silver had seen this one in the notable company more than once. When she told a joke, the other new foals laughed, and when she talked, they listened.

Silver Spoon moved fast. She held out a sticky hoof and smiled. “You moved in a few weeks ago, right? In the house with the blue mailbox? I don’t think we’re really met. My name’s Silver Spoon.”

“I know.” The filly took Silver’s hoof and shook it as if it were made of glass. She smiled. “Everypony knows who you are. I’m Boysenberry. Hello.”

“And how do you know Miss Berry Pinch, Boysenberry?” Silver tilted her head to see the blackberries on the filly’s flank. “Are you related?”

“Mom and Boysenberry’s dad do business sometimes. They’re old friends.” Berry Pinch narrowed her eyes, a not-so-subtle warning against evading the subject.

Gently, Silver Spoon chewed through a vine and lowered the grapes into a basket. “Pleasantries before business, Berry Pinch. I don’t think we need to drag Boysenberry here into drama right out of the gate, do you?”

“Drama?” Boysenberry flipped around so fast her braids smacked the vines. Her neck stretched out, as if she might somehow catch a better view of something. “What kind of drama?”

Berry Pinch lashed her tail and stamped. The grape stains on her hooves stopped at the fetlock. 

*Interesting.*

Silver gathered up another grape bundle and glanced back to the thick socks of mashed grapes upon Boysenberry’s legs. *For somepony with berries for a cutie mark, she doesn’t handle them well.*

The filly had spilled more grape juice than Silver Spoon and Berry Pinch combined, and Silver had never touched a grapevine in her life. She didn’t seem too enthusiastic about harvesting, either. Silver’s eyes trailed down to the ripe, juicy berries on the yellow flank. *Could her talent be for something else?*

“I’m sorry, but young ladies don’t share other ponies’ personal business, Boysenberry.” Silver baited the hook. “It’s like I told Scootaloo this afternoon on our way to—” She put a hoof over her mouth. “Oh! Forget it—it’s nothing.”

Silver Spoon returned to harvesting grapes, and said no more.

The vineyard rustled with Boysenberry’s fidgeting. “No, what? What?” She buzzed around Silver Spoon like little nosy hummingbird. Her voice squeezed into a desperate whine. “Aw, come on, whaaaaaat?”

“I told you, Boysenberry.” With great effort, Silver kept her eyes on the grapes and maintained her poker face. “It’s nothing.”

“Nuh-uh! It’s TOTALLY something!” Boysenberry bounced on her hooves. “Ohhh, you can tell me, Silver Spoon, I promise! Please?”

“Absolutely not,” said Silver Spoon. “The princess would never forgive me.”

Poor little Boysenberry practically flew out of her horseshoes. “*Princess?!*”
“Oh, come on, Boysenberry! Don’t tell me you’re falling for this garbage.” Berry slammed her grapes down and whirled around. “I don’t care how fancy schmancy Silver Snob says her parents are, she does not know a princess.”

“Yes, that’s right, Pinch.” Silver grinned, sly and enigmatic. “Of course I don’t.”

Boysenberry salivated.

Berry Pinch went back to harvesting grapes.

Silver watched them, tail twitching.

The original plan didn’t account for Boysenberry. A filly thirsty for gossip juicy as a blackberry could be useful, but with her around, Silver had no chance of a serious talk with Pinch.

If Boysenberry was going to spread gossip, then she had better spread the correct gossip.

“Listen, Di didn’t send me over, Berry Pinch. I came here on my own.” Silver clipped a vine and spat out a leaf. “Pretty sure Diamond doesn’t care either way, but personally I thought you should know something. By tomorrow morning, everypony who matters is gonna know. I thought you shouldn’t be left out.”

“Why are you here, Silver Spoon?” The unicorn sagged against the wicker basket. Her face slumped in what was probably supposed to be irritation. Instead, she just looked tired. “I mean, why are you really here?”

“To tell you something.” Silver side-eyed the new kid. “But I didn’t know you’d have company. “She leaned over the grape basket and stared at Boysenberry. “Can you keep a secret?”

Boysenberry’s eyes grew wider than wagon wheels. “Yes.”

She’d tell every single pony in her neighborhood by sundown. Minimum.

Guile, sweet-talk, and half-truths didn’t work on Berry Pinch anymore. Thus, Miss Silver Spoon drew the strongest weapon in her arsenal: the truth.

“I just came back from Princess Twilight Sparkle’s house.” It still felt weird saying “house,” and not “castle” or “palace”. “We tagged along with the Cutie Mark Crusaders; they’ve been taking lessons with the princess every week for a while, now. Up close and personal, one-on-one. They call it Twilight Time.”

“Seriously?!” gasped Boysenberry.

Berry Pinch’s ears stood up. “…seriously?”

“Quite seriously,” said Silver Spoon. “We ate nachos. You can ask the princess yourself if you don’t believe me.” She watched Berry Pinch, who’d gone back to looking skeptical. “But remember, this is between the three of us, okay?”

“O-okay, Silver Spoon! I won’t tell a soul.” Boysenberry pressed a hoof to her chest and grinned. “I promise.” She bobbed in place, chewing her bottom lip and staring at the gate. “Uh, Pinchy? Would it be okay if I—”

“Yeah, go ahead. We’re almost done, anyw—” Dust clouds kicked up before Berry finished the sentence. Boysenberry scrambled across the yard, out the gate, and down the street.
Berry Pinch crossed her forelegs and fixed Silver with a hard stare.

“What? I had to get rid of her somehow.” Silver tried (unsuccessfully) to wipe her hooves on the basket. “Besides, that is what I came to tell you. Half of it is, anyway.”

“Why would the Crusaders invite you guys, of all ponies, to their princess meeting thingy?”

A slight smile quirked Silver’s muzzle. “Because Diamond Tiara is Diamond Tiara.”


“Diamond and I have agreed to draw a truce. We scratch the Crusaders’ back, they scratch ours. Twilight Time could get your hoof in the door, Berry. Thought you should know about it.”

A gentle breeze hissed through the vines. Berry Pinch’s tail twisted slowly behind her. She frowned. “Why?”

“I thought maybe you could get the chance to talk to her…” Boysenberry was long gone, but Silver whispered anyway. “…about your…um…friendship problem?”

A tepid calm settled over the vineyard. Motionless, save for the twitch of her nose, Berry Pinch scrutinized Silver Spoon carefully. Looking for lies. When she didn’t find any, she asked, “’Kay, so what’s in it for you?”

Silver blinked, a little offended. “What? Nothing’s ‘in it’ for me, Pinch. I’m concerned. I’m allowed to be concerned, aren’t I?” She paused and thought about it. Maybe she did have a little something to gain. “And I also feel kinda…” The sentence trailed into nothing.

“Kinda what?”

“You know, that, like…gross oily sticky feeling?” The more Silver talked, the stupider the whole thing sounded, but she didn’t know how to stop it now. “The kind that wiggles around like spiders under your coat when you’re trying to sleep and then you can’t sleep and you think about stuff you did instead?”

Pinch flipped her bangs to the side and gave Silver a weird look. “What, you mean guilt?”

Silver Spoon wrapped her tail around her cutie mark. Her cheeks turned hot. “Um. Maybe?”

“You said it’s when you think about stuff you did. Bad stuff, right? And you feel like you’re gonna puke up a swamp of slug butts all the time?” At Silver’s nod, Pinch clicked her tongue.

Somehow Silver got the feeling Berry Pinch was enjoying this. Father said the griffons called that schadenfreude.

“Yeah, that’s called guilt, Spoon. Sucks, huh?” Berry Pinch squared her shoulders and started shoving a grape basket to the porch. Her muscles strained under the pressure.

“Dunno what that’s got to do with me, though.” She glanced back at Silver Spoon following a few steps behind her. “I’m not the one with the friendship problem.”

A thousand indignant responses flared up in Silver Spoon’s chest, but she wrangled them back. They’d do her no good. Silver shoved down the sinking feeling in her chest and helped Berry Pinch push. “I heard what happened between you and Diamond Tiara, Berry Pinch.”

“So?”
“So, I…I feel bad about it.”


Silver’s head poked over the basket rim. “You don’t?”

“Why would I? It’s done.” Berry Pinch grabbed an old bar rag, spat in it, and wiped the grape juice off her hooves. “I told you one of us oughta tell her the truth, and one of us did.”

“Yeah, about that.” Silver jumped on the porch with a thump. “Three days, Pinch? Three days, seriously? That’s not even enough time to unpack! You couldn’t have even given me a week before you decided to—”

“I know!”

Glaring, Berry Pinch edged away from Silver’s shadow. She set her back against the house, rubbing her nose. “I know, okay? I didn’t really mean to do it then, but Diamond came up to me and we started talking and somewhere in there she said some mean stuff about Shady Daze and the paper staff, even though what happened wasn’t Shady Daze’s fault, and…it just slipped out.” She turned away and curled in on herself so tight, Silver saw the bumpy ridge of her spine. “And Diamond didn’t take it too good.”

Silver Spoon hung back, unsure of what to say.

Pinch was right; it hadn’t been Silver’s fault. Not really. The sabotage of Foal Free Press might have sparked the fight, but whatever had followed had been about a lot more than that. Gently, she leaned over the unicorn’s shoulder. “Pinch, Diamond...when Diamond’s upset sometimes she say things she doesn’t—”

Berry Pinch’s tail swatted Silver in the face. “No. You don’t say stuff like that and not mean it.” She sniffed wetly. “You don’t.”

“What in Celestia’s name happened between you two?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Pinch tossed the bar rag over her shoulder. It hit the porch with a wet thud and slid off the side. “I’ll check out this Twilight Time thing if The Dink is going, but that’s all.”

Silver Spoon circled back, trying to look the unicorn in the face. “But since you’ll be there anyway, it couldn’t hurt to try asking Princess Twilight about it?” She attempted a hopeful smile. “Right?”

Berry Pinch flipped onto her hooves. “Drop it, Silver. It’s like I said: I don’t have a friendship problem. Me and Diamond Tiara aren’t friends.” She yanked the door open and stomped inside. “Believe me, that is not a problem.”

Ice swirled and clinked in Silver Spoon’s glass of lemonade. She took a sip as she held out Princess Twilight Sparkle’s autograph for her small audience to admire. The princess had given out several autographs at her Hayburger appearance two days ago, but as the Cutie Mark Crusaders’ nearest and dearest friend, Silver’s had an extra dose of authenticity.
It also made her the perfect candidate for publicity appearances and press interviews. Silver glanced over her shoulder at activity bubbling on the far side of the field. Besides, the Crusaders’ unofficial manager needed to stay close and monitor things. For their best interest and convenience, of course.

Featherweight gripped his notebook and edged in closer, pencil clamped between his teeth. He scribbled a few notes in his notebook. Beside him, Truffle Shuffle—who’d been too slow to snag an autograph of his own—stared hungrily.

Contrary to expectations, the princess’s hornwriting leaned hard left in firm, jagged strokes, not calligraphy loops. “It’s the signature of a pony with a lot of work on her hooves,” said Silver Spoon. “Note the especially large capital letters. They stick out so much, she doesn’t need to bother writing the whole thing clearly.”

Dimples poked the ends of Truffle’s smile. “Princess Twilight’s so cool, isn’t she? It’s almost like she’s a normal pony like us, eating at the Hayburger and everything. I mean, I know she’s not, but you know.” He squished his chubby cheeks in his hooves and sighed. “She’s so cool.”

“She is, yes.” Silver tossed Truffle a polite smile before she turned back to Featherweight. “Shady Daze is still the newspaper photographer, right? How long do you think it’ll take him to develop those photos? Diamond and I want a copy for our albums.”

Featherweight’s darling dinner plate ears swiveled in Silver’s direction, but he didn’t look up. “Wha? Oh, um…about two weeks, I think. Shady doesn’t give out copies until the paper’s out.”

Silver Spoon drew her head up, frowning. “Two weeks? I give you the keys to an exclusive interview with the Cutie Mark Crusaders and the best you can do is two weeks?” She crossed her hooves, narrowing her eyes. Featherweight was cute, but not that cute. “Maybe the Foal Free Press doesn’t want a meeting with Princess Twilight Sparkle after all.”

“Okay, okay!” Featherweight’s wings popped out, fluttering anxiously at his back. “One week. One week at the most.” He hovered in the air with his spindly little forelegs clasped together. “How’s that sound, Silver Spoon?”

“Much better. Thank you, Featherweight.” Silver settled back onto her pillow and took another sip of lemonade. She smiled to show him she harbored no hard feelings and asked, “Anything in particular you’re excited to ask the princess?”

“Oooh! Lemme show you!” How could anypony stay mad at Featherweight? Sweet Celestia, the colt’s smile could melt butter. He flipped to the back of his notebook and held it out. “I’ve been taking questions from everypony in our class. Mine’s at the top: ‘Did you have to learn how to fly, and how long did it take if you did?’ and also, ‘Do you do workouts?’.” He peeked over the notebook. “My brother came up with that second one.”

“Can you put in a couple from me?” asked Truffle Shuffle. “I wanna know what it’s like being a royal pony in a town that’s already got a mayor. And what her favorite dessert is.” He rubbed his chin in thought. “Wait, that’s two questions. Silver Spoon, do you think the Crusaders could ask for me instead?”

“I’ll do my best to squeeze it in.” Silver angled her neck to check on the Crusaders, but they’d become so swamped by sycophants, she could barely see them. She only knew Apple Bloom from the light reflecting off her newly bedazzled hair bow. “No promises, though.” She smiled diplomatically. “The Crusaders are very busy these days. You understand.”

“Oh, sure. I mean, if you get a chance.” Truffle sucked the lemon wedge from his dry lemonade
“Hey, speaking of politics, Silver Spoon?”

“Yes?” Silver kept her sight on the Crusaders. Snails finally moved aside to reveal Sweetie Belle. The unicorn adjusted her sunglasses and rattled ice at the bottom of her glass. Somepony should have topped her off a long time ago.

Truffle Shuffle scooted closer. “I’ve been wondering if you’d come back and be student council secretary. Technically, you still are; everypony’s got a two semester term for each position, and you were only there for a couple weeks. You could probably stay there for the rest of the year.”

Silver Spoon tilted her head and blinked at him. She hadn’t even thought of the council in months. “What brought this up?”

“Twist’s stepping down as president this semester, and it’d be good to have at least one other pony on the council with experience.” He reached back and rubbed the back of his short mane. “Or on the council at all.”

“What about you?”

“Well, since nopony’s wanted to run yet, I thought…” He shuffled his hooves. “Maybe I’d run for president this semest—”

Pipsqueak’s head popped up between them. “We’ve got a president?” The little colt stood so low to the ground, Silver hadn’t seen him coming. He beamed at her startled expression. “Blimey, I didn’t know that!”

Featherweight wrinkled his nose. “We do? Since when?”

“Since always. I just said we’ve got an entire student council.” He shot Siver a meaningful glance “Or at least part of one.” Ice cubes sprayed across the grass as Truffle threw his hooves in the air. “Sheesh, we’ve had meetings every week for a year, you guys! See, this is exactly what I’ve been talking about. Big stuff’s happening all around you all the time and it’s like nopony even cares!”

Before Truffle Shuffle nosedived into another sermon about citizenship and responsibility, Silver turned to Pipsqueak. “Hey. This is the grand opening of your lemonade stand, right?” She jabbed a hoof in Sweetie Belle’s direction. “In case you didn’t notice, your guests of honor need a refill.”

“Oh, right!” Pipsqueak raced off to fetch his lemonade pitcher. “I’ll see you guys later!”

Sensing the citizenship lecture was a wash, Truffle clicked his forehooves together and tried to reconvene. He glanced between Silver and Featherweight, who’d now taken interest in the conversation. “So, how about it, Silver Spoon? Wanna come back to council? We could serve tea if you want.”

Tea and politics. Interesting combination. She wondered if that offer counted as pandering or lobbying, or a gesture of friendship. Was there really a difference?

“I don’t know yet.” Silver Spoon kept one ear tilted towards Sweetie Belle. She side-eyed Featherweight’s press notebook. “I’ll think about it.”

“Are you really gonna think about it, or are you just trying to get rid of me?” Truffle scooted in so close, Silver heard the croaking wheeze of his breath. “You were a good secretary, Silver Spoon—better than I thought you’d be.”

Not unkindly, Silver laughed and asked, “Is that supposed to be your idea of a compliment, Vice
President Shuffle?”

He smiled at the formal address. Silver wondered if anypony had actually used it before. “It’s supposed to be the truth. If you ask me, I think you’d do better—a lot better—using your talents to help ponies instead...of...”

Something in the wind changed. Slowly, Truffle Shuffle put down his empty glass and stepped back. “I-instead of...um. Other stuff. I’m gonna go see if Pip needs any help. Bye, Silver.”

“Oh, uh, alright.” He’d taken off before Silver Spoon even sat up. “Bye?” She had no idea the butterball could run that fast.

“Wait up, Truff! I’ll join you.” Featherweight snapped his notebook shut, shoved it into his mouth and went aloft. He waved goodbye as he caught an updraft and wheeled away.

A lone primary feather drifted down to Silver’s hooves. She frowned, watching Featherweight’s silhouette vanish into the clouds. “Huh. What’s gotten into them?” Her ears twitched at the sound of approaching hoofbeats.

Diamond Tiara skidded to a stop, dust clouds kicking up at her hooves. “Silver Spoon, there you are! Hey, did you—” She crinkled her nose at the second empty lemonade glass and poked at the impression in the grass Truffle left behind. “Ew, since when do you hang out with the fat snitch?”

Silver’s frown deepend. Fat snitch or not, Truffle didn’t justify an “ew”. She might not take him to the winter ball or anything, but the colt was okay. “We were only talking, Di.”

“There are better ponies to talk to, and almost all of them are over there, remember?” Diamond tilted Silver’s chin back toward the crowd. “How are Ponyville’s newest superstars?”

Silver Spoon squinted through the faraway mass of bodies. Truffle Shuffle had squished himself between Pipsqueak and Twist. He could have stepped aside to make room for Diamond Tiara, but he hadn’t. He didn’t even walk away—he ran. Featherweight’s departure she could understand, but…

Before Diamond could get impatient, Silver nodded towards Scootaloo’s hoof shine. “Licking it up, still. Exactly how we left them yesterday.”

It had taken a couple of days for Apple Bloom to really get into the privileged treatment, and even longer for Scootaloo to quit glaring at Diamond and Silver on sight. Sweetie Belle, however, took to power and prestige like a griffon to gold. She bore fame with the regular novice clumsiness, but still bore it relatively well.

Sweetie clearly hadn’t expected a full entourage of admirers to spring up overnight, but still orchestrated the situation with finesse. Loathe as Silver was to admit it, the Crusader was good.

If they didn’t watch it, the power shift could tilt in the unicorn’s direction permanently, and Silver Spoon told Diamond so. “You have a backup plan before that happens, I hope?”

Diamond Tiara motioned to leave and trotted across the field, Silver in tow. The crowd parted for them several feet in advance. They didn’t take two steps back, they took four. She flicked her tail and grinned. “You’re walking through it.”

The sunlight winked off the tiara as Diamond nestled close to Silver’s cheek. “They owe us now for all of this.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “But just in case they don’t want to pay their tab for us...”
Silver glanced at the colt shining Scootaloo’s hooves. “We can call in all of their other tabs. Not bad.” The Crusaders might be able to say no to two ponies, but not twenty. Not without serious consequences. “Speaking of favors, did you get Bloom for this weekend?”

“Apple Bloom and Scootaloo. We’re doing lunch and a movie.” Diamond shrugged. “I tried to get them one on one, but Scootaloo really doesn’t wanna be alone with me for some reason. Weird.”

“Well, you did hit Scootaloo pretty hard about…” Silver Spoon checked her surroundings. Dozens of ears surrounded them, but none turned in their direction. “You know. The flag thing.”

Diamond Tiara raised an eyebrow. “What, with the wings? That happened like, forever ago, Silvie. I’m sure she’s totally over it by now.” She reared to wave high over the crowd. “Lookin’ good with those hooves, Scootaloo!”

Scootaloo fluffed her wings proudly and exchanged a grin with Apple Bloom. Sweetie Belle lowered her glasses and winked at them.

Diamond giggled and winked back. “You’re still having Sweetie Belle over for dinner, right Silver?”

Shadows skimmed over Silver’s shoulders. In the branches of an elm tree, Featherweight watched Diamond carefully. The feathers in his outstretched wings twitched, prepared to take flight again. Above him, Rumble climbed to a higher branch.

“Sweetie Belle and Rarity. We had to move the date to Tuesday night, because Miss Rarity won’t be done with her commission until then.” Silver glanced at the thinning herd of foals. There’d been twice as many ponies here a minute ago. “Mother can’t wait.”

Diamond frowned, but said nothing. Sunday would be the ideal dinner date, but even Diamond Tiara couldn’t argue Word of Mom.

By the time Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon reached the Crusaders, the ocean of admiring foals had become a puddle. They watched from afar, patiently waiting for their chance to swoop back in to earn Crusader points.

A gesture of respect, of course. Silver looked over her shoulder. Peach Fuzz—one of the newbies—flinched. Respect or something else. Unable to frown in present company, Silver flicked her tail.

Meanwhile, Diamond Tiara swept in the nudge the last piece into place. “You three must come to my pool party.” The pool party scheduled early Monday afternoon, perfectly scheduled between Spoiled Rich’s spa trip and Twilight Time. She gave a derisive sniff to Pipsqueak’s lemonade. “It’ll be much cooler than this.”

“Look who’s inviting who to her fancy house!” As they walked away, Silver could practically hear Sweetie Belle’s grin.

Apple Bloom sighed with satisfaction. “Cutie Mark Crusaders, I do believe we have arrived.”

Diamond nudged Silver’s ribs. “And I do believe we have Twilight Time in the bag.”

“We must,” said Silver Spoon. Her eyes trailed Featherweight as he watched them leave. He didn’t dare come down until Diamond Tiara walked halfway across the field. “Thanks to you, they’re the most most popular fillies in school.”
The Squeaky, the Snobby, and the Saucepan

In retrospect, Silver decided, it could have gone worse. For the most part, Operation-Get-Invited-To-Twilight-Time-And-Schmooze-With-Royalty had been executed perfectly…except for that blind spot.

Learning.

Silver Spoon hovered over her open notebook, idly chewing the end of her pen and half-listening to Miss Cheerilee’s Breezie migration lecture. Princess Twilight Sparkle lives in a library. She’s probably the princess of learning, with that whole book aesthetic going on in her place. Of course Twilight Time was about learning. Well, learning and hobnobbing, but a pony could do two things at once.

I should have asked for history pointers, or some kind of magic methodology lesson. Something. Silver glanced up and scanned her classmates. Thank goodness the safety net broke our fall. Drawing the ire of a princess never boded well, but spread over twenty-five foals instead of two, it didn’t hurt quite so much. Diamond and Silver managed to walk away no worse for wear than Pipsqueak or Cotton.

That said, they could have done without that applesauce explosion. Almost twenty-four hours and two showers later, Silver Spoon still smelled like a cobbler. Diamond Tiara stayed home today altogether, and although Randolph wouldn’t say why, Silver suspected it had something to do with getting all the apple gunk out of her mane.

Silver sniffed her foreleg. With luck, she’d squeeze in a couple more showers before the big event tonight. Three more hours to go. It’s one night. If only she could go to bed now and skip to Wednesday morning. Just one night. Besides, she’s the least-bad of the three. You can do it.

The school bell rang. Classmates slammed their desks shut, crammed their books into bags, and filed toward the door. Sweetie Belle had her saddlebag ready to go well ahead of time and jumped out of her seat before Cheerilee even dismissed the class.

Oh, no you don’t. “Hey, Sweetie Belle!” Silver weaved through the desks, dodged fleeing classmates, and hopped over Scootaloo’s strategically placed saddlebag to land square in front of the aisle, blocking the unicorn’s path. “Sweetie Belle, you’re still coming at six, right?”

“Uh…” Sweetie Belle turned in a slow circle, searching in vain for an escape route. The crowding foals moved too slowly for her to take the long way around, and flanked her desk on both sides. Desperately, she stared at the other Crusaders for support. “At six? Sure, I guess, but…”

Scootaloo shrugged. Apple Bloom doubled over her notebook and mimed coughing.

Silver Spoon narrowed her eyes. “…but?”

“…but you know, I could send Rarity over instead. I mean, I know how excited Mrs. Perfect is to have my sister over for dinner, but she won’t really mind if I don’t show up.” Sweetie Belle coughed a pathetic little cough and fake-sniffled. “Also, I’m sick.”

It was really too late in the day for this. “Okay, future reference: if you’re going to fake sick, maybe start the act before somepony asks the question.” Silver rubbed the bridge of her nose and sighed. “Look, it’s just dinner, Sweetie Belle. Not even a big formal dinner; there’ll be like, four ponies and won’t last more than a couple hours. Three at most; it’s a school night.”
“Ya know, we’re not invitin’ y’all to another Twilight Time,” said Apple Bloom. “Not after what happened last time.”

“I know.” An immense amount of restraint kept Silver Spoon from pointing out that it wasn’t her fault Bloom’s dumb apple project exploded all over the place.

Scootaloo buzzed across the aisle, landing on Sweetie’s desk. She flared her raggedy feathers and tilted her head upwards to take full advantage of the high ground. “Exactly. You don’t even have a real reason for Sweetie Belle to come to dinner anymore.”

Silver Spoon gave a flat stare over the rim of her glasses. “Good to see you keeping up, Scootaloo.”

“And besides all that, you don’t even want me there anyway,” finished Sweetie Belle.


“So then why—”

“I invited you.” Silver propped her forelegs on Sweetie’s desk and pointed a manicured hoof. “Not Rarity, you. I can’t uninvite you; that’s not how it’s done. Not by proper young ladies, not by party ponies, and not by me.” If Sweetie really didn’t want to come, that was her own fault. She should have RSVP’d before lunch. “So I’ll ask you again: are you still coming at six?”

Sweetie rubbed her hooves together. “Well, I—”

Silver Spoon glared.

“Yeah… guess I am.”

“Then it’s settled. See you at six.” Silver went back to her own desk to gather her things.

Behind her, Apple Bloom whispered, “It’s only a couple hours. Can’t be that bad, right?”

“Yeah,” sighed Sweetie Belle. “I hope so.”

Silver clicked her tongue. “You and me both.”

In the hallowed alcoves of the Wisteria Academy library, three junior students bent around a table and a book. The recess hour was the key time for socializing, power struggles, hopscotch, verbal fencing, playing the trading card market, hostile takeovers, and braiding hair. As the only time Wisteria students didn’t need to triple-check their posture and predicate every sentence with “Yes, ma’ams,” it was not an hour to be wasted lightly.

Only the most important of important things could be enough to skip recess. They couldn’t afford to overlook a single word.

“Are you sure?” Silver Spoon whispered. “Read it again, Brights. Maybe you missed something?”

Brights Brightly III steepled her hooves over the ancient tome. Beside her, Fair Weather twitched her wings nervously. She’d never seen the unicorn this serious before.
“No,” said Brights Brightly. “I’m positive. I read the Wisteria Codex three times last night and twice just now.” She shook her head. “It’s concrete, girls: No appeals from students under ten.” She gestured towards Wondermint, on watch for enemies and tattletales by the stacks. “Wonder’s our closest shot, but—”

“Ooh, right! Wonder’s a whole year older than us!” Fair Weather flapped her tiny wings, dangerously close to breaking the No-Fly rule. “What if she led our appeal thingy? Her mommy’s a grand-alum, right?”

Silver Spoon shook her head. “Wondermint is still only nine, Fair.” She shrugged apologetically. “Maybe her mother could pull some strings, but even then you need like...three fillies to appeal a rule, right?”

“Three fillies at least. For a rule this big, we’d need...” Brights Brightly tried to do the math in her head. She rubbed her hooves in her fluffy round mane and sank into her chair. “More ponies than we’ve got.”

Wondermint looked over from the shelves and offered an apologetic smile. “It’ll be okay, Brights. We can try again in two years, right?”

“I can’t wait two years!” Brights Brightly slammed The Wisteria Codex of Rules, Regulations & Traditions: 8th Edition with a satisfying snap. It did little to alleviate her mood. “Justice can’t wait two more years! Tyranny can’t continue for two more years! This is unwarranted. Unjust.” Brights might have gone further, but she’d run out of impressive vocabulary words. She pursed her lips and sulked. “This isn’t fair. This isn’t right.”

“It’s the rules.” Silver Spoon tried her best to sound gracious, but it came out pouty anyway. She frowned at the pleated skirt covering her flank. “We can’t not follow the rules.”

“Well, it’s a dumb old rule,” insisted Brights Brightly.

Fair Weather hovered over her shoulder. “Yeah!”

“I mean, our moms and dads pay for tuition—”

“Yeah!”

“—so I think that means we should wear whatever we wanna.” Brights flinched and instinctively looked around for Miss Sugarcoat. “…um, whatever we want to, I mean.”

Silver Spoon had to admit that even she didn’t understand the point of such an unfair rule. “Why would our parents buy us all these amazing wardrobes when we can’t wear them to class?”

Wondermint approached the table. “I’m not sure we could do much about it anyway. It’s against the school code, right?”

“But uniforms aren’t in the original code, though!” Brights would know, she’d read the thing fifty times.

“No,” said Wondermint, “but it’s still in the spirit.”

Together, all four fillies stared at the library’s domed skylight. A stained glass depiction of Madam Wisteria picnicked in the grass, surrounded by little fillies dressed in royal robes and tiered crowns. At their hooves lay the school motto: Princesses, All of Us.
“Yes, we’re supposed to all dress alike so we can be equal.” Rich and poor, unicorn, pegasus, and earth pony alike were noble ladies under Wisteria’s roof. Silver Spoon rolled her eyes. “What a bunch of garbage. It doesn’t do anything except make us look boring.”

Fair Weather wrinkled her nose. “That rule’s just there to make the charity cases feel better.”

Everypony from the janitors to the headmistress, from the scholarship kindergarteners to the senior valedictorian knew who had money and power at Wisteria Academy. Everypony knew who mattered and who didn’t, and uniforms—as Brights Brightly eloquently pointed out in the class debate last week—would not and could not change that. Not now, not ever.

Silver Spoon smiled and patted her friend on the back. “We’ll try again in two years, Brights. Fashion tyranny can’t last forever, right?”

Two years after their gallant attempt to challenge Wisterian protocol, Silver Spoon discovered she’d been right. The tyranny of fashion couldn’t last forever…unfortunately.

Older, wiser, and several million bits poorer, Silver Spoon stared into the depths of her closet, at a complete loss of what to wear.

“Let’s see, it’s late September, so I could go with an autumn outfit…” Her eyes slowly traveled from the sweater dresses to the sundresses. “…but summer clothes aren’t out of style yet.”

That didn’t even get into the etiquette factors. At what point did casual slide into sloppy? Where did young ladies draw the line between dressing fancy and showing off?

Dinner parties could be dressed up or dressed down at the host’s discretion, and Mother had not enforced a dress code, for she wanted Miss Rarity’s fashion options to be open. Silver Spoon’s, too.

“Wear? You may wear whatever you like, my love. I trust your judgement.” Mother’s sincere smile implied there would be no kids table tonight. This was the real deal. Just a tiny dinner party, but still Silver’s first.

Silver Spoon sighed. Designer labels, flowing gowns, jeweled necklines, pleated skirts, broaches, sashes, horseshoes, earrings…so many options. Too many options. In desperate times like these, young ladies such as Silver had one clear option.

“Brass Taaaaaaaacks!”

She waited until she heard the familiar hiss of bare, manicured hooves upon the carpet. Silver craned her neck backwards to pout at him upside down. “Tacks, I don’t know what to wear. Pick something for me.”

Brass Tacks, already dressed in his best tuxedo, stepped in to examine the contents of the closet. He squinted at the dresses, the vests, and skirts. He nodded to himself, as if he’d come to a decision. “As I understand it from Miss Pinkie Pie, the proper attire for a party—especially parties one is hosting—is a smile.” He flicked an ear at Silver’s annoyed huff. “Barring that, your dress code is open.”

This was not at all the advice Silver requested, but she had no time to argue. “Come on, Tacks! There’s too many options and I have to wear something! I almost never get a chance to wear my nice
clothes so I want to wear the fancy stuff, but I can’t wear the fancy stuff because it’s rude to outshine the guest but I also can’t look worse than her because that’s even worse!”

The amber sunlight streaming through the window had taken on a pink tinge. It had to be nearly dusk by now. Silver tugged at the door handle, dancing an anxious little jig with her back legs.

“Ohhhh, and they’re gonna be here any minute.”

Slowly, the slender unicorn tilted his head. His magic idly adjusted a chiffon dress as he mused, “Such a fuss in the name of Miss Sweetie Belle. Why, if I didn’t know better, Miss Silver, I might think…”

Silver Spoon raised an eyebrow and turned to face him.

A smile flicked over Brass Tacks’ muzzle. “… that you were intimidated.”

Silver clutched her pearls, sputtering gasps of outrage. “Wha—I—no!”

Intimidated? **Intimidated**? By that frivolous, free-wheeling, giggly, head-in-the-clouds pile of blank flank marshmallow fluff? In Silver’s own house? At her own party?!

She turned up her nose at the very idea. “Don’t be ridiculous. That filly may have a genius designer for a sister, but fancy clothes do not make fancy ponies.” Silver added another humph for good measure. “For goodness sake, Brass Tacks. It’s Sweetie Belle, not Princess Celestia.”

Turning back to the closet, Silver nosed through the summer wear until she pulled down a pleated sweater dress. The green high-necked dress beautifully highlighted Silver’s pearls, and bridged the formal/informal gap with grace. One could wear it from a birthday party to the opera, no trouble.

Brass Tacks nodded his approval at the choice and zipped open the dress so that Silver could step in. “Indeed, Miss Silver Spoon.”

“It’s the pony that counts, you know. The best dress in the world can’t make Squeaky Belle any less of a mushy dork.” Silver’s head popped out of the high collar and shook out her mane. “Like, don’t get me wrong—she’s okay for a mushy dork, but still.” She ran a comb through her mane as Tacks zipped her back up.

Thankfully, after this afternoon’s shower and rosewater rinse, Silver smelled more like a debutante and less like an apple cobbler. “But see, she’s still my guest, Tacks. I wouldn’t want her to show up and feel bad about her wardrobe.” She bent her head so Brass Tacks could pin her braid up. “Mirror, please?”

Silver angled her head to the side, watching the barrette slide into her mane. She grinned at the pearl strings dangling from the green ribbon. “Intimidated. Like, seriously?”

“A passing thought, Miss Silver Spoon, no more. However, if you will recall, I stated ‘if I did **not** know better.’” Brass Tacks opened the door and followed Silver into the hallway.

He grinned and moved towards the foyer seconds before the doorbell rang. “Fortunately, I do.”

In the shadowed hallway, Silver hung back and watched him go.

Around the corner, the door opened. Rarity exchanged lively greetings with Tacks’ formal invitation inside. Hoofbeats echoed in the foyer. Sweetie Belle attempted a squeaky, wobbling imitation of her sister’s introduction.
Silver—who did not feel intimidated—toyed with her mane, quizzing herself on dinner decorum. Should she come out to meet the guests in the foyer or at the table? Mother was the lady of the house, so maybe she should wait for her first? She didn’t wonder about either question long.

“There you are.” Mother skinned past, her grey dress fluttering beside glittering horseshoes. Her tail flicked Silver’s chest, motioning her toward the garden. “Come along, dearest heart. Our guests can’t arrive to an empty table, right?”

Silver fell in step beside her. “Yes, ma’am.” A curious scent twitched at her nose. Juniper perfume mingling with something else. “Mother, why do you smell like eggplants?”

“That’s what we’re having, remember?”

“But why do you smell like eggplants?” Silver glanced in the direction of the kitchen and knitted her eyebrows. “You didn’t cook it yourself, did you?”

Mother only beamed.

So that’s where she’d been all night! “Really? All by yourself?”

“It’s a night for branching out,” said Mother. “Since you’re making an effort, I thought I would as well.” She glanced down with a playful little smile. “Nervous?”

“Not at all, Mother.” Seriously, why did everypony think she was nervous?

They passed through the double doors and into the garden. The last slivers of sunlight glowed on the horizon while the shy stars appeared overhead. String lights lit the path to the gazebo, shining off Silver’s mane as she climbed the stairs.

The dinner table—already set with the main course—could fit seven ponies, more than enough room for tonight. Silver Spoon picked a spot beside the rose bushes, eying the chairs adjacent to her.

“This was a wonderful idea, Silver Spoon,” Mother said. “What made you think of it?”

Silver pushed down rising memories of Twilight Time, exploding apples, and the mad dash to realign power shifts. A week of kissing up to the Cutie Mark Crusaders and nothing to show for it but a pointless dinner.

Why hadn’t she invited them to dinner at a restaurant or something? Silver clutched the back of her chair, listening to the approaching hoofsteps. “It seemed like the proper thing to do at the moment.”

“Well, I’m glad you did. I know you don’t always get along with Sweetie Belle. It’s easier to have enemies than friends, sometimes.” Mother’s eyes flicked beyond the fence, towards the rows of thatched roofs silhouetted against the indigo dusk. “It’s no small effort to build bridges, but you’re still trying.” She smiled. “I’m proud of you, dear.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

The start of the evening, to Silver’s relief, proceeded normally and painlessly. Hosts and guests exchanged welcomes, curtseys, and bows before moving into small talk:

“Yes, lovely weather for dinner.”

“And dinner looks delicious!”

“Love the dress.”
“No, this old thing? Just something I threw together. Oooh, but I do love your dress!”

They sat to dinner. The eggplant and roasted mushrooms provided Silver an excellent excuse to stay quiet without being rude. Not that she needed to say much of anything, anyway. Mother and Rarity dove into conversation right away and kept the atmosphere pleasant and chatty.

Aside from the initial “Good evenings,” Sweetie Belle had barely said a word all night. She politely ate her dinner and barely even looked at Silver Spoon, despite sitting next to her. Once, she apologized for wrinkling the tablecloth when they sat down together, but that was all.

Still, two fillies couldn’t sit in silence for two hours. Somepony had to say something, eventually.

“So, um…” Sweetie Belle rolled over a half-eaten mushroom with her fork and looked around for a subject. “I’ve never really seen your garden up close before. It’s pretty.”

Level One polite dinner conversation: the stuff of Wisteria’s kindergarten classes. Sure, Silver Spoon could work with that. “That’s kind of you to say. Thank you, Sweetie Belle.”

Silver glanced down at Sweetie Belle’s wardrobe. Her seashell pink dress had a deceptively simple design: an A-line without frills or sequins, just good silk. She didn’t wear it like armor, or a blue ribbon, or a neon sign. Sweetie Belle wore her evening dress like…a dress.

Not on the attack. Not on defense. For the first time since they’d met, both fillies sat in neutral territory, in neutral outfits, discussing a neutral subject.

Silver Spoon didn’t quite know what to do with that.

A moth fluttered over the rosebushes. It landed in the white roses, and Sweetie Belle tilted her head over the gazebo railing to watch. “Did Mrs. Perfect grow these? Or your butler?”

“You mean the roses?” At Sweetie’s nod, Silver sat up in her chair and smiled. “I did.”

Sweetie Belle turned towards the table with an incredulous expression.

“I did!” Raising one’s voice didn’t constitute good manners, but Silver couldn’t help it. “I mean, Tacks does trim and prune them, but I planted them and I’m the one who waters them in the morning. I use them to brew rose tea.”

Squinting with effort, Sweetie Belle lifted a yellow rose with her magic. The half-bloom would be ready to pick soon. “Oh, like for your tea parties? Huh…weird.”

Certain ponies at this table had some nerve calling other ponies weird. Silver Spoon flattened her ears. “And what’s so weird about it?”

“I dunno.” Sweetie shrugged. “Just didn’t think you did that kind of thing. I always thought you’d get them from Roseluck.”

“Miss Roseluck grows roses for eating and decorating, not tea. Besides,” said Silver, “it’s always better to use what you grow yourself. I’ve done that ever since…hm.”

A couple summers ago, wasn’t it?

“‘It’s your tea, so you should be the one peelin’.”

Not long after Apple Bloom suggested that Silver should peel apples herself instead of buying apple skins from Applejack.
“Ever since I got my cutie mark. Comes with the territory, you know.”

“Oh,” said Sweetie Belle.

Now ought to be Silver’s turn to pay a compliment. Praising a nice coat or mane might read like passive-aggression, and she couldn’t note the dress (that would be praise for Rarity).

Silver nodded at Sweetie’s mane. “I like your headband.” The white fluorescent material shimmered rainbows whenever Sweetie Belle turned her head. A tacky accessory, to be honest, but the filly pulled it off.

“…oh?” It took a moment for Sweetie to drop her guard. “Oh, thanks, Silver! I picked it out myself.” She shot a proud grin across the table. “See, Rarity? I told you it was a pretty headband.”

Miss Rarity paused in her story—something about meeting Aunt Silver Frames and her friend, Fancy Pants, in Canterlot not long ago—and chuckled herself. “You certainly did, Sweetie. Nopony can be right all the time, I suppose.”

Rarity turned back to Pitch Perfect, swirling her champagne glass. “Anyhow, Pitch, that was when we…when…” She clucked her tongue. “Oh dear, where was I?”

“You’d mentioned a visit to Canterlot Opera House after the art gallery.” Before Rarity could press on, Mother leaned forward. Her ears twitched with interest. “If you don’t mind, what did you see?”

“Not a full opera, I think; it didn’t last more than an hour. Something about a waylaid sea voyage… Candied, I think?” Rarity blinked at Mother’s attentive stare. “Do you know it?”

“One of my first productions! Oh, it’s a wonderful operetta, always good for a laugh.” Mother glanced at Silver Spoon, who blinked curiously at the mention of an opera she’d never heard of. “A laugh from adults, that is. Do you remember who was in it, Rarity?”

And thus, it began. For what seemed like hours, Mother grilled poor Rarity on the director, the staging, the chorus-fillies, the conductor, the orchestra, the acoustics, the overture and finale, the libretto and the arias.

Sweetie Belle slowly chewed the last of her eggplant as she put it together. “Silver Spoon, your mom used to be an opera star, right?”

“Um, no.” Silver frowned. “She was the opera star, and she still is. Nopony in the whole world is a better soprano than my mother.” Her voice rose higher than she meant it to, and everypony at the table watched her now. Well, good. Silver lifted her chin, daring somepony to disagree. “Nopony.”

Mother returned to her dinner. A modest smile crept along her face. “I don’t know about the world, dear. The best in Manehattan, perhaps.” She sighed a little. “Once.”

Silence settled over the gazebo. Rarity folded her hooves, suddenly quite thoughtful. Her eyes trailed from the table to the Canterlot mountains and back again. Gently, she asked a question Silver had wondered for two years. “Do you ever consider coming back to the stage, Pitch Perfect?”

Mother gripped the table and stared at her.

Silver Spoon didn’t practice subtlety at an adult level yet, but she still felt the weight and implications behind that question. A question that likely led to one of two things: a cruel tease or a job offer.

Miss Rarity did not strike Silver as the teasing type.
“I can’t say that I haven’t given it consideration, but you must understand, my circumstances have changed a great deal, Rarity.” A diplomatic, careful answer. Mother glanced at Silver Spoon.

Unsure of the appropriate response, Silver Spoon chose to smile.

“At my stage in life,” Mother continued, “I don’t believe it’s practical to return full time.” She rested her chin on her pastern. “Besides that, the train to the nearest opera house is at least a three hour ride. Laurel’s gone most of the week as it is. I don’t like the thought of Silver Spoon alone all the time.”

“I don’t mind being by myself for a little while, Mother.” Silver folded her hooves upon the table, ladylike and mature—the perfect posture of a pony who ate all her alfalfa and went to bed on time without being told. “I’m not a baby anymore; I’ve got my cutie mark, remember? Plus, I’ll have Brass Tacks with me.”

Sweetie Belle stiffened beside her. Out of the corner of Silver’s eye, the unicorn wrinkled the silk dress with her crabby fidgeting. Heat practically radiated off her coat.

Silver Spoon gave her an odd look.

What’s your problem?

Sweetie Belle flattened her ears and turned away.

Okay, whatever. Be a grouchy weirdo if you want.

Luckily, nopony else had noticed Sweetie’s bad mood. Mother didn’t concede nor argue Silver’s point, but she did watch Rarity with brighter eyes than before. “Be that as it may, there’s still the matter of finding work in the first place. I’ve been off stage for over a year, after all.”

Rarity edged forward with an eager grin. “But if the opportunity came up?”

The answer was yes, and everypony at this table knew it. Yet, Mother still hesitated. Why?

Silver Spoon blinked as her mother glanced at her again.

It’s me.

The decision teetered on the fence, and only needed a light push from Silver Spoon. She really didn’t mind the alone time—she spent most of the day without her parents anyway—and job opportunities didn’t grow on trees.

Silver couldn’t smell any fine print in Rarity’s offer, nor any hint of expected restitution. However, that did not mean it was without debt. A debt owed by the entire family—if not a lifetime or a generation, then at least for a few semesters.

For Luna’s sake, it wasn’t enough that Sweetie Belle and her Blank Flank Brigade coasted through victory every other week? Now Silver had to be in Sweetie’s debt, too? Pride burned in Silver Spoon’s chest, spiteful and hot. Memories of the Manehattan opera house burned brighter.

Mother did like Ponyville. She transitioned into retirement with all the grace expected of a lady, and truly enjoyed helping new talent flourish. But the Silvers’ drawing room—despite the good acoustics—was no opera house.

Silver Spoon cleared her throat. “Do you know what I think, Miss Rarity? I think that when opportunities like these come up, one ought to take them.” To her mild surprise, Silver didn’t have to force a smile; it arrived on its own. “I’ll be fine, Mother. Really.”

“We could all come and see you on opening night,” added Sweetie Belle.
Mother steepled her hooves over the plate, deep in consideration. Finally, she raised her head. “Rarity,” she said, “did you have something in mind for me, perchance?”

The dishes rattled with Rarity’s little jump. “As a matter of fact, darling, I do!” All aglow, she clapped her hooves and bit back a giggle. “Now it happens that I’ve finished costumes designs for an associate of mine who’s planning a revival of *Ponyacchi* and…”

That sounded like the cue for the fillies to leave. Silver watched Brass Tacks’ magic lift away the empty plates, frowning. She huddled in her chair, quiet as a statue. Perhaps if she sat politely and didn’t attract attention, they could stay at the table.

“Silver Spoon, sweetest heart, why don’t you take Sweetie Belle and go play?” Mother glanced at Rarity, smiling as if they were doing Silver Spoon a favor.

“Yes,” chuckled Rarity, “I’m sure you two don’t want to sit around hearing boring business talk all evening.”

Sweetie Belle pulled out of her chair. Her eyes stayed on the ground. “Sure, okay.”

Again with the moping. Silver had real reasons to mope, but she still managed to put on a pleasant face. Her tail flicked Sweetie’s leg. “Come on, I’ll…” She glanced at the rosebushes. “…show you how to brew rose tea.”

Good hosts didn’t leave guests without something to do. That and Silver didn’t fancy the idea of Sweetie Belle running loose in a house full of breakables.

Sweetie Belle agreed to the idea with a nod. Her mouth twitched, sour and twisted up by unsaid words. She walked in tight, moody steps. Despite that, she followed Silver’s instructions and helped pick roses without complaint. Not even a squeak when a thorn poked her nose.

“All right, I think this is enough.” Silver nodded her approval at the two small piles of yellow roses at their hooves. Those looked like sharp thorns, however, and she didn’t favor the idea of carrying them in her mouth. “Is your magic strong enough to carry these to the kitchen?”

The sour expression curdled and Sweetie Belle braced her shoulders. “No. Not really.”

Oh well, worth a shot. Silver Spoon shrugged and carefully gathered her bundle of roses into her mouth. She arched an eyebrow. “What are you making that face for?”

“Nothing.” This, of course, meant the exact opposite.

Sweetie Belle grabbed her bunch of roses and followed Silver across the garden and into the house. The chill of late September eased into the warm, still air of the hallway. A bit hot for Silver’s sweater dress, but she’d be fine.

“All right, huh?” Silver Spoon smiled around the rose stems. “So, your face just naturally looks like you ate a stinkbug?”

Sweetie’s eyes snapped up. She glared.

It was a sharper glare than Silver expected, especially from the marshmallow. Silver’s tail gave a nervous flick. “Relax; it’s only a joke.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not very funny.”
Sweetie’s pace fell back behind Silver’s.

Silver didn’t need to look back to know the unicorn still followed her.

Hard, angry hoofsteps echoed through the foyer.

Clack, clack, clack.

Clack, clack, clack.

Clack.

Silence.

“Why do you always do that, Silver Spoon?” She said it softer than the ticking of the clock.

Silver looked back, yellow roses bobbing in her teeth. “Um…do wh—ow!” A thorn pricked her tongue. “Do what?”

Sweetie Belle spat the roses out. “You KNOW what!” Magic sparked from her horn, bright green and hot.

“I—hey! Watch where you point that thing!” Silver lurched back with a snort. “I don’t know what in Equestria you’re talking about. I didn’t do a single thing to you except try to be polite.”

Slowly, Silver Spoon put down her roses. She narrowed her eyes at Sweetie’s glowing horn. “And if you shoot magic in this house again, I’m telling.”

The glow faded.

“Look, I don’t know what Windigo frosted your corn flakes, but you need to quit taking it out on me.” Silver turned her nose in the air and sneered. “Excuse me for trying to be nice. It’s not like I took time out of my day to invite you into my—”

“Oh, shut UP, Silver Spoon!” Sweetie Belle’s voice pitched and cracked and squeaked like a broken clarinet. “I’m not stupid! Maybe you think I am, but I’m not!”

She snorted at Silver’s baffled expression. “Oh, come on. ‘Is your magic strong enough?’ ‘I’m not a baby because I have a cutie mark?’ And that mean stinkbug thing from a couple minutes ago?” Her white coat flushed an angry shade of pink. “Y-you’ve been trying to embarrass me all night. That’s the whole reason you even invited me—admit it!”

Silver Spoon rolled her eyes and bent down to get the roses. “Oh please, Sweetie Belle. That’s…”

She began to explain the stupidity of that accusation. She began to demand hard evidence, and wonder how self-centered a filly had to be to assume every little comment was about her. Silver began to brush off the whole thing as paranoia cooked up by an oversensitive filly with a victim complex.

But then Silver looked up again and grew quiet.

Tears glistened in Sweetie Belle’s eyes. She breathed hard, determined to keep them from falling.

Okay, back up. Start again, calmer this time.
“I’m sorry you’re upset, Sweetie Belle, but I wasn’t trying to make fun of you. I wanted to know if you could carry the roses ‘cause they’ve got thorns and I didn’t want to poke my mouth. It wasn’t like—”

Scootaloo. Silver frowned. She thought I was picking at her magic the same way we picked at Scootaloo’s wings. Oh, boy.

Silver sat down and bent her head to look Sweetie Belle in the eye. “It wasn’t like that, seriously. The thing about my cutie mark was about me, not you. I mean, if you’ve got a quicker way to convince my mother I can stay by myself, I’m all for it.” Gently, she laid a hoof on Sweetie’s shoulder to call a truce. “All I want is to get through tonight, same as you. That’s it. Okay?”

The tears dried up, thank goodness, but Sweetie’s cheeks still burned pink and splotchy. “Yeah, sure. And I’m supposed to believe you invited me over to be nice? You don’t even want me in your house.” She shrugged off Silver’s hoof with a hard sniff. “Twilight Time’s not happening, there’s nothing in it for you, and you hate me. There can’t be any other reason.”

For pony’s sake! Why did this filly need to make everything so darn difficult all the time? “Augh! For the last time, I did NOT invite you over to mock you!”

“Then why—”

The words tumbled out before Silver could stop them. “Because I HAVE TO, you stupid, stupid blank flank!”

Silver squeezed her eyes shut. She stomped the floor, embarrassed and outraged and horrified with herself, with Sweetie Belle, with everything. Decorum and logic told her to backtrack, calm down, and apologize. But Silver couldn’t backtrack now, didn’t know how to calm down, and didn’t want to apologize.

Sweetie Belle rubbed her nose and sat. She wrapped her tail around her hooves, giving Silver a suspicious squint. “What do you mean you ‘have’ to? Is somepony making you?”

“No exactly, but I still, like…have to. I told you before: I can’t uninvite you. It’s in the rules, so that’s the way it is.” Silver rubbed her hooves over her face, trying to realign herself. “Not everypony gets to run around breaking rules whenever they want, you know.”

Silver opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, waiting for a response.

It didn’t come.

When Silver’s heartbeat returned to normal, she added, “And I don’t hate you.”

Sweetie lashed her tail, still suspicious, but the fire had gone out of her eyes. “Well, okay…maybe. But it’s not like you can blame me, Silver Spoon. You guys mess with us all the time; how was I supposed to know this time would be different?”

Slowly, carefully, Silver gathered the roses into her mouth. “No offense, but I don’t need to set up a fancy dinner just to laugh at you, Sweetie Belle. Besides, nopony else is here. Who am I going to embarrass you in front of? My mother?” She froze.

Mother. Oh no.

“What’s the matter?” Sweetie Belle lifted an eyebrow.
“Please don’t tell Mother I yelled at you, Sweetie Belle.” Silver stared up at her guest, ears plastered flat against her mane. “Please? Please? You gotta understand, I didn’t mean—it’s…you jumped down my throat and I got upset for a second.”

Sweetie’s curly tail flicked across the hardwood. She stared back, blank and unreadable.

“Please, she can’t know! Not after what Rarity did for her—not when we’re in her debt.” Silver Spoon’s bottom lip wobbled. “She’d be so disappointed.”

The clock rang seven. As the seventh chime faded, Sweetie sighed. “I wasn’t going to, Silver Spoon. I like Pitch Perfect too; I don’t wanna upset her either.” Green, wobbly magic gathered her share of roses back into their bundle. “Rarity didn’t do that so you’d owe her, though. She wanted to be nice—you know, Element of Generosity?” She chuckled. “It’s kind of what she does.”

If anything, that made it worse, but Silver felt too tired to try and explain. It’d probably be pointless anyway. “It’s getting late. We’d better hurry with the tea.”

“Okay.” Sweetie grabbed her half of yellow roses and followed.

By the time they reached the kitchen, the tension and rotten mood seemed to have dissipated. Not completely, but enough to be civil. The fillies stuck to safe, customary topics nopony cared about, pretending the drama of the past ten minutes never happened.

Sweetie set her roses next to Silver’s on the counter, already peering into cabinets for supplies. “Okay, so what first? It’s just tea, so we just like…gotta get some water in a teapot and put petals in it, right?”

Silver bristled at “just tea,” but tried not to show it. “Teapots come later. While you’re in there, get the little saucepan on your left and put two cups of water in it.” She fetched a colander from the drawer and placed it over the double sink. “I’ll pluck and clean the petals. We’ll go on from there.”

“Why are we using a saucepan for tea?” Sweetie bore the copper pan above her head, peering inside. “I thought you used a kettle.”

Around a mouth full of petals, Silver muttered, “Saucepan’s bigger.” A lot more went into it than that, but the condensed version would have to do. Her tail pointed at the drawer next to her. “Cups are in there.”

“Okay.” Water gushed into the first cup, then the second. Carefully, Sweetie Belle poured them both into the saucepot. With nothing left to occupy her hooves, she turned her attention towards Silver’s plucking. “Need any help with that?”

She didn’t, but Silver nodded anyway. “If you want, you can put the petals in the colander.”

Slowly, Sweetie’s magic lifted five petals from the plate. They hovered in the air a moment, their edges fluttering in the green glow of her horn. “So…um. You really don’t hate me?” The petals dropped into the colander.

Silver looked up to see Sweetie’s tentative expression. She tossed aside a bare stem and blinked at her. “No, of course not.”

Sweetie Belle flicked her ears and smiled. “I just don’t like you.”
“Hey!”

Her umbrage rolled off Silver’s back like bathwater. She shrugged. “Don’t know what your problem is; you don’t like me either. Ponies don’t like each other sometimes. It’s like, whatever.”

Silver finished stripping the rose and checked her progress. More than halfway through the pile, good. “Besides, you can’t honestly expect me to like you after all that stuff you did.”

“What?!” Sweetie spun around, dress flaring at her heels. “I—but—you—the stuff I did?!”

“Uh, yeah.” Silver stripped another rose. “Stuff you did.” Maintaining civility was important, but she would not be guilted into a senseless apology. “Don’t pull that innocent victim act on me, Miss Sweetie Belle. You’re the one who fell in with ruffians and troublemakers.” She spat out a mouthful of petals. “You started it.”

“I started it?! Are you insane?”

“Inside voices, please.”

“Who’s the one that’s been laughing at us for two years straight, Silver Spoon? Who’s been calling me a blank flank and constantly picking on me every single day?”

“No pony likes drama queens, Sweetie Belle. You are a blank flank, unless you got a cutie mark in invisibility. I never said anything that’s not true—and yeah, as a matter of fact, you DID start it.”

Silver tore another mouthful of petals and dropped them in the colander herself. “You want to talk? Let’s talk about ponies who go out of their way to embarrass somepony at their own cuteceañera, Sweetie Belle. No pony says one unkind thing to you—not one thing—all week and you decide to ruin the only cuteceañera somepony ever gets.”

“Well, we had to do something! Diamond Tiara was about to rip poor Apple Bloom apart!” Again with the dramatics. Sweetie Belle saw Silver’s eyeroll and wrinkled her nose with a snort. “We saw you guys about to pounce on her. You were being mean, the way you’re always mean to ponies you don’t like.”

“Right, and Apple Bloom rubbed her fake loopty-hooping cutie mark in our faces to be nice, I suppose.” Silver polished off the last clutch of rose petals with a hollow laugh. “No pony minds when she’s a liar and a showoff, but oh, it’s suddenly bad when Diamond does it for her acrobatics act?”

“You mean her butler’s acrobatics act,” sniffed Sweetie Belle. “She sat on her butt and didn’t do squat.” She side-glanced the copper saucepan. “Like always...”

Silver’s mouth drew into a taut, grim line. Slowly, she turned around. “Diamond Tiara,” she said, “works harder than you and the Crusaders and the entire school put together. She does more in an hour than most ponies do in a week.”

The faucet turned on with a flip of Silver’s muzzle. Petals jerked and sloshed under the water. “I’ve seen Di run her tail ragged getting up before sunrise to practice for hours and hours and hours to win. She puts everything into what she does every single time.” Silver clenched her teeth and shook the colander hard. “And every time, you guys crash in and win without even trying. Of course Diamond didn’t do those flips herself—whenever she does anything, you ruin it! You wreck everything you touch and everyone throws you a parade!”

Sweetie Belle leaned on the counter and crossed her hooves. “Then I guess I’m the one who needs glasses, ’cause the only parades I ever see are for you. You and Diamond Tiara have half the school
drooling at your hooves for being rich and popular. Not because you’re nice or funny or help ponies—no, it’s because you think you’re better than everypony else.”

When the faucet turned off, Sweetie grabbed the colander and dumped the petals in the saucepan. “You’re the meanest fillies in school and everypony—for some reason—still loves you for it. You wanna tell me that’s fair, Silver?”

Silver put a hoof to her chest and scoffed. “I am not mean!”

Mean was Bankroll tripping the scholarship kindergarteners into puddles. Mean was Palanquin pulling a Foxglove Maneuver on Brights Brightly at the Spring Social. Mean was leagues and leagues away from some light teasing every now and then.

“Yes, we poke fun at ponies once in a while—who doesn’t?” Under her breath, Silver added, “It’s not like you don’t deserve it most of the time…”

Sweetie Belle’s ears shot into the air. She hooked her hooves over the saucepan, nose to nose with Silver Spoon. She gave her a long, hard stare. “So you called Scootaloo worthless for not being able to fly because she deserved it?”

“That—that’s not what we said.”

“Yeah, we poke fun at ponies once in a while—who doesn’t?” Under her breath, Silver added, “It’s not like you don’t deserve it most of the time…”

Sweetie Belle’s ears shot into the air. She hooked her hooves over the saucepan, nose to nose with Silver Spoon. She gave her a long, hard stare. “So you called Scootaloo worthless for not being able to fly because she deserved it?”

“That—that’s not what we said.”

“It’s what you meant.”

Silver Spoon’s ears drooped. “No, but…” Her eyes flicked up.

Sweetie Belle’s glare seared.

Silver’s eyes darted away. “I didn’t mean she deserved it that time. That was different.” She rested her chin on the rim of the saucepan, breathing in the scent of copper and roses. “You pushed us. We saw your routine and we got so—nervous.” Silver wrapped her tail close and dragged her gaze upwards. “We got nervous…and, yeah. We did something mean.”

“And for no good reason, either.” The glare softened, but didn’t vanish. “I get nervous all the time, Silver Spoon, but I never tried to hurt anypony because of—” She paused. Sweetie Belle sighed, and all the tension slumped out of her shoulders. “Actually…maybe I can understand that. A little.”

“How?” Silver gripped the side of the saucepan and considered the Crusader in her kitchen. “What did you do?”

Sweetie Belle sprawled on the tile, one hoof on the saucepan handle. “Remember that play me and my friends did a few weeks ago?”

“…No?”

“It was about three princesses in olden-times?”

Silver Spoon blinked.

“It starred all three of us, and Apple Bloom played a grand duchess?”

“Like, literally no clue.”

Sweetie Belle rubbed her temples. “It had nice costumes…?”

“Oh!” cried Silver. “Oh, right! Peachy Pie told me about those costumes at tea the other day. I didn’t
“Yeah, neither did anypony else. I wrote and directed the whole thing. I even starred in the leading role.” A bitter and spiteful cloud crossed the unicorn’s features—there and gone in a blink.

Silver knew that expression well.

“I did all that work, but everypony only cared about Rarity’s costumes.” She scratched the back of her neck. “I got really, really super mad and ruined a costume Rarity made for Sapphire Shores to get back at her.”

**Wait. Did she say Sapphire Shores?**

Silver knew Rarity’s business had found success, but she had no idea it had attracted the likes of The Pony of Pop. Sweetie Belle namedropped her so casually, too. Did she not know what a big deal Shores was, or did this type of thing happen all the time?

“So, what happened?”

“Nothing.” Sweetie rose to her hooves and smoothed out her dress. “I fixed it before anything bad happened.”

It sounded like that story had a lot more to it than that, but Silver decided not to pursue. “Good thing you did. Rarity’s a nice pony, I’m sure she didn’t mean to show you up.” She grabbed one of the saucepan handles. “Can you help me get this on the stove?”

Sweetie nodded and got the other side. “Scootaloo’s a nice pony too, Silver Spoon. It’s not like we’re out to get you, you know.” Together, they slowly lifted the pan and pushed it onto the stovetop. “Uh…I’m not allowed to use the stove anymore. You’ll have to do this part.”

“We’re just boiling water, it’s perfectly…” Silver reconsidered the Crusaders’ disaster record. “I’ll get it.” Five minutes to boil ought to do it. She adjusted the temperature and let the stove heat.

Silver Spoon sat on a stepstool, keeping an eye on the pot. “Anyway, the flag thing’s not the same. We’re supposed to show each other up in a competition. We—I—knew a winning routine when I saw one. Scootaloo being nice or mean didn’t have anything to do with it.”

Sweetie shuffled her hooves, perhaps calculating the chances of another fight. “Then what did?”

“Stakes. We couldn’t lose that time.” Silver closed her eyes and let her head thunk against the counter. “Didn’t matter in the end. You guys still won.” She couldn’t help the ice crawling into her voice. “Like always.”

“That still doesn’t make it okay,” said Sweetie Belle. “It’s only a competition, anyway.”

One eye opened. “Easy for you to say.”

The unicorn snorted. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“No offence, Miss Sweetie Belle, but if you lost the flag, then who cares? You can bounce right back and go into a game of hockeyball or whatever like it’s no big deal—“

Sweetie tilted her head. “...hockeyball?”

—but ponies like Diamond and me have so many ponies to answer to.” Silver’s hoof stretched toward the foyer. “You’ve seen those portraits in the hallway, right? That’s every single pony I have
to live up to. I’ve got standards to uphold. A legacy.”

“Oh,” said Sweetie Belle.

Not a shocked “oh”. Not an “oh” of understanding or regret or hesitation or confusion. An “oh” of observation. The blanest of bland responses. She blinked back at Silver, not unsympathetic, but wholly unimpressed.

Silver pursed her lips. She hadn’t expected tears of sympathy, but she deserved more than a simple ‘oh’. Lashing her tail, she turned back to the saucepan. “I knew you wouldn’t get it.”

A flat laugh. “You are so conceited, Silver Spoon.”

Silver’s jaw dropped.

“You heard me. What, you think you and Diamond Tiara are the only ponies in town without anypony to disappoint?”

Sweetie laughed again. “Have you SEEN my sister? You know my sister, right? The sensational seamstress, the brilliant fashion designer, the most elegant unicorn in the history of ever? A pony that’s saved Equestria—” she paused to count. “Three times by now? Rarity’s off all the time being amazing and I’m…here in Ponyville.”

The nagging sensation Silver had felt in Princess Twilight’s library came back. Stronger this time. The feeling that she’d overlooked something. Something huge. Silver Spoon tread lightly. “Maybe, but nopony expects you to—”

“Exactly!” Sweetie stamped her hoof with a clack. “She’s Rarity, the Element of Generosity and I’m just…just some dumb kid with a blank flank.” She sniffed wetly. “You’re right, Silver. Nopony cares what I do, even though I try all the time to stand out and be the cool, pretty one for once.” She kicked the cabinet, but it didn’t make a sound. “I’m invisible and it stinks.”

Silver Spoon didn’t find much to say to that. “Yes,” she said. “When you put it that way, I suppose it would.”

A loose thread in Sweetie’s tirade nagged at Silver’s mind. A thread slowly unwinding, leading her to a place she should have been ages ago.

If Miss Rarity worked with Sapphire Shores, her outreach had to be huge. At dinner, she’d mentioned attending Prince Blueblood’s airship christening with Mr. Fancy Pants. From what she’d heard, that came from personal reputation and nothing to do with wielding the Element of Generosity.

The pieces snapped together.

Oh. Oh, Celestia.

Element of Generosity. Best friend to Princess Twilight Sparkle. That was how Sweetie Belle got into Twilight Time.

I’m an idiot.

The room lurched. Horrified, Silver Spoon stared blankly at Sweetie Belle, who stared back, perplexed.
Sweetie Belle, sister to Princess Twilight Sparkle’s best friend. Princess Twilight, personal student to Princess Celestia herself.

And not only Sweetie Belle. It was all of them: Apple Bloom, sister of the Element of Honesty. Scootaloo, so close to Loyalty they may as well be blood.

The Cutie Mark Crusaders didn’t just have connections. They had THE connections. The best in Ponyville. Maybe the best in Equestria.

*I’m the* biggest idiot.

“Silver Spoon? I think it’s ready.”

“What?” Water bubbled under Silver’s nose. “Oh!” She turned the stove off, squinting through the steam. No harm done, thank goodness.

Sweetie Belle tossed Silver an oven mitt. “Are you okay? You looked kinda out of it.”

“No, I’m fine. I got distracted.” She offered a watery smile. “Alright, so the tea’s done. Now we transfer it.” Silver gestured toward the jade teapot waiting on the counter, pre-set with cups and saucers. “Careful, this scalds.”

Silver Spoon managed the front of the saucepan while Sweetie Belle lifted the back. Carefully, slowly, they tipped the saucepan and let the tea strain into the jade pot.

As the last of it dripped in, Sweetie closed her eyes and inhaled. “Wow, Rarity’s gonna love this! I don’t think she’s ever had this kind of tea before, either.” Her green eyes flicked up to Silver Spoon. She frowned. “You sure you’re okay? I thought you loved making tea.”

She must have started brooding again. The watery smile returned. Silver forced it wider. It wouldn’t do to be quiet around company. “Oh, I do. You did a lovely job helping me, by the way. Thanks, Sweetie Belle.”

“You’re welcome.” Sweetie smiled back, but it didn’t last. “Um…not that I mind you being nice to me, Silver Spoon, but…” She fussed with the collar of her dress and chewed her lip. “We don’t need to be friends just because you think you owe me.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Sweetie Belle. Of course I want to.”

Something brushed against Silver’s hoof. A stray rose petal hadn’t made it into the tea. Silver gave it a quick sniff and popped it into her mouth. “It’s fine, really.”

“Yeah, alright,” sighed Sweetie. She rocked back on her heels, watching Silver chew. A slow grin crawled across her face.

The unicorn gasped and leapt backward. “Oh my gosh, Silver Spoon!” She pointed a shaking hoof at the teapot. “Oh my gosh!”

“What?” Was it the tea? Silver checked the jade pot for cracks or chips. She couldn’t see anything wrong. Nothing weird with the stove, either. “What is it?!”

“I can’t believe it!” She grabbed Silver’s shoulders with both hooves and pulled her close. “You totally saved my life just now!”

“I…” Alarm faded into confusion. “…I don’t…what?”
“That one rose petal you ate was poison, but you ate it before it went in the tea. You saved me!”

Silver rolled her eyes. “Come on. Roses aren’t poisonous.”

“That one petal was.” Sweetie barely kept the laughter from her voice. “Actually, since that tea was for Rarity too, I guess you saved both our lives!”

“Why that one petal and not the whole rose?”

“That one fell on the floor where all the germs are.” The unicorn nodded soberly. “Also, a witch cursed it.”

How a witch managed to even get inside the house—presuming that witches even existed (they did not)—much less curse Silver’s rose petals raised even more questions. Silver’s gut said that Sweetie Belle had answers for all of them.

“Okay, so a witch did it. Apparently.” Stone faced, Silver Spoon peered over the rim of her glasses. “How come I’m not dead if it’s poison?”

“Because…um…it’s your rose!” Sweetie Belle beamed, quite proud of her answer. “You raised it, so it doesn’t wanna hurt you.”

“You’re making this up as you go.”

“Nuh-uh!” squeaked Sweetie Belle. “I know it’s true ‘cause unicorn powers are good with poisons.” With all the confidence of a Canterlot councilmare, she puffed her chest in triumph. “If you’re so sure, prove it wasn’t poison.”

“I can’t, I ate it!”

“Exactly. You saved my life. Now you don’t owe me anymore.” Sweetie Belle giggled and bumped Silver’s shoulder. “See?”

“I think I’m starting to.” The façade broke. Silver shook her head and laughed. “Fine, fine. I saved your life.”

“And we’re eternally grateful.” Sweetie Belle poked the edge of the silver tea tray. “By the way, how’re we supposed to carry this all the way to—”

In one fluid motion, Silver Spoon rolled the tray onto her shoulders, tea, sugar bowl, and all. “I got it.” She checked her hair in the reflection of the saucepan and trotted out the door.

Sweetie trailed her into the foyer with wide eyes. Mesmerized, she watched the smooth roll and bob of the tea tray balanced on Silver’s shoulder blades. The tea cups didn’t even rattle. She glanced between the jade teapot and the prim, clipped pace of Silver’s hooves. “How are you doing that?”

Silver Spoon allowed herself a proud smile. “Talent, of course.”

“Oh, of course.” Sweetie Belle huffed, but a smile lurked beneath. “What was I thinking?”

As the garden drew closer, a silence fell between them. A draft swept through the open doors and into the hall. Their dresses rippled and snapped at their hooves.

When they reached the double doors, Sweetie paused. “Hey, so…are we still enemies, or…like, what?”
Silver Spoon thought about it. “I’m not sure.”

They weren’t friends, she knew that for certain. However, when Silver searched for that familiar smolder of resentment, she couldn’t find it. No prickling stabs of annoyance. No oily disdain. Not much of anything.

“Hm.” Silver flicked her ears. “You know what? I don’t think we are.”

“Then what are we?”

Silver shrugged.

Water spots and wrinkles mussed the edge of Sweetie’s dinner dress. She’d picked up a weird grease stain from somewhere—probably when she’d sprawled on the floor. In her own weird, dorky way, it actually suited her better.

“Maybe we’re not anything,” said Sweetie Belle. “Maybe we just…are.”

Silver stepped into the starlit garden and smiled. “Yes, that sounds about right. We just are.”
"Seriously?" Diamond Tiara hooked her hooves over the picket fence and stared in disbelief. "You've been here by yourself all week?"

Silver glanced up from watering her roses. "Almost. Mother and Father were here for my birthday on Sunday, and Father's coming back this afternoon, but it's just been me most of the week, yeah. Me and Tacks."

"Yeah, but he's your butler, that's different. Butlers do what you say, not the other way around." Somehow, Silver got the feeling Diamond dealt with a different variety of butlers. "Besides, yours is so low profile you might as well be alone, except somepony still makes you dinner and waxes the floor." She propped her chin on the edge of the fence with a wistful sigh. "Some fillies get all the luck. You could do whatever you wanted for days."

"Oh?" Silver paused to pluck a withered rose petal. She popped it into her mouth and tilted her ears curiously. "Like what?"

"Wha—I—you—seriously?!!" Diamond thrust her hooves into the air, sputtering and stuttering over her words like a faulty record player. "Like wh—like anything, Silver Spoon! Come on, use that nerd brain of yours. You've got a blank check to do anything you wanna do whenever you wanna do it! How are you not getting this?!"

"No, I get it," said Silver, who still kind of didn't. "But it's still the same house with the same stuff." She glanced back at her cozy white walls and crawling ivy. "There's not that much to do alone I can't do otherwise. Right?"

"For pony's sake, Silver Spoon, think outside the box. There's TONS you could do, like…um…eat jelly beans for breakfast! Or you could go to bed after midnight, or go out whenever you wanted to buy candy and then you could eat lemon drops until the sun came up. Maybe you could even decide not to go to school one day and sleep until noon or….or… Oh, I dunno, it's your house, you know more than me about it." Diamond's hooves came down with an exasperated clack. "Sheesh, Silvie, don't tell me you didn't do anything all week!"

"For your information, I did plenty." Silver tossed her braid over her shoulder and jutted her chin. "On Tuesday, I ate three croissants instead of one with my tea and I ate them in the drawing room."


"Well, I…" Darn it, what else did she do this week? "I also decided to practice the harpsichord on Wednesday!"

"…so you're saying you did exactly what you're supposed to do, but four days early."

Silver frowned. "Well, when you put it that way…" She wrinkled her nose at Diamond's pitying head shake. "Di, the only thing that'll happen if I do something crazy is nopony will trust me on my own anymore. Plus, Brass Tacks is still here, and it's not like he's blind."

As if on cue, the attic window swung open, and a thin, brown unicorn stretched his neck into the fresh air.

"Hello, Tacks!" called Silver Spoon.
Diamond offered a limp wave.

The Silvers' butler gave them both the briefest of nods, but kept his blue gaze upon the Ponyville skyline. His tall ears stood erect and still. Even from a distance, Silver noticed the odd expression on his face: so stern and grim. It didn't suit such a pretty day at all. He had been this way since he tucked Silver into bed last night.

"He keeps watching the sky. I bet he's looking for the mail." Silver Spoon glanced at the mailbox by the gate. "It didn't show up yesterday."

Whatever Tacks waited on must have been very important. Silver hadn't seen him this grave since that minor crime wave swept Lower Manehattan a few years ago. It couldn't be anything as serious as that, though. He would have said something by now, or else shadowed her from breakfast to bedtime. During the money crisis, Silver couldn't brush her teeth without him fussing.

"Yeah, we didn't get ours either." Diamond shrugged. "Mother thinks that The Dink's mom lost it in a cross breeze."

"I don't think so," said Silver Spoon. "The Dink told me her mom's visiting relatives in Cloudsdale this weekend." She cradled a droopy rose in her hooves, debating the effort of saving it or not. "Something got tied up somewhere, I guess."

Diamond's tail swished impatiently. "Whatever, it doesn't matter. You said your dad's not home until late this afternoon, right?" A mischievous smile quirked at Silver's nod. "Let's do something fun."

That sounded an awful lot like "let's get into trouble" from Silver's side of the fence. "What kind of fun did you have in mind, Di?"

"Something way better than doing chores all Saturday, that's for sure."

Silver Spoon laughed despite herself. You're making it up as you go along, aren't you? Even if she didn't entirely trust the roguish gleam in her friend's eye, it'd be nice to stretch her legs for a while.

"Okay, but nothing too crazy."

"Silvie, please. When have I ever suggested something crazy?" asked Diamond Tiara, who'd literally suggested eating jelly beans for breakfast two minutes ago.

"I can't imagine." Silver let the droopy rose fall back into place. Nothing had wilted or turned brown yet; she could give it a few days to come back. She flicked water off her hooves and headed for the gate. "I'll be back a little later, Tacks."

Brass Tacks spun on his heel. "Where are you going, Silver Spoon?"

He asked—no, demanded—in such a sharp tone, Silver paused in mid-step. "I'm only going into town. You know, the square and shops and stuff?" She glanced between the garden gate and Diamond's impatient hoof tap. "Brass Tacks, it's Saturday, remember? I finished all my homework already."

"Yes, I remember." All the muscles in the unicorn's neck tensed. He pressed against the window ledge as if he intended to jump down all three stories and follow them. "When do you intend to return?"

"I don't know…" Midway through the sentence, Silver realized that was an unacceptable answer. "Around four or five, when Father's train arrives, I guess."
Silver's eyes lingered on Brass Tacks' hooves digging into the wood. "Is there some reason I shouldn't go, Tacks?"

"Why would there be?" Diamond Tiara rocked against the fence, half-leaning over the edge. "You've done everything you had to do and been freakishly well behaved all week—seriously, who decides to practice harpsichord early—you oughta go wherever you want." She fluttered her innocent baby blues at Tacks. "Your parents trust you on your own, so if he stopped you, it'd be kind of like stepping on their hooves."

Brass Tacks lashed his white tail and ignored her. "Not a particular reason, no. None that I know of." His eyes flicked up to the clear, tranquil sky. Not so much as a stray pegasus feather, yet he frowned all the same. "However, I strongly advise you to remain watchful today, Young Miss Silver Spoon."

Silver Spoon frowned back. "Why?"

After a brief moment to gather a proper response, Brass Tacks met her gaze. "The sun rose an hour late," he gently said. "Have a good time in Ponyville, but return before five. Do we understand each other, Miss Silver?"

"Home before five." Best to make it home before four-thirty, to be safe. Silver waved to her butler as she left the gate. 'I promise. Bye, Tacks."

"There, you see? Even Princess Celestia takes a break sometimes." Diamond's tail beckoned Silver to her side and they set on down the path. She smiled and nodded to herself. "I bet she slept in. Dad says she does that sometimes, especially when the leaves get ready to fall."

Across the street, Sweetie Belle stepped out of Davenport's. She waved her hooves, trying to direct her parents as they backed out of the store, balancing a new loveseat between them. "Okay, a little to the left, Mom… careful, caaaareful. Good. Okay, now it's—oh hi, Silver Spoon—it's a little farther to the cart, Dad. You got it!"

"Hello, Sweetie Belle." Silver smiled and breezed back into the conversation, as if they'd only met Cotton, Dinky, or Twist. "Diamond, the Running of the Leaves isn't for another three weeks."

"It's not an exact date. I said it's around the time the leaves fall." Her gaze skipped from Sweetie to Silver to Sweetie again. A mild sneer crossed Diamond's face. "What's with the buddy-buddy act?"

Silver tilted her head and cast her best I'm-ever-so-sure-I-don't-know-what-you-mean face.

"Don't get cute; I've seen it happening all week between you and the Goofsaders. Something's going on." Diamond Tiara narrowed her eyes. "Are you planning something and not telling me? If it's a prank, you've got to let me in on it."

"It's not a prank, Di. It's nothing. Really."

Darn it, she should have walked on and ignored Sweetie Belle. She should have said hello to all three unicorns and masked it under standard etiquette. Silver Spoon knew this conversation had to happen eventually, but did it have to be now?

"Oh, it's definitely something. Something happened at that dinner of yours didn't it?"

For once, the two fillies cut across Saturday's market square with ease. The usual stands were up and running, but the minimal crowd offered plenty of space. No crowds to fight through, but none to shelter behind, either.
"Nothing to do but come out and say it. "Sweetie Belle and I have agreed to a truce."

"Wait, what? Why didn't you say anything? What kind of truce?" Diamond's suspicious frown deepened, but she didn't flatten her ears or raise her voice. Not yet, anyway. "What happened?"

"I wanted to wait and see how it worked out before I told you." Encouraged by a lack of shocked disbelief or screams of betrayal, Silver pressed on. "Sweetie Belle and I talked after dinner, and we came to an understanding. Cleared some bad air between us, that's all."

Silver jumped to the point before Di could ask for details. "Diamond Tiara, we can't keep up this feud with the Crusaders anymore. I know I've said it before, but I really mean it this time. We have to drop it and make peace." She stepped closer and frowned to show she meant business. "We have to."

Diamond snorted. "Oh, so we let them walk all over us and straight over the finish line?" Her volume slowly climbed past the safe point. "You're telling me we're just supposed to—"

"They can't win if it's not a competition, and they won't win if we don't goad them into competing."

Did that second part imply fault on Diamond's part? Silver hoped not; she had enough to handle as it was.

"Listen, I'm not saying we all need to be friends. I'm not even saying we need to fake nice with them. All I'm saying is that we stay out of each other's manes from now on." Silver shrugged with a placating smile. "We don't like each other anyway. Why waste our valuable time on them?"

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon rounded the Golden Oaks Library. In the window, a fluffy little owl perched atop a globe. It had its head tucked under its wing, but when Silver went for a closer look, it opened an eye at her.

All the lights were off; Princess Twilight Sparkle must have taken a lunch break. But no, she would have left her dragon friend behind to look after the library, right? No sign saying when the library would open up, either, just an open book return beside the door. Weird.

Diamond's reflection appeared beside Silver's in the window. "You're not answering me, Silver Spoon. What happened?" She sucked her teeth and rephrased the question. "No, what changed? I know you, Silver. You don't backpedal this hard unless you've got a solid reason. What aren't you telling me?"

Diamond must have noticed the nervous twitch in her ears, because after a moment, she added, "I won't get mad."

A phrase that, in Silver's experience, always meant the exact opposite. Treading lightly wouldn't work with Diamond on edge. She could only hope to offer a logical appeal. "I realized something last week. Sweetie Belle, Apple Bloom, and Scootaloo have connections. Like, really good connections. Their sisters are best friends with the newest princess, but even on their own, they've got tons of influence. Either one of us has more money than all their sisters put together, but they... they're stronger than us."

Diamond Tiara gave a disdainful sniff. "That's something cowards say, Silver Spoon. Cowards back out as soon as things get tough—and that's what it really is, isn't it?" She glowered at the library and trotted on at double speed, leaving it to Silver to catch up. "You're just scared of them 'cause of their families. Well, I'm not. I'm—"

Silver closed the distance in a sprint. "What you're doing is throwing rocks at a hornet's nest,
Diamond!" She dashed ahead, hopped a flower bed, and swung about to land in the middle of Diamond's path.

Diamond pinned her ears back and stomped.

The earth dug deep into the caulkins of Silver's shoes. She didn't budge. "We've been lucky so far. Nopony's noticed or said anything—yet—but what happens when Apple Bloom tells Applejack that you've been on her case? I'm sure she's already watching us, Di, I've seen her."

"Yeah, so?"

"So, what do you think is going to happen if Applejack or Granny Smith goes to your dad about it? Because that'll be the first place they'll go."

Something like alarm shadowed Diamond Tiara's face, there and gone in an exhale. Her tongue ran across the edge of her teeth, ready to counterattack, but it didn't come. Diamond stepped around Silver and moved on at a slow walk.

"Do the other two blank flanks know about your little truce?"

Okay, she'd broken ground. Good. "I'm not sure," Silver admitted. "I haven't actually talked to Sweetie Belle since the dinner, but I've noticed Scootaloo's stopped shooting us nasty looks all the time." That probably had less to do with a truce, and more to do with the Crusaders having a new project, but…details.

"I don't like it, Silver. It sounds like we're giving up without a fight." She didn't look at Silver when she met her at the shoulder, but kept her eyes fixed on the crowd of ponies milling around the train station ahead. "I'm not letting Apple Bloom stomp all over me again just 'cause Applejack's some big important hero or whatever. If she comes at me again—"

"IF she comes at us again, we'll fight back. If we have to." Silver laid a hoof upon Diamond's withers. "It's a truce, not a surrender."

Diamond closed her eyes and sighed. "Then why does it feel that way?"

Silver Spoon couldn't answer that. "All I'm saying is we don't need to start anything. We leave them alone, they leave us alone. Simple as that." She smiled. "We're fillies moving up in the world, right? We don't have time to worry about whatever nonsense Bloom's wrecking crew is up to. Besides, this truce was technically your idea in the first place."

"Mm. I guess…." Diamond didn't smile back, but she didn't scowl either. "I guess if they mind their own stupid blank flank stupid business that'd be okay. I guess."

Silver Spoon held her hoof out. "So, truce?"

Slowly, Diamond took it. She thought on it a moment, nodded to herself, and shook. "Truce. Like, it's a dead weight loss, right?"

"Right."

The crowd at the station had grown larger. Silver couldn't ever recall it being this crowded. Or this calm. Nopony pushed against the tide of bodies to get where they needed to go, because nopony was going anywhere. They didn't meet anypony at the station or hail cabs or walk to other destinations. Travelers parked themselves on benches and idled by the post, preparing for a long wait. No smoke trailed from the engine's smokestacks.
Curious, they trotted closer for a better look. Silver craned her neck back to stare at the growing mass of travelers. She and Diamond climbed onto the platform, pressing close to the wall to avoid getting stepped on.

"I've been thinking about something else Sweetie Belle said to me that night." A few feet away, a stallion in a paisley jacket and striped fedora read a newspaper. Without any effort at all, Silver Spoon found nineteen ways to insult that outfit. "Di, are we mean?"

"Mean?" Diamond Tiara tilted her head and blinked. "Nah, we're only—hey!" She ducked to avoid a swinging briefcase. "Watch it!"

The offending pony hadn't even stopped to apologize! Rude. Silver Spoon glared, hoping the sheer force of her indignation might inspire some modicum of manners. "Ugh, what is with this place today?"

Diamond checked her tiara for damage. "I heard somepony mention some sort of conference happening in Manehattan. Maybe it's a pit stop on the way to that?"

"Lot of ponies for one conference." They also looked too put out for a routine pit stop.

Silver stretched on her back legs to keep glaring at the rude pony. He weaved around the stallion with the paisley suit and shoved past a mare with a golden coat. The mare stopped glaring at her watch to glare at the offending stallion and grumbled something. Silver couldn't see her face, but she couldn't mistake those shots of lavender streaking through the pink power hair.

"Hey, Di?" Without looking away, Silver patted her friend's hoof. "This is going to sound crazy, but I think I see Golden Glitter. By the conductor, see?"

"What?!" Diamond took a running leap onto a bench, ignoring the glares of the ponies already sitting there. Ears flicking faster than a telegraph, she followed Silver's line of sight. "Oh my gosh. I think you're right, Silvie."

The mare shifted on her hooves at the edge of the platform, holding her purse close to her chest. Green rectangular sunglasses hid her eyes as she stared holes into the train window.

"You sure?" This mare certainly looked the part, but the tense posture and flighty flick of her ears didn't resemble the loose confidence Silver had seen at Wisteria.

"Positive. Mom!" Diamond stretched as tall as she could and waved her forelegs in the air. "Hey, Mom! Over here, it's me!"

Golden Glitter pivoted so hard, her hooves scraped the wood finish. "Diamond Tiara?" As she zeroed in on them, her polished smile lit the train station. The anxious, impatient mare vanished entirely. Golden's laughter sparked wild and bright and joyous. "Ha, Diamond Tiara!" She raised a hoof as Diamond started to climb from the bench. "No, no, stay there. I'll come to you."

Silver followed Golden's haircut slicing through the crowd. "What's she doing here? She didn't say anything about visiting, right?" If so, Silver never would have heard the end of it.

"Um, it's called a surprise? Duh." Diamond's tail waved in a show mare's flourish. "You don't know my mom, Silvie. She's got more flash and style than all of Bridleway and Applewood put together. I bet she wanted to make an even bigger entrance, but we ran into her before she got the chance."

"But why?" asked Silver Spoon. "It's awfully sudden."
Diamond waved again, just in case Golden had forgotten where she was. "She probably came for my birthday."

"Um. Your birthday was last month, though."

Diamond's tail flicked Silver on the nose. "Details. Ever since *Hinny of the Hills* took off, I bet she's been super busy with her big star clients."

"Oh, but none of them bigger than you!" Golden's hooves wrapped around Diamond Tiara's barrel and lifted her into the air. She rose only a few inches before Golden set her down again and opted for a nuzzle instead. "Oof—literally. Diamond, I swear you're ten inches taller every time I see you!" She laughed and kissed the soft curls around her daughter's ears. "What, did you start eating the Apples' plant food?"

Diamond Tiara wrinkled her nose and blew a raspberry. "Ew, no!"

"No?" Golden Glitter drew back and rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Hmm. Well, then I suppose natural fabulousness must make pretty fillies grow faster. It's the only explanation. C'mere." She tilted her daughter's chin upwards and planted another kiss on the tip of her nose. "I missed you, princess."

"Yeah." Diamond buried her smile against her mother's silk ascot. "Me too, Mom."

Silver stepped into their circle quietly, not wanting to intrude on the moment. "Hello again, Miss Golden Glitter."

"Hey, great to see you, Silver Spoon!" Despite the long train ride, she still smelled of new carriages. She gave Silver one of her firm, professional hoofshakes. "Still fighting the good fight?"

"As always. How's Pot Luck doing?" Not that Silver cared, but an adult hoofshake demanded adult small talk.

Diamond tugged her mother's sleeve, trying to steer her towards the road. "The town's changed a lot since the last time you were here, Mom."

Beyond the train station, a few passersby had stopped to observe the happy reunion. Silver noticed Berry Punch, Minuette, and White Lightning among them and whispering to each other. None of them smiled, though Minuette tried to. Miss Punch almost looked nervous.

Golden Glitter took one last glance at the train and stepped into the Ponyville street. "I bet it has." Was that enthusiasm or sarcasm? Silver couldn't tell.

Diamond scoped their surroundings and led the way west, opposite of the Rich household and the looky-loos.

"Anyway, Silver—it's Goldie, by the way—Pot Luck's doing good, but she's got her hooves full. Anypony would, what with the interviews, photoshoots, rehearsals and shows, and that's on top of school. You know Wisteria won't let up on homework just because *Hills* is sold out until December. She's a trooper, though; handles it all like a dream."

The filly likely rose to the scholarship students' top ranks, too. If the show kept its momentum, the kid could qualify for the new money cliques soon. Not bad for a charity case, though Silver didn't envy her new workload. "That's good to hear."

Golden glanced over her shoulder and lowered her sunglasses to shoot Silver Spoon a conspiratorial
wink. "But between you and me," she whispered, "she doesn't have half of Diamond's star power. Diamond here scored blue ribbons before most foals learned to walk."

Silver side-glanced Diamond Tiara, who grinned but didn't leap in to champion her accomplishments. "I've seen them, um…Goldie."

Addressing an adult—much less somepony's mom—so casually still felt weird, like she spoke to Di's big sister or something. She supposed it made sense for a mare who worked with foals. Plenty of tutors, sitters, and new teachers went for the easygoing buddy thing, too. Still weird, though.

Several blocks away, Barnyard Bargains' wide roof slowly rose behind Twist's house. Signs staked into the grass trailblazed a semi-annual sale.

Diamond twitched her ears and gently pulled Golden Glitter in another direction, though she didn't seem to have a destination in mind yet. "Mom, did you know a princess lives in Ponyville, now? Twilight Sparkle did a thing with some stuff and became an alicorn last spring, wings and tiara and everything! We got to meet her, right Silvie?"

"Yes, a few weeks ago!" Silver nodded, the message all too clear. Keep it light, keep it fun. Keep Mr. Rich and all associated with him far, far away. "Her dragon assistant served us tea and nachos."

"So I heard. Strange place for a princess to settle down, but who can tell how royalty thinks?" Goldie looked among the trees and rooftops, frowning. "No towers or spires…where does she live, anyway? Does she have an estate?" Her searching eyes found a stray Barnyard Bargains sign. She mouthed the advertised slogan to herself and shook her head. "Ew, and what a terrible font. Who'd he put in charge of marketing?"

Unsure if that question was rhetorical—and no idea what the answer would be anyway—Silver pointed south. "Princess Twilight's right across from Town Hall, at the library."

"A princess of Equestria lives in a library?" Goldie tilted her head at the oak's faraway branches. "Doesn't seem—"

**BANG**

A bolt of pink and white and purple tore the sky in half. Birds careened off course. The trees smacked sideways and clouds of debris swirled into the sky.

Blown off her hooves, Silver Spoon yelped and pulled herself into a ball. For a split second, the hairs along her spine burned supernova hot and the world crackled.

Miles away, something crashed.

Debris settled. The birdsongs resumed.

Silver shook the dust out of her coat and slowly got up. She still felt the earth's aftershocks trembling in the soft frog of her hoof. "What was that?"

Golden Glitter huddled over her daughter, and didn't rise from her protective crouch. Crooked sunglasses dangled off her muzzle. She stared at the path of minor destruction that cut through Ponyville, then at the sky. "I'm not sure."

Flurries of lavender feathers dusted down the path. A couple tangled in Diamond Tiara's mane as she climbed out from under Goldie. "It kinda looked like Twilight Sparkle." She pulled a quill out of her hair. "She has feathers like these, see?"
Above, a figure burst from a cloud and beelined for the crash site.

Silver Spoon pointed at the fading rainbow streaks in the sky. "Oh, there goes Rainbow Dash! I think you're right, Di; that was Princess Twilight."

"Testing out some new flying move, I bet." Diamond shook the feathers out of her mane. "She crashed into, like, a million billboards when she learned to fly."

"Princess ought to know better; she could hurt somepony that way." Goldie smoothed Diamond's mane into place while she checked for damage. "You two alright?"

"Yep." Diamond swished her tail and did a little prance to prove it.

"That's my tough girl." Goldie laughed it off and jostled Di's withers. "It takes more than that to shake you guys, right?"

"Much more." Wish it didn't shake up all that dust, though. Silver wrinkled her nose. She'd need another bath before she met Father this afternoon.

"That's the spirit." Goldie sighed, shaking her head. "Sheesh. Ponyville." She slid the sunglasses back on and let Diamond lead her down the road. "It's never boring; I'll give the place that much."

Indeed, the town seemed to have familiarized itself with random crashes and near-disasters. A pony or two looked out their windows to see what caused all the commotion. Some stopped on the street to mutter to each other, and one rubbed her ears to see if they'd popped. No screams or stampedes, though. No sign of panic at all.

Slowly, Silver felt the last of the tension ease out of her shoulders.

"All this going on, I'll bet it's impossible to get any beauty sleep around—oh!" Goldie's ears perked and the million-bit smile flashed across her face. "Oh, Diamond, I almost forgot to ask! How'd Nationals go this year?"

Diamond Tiara tripped over a rock.

Goldie caught her before she fell. "Careful!" She tilted her head and frowned at Diamond's less than enthusiastic expression. "Oh, princess. I'm so sorry I couldn't make it this year. I would have—I promise I would have—but I never got a letter from Coach Razz to tell me where it was. By the time I even found out it'd be in Whinniapolis, the prelims were half over."

"That's…" Diamond glanced to Silver for help.

The best Silver could do was maintain airs and offer a sympathetic wince.

"That's okay, Mom. I know you tried." Diamond smiled, soft and understanding and a little sad. Too soft not to be real. "It's okay."

"That's mature of you, Diamond, but it's not okay. I should have been there." Goldie folded her ears and snorted. "I'll bet my bottom bit that bubblehead at the post office lost it in the mail. Nothing we can do about it now, I guess."

Not one to dwell on past mistakes, Goldie sighed and patted Diamond's back. "So, how bad did you slaughter them this year? Am I looking at a nine-time National Ultimate Grand Supreme?"

Silver Spoon blinked, not sure if Goldie just named a pageant title or one of Pinkie's sundaes.
"Um." The smile thinned. Diamond's eyes trailed sideways, searching for another princess crash. "Well, um... eight-time National Ultimate Grand Supreme's still pretty good, right?"

"Eight ti—? Oh, Diamond Tiara." Goldie pursed her lips in a huff. "Well, I'm..." She sighed. "I'm sure you still did your best. Even if it's only Grand Supreme, there's always next year."

"Absolutely." Silver Spoon had no idea what Grand Supreme meant, but it sounded like second place. She pointed towards a sign leading to White Tail Woods. "It's nice out for autumn, isn't it? We should go for a hike." Far away from Ponyville and Mr. Rich.

"Great idea, Silver. We can go down the Running of the Leaves route." The spring returned to Diamond's step. "Mom can tell you how she beat Berry Punch and Applejack in the race. Twice!"

But Golden Glitter knew a distraction when she saw one. Sharp violet eyes narrowed behind the sunglasses. "Diamond. You did get Grand Supreme, didn't you?"

"Not exactly..." Diamond looked at her hooves. "No."

"Then, did you get Mini-Supreme? High Queen?" The hard, thin line of Goldie's mouth dipped into a frown. Worry knitted her eyebrows. "Pretty Princess? At least tell me you got a Little Miss?"

Diamond shuffled her hooves and didn't answer.

"Diamond Dazzle Tiara, don't tell me you didn't crown at all?" Golden Glitter slowed to a stop and knelt to face her daughter. "Pony's sake, what happened? Didn't you practice at all? Princess, I told you to practice."

"I did!" Diamond squeaked. "Three hours a day, every day! Like always."

"It's true, Mis—um... It's true, Goldie." Silver stepped up, anxious to pull the threads of their nice walk back together. "I was with her all spring: three hours every day, and some days she did four or five."

"Don't lie to me, Diamond." Goldie shot Silver Spoon a withering glance. She didn't approve of supposed lying to buff cover stories either.

"Mom, I'm not lying!" Diamond stomped hard with both hooves. "I'm not!"

"Then there's something you're not telling me, and that's just as bad as lying." Goldie met her daughter nose to nose. "No pony with your talent could work as hard as you say you have without at least crowning Queen. What happened?"

Movement in the street caught Silver's attention. A trail of ponies filed out of Bon Bon's candy shop and down the street. They stuck close together, though Silver couldn't recall that particular assortment of ponies being friends. Pinkie Pie stood on the roof, watching them go.

"I didn't crown because..." Despite the tremor in her voice, Diamond Tiara brought her head up and didn't break eye contact. "Because I didn't qualify for Nationals. I didn't go to the Regionals in spring at all."

The sunlight glinted off Goldie's lenses, obscuring her eyes. "Why not?"

At first, Silver assumed Bon Bon decided to close shop early. Then she noticed the bowling alley turning its lights off. Vinyl switched the music shop's sign closed. Ponies shooed out of the theater, Applejack and Rarity on their tails.
Silver Spoon pulled her attention back to the matter at hoof. "We—that is, Diamond Tiara and I—entered to carry Ponyville's flag at the Equestria Games. It's a huge honor."

Her ears twitched at voices whispering in a hushed argument. Out of the corner of Silver's eye, Applejack pointed at them while Rarity shook her head and Pinkie frowned.

"Yeah," said Diamond. "The contest happened the day right before the Baltimore regionals, we couldn't travel to both. There's only one chance in our whole lives to carry a flag in the Games."

Golden Glitter flicked her tail with a sigh. "That is true. Why didn't you say anything about it, Diamond? You know I would have come straight to the Crystal Empire to…see…" The sentence trailed off.

Slowly, Golden folded her sunglasses and slipped them into her front pocket. Her tongue ran across her perfect teeth, mulling over her words before she said them. "You lost the flag, too, didn't you?"

"I'm sorry," whispered Diamond Tiara. "I tried."

"And what do we say about trying, Diamond?"

"Everypony tries." The dirt ground against the filly's hooves. She swallowed down the trembling in her voice and kept her head high. "Winners succeed."

"That's right." The sunglasses had vanished, but that didn't matter. Nopony short of Celestia herself could crack Golden Glitter's poker face. "So, you know what you need to do before you try again next time?"

Diamond Tiara narrowed her eyes and gave a quick, firm nod. "Figure out what I did wrong, and remember not to do it again."

"That's my girl." Goldie smiled. "So, do you know why you lost?"

The whispered mutterings became regular mutterings. Silver Spoon turned to find Applejack and Rarity slowly pushing Pinkie Pie toward them. All four of Pinkie's hooves dug so deep in the ground, they ploughed trenches.

Silver Spoon and Pinkie Pie's eyes met. That seemed to seal the deal, and the other two mares ran for it. Pinkie humphed, shook it off, and approached them.

Meanwhile, Diamond Tiara squinted in concentration as she considered her answer. Eventually, she rubbed the back of her neck and admitted, "I don't think I actually do."

Goldie spared Pinkie an annoyed glance, but otherwise ignored her approach. "I don't know, Diamond, I think you do." She curved a foreleg around Diamond's shoulders and both of them turned their backs on the pink mare. "Don't you think it may have had something to do with splitting your attention between two projects?"

"Maybe." Diamond's shoulders sagged a little. "…Yeah."

A bouncy shadow with a fluffy mane fell over their withers. Pinkie Pie cleared her throat.

"Yeah, see? I knew you knew." Golden gave Diamond a mild noogie and chuckled. "See, but here's the part I don't get. You never had a problem with priorities before, or even seemed that interested in the Equestria Games." She raised an eyebrow. "Did somepony suggest it to you?"
Pinkie cleared her throat louder.

"Pinkie," whispered Silver Spoon, "it's not really the best time?" She turned back to Golden Glitter. "Yes, ma'am. Gamemaster Miss Harshwinny visited our class and told us all about it."

Goldie flicked out her sunglasses and slid them back on. A sneer wriggled across her muzzle. "Hm. Harshwinny and somepony else, I'll bet."

The color washed out of Diamond Tiara's face. She smelled the outcome of this conversation miles away. "The flag was my choice, Mom." Diamond kept her firm stance, but her ears pressed flat against her head. "Mine. Not Dad's or Spoiled's or anypony else's. They wanted me to choose one, but that's all! I'M the one that chose it." Both hooves clutched Goldie's sleeve. "It's my fault, okay?"

"Alright." Goldie's face softened. "It's alright, princess, we don't need to talk about it anymore if you don't want to. I didn't mean to upset you." She rubbed Diamond's shoulders and rose back to full height, searching for a change of subject. "Why don't we all get something to eat and—"

"A-HEM." Pinkie Pie practically rode the sound into the conversation.

"Oh, for the love of—what is it?!"

"Seriously, Professor Pie," Silver Spoon whispered, "this really, really isn't a good time." She wondered if she should try a bribe.

"Can't be helped, faithful student." Pinkie didn't bother whispering at all. She smiled at them with all of her teeth. "Hi there, Golden Glitter! Haven't seen you around here in a while, not since you got in that cab and said it'd be a cold day in Tartarus before you'd ever set hoof in—"

Goldie's stare began to smolder.

"Okay. Touchy subject. Forget it, toootally my fault." Pinkie laughed too merrily for a genuine laugh. "Heeey, I know you guys are probably really busy and I don't wanna get in the way of your fun, but if it's not too much trouble could you maybe, possibly, perhaps go inside, lock all the doors, board up the windows, and stay there for a while?"

Silver Spoon, Golden Glitter, and Diamond Tiara exchanged a three-way frown.

Goldie flicked her tail skeptically. "And how long is 'a while', Pinkie Pie?"

"In-definitely!" She chirped it like a charades answer. "Or at least until Mayor Mare or Twilight gives the all clear."

Silver studied her old mentor's smile, but couldn't quite get a bead on it. "Should we be worried? What's happening?" If she didn't know better, it looked suspiciously like a smile trying too hard. "Miss Pinkie Pie, is this like an Everfree monster emergency, or a Nightmare Moon emergency?"

Diamond must have sensed it too. She looked between the two mares and hummed to herself. "Don't worry, we've got our best draconequus on the job." Which didn't actually answer any of Silver's questions at all. Pinkie Pie winked. "This is just to make sure you guys stay extra-super safe. Think of all the fun stuff you can do inside, like board games and teatime and blowing balloons and playing dominos. It'll be like a slumber party that doesn't end! Ever."

Not an apparent fan of everlasting slumber parties, Golden Glitter snorted and rolled her eyes.
Pinkie Pie began to say something else, but stopped at the sight of Sunny Daze and Shady Daze coming back from Sweetshine Lake. "Ooh! I gotta go. Remember: hunker in your bunker and everything'll be hunky-dory-lemon…um…chorey." She spun and dashed down the street. "Sunny! Shady! Wait up, I gotta talk to you!"

A moment later, Silver's ears twitched at the sound of Sunny Daze's tearful whimpers. Were it anypony but Pinkie, the filly would be sobbing buckets by now.

"Should we go to town hall or something?" Silver wondered how fast they could even get there. "Or maybe the school?"

Golden Glitter laughed dry and short. "Yeah, the town's center of government. Nothing would think to hit there, I'm sure. We'd do better in the Apples' cider cellar." She shrugged. "Assuming there's even anything to worry about."

"I don't know. Pinkie seemed worried."

"Silver. Honey. Pinkie Pie worries about everything from sprinkle overflow to sasquatch attacks."

Despite the nonchalance of Goldie's tone, the hair at the base of her neck fuzzed. She lifted her head to take in the scope of the town. "Besides, those places are probably packed by now."

Diamond pressed close to her mom's barrel. She hadn't said a word since she took the blame for choosing the flag. "Didn't your butler say the sun rose late today?"

"...yes," said Silver Spoon. "Yes, he did."

Even on the chance Silver had nothing to fear, if Pinkie and her friends had combed all of Ponyville to warn everypony inside, poor Brass Tacks must have been worried sick.

"Di, I think maybe I should go ho—"

A flash of blue light blinded them for a split second, and the air smelled of ozone, smoke, and lemon cleaner.

When Silver Spoon opened her eyes, Brass Tacks stood over her, his horn brightly lit, and the edges of his white mane singed black. "There you are. Miss Silver Spoon, you need to find shelter."

Tension lines mapped his face. "All of you. Now."

He turned towards Golden Glitter, turning something over in his mind. "You arrived by train, yes?"

"Noon train to Canterlot." Goldie placed a hoof on Diamond's shoulder. "Why?"

Diamond's ears drooped. "The train to Canterlot?"

Brass Tacks stepped closer, lowering his voice so that Silver barely heard him. She caught the phrases "reroute", "emergency stop", and something about the arriving trains.

Goldie considered whatever question Tacks had asked her and shook her head. "I don't know."

An emergency stop. That explained the anxious, impatient crowd at the station. If Goldie had been on that train, she must have known the train would remain in Ponyville for several hours. Otherwise she'd have stayed put.

A chill coiled in Silver Spoon's stomach. No mail for two days. The sun rose late. And now, the trains—or at least the Canterlot trains—had stopped running. Including the train Father was supposed
to arrive on today.

"B-Brass Tacks?" Silver stared at the harrowed lines under Tacks' blue eyes. "Please, what's going on?"

The unicorn looked at her closely. "Young Miss Silver, you must be brave. I need you to remain calm. Will you do that for me?" He waited until she nodded. "Equestria is under attack. Canterlot has…been compromised."

Somepony—Diamond or Goldie or Tacks or maybe even Silver Spoon herself—said a number of things. Silver couldn't hear any of it above the blood rushing in her ears.

"What? But Tacks, Mother and Father are still in—"

"I know, Miss Silver Spoon." The grass trembled under the unicorn's pale hooves. In the far distance, a white trail of smoke curled into the clouds. "We can worry about that part later. Right now, you need to find shelter."

You. Not we. "Aren't you escorting me home, Tacks?"

"It's too far. I can't be certain you—or I—can run that fast." He glanced up at the wisps of smoke around his horn. "And I don't think I can send you all the way across town."

Suddenly Silver wished they hadn't walked so far. They didn't have to go to Whitetail Woods; there was no reason they couldn't have gone to the lake or a restaurant.

Tacks kept his eyes on the skyline, mentally mapping something out. "Now, there's a place under the schoolhouse, and if we—"

"I know a place." Diamond Tiara's head poked out from behind Golden Glitter. "We've got…uh…" She twitched her ears and cleared the frog in her throat. "There's a panic room under my house. It's closer than the school and way bigger, with an iron spell-buffed door, and…"

Diamond frowned and looked away from Goldie, who appeared as if she'd swallowed a bug. "…a-and Daddy says it's the safest place in all of Ponyville."

"I do hope he's right, Miss Diamond Tiara." Brass Tacks braced his hooves, took a deep breath, and lit his horn. "Stand close together, if you please."

"Wait. Tacks, you're coming too, right?" Silver Spoon frowned as her butler's magic pulled her away from his legs and nudged her beside Diamond. "Right?"

He smiled and nodded towards the train station. "I only need an extra moment to confirm your father hasn't somehow arrived early."

"But—"

"I'll be right behind you, Miss Silver." The grass trembled again. "You promised to be brave, remember?"

Far away, ponies screamed. Before the blue light blinded her eyes, the last thing Silver saw was a crooked pair of horns rising over Town Hall.

The air flipped inside out, Silver Spoon's stomach turned upside down, and when she opened her eyes, she found herself stumbling over the Rich household carpet. Her ears rang and she smelled
smoke and she wanted to throw up for more than one reason. The room swung and wobbled.

Golden caught Silver's right side before her hooves gave out. "Teleporting's some ride, huh?" She laughed a thin, watery laugh nopony believed in. "Everypony's okay, right? Diamond, you good?"

Diamond realigned her tiara and nodded. Her legs wobbled under her.

"Good." Goldie dusted off her suit jacket, cleared her throat, and stood up. "Then let's—" The surroundings hit her all at once. Quietly, she took in the high arch of the ceiling, the gaping maw of the window, and the glittering reflections from the pool outside; Diamond Tiara's saddlebag, hairbrushes, and half-finished homework on the couch; back issues of *The Stall Street Journal*, *Hoof Beats*, and *Weekly Wedding Prance Primer* on the coffee table; and the line of new photographs leading up the staircase. She cleared her throat again. "Let's find this panic room of yours."

Diamond Tiara curled her tail around Silver Spoon's and led the way. "We put it under the War Room. C'mon."

The house had gone dark. Silver guessed that made sense, since nopony needed lights in the middle of a sunny day, but the light streaming through the window had taken on an ominous orange tinge. The color reminded her of old amber and sickly sunsets, and she wished somepony would turn a light on or play some music or something.

Where was everypony? Shouldn't Randolph have greeted them already? Silver wrapped her tail tighter around Diamond's, staring at the shadows of the chandelier slithering up the stairwell. She'd never quite noticed how big and empty this house felt. "It's really quiet in here."

Diamond shrugged. "Maybe everypony's down there already?"

"Maybe." Silver frowned at the silhouetted shadow pouring over the carpet a few feet ahead of them. *Or not.*

Spoiled Rich sat in the bay window with her back to them, cuddled in a spa robe. She cradled half a glass of brandy with both hooves and stared at the road leading up to the house.

Her ears pricked at their approach. "Fil?" Spoiled turned and sighed with relief. "Oh, Diamond Tiara. I didn't hear you come in. And with Silver Spoon, too." She glanced back toward the window, and barely seemed to register Silver at all. "You ought to be at home, dear. It's dangerous outside."

"Yes, ma'am," said Silver Spoon. "We know."

"We teleported here." Diamond patted Silver's withers. "Nopony's home at Silver's house right now, so I brought everypony here." She stepped toward the window and peeked out at Ponyville. "Dad's not home yet?"

"I sent Randolph to get him. He'll be back home…in…" Mrs. Rich finally looked beyond Diamond Tiara and across the hall, where Goldie leaned in the doorway of the War Room, examining the trophies with convincing nonchalance. "…in no time."

Diamond Tiara edged to the farther end of the window.

The corners of Mrs. Rich's mouth drew taut. Her words sagged like wet cardboard. "What are you doing in my house, Glitter?" She slung back the rest of the brandy in one gulp.

Goldie put down the dance trophy she'd been turning in her hooves. She tilted her left ear a centimeter; the barest minimum of her attention. A chuckle ruffled behind her half-smile. "The
Trottingham Shuffle, what's it look like?” She set the trophy down and turned, priming another quip. "As a matter of fact I—*pffft!*" The cool chuckle exploded into laughter. "What happened to your face?"

A feverish shade of scarlet ran from Spoiled Rich's ears to the tip of her nose. She drew her lips and pulled the robe tight around her shoulders. Turning away, she looked back to Diamond Tiara.

Diamond watched the road. She hadn't even flicked an ear. Silver stood beside her and laid her chin upon the bay windowsill.

When she couldn't stand the silence of Mrs. Rich's eyes upon her, Silver glanced back. "...Ma'am?"

"Silver Spoon, why is nopony at your house?” she softly asked. One hoof absently toyed with the golden chain around her neck. "Surely your parents didn't leave you all alone?"

"No, ma'am."

Silver didn't know if Mrs. Rich heard her, or had even really been addressing her in the first place. She also really didn't want to discuss this subject now—least of all with Mrs. Rich—but when an adult asked a question, that question had to be answered.

"They... left Brass Tacks to look after me. He's our butler. Mother and Father have business in Canterlot this week."

The clock chimed four. Father should have been boarding the train right now.

"I see.” Mrs. Rich peered at Silver Spoon with an expression that could have indicated anything from genuine sympathy to a minor gas pain. "I'm sure they're fine. Old and paranoid as they are, the Silvers likely own a bunker twice our size somewhere. They wouldn't leave their heirs unguarded.” Her gaze shifted to the road. "Ponies know better than to run off and leave their foals all by themselves. Wouldn't be responsible."

The smile faded from Golden Glitter's face. She stepped closer. "You got something you'd like to say to me, Spoiled?"

"Did I address you, Glitter? I know this may be hard for you to comprehend, but not everything has to do with you.” The robe twisted in Mrs. Rich's grip. She twitched her ears and edged closer to the window. It rattled. "I have better things to worry about."

A shadow swept the lush expanse of the Rich front lawn. Too big for a pony, griffon, or most creatures from the Everfree. Silver wondered if it might be a dragon, but outside migration season, Ponyville didn't get that sort of air traffic.

*Maybe it's some kind of wild storm cloud.* The windowpane rattled again. *Nothing but clouds made shadows that big.* Silver crouched low. *It has to be a cloud."

The shadow crept closer. The windows trembled in a slow rhythmic pulse. Spoiled Rich stared at the swinging light fixtures above their heads. "Diamond Tiara, take everyone and go down. You remember how."

"But Dad's not here yet!” Diamond pushed her back against the rattling glass, cornered in the crook of the bay window. "I wanna wait 'till—"

"We all want a lot of things. Wait downstairs.” Mrs. Rich narrowed her eyes as Diamond opened her mouth. "Do. Not. Argue with me."
"Yes, ma'am. Come on, Silver." Diamond tapped Silver's leg, and led the way into the dim War Room, where Golden Glitter waited for them.

"It's under here?" Goldie blinked up at the winner sashes stretched across the skylight. Light leaked between the silk and satin in weak, sallow stripes. The walls of awards, prizes, and trophies dappled wavering spots of light across their coats.

"Yeah. Under the table." With one last look at the bay window, Diamond braced her shoulder against the metal table and shoved. It didn't budge.

"I got it, princess." Golden Glitter popped her neck, shook out her muscles and shoved. The table groaned and squeaked in protest as it slid across the floor.

Diamond Tiara followed close behind, rolling up the carpet to reveal an odd decoration in the center of the floor.

The off-color circle of petrified wood blended almost perfectly with the hardwood floor around it. Faint green magic glowed around the edges, only visible because the lights were already dimmed. It felt warm underhoof.

Diamond pulled off her right shoe and gave it to her mother, who hovered behind to watch. "Hold this for a sec." She pressed her bare hoof in the center of the circle, knelt, and whispered something. Her eyes flashed sea-green for a second.

She stepped back, watching the door glow brighter. "Sheesh, this thing takes forever."

The trap door fell open with a ch-chunk. Silver Spoon gingerly stepped down the carpeted stairs into the bright room beneath their hooves. She eyed the labyrinth of iron teeth and bars and locks and runes beneath the door. It was thicker than her haunch. "Kind of reminds me of the bank vaults Wondermint's mom has."

"Same design, I bet." Goldie nudged her daughter to the bottom of the stairs.

Diamond took her sweet time getting there. She sat upon the last stair, swiveling her pricked ears.

Just outside the War Room, voices rumbled in low, urgent murmurs and hissed harsh whispers. Silver heard hoofbeats above their heads. After a moment, Randolph's wrinkled face appeared above their heads.

The whisperings grew louder until they were no longer whisperings. Somepony spoke; clipped and stark, like flint hitting stone. "When?"

There could be no mistake; Mr. Filthy Rich's voice clearly said it. Yet, this calloused growl sounded nothing like Filthy Rich at all.

"A few minutes ago. Teleported, apparently," Spoiled Rich said. "I told the maids to lock the liquor cabinet."

"Good."

Silver Spoon felt Diamond's tail wrap around hers again. Tight. Silver didn't blame her. "Come on, Di. Let's go get settled."

Diamond nodded. "Okay."
Large enough to house at least three families, the Rich panic room looked more like a strange meeting between a basement lounge and a furniture store's showroom.

Two rows of curtained beds filed along the back wall, separated by a large nightstand and a traveling trunk. Ceiling-high cabinets with supplies to last weeks—if not months—ran along the walls. Silver glanced back at the mini-kitchen in the corner and wondered if any of those cabinets housed some decent tea.

"Has anypony come down here before?" Silver's nose twitched at the scent of fresh varnish as she wove her way around a bookcase that still had its price tag.

Diamond shrugged, glancing up at the ornate, too-bright lanterns that cast few shadows and gave no heat. The springy carpet fluffed underhoof. It still held the smell of the store it had come from. "I did, before we moved the table over the entrance." She pointed at the Power Ponies pinball machine beside the billiards table. "I liked to come down and play sometimes, because then nopony could complain about the noise."

They found Golden Glitter perched upon the sofa in the center of the room, investigating her reflection in her pocket mirror. She smiled up at them as if they'd just come back from a dip at the beach. "Nice setup you've got down here."

"Yeah." Diamond Tiara plopped into a lounge chair worth more than some ponies' living room set. "It's pretty nice, I guess. I like our living room more, doesn't smell as weird."

"Only the best for you, right? I bet all of Equestria could burn down and you'd never know it, too busy baking cupcakes and playing Battleclouds." Goldie laughed. "Even better, you could actually play a full game of Oligarchy, because everypony'd be stuck down here with you and couldn't leave the game." She leaned on the arm of the sofa with a small sigh to herself. "...You do still like Oligarchy, don't you Diamond?"

"Uh-huh." Diamond nodded towards a stack of board games underneath the billiards table. "But nopony wants to play with me anymore, 'cause I win all the time." She shot Silver Spoon a playful glare.

Silver flicked her tail with a smirk. "Or because you want to play for five hours. You don't win all the time, you just wait everypony out."

"Same thing," said Goldie. "Sometimes, the pony who wins is the pony that lasts the longest, because she wants it most. It's not enough to be good or lucky or rich. Ponies—especially earth ponies—need to put in the work, otherwise they'll never get anywhere worthwhile.

Golden Glitter leaned back, dangling a foreleg over the arm of the sofa. The Applewood smile didn't falter an inch when she spied Filthy Rich in the reflection of her pocket mirror. "Heya, Ritchie." She glanced back with a wink. "How's business?"

Spoiled Rich lashed her tail and glowered at her from behind her husband's withers.

"Good, as always." Mr. Rich's tie hung askew, like he'd been fiddling with it. "We're expanding. Considering partnering up with the Brightly Company." He closed the distance between them and leaned on the billiard table. "How about yourself?"

Silver Spoon joined Diamond Tiara in the lounge chair, though Diamond didn't seem to notice.

"Can't complain." Goldie shrugged. "Three clients with a nationwide ad campaign, four with a decent film contract, and one in the biggest Bridleway hit since Mare of La Manecha. Oh, and I
bought a new house."

Mr. Rich offered a weak, diplomatic smile. "Are you ever even in it?"

"I pop by every couple months to give housekeeping something to do."

"Mm. Well, that's..." The creaky half-smile snapped into a grimace. "No. No, I'm sorry, I can't do this." He breathed a deliberate, calculated sigh. "Goldie, I'm grateful to you for bringing the girls here safe, I mean that, but I don't think I can have you in this house. You need to go."

Diamond Tiara jolted upright. "Dad, she just got here!" Nopony besides Silver heard her.

The pocket mirror shut with a snap. "Fine by me." Golden Glitter curled her tail in a perfect pink arc. "I was on my way out, anyhow." She flicked her sunglasses out and walked towards the entrance.

Diamond bounced off the chair and ran to cut her off at the stairs. "Mom, no! It's dangerous outside, and where are you even gonna go?" She stamped the plush carpet. "You can't."

The elder Riches exchanged glances and moved fast. Spoiled got there first, reaching a foreleg around Diamond's shoulder and steered her away from the stairs. "The school's not far from here, sweetheart. There's a shelter underneath it."

Diamond glared. "It's four blocks away."

Goldie glanced at the ceiling and shrugged. "I'm a fast runner."

"I'd have thought it'd be the first place you went, honestly." Mr. Rich blinked slow and dry. "It's perfect. You like spending time with every other foal besides your own."

A ridge of fur sparked at the base of Golden's mane. Slowly, she turned around. "You know, Filthy, I might see her more if somepony hadn't shackled her to the boonies of Canterlot. Or been so mule-headed to get custody." She held up a hoof before her ex could retort. "No, it's fine. I don't want to spend another minute in this tacky, gilded stable. Diamond, I'll see you at Hearth's Warming. If your father lets me."

Diamond Tiara wrapped her tail around her hooves and glanced at the stairs. For all intents and purposes, she'd technically done what she set out to do. After all, a pony too busy fighting couldn't leave.

Looking at the desolation upon Diamond's face, however, Silver Spoon wondered if this option might have been worse.

Mr. Rich raised his eyebrows. A cold laugh rumbled under his breath. "Right, Goldie. 'Cause of course it's always me, isn't it? It's my fault you can't be bothered to see your own foal more than once a year. At most. Oh, but that's not all I did, right?"

He laughed again, now with all of his teeth bared. "I'm the one who forced you to move clear across Equestria. I'm the one who personally stops all the cabs and wagons and trains from ever gettin' you five steps within Ponyville. Oh, and naturally I'M the one who bought up all the inns in town and told 'em not to let you stay. You've sure got my number, darlin'."

Silver Spoon pressed against the back of the chair and stared.

Once or twice, Silver had caught the smoldering embers of an argument between Mother and Father. At the country club, she'd watched adults she didn't know trade viperous quips over champagne,
either not knowing or not caring small foals were in the room. She'd also seen those same quips somersault into sobbing, drunken shouts. On rare occasions, Silver had even seen ponies on the street snap from verbal to physical fights.

None of them were anything like this at all. A corrosive ugliness Silver Spoon didn't have a name for bubbled up from the carpet and soured the air. She couldn't recognize half the ponies in this room anymore.

Diamond Tiara's fires extinguished without a trace of smoke. She wilted against Mrs. Rich's barrel and turned towards Silver's direction, but she may as well have been staring at the wall.

The wrongness of it all frayed the ends of Silver's tail. She glanced at the panic room's kitchenette, and recalled what she'd told Berry Pinch a couple of weeks ago: Sometimes when ponies are upset, angry, or scared, they say things they don't mean. The ceiling rumbled. Things are pretty scary right now, but maybe...

While Mr. Rich and Golden Glitter crossed verbal swords, Silver hopped out of the chair and went for the cabinets. Her nose led her to the teas in no time. She fired up a copper kettle she'd found with the teas, set out some cups on a platter and waited for the water to boil. Silver didn't quite know what could be done here—she'd never handled an adult party on her own, and this set up didn't constitute a real tea party—but still.

Am I a party pony or aren't I? She'd averted total disaster before, she could do it again. This was her element. Silver nodded to herself and took the kettle off before it could whistle and make everypony angrier than they already were. She jury-rigged a peppermint tea blend and let it steep. If I think a little outside the box, surely, I can—

Somepony cleared his throat. Randolph—who'd come down with the Riches and quietly been picking price tags off the furniture—stood beside her and placed a hoof on Silver's shoulder.

"Hello, Randolph. Um, do you know if there's a fancier pot down here? I don't think Mrs. Rich would want to…" The butler didn't seem enthusiastic to help. Silver frowned. "…to drink from a copper kettle."

Randolph blinked at her sympathetically, but shook his head. "Miss Silver." He spoke in a soft, tottering creak. "You can't fix this."

"But somepony's got to do something! Look at this, this is terrible!"

Randolph sighed. "Yes. And not your mess to fix."

Silver Spoon blinked at him, suddenly aware of something. "Since when do you talk?"

"When it's necessary." He straightened and bowed his head to Mrs. Rich, who was approaching with Diamond trailing behind.

Silver set up the sugar bowl and spoons, just in case. "Randolph? Can…" Terror and tears welled in her chest. She shoved it down. Brave young ladies did not cry in the presence of company. "Randolph, I know it's a little late to ask, but can you leave the front door to the house open? For when Tacks gets here?"

The old cob tilted his head curiously.

"Brass Tacks teleported us and told us he'd meet us here. He said… he said he'd be right behind us, but we won't hear him knock from down here. He can't get in the house if the door's not open."
Silver indicated the house above. "I don't think whatever's out there will be stopped by a front door anyway."

The shadow of Mrs. Spoiled Rich spread over the tea tray. She eyed the steaming tea pot curiously, but said nothing of it. "Your butler knows how to teleport other ponies? More than one of them?"

Silver chewed her bottom lip in defiance. "He's not just a butler, Brass Tacks is my friend." She glared at Mrs. Rich's unimpressed expression. "And also my bodyguard."

"In that case," said Mrs. Rich, "he's done his job already and can probably take care of himself."

Silver flattened her ears. The job covered protection against muggers, kidnappers, pickpockets, criminals, and ketchup stains. Amazing as he was, whatever waited out there had to be way out of Brass Tacks' pay grade.

"Besides, it sounds like it's calmed down out there already."

Indeed, the ceiling stopped rumbling a while ago. That might have been a credit to the panic room's thick walls, or meant they'd entered the eye of the storm, or the emergency had truly ended.

Mrs. Rich presumed the latter. With a flick of her head, she indicated the door. "Which means you can go now, Glitter."

Goldie smoothed her jacket collar. "Fine. I'm going." Her eyes fixed upon Spoiled's hoof on Diamond's shoulder. Golden's perfect teeth clenched. "Don't want to get in the way of you playing house."

Diamond Tiara blinked slowly. Goldie's pink and purple tail slipped up the stairs and vanished. Slowly, the vacant haze faded from her face. Diamond's eyes narrowed into a familiar blue glare. The kind of glare that came before doing something stupid. Really stupid.

Silver Spoon opened her mouth to protest, but closed it again when Diamond shot her a look. Diamond ducked out from Spoiled hoof and bolted. "Mom, wait, I'll—I'll walk you to the school!"

She cut through the room, hooves skidding and slipping over the carpet. Her hooves hit the stairs before anypony caught her.

Mr. Rich hopped a coffee table and dashed after her. "Diamond Dazzle Tiara, you come back down here this instant!"

Mrs. Rich remained in the kitchenette. She sank into a chair and let her hooves rest in her lap. Her eyes bored holes into the marble countertop.

Silver nudged a cup of tea in her direction. After a moment, Spoiled Rich took it and sipped. Satisfied, Silver nodded and crept off to sneak back up the stairs. She cautiously stepped into the dim light of the War Room, flicking her ears.

Down the hall, Diamond Tiara's voice pitched over her parents' gentle counterarguments. "No! If it's safe enough for Mom, then it's safe enough for me!"

"Diamond, come on." Goldie strained, as if trying to pull out of something. "I'll be fine."

Mr. Rich did his best for calm, but it sounded like a struggle. "Your mama's a grown mare, darlin'. It's different."
"It's not even half a mile from here, princess. You know me. I can make that in five seconds." The front door swung open. A breeze rolled into the War Room, curling Silver's braids. Goldie sighed. "I'll still be here, and I'll come right back as soon as we know it's over. I bet it's probably over already —"

**THOOM!**

The house lurched and shook to its foundations. Something hit the roof so hard, bits of ceiling plaster dusted the floor. Winner sashes came fluttering down from the skylight, flopping over trophies, crowns, and Silver's face.

Silver shook off the trappings of *Mini-Grande Supreme '92* and stepped out into the hallways on trembling legs. Something in the air stung her eyes and hurt her throat.

The front door sagged open on busted hinges. A few feet away, Golden, Diamond, and Mr. Rich huddled together in silent shock. They were staring at something. Silver Spoon stepped closer and looked outside.

Several blocks away, dark plumes of smoke and embers billowed over the rooftops and into the orange sky. The stink of burning wood and paper choked the air. Tattered remains of books scattered across the roof of Pipsqueak's house. And Twist's. And Miss Shoeshine's. A smoldering copy of *Wuthering Hooves* tumbled over the Riches' welcome mat.

Far away, a charred gnarl of wood twisted through the smoke. The lofty branches of Golden Oak Library had vanished.

Filthy Rich coughed. "Maybe..." He blinked at the burnt pages scattering into his house. "Maybe that's just a weird coincidence. I'm sure it's fine."

Diamond glared. "Daddy!"

"Totally fine," said Golden Glitter. A lens popped out of her sunglasses. "Libraries explode all the time. You know, one of those natural small-town milestones."

Mr. Rich nodded. "Yup. First farm, first store opening, first thousand ponies, first tourist spot, the first time a library explodes..."

Goldie brushed ash out of her mane. "Cycle of life."

A blinding light sliced through the smoke towards the hulking horned mass outside the Everfree Forest. The air burned and the ground trembled.

The light of a mushroom cloud reflected in Goldie's remaining lens. "But, uh...it wouldn't hurt to stick around a little while longer." She shot Mr. Rich a glare he pretended to ignore and marched down the hall.

Glass tinkled around the corner. Silver Spoon coughed and sat up. She thought she heard hoofsteps on tile, but everypony should have already been either here or downstairs.

Goldie pricked her ears. "Something's in the kitchen."

As one, Golden and Mr. Rich took up Diamond Tiara and shoved her into the War Room with Silver Spoon. Around the corner, something fell and shattered.

Before either filly could try and see what was happening, Spoiled Rich grabbed their tails and
dragged them down into the panic room. She pinned them in place with a glare. "Don't know why children can't do what they're told."

Overhead, Mr. Rich braced for impact. "Who's out there, comin' round? Speak up!"

"It's us, sir," a young mare's voice rasped. She had a terrible cough.

Diamond glanced at her stepmother. "That sounds kind of like Dusty Trails."

Mrs. Rich kept her grip on Diamond's tail, watching Goldie trot back down the stairs. "It does."

It went quiet. After a few moments, Mr. Rich backed into the panic room. "…won't hear of it. It's the least I can do for getting everypony here safe. I can't tell him how grateful we are."

"I know he appreciates it, sir." A maid with a sooty purple coat and a blue mane limped over the lush carpet. She supported a barely conscious Brass Tacks upon her withers. The maid—Dusty Trails, apparently—coughed and nodded to Silver Spoon. "He's fine."

Silver's dry throat cracked with a whimper. "No, he's not."

The shine in Brass Tacks' coat had dulled to the color of parched soil. At the sound of Silver's voice, his ears twitched against his limp, sallow mane. When he tried to stand, his legs buckled under him and he fell back upon the maid's withers. Brass Tacks blinked at her through milky, clouded eyes.

"Well, he's alive, anyway. That's fine enough." Dusty Trails glanced at Tacks with the same milky eyes while she eased him onto the soft carpet.

Randolph whispered something to Dusty that made her smile. He nodded, patted her on the back, and stepped aside to speak with Mr. Rich.

Silver Spoon curled next to Brass Tacks and nuzzled his ear. She guessed he hadn't found Father at the train station. "I'm sorry, Tacks. I should have stayed closer to the house."

"Think nothing of it, Miss Silver." Brass Tacks brushed ceiling plaster off Silver's haunches and checked her for damage. He waved his charred tail and smiled at her. "This is a better spot, anyhow."

Diamond Tiara sat on the unicorn's opposite side. She tilted her head, squinting at his haunch. "Your cutie mark is gone," she whispered. Indeed, the blue irises weaving through crossed keys had vanished. Brass Tacks lay blank as a newborn foal. "Is yours gone too, Dusty?"

Dusty Trails bowed her head and sighed. "Yes, miss." She frowned at sooty hoofprints she'd tracked across the carpet. "Completely."

The little pink filly stared at him, still not processing it. "But… like… how?"

"Taken." Brass Tacks bobbed his horn toward the shaking vault lock above their heads. "Along with the…" He ground his teeth and tried to shake the cobwebs out of his head. "…the rest of our magic."

Silver Spoon wrapped her forelegs around her butler's lean neck and buried her face in his ashen mane. He smelled like a steel mill, all smoke and sweat and sulfur.

Mr. Rich sank into the daybed, next to his wife. He rustled a hoof through his mane, staring at the ceiling. "What in Tartarus are we dealing with, Spoils?"

"We?" Goldie paced the room, flicking her tail like a metronome. "We're not dealing with anything
—not that you ever deal with anything, anyhow—that's for that new princess of yours."

Mr. Rich snorted and ignored her.

"Do you think she'll get him?" Diamond Tiara asked nopony in particular. "I mean, it's kind of her job. She has to do her job, right?"

"I do believe she shall, Miss Tiara. Young Miss Silver Spoon, if you'll kindly step aside a moment?" Brass Tacks sat up and shook the ashes out of his mane. He adjusted the lapels of his tattered tailcoat, and flicked some debris out of his tail. "Are you quite sure you're alright?"

Silver helped wipe the soot from his cheeks. At worst, her hooficure would be ruined, but then, what didn't ruin nice hooves in Ponyville? She'd live. "Yes, Tacks." She stared at the fog in his eyes and bit her bottom lip. "I'm okay.

"Very good." The tip of Brass Tacks' nose sniffed at Silver's hooves. "You've brewed tea. Peppermint, I believe."

Diamond Tiara lashed her tail and gave Silver a weird squint. "You made tea? When?"

At the farther end of the room, the Riches and Golden Glitter huddled with harsh whispers and strained sentences. Another storm brewed beside the daybed, quieter this time. Every few seconds, the jagged corner of an argument poked out.

"...am not getting into this with you again, Golden."

Silver shifted towards a more peaceful part of the room. "Um. A little while ago."

The steel tiara slumped with Diamond's head toss. "Everything else going on today and you decide to focus on teatime? Seriously, what is the matter with you?" She tilted the tiara back into her mane, but her flattened ears couldn't keep it upright. "That's not gonna fix anything, Silver Spoon."

"That's right, Filthy. Go back to your charts and stick your head in the sand like you always do."

It likely wasn't even very good tea, either. Silver had to use whatever she found offhoof, and neither the withered peppermint leaves nor sparse fennel seeds looked exceptionally promising. She'd added some ginger and honey to even it out, but who knew if it hadn't only made the brew worse.

"Don't you speak to him that way! I've never seen a mare so ungrateful. Thank your lucky stars you're in here at all and not out there on your rump."

"It was the only thing I could think of." Silver should have tasted the tea before she let Mrs. Rich have some. Hopefully she hadn't been too disappointed with it. Silver Spoon wrapped her tail close to herself. "I dunno, I just thought…I dunno."

Brass Tacks leaned one ear towards the festering nastiness in the corner. He smiled to cover a frown. "Well, I, for one, would enjoy a cup of tea. My throat could certainly use it after the hot air." The unicorn eased to his hooves, walked a few steps to test his legs, and nodded toward one of the large beds with thick curtains. "Why don't we take our tea there? It appears to be a somewhat cozy and….."

"Ha! I thank my lucky stars there's even a house left, the way you've handled things."

"…quieter place."
Diamond, who did not appear at all in the mood for tea, wrinkled her nose and readied a complaint. A few feet away, her father brushed past the bookcase and stormed into the kitchenette to cool off, armed with a pen and a small portfolio of paperwork. "Yeah. Tea does sound kind of good."

Despite Silver's protest, Brass Tacks insisted on sending them ahead while he took care of the tea. Diamond crawled over the satin duvet and nestled into a nest of throw pillows at the head of the bed. Silver drew the bed curtains, leaving just enough room to stick her head out in case Tacks needed any help. The lack of magic slowed him down—two minutes instead of twenty seconds—but he managed to gather up the tea tray without much trouble. Before he joined them, Tacks paused and gave the Riches a loaded stare.

"...can't be surprised, it is in the name. I feel for you Spoiled, but I don't see why you're so determined to ruin my foal just because you can't have your own." Goldie didn't even bother whispering anymore.

Tacks drew the bed curtains tight.

Silver Spoon sighed, listening to the familiar comfort of tea pouring into teacups. She listened until it became louder than the voices outside, louder than the terrible rumbling above their heads, louder than the labored breathing of her butler. Here was tea. Tea was good.

"It has gone a bit lukewarm, but no harm done." Tacks took a sip and smiled. "You discredit yourself, Miss Silver. Superb work as always."

Silver tried some for herself. It tasted…well, it did alright. Still better than generic teabags. "Thank you, Brass Tacks." She took another sip and smiled a little. Yes, even if everything else had gone bad, tea was always good.

Somepony muffled something nasty and indecipherable. Somepony else cried out in indignation. Diamond cradled her teacup in her hooves, staring at her reflection. "Can I have more sugar? Please?"

"Really, Spoils, sweetheart?" Silver could practically hear Golden's crushing smile through the curtains. "In that case, maybe you can explain why you've turned my daughter into a loser."

"For Celestia's sake! She's right there."

"Of course, Diamond." The sugar spoon shook in Silver's hooves. "One lump or two?"

"Five." That honestly made it more sugar than tea, but whatever. Diamond slung back half a cup and squeezed her eyes shut. "I should have just let her go to the schoolhouse before." She gulped down the rest. "I knew they'd do this."

"Oh, trust me, Filthy, I know! It's not Diamond I'm blaming."

Diamond Tiara huddled into the pillows. "They always do this."

"But you weren't wrong, Di." Silver edged closer, but she couldn't quite pass the moat of bolster pillows. She reached a hoof out anyway. "You wanted to keep everypony safe, and it's really safe down here. Right, Tacks?"
No response. Brass Tacks curled at the foot of the bed, gangly hooves dangling over the footboard so they wouldn't stain the duvet. He'd fallen fast asleep. Silver hoped the commotion wouldn't wake him up; she didn't think he'd slept at all last night.

“You know what?” Spoiled Rich's laugh rang thorned and hollow. "You're right. I'm not her mother. I never sent her to the emergency room."

A heartbeat of silence. "You were—NEITHER of you were there, and don't you dare give me that look Filthy Rich, don't you dare! What happened in Vanhoofer was an accident and you know it!"

Diamond Tiara pulled her cracked hoof against her barrel and sank deeper into the pillows. She pressed her cheek against the silk, breathing hard against the fringe. The little flag of her tail tip lashed over the side of the pillow fortress. She muttered something into the fabric.

Silver twitched her ears. She'd heard her name in there. "Di? Did you say something?"

She shifted. Blue eyes glared over a crest of chiffon fringe. "I still can't believe you want to make nice with the Crusaders. Even after all they've done." Her voice shook. "After all the times I'd been doing great and they wrecked everything."

That had not been the subject Silver Spoon expected at all. She blinked, unsure of how to respond. "Diamond, I don't think they do it on purpose. It sort of just… happens. They wreck stuff like a freak storm or a hydra wrecks stuff. It's not personal. That's why I don't want us to step into their path anymore. Try to be… well, if not nicer, then civil." Silver reached out to the pink hoof poking over the pillow.

The hoof snapped back before Silver reached it. "Don't you get it? It doesn't matter if I'm civil to them or not, Silver Spoon! I tried being nice and fair and a good boss when they were writing the Gabby Gums stuff, and look what happened." She wrapped her hooves around one of the pillows and gave it a firm shake.

All at once, a familiar wave of oily blackness rose from the depths of Silver's stomach. "Uh, Diamond, I..." She poured herself more tea to steady her hooves. "I'm not sure what happened with the Press was the Crusaders' fault. Not entirely, anyway."

A snort ruffled the pillow fringe. "Yeah?" Diamond bared her teeth in a snarl. "Yeah? Whose is it then? If it's not them, then..." The snarl crumbled into a grimace. "...then why am I losing? Why am I losing all the time?" She buried her face in the pillows and Silver heard a muffled whimper. "Why can't I win, Silver Spoon?"

If she knew the answer to that, Silver would have told her a long time ago. She couldn't touch Diamond within the pillow nest, so she cozied up to one of the silk bolsters.

"I'm supposed to be a winner, Silvie. I don't understand what happened." A wet sniff. "Is it me? Am I not trying hard enough?"

"Diamond." The long claws of guilt wrapped around her throat until she couldn't breathe. "Di, the thing with the press... It...um... It wasn't..."

It bubbled beneath Silver's bones and skin, and burned her tongue. "It wasn't the Crusaders' fault, but it wasn't entirely your fault, either. Like. Um."

Her mouth forgot how to form words. "What I mean to s-say i-is... uh."

Diamond Tiara's ears flicked up. Slowly, she lifted her head from the pillow and rubbed her wet
eyes. "Silver Spoon." Something pieced together behind her eyes. Her withers stopped trembling and her breathing steadied. "Silver, the thing Pinch said, that you… That you told Featherweight to—"

Diamond took a deep breath and looked Silver Spoon in the eye. "You messed up my editor job. Didn't you?"

Silver Spoon nodded. "I'm so sorry, Diamond Tiara. I didn't…"

Didn't what? Didn't think about how much it meant to her? Didn't think it would hurt her? Didn't think at all? Even if all of those were true, they still were pathetic excuses.

"I did tell Featherweight to use the pictures because I knew what you'd use them for, but that's all." Silver heard her voice talking but didn't feel herself saying words. "I also don't really think the Gabby Gums thing could have lasted much longer, no matter what anypony did. The Crusaders are too clumsy not to have been found out on their own."

For all Silver knew, maybe they already had. Maybe she'd done the whole thing for nothing.

Silver cast her eyes down at the pillows. "Anyway, it's still partly my fault. I'm really, really sorry, Di. I've been sorry."

"I bet you are."

"I didn't know how to tell you."

"I bet you didn't."

The nest of pillows tumbled off Diamond's shoulders as she stood up and shook herself off. She jumped onto the velvet duvet without a sound. She paced in a circle, first clockwise, then counterclockwise.

Diamond stopped and looked at her. Not angrily. Not with the slow-burn build to anger, either. No faux-serenity masking anger. No cold fire. No scowls. No narrowed eyes or pinned ears. She didn't even sound upset. "Was it because of your crush of Featherweight?"

"When all the secrets started being published in the paper, I thought—"

...Wait.

Wait, what?!

"I… no!" Silver felt her whole face burn from ear tip to chin. Her glasses fogged up and for a second, her tongue forgot how to work. "Wh-what… are you talking about? I don't have a crush on Featherw—"

Diamond snorted. "I'm not the blind stupid idiot you think I am, Silver Spoon. You drooled all over him through half of Nightmare Night and mooned over his flimsy wings all through Hearts and Hooves. You've got rotten taste in colts, Silver, but whatever. No tan off my hide."

Silver pulled into a ball and flattened against the duvet. Diamond's shadow fell over her shoulders. Silver's tongue still wouldn't work.

"What, did you think if you gave him a cushy editing job, he'd hold your hoof?" A dark smile curled at Silver's flinch. Diamond laughed. "You thought you two would share milkshakes at Sugarcube Corner? Go to the school dance and he'd ask you to be his special somepony?"
"Diamond, n-no, it wasn't—wasn't like tha—"

"Oh, no, I think I got it! You wanted a big wet kiss from those giant ugly buck teeth." She laughed again. "It'd be cute if it wasn't so pathetic." Diamond kneeled down to eye level and wrapped a foreleg around Silver's shaking withers. "Oh, and fun fact: Featherweight likes colts."

Silver Spoon stared at her. ". . .he does?" she whispered.

"Yup! He's had a crush on Rumble since last year. What, you didn't know that?" Diamond Tiara grinned so wide Silver saw the alfalfa in her molars. "Wow. Guess that means you went and sold out your best friend for absolutely no reason, huh? Sweet Luna, what an idiot."

"Diamond, I got SCARED!" Silver's words squeaked out a tight, frantic whisper. "I didn't do it because of Featherweight. I . . .I just got scared and I did something stupid. I'm sorry. Diamond, please. I'm so sorry."

The grin faded. Diamond Tiara flicked an ear. "I believe you. It doesn't matter anymore, Silver." She brushed open the curtain and hopped onto the carpet. "It's fine. Quit crying before you stain the velvet."

Silver Spoon hiccuped. She sniffled and wiped her lenses. No wonder they'd gotten so blurry; she hadn't even realized she'd been crying.

Brass Tacks shifted at the end of the bed. Still asleep.

Silver folded part of the duvet over him so he wouldn't be cold and stepped back out into the panic room. She twitched her ears. No low rumblings from the ceiling. No shouting. No whispered venom or stifled crying. Nothing at all. Silence misted over the varnished wood and fluffy carpet. It reminded Silver of humid air after rainfall, the kind that fizzed manes and made fetlocks soggy.

Silver crept to where Diamond Tiara sat staring up the ladder. The hatch hung wide open, with Mr. Rich and Randolph nowhere to be seen. They must have gone up to check if the coast was clear. She wondered how long they'd been gone. The maid, Dusty Trails, dozed in the corner with her tail wrapped over her flank.

Golden Glitter and Spoiled Rich stood in deadlocked silence beside the fireplace, waiting for the other to strike. Every couple of seconds, Goldie glanced at the fillies in the room and she recalculated whatever argument she'd been building up to. At some point, she'd reapplied her eyeshadow; when the light touched Goldie's face, Silver saw faint smudge lines on her cheeks.

An aura of calm severity hung over Mrs. Rich, calmer than she'd been all day. Whatever had happened, she'd gained the high ground. She took a breath and continued off an earlier tangent. "The simple fact is, Glitter, there are better, more productive applications of her talents than the stage." She glanced at Diamond, who didn't dare glance back. "It isn't my fault or his if you're too mulish to see that."

"Hm. Decent sales pitch, Spoiled, but anypony can toss out a couple of buzzwords. It means nothing without results—at least I've accomplished something." Goldie flicked her pocket mirror open and sighed. "What have you produced, aside from more stress and zilch to show for it?" The mirror snapped shut without Goldie even looking inside. "Do you even have an example of one of these "productive applications"? Or a plan, for that matter?"

Mrs. Rich raised her eyebrows, unfazed. "Well, Glitter, not all ponies are so tacky and insecure they need to announce their plans with a megaphone." She angled her head towards Silver Spoon and
fixed her under a teal gaze. She smiled.

Instinctively, Silver edged towards Diamond Tiara.

Diamond stared at her as if Silver had just been sick on the rug. After a moment, she smiled, too.

Silver Spoon clutched her saddlebag and flattened her ears.

The student council pin on Silver's bag gleamed in Spoiled Rich's eyes. "I'll have you know, Miss Glitter, our little Diamond Tiara is aiming for Student Pony President next month."

Silver blinked and frowned. "She is?" She looked to Diamond, who stood up and blinked back at her. "You are?"

"Uh. Y-yeah?" Diamond glanced between the two mares and her best friend. She cleared her throat, tilting her chin in the air. "Yeah. Of course I am!"

"Of course she is." Spoiled Rich fluffed her mane, smiling sweetly at the room. "Why do you look so surprised, Silver Spoon? I thought you would have known, being secretary of the student council."

"I know, right?" Diamond's tail whipcracked against Silver's hoof. "Come on, like, keep up, Silver Spoon."

Silver Spoon would have bet her rarest tea blends that Diamond didn't know Ponyville Schoolhouse even had a president until ten seconds ago. Would have, except after the past couple of hours, Silver didn't really feel certain of anything anymore.

"I told you about it," said Diamond. "Remember?"

"Oh, right. …Right." Silver adjusted her glasses. "You've been planning it since Aug—"

Diamond stared at her hard.

"Uh. Since May." At Diamond's slight nod, Silver smiled. "Yes, May. Started plans in May, solidified them in August. Heh, must have slipped my mind."

"May, huh?" Golden Glitter raised an eyebrow at her daughter. In better circumstances, she might have smiled. "Strange nopony mentioned it before."

Diamond shrugged. "We didn't get a lot of time to talk before all that stuff happened."

"There's not much to tell this early," Silver added. "Nopony else has even officially announced they're running yet." Keyword officially. Interest had been expressed in the position a while back, but she'd heard nothing else about it since then.

"I'll take your word for it, then. Good luck, Diamond." Golden offered a small smile.

"Thanks."

Above, the lanterns pulsed once, then twice. Randolph appeared at the foot of the ladder to confirm the all-clear.

"Finally." Spoiled Rich wrinkled her nose at the hoofprint stains in the carpet and nodded towards Dusty Trails in the corner. "When that one wakes up, tell her clean up her mess." She dropped her robe in the butler's waiting hooves and climbed up.
Diamond and Goldie followed a few rungs behind. Diamond waved from the top. "Come on, Silver."

Silver glanced back towards the bed where Tacks still slept.

"Today, Silver."

Silver sighed. "Randolph, can you wake Brass Tacks up and tell him it's safe outside?" At the old stallion’s nod, she rushed up and out into the War Room. Above, cracks spiderwebbed across the skylight. The sun, unhindered by the banners and sashes, hurt her eyes.

In the hall, Spoiled wished Golden a terse, "See you," with a distinct aftertaste of "in Tartarus."

Goldie snorted after her and grumbled a sentence most unsuitable for polite society.

"You know..." Diamond waited until her stepmother had rounded the corner. She sidled up to Goldie's leg. "You could stay a while longer. The inn doesn't have any stars, but it's not that bad."

From the living room, Filthy Rich's voice assessed damages to the house. Apparently, part of the roof had caught fire and since gone out.

"Diamond, princess." Golden Glitter rubbed her temples. "I don't think that'll work."

"I didn't think it would," sighed Diamond.

"We can still finish our walk, if you want."

"Okay. That's good."

Outside, a pastel rainbow arched above the battered rooftops and smoking debris. Odd, as Silver saw no sign of rain. A few pegasi fluttered amongst the clouds, perhaps one of them made it. One of them nosedived straight toward The Dink's house.

A few restaurants had already reopened for business. Golden Glitter bought them all a round of carrot dogs and raspberry lemonade, so they could eat while they walked. It was a significantly quieter walk than before.

A train whistled in the distance. Diamond watched her mother's ears prick. "You were on the train to Canterlot, weren't you? You didn't plan on visiting me today at all."

"Close, but you're only half right." Goldie swallowed the last of her carrot dog. "As a matter of fact, missy, I did plan to visit, just not today. I had an extra day or two on the way back from my week-long conference in Canterlot." And she had also probably intended to send a message ahead of time.

"Oh," said Diamond. "Are you still going to?"

Debris crunched behind them. Silver Spoon turned to find Brass Tacks plodding a respectful distance away. He'd exchanged the tattered suit for a new vest and tie. Where he got them, Sliver had no idea. The cutie marks had returned to his haunches, and when he raised his head to nod at her, his eyes shone clear. Still, Tacks looked like he could use a nap or... twelve.

Golden Glitter hummed uncertainly. "The conference might be delayed, thanks to..." She gestured to the wreckage around them. "I have no idea how long it'll take now, especially with that distempered little nag, Svengallop, directing. But if I can, I'll still drop by on my way back to Applewood." She smiled her million-bit smile. "I promise."
"Okay." Diamond smiled back, but it faded after a moment. She shuffled her hooves and looked at the pony-sized dent smashed into the side of a dentist's office. "You've promised before, though."

The million-bit smile dropped a few zeroes. Goldie chuckled under her breath. "Nopony's pulling a fast one on you, huh? Okay, how's this: I promise to do my best to drop by on my way back. And if not, I'll get down here for Hearth's Warming."

For a second, Diamond's eyes shone brighter than the broken glass at her hooves. "Really?" She twitched her tail, thinking it over. "I'm not sure if Dad'll like that, though. And don't you have to work?"

"Your father doesn't like a lot of things; he'll get over it. We just need to stay out of each other's manes, that's all. I haven't had a vacation in, what, six years? I'm way overdue." She kicked the broken glass out of her path. "Besides, it's not every Hearth's Warming I get to meet with a president. Don't beat the other guy too bad, alright?"

Diamond Tiara stuck her nose in the air. "No promises." She exchanged a meaningful glance with Silver Spoon. "Whoever the other guy is, they're going down, because I am going to win."

"I don't doubt it." The train station appeared over the next ridge. Goldie's pace slowed to a stroll. "You do know I love you no matter what happens, right?"

This conversation started to edge into awkward territory. Silver fell back a couple of paces to give them space. It also gave her the chance to walk with Brass Tacks. She stepped lightly around the juts of obsidian spiking from the ground. Princess Twilight must have passed through here.

"Yeah, and what's going to happen is I'm gonna win." Diamond lifted her head high and narrowed her eyes. "I'm gonna be perfect."

The train platform rumbled with activity. The crowds leapt back into impatient activity, with passengers and conductors shouting to be heard over each other. The battle debris had been pushed aside to form a hill of loose nails, boards, and broken glass.

It looked like the trains had started running again. Silver wondered if Father might make it home tonight after all. She hoped so.

Golden Glitter helped Diamond Tiara onto the platform. She brushed the bangs out of her daughter's eyes and looked at her a long moment. "You're already perfect, you hear me? You're strong and brave and beautiful, and…" She lurched forward and crushed Diamond in a hug. "Oh, Diamond Tiara, you're brilliant! You're the brightest star in my whole damn sky. Nopony shines brighter, don't forget that. I love you."

Diamond buried her nose in Goldie's short mane. "I know. I love you too, Mommy." She pulled away with a nod. "I'm going to make you proud."

"You already do, princess."

The train to Canterlot boarded at six. In the half hour they had to wait, Golden bought them all flower wreaths, both for future victory and a pre-dinner snack. Brass Tacks ate his in only a few bites, while Diamond elected to wear hers on her head. They sat on the bench together until Golden Glitter boarded her train.

Diamond Tiara perched at the edge of the platform, watching the caboose fade into the horizon. The setting sun glinted off the fresh obsidian and lit her tiara bright orange—a blazing torch in the center of her flower crown.
"Silver Spoon." Diamond didn't move her head. "You are with me on the student pony president campaign, right?"

"Absolutely!" Silver cried a little too loudly. "I'm with you all the way, Diamond."

"You're not going to get 'scared' again?"

"No." Silver thought it over. She played the strongest card in her deck. The one thing she couldn't break. "I won't get scared on this. I give you my word."

"Hmph. Good." The fillies shook it on it. Diamond slowly stood up and popped the bones in her neck. "Let's get to work."
A Young Lady's Book of Gratitudes

A lady—a young lady, especially—must understand and appreciate the significance of Gratitude. Indeed, in the hierarchy of virtues one should possess, Gratitude ranks second-highest. Only Kindness ranks above it.

Yes, ladies ought to mind their manners. It is essential to know when and when not to speak, how to lay their napkins, and arrange the silverware. One must understand the proper way to carry a tail, hold a polite conversation, court a suitor, offer and receive an apology, defend one’s honor, and engage in social combat. All these things and more will be expanded on in the subsequent sections of this Codex.

However, young ladies MUST note: None of what is listed above can function without the virtue of Gratitude.

A high society pony indulges in a life of comforts. Thus, parents, teachers, and foals must remember: appreciation and accustomization to finer things can—and WILL—descend into spoilage, entitlement, and egotism if one is not cautious. A spoiled, entitled pony perceives themselves to be above the need to follow social protocol and soon forgets how fortunate they are to possess the life they have, and that such a fortunate life is not a guarantee.

Thus: the bearing rein of Gratitude lifts a lady’s head to proper height: not too low, but not too high.

Kindly note: we speak here of Gratitude, not Humility.

Humility and Gratitude share the same taxonomy and genus, but are entirely different species. A laymare may mistake Humility and Gratitude to be the same thing, but proper ladies know that anypony of any class can be humble—as well they ought to be—state of Humility requires no intention or foreknowledge.

In other words, one possesses Humility. One PRACTICES Gratitude.

Ladies, kindly recall how often Gratitude plays a part in our daily interactions:

“I am so happy to be here.”

“We are delighted you could come.”

It is an action, my little ponies. Not a state of being.

Father knocked on the open door as he entered Silver’s room. “Are you nearly ready, Brightness?”

“Oh! Yes, sir, almost.” A draft ruffled the open pages of Madam Wisteria’s introduction to the Official Academy Codex. Silver Spoon marked her place and set the book back on the bed. “May I do one more thing before we go? It’s important.”

“Very well, but don’t dawdle.” Father checked his pocket watch. “Your mother won’t approve being late.”

“I won’t.” After a short pause, Silver added, “Thank you, Father.”
“No trouble, Silver Spoon.”

To be grateful meant an appraisal and acknowledgement of one’s blessings and one’s luck. Not everypony in Equestria knew good fortune. Now, more than ever, Miss Sterling Silver Spoon understood that she’d been blessed as a fortunate filly, even if she did not always feel so.

The wind creaked and moaned against the wooden planks nailed over Silver’s shattered bedroom window, rustling the lace curtains. Pinstripes of sunlight filtered between the boards, hardly enough to see by. The sun couldn’t wake her anymore, and Silver’s sense of time bent at an awkward angle now.

Withholding a sigh, Silver Spoon rearranged the curtains so they wouldn’t catch on the planks or tear on a nail. Be glad it was only a window. You could have lost an entire wall, or the roof. Glass can be replaced.

She switched the lamp on, angling the shade toward the fish tank to focus the light. “Can we get another lamp in here? It doesn’t feel bright enough; he’ll know it’s not daylight.”

Father glanced up from cleaning his monocle. “I think one’s alright for now, but are you sure it’s necessary?” He gestured his cleaning cloth toward the tank’s miniature jungle of aquatic plants. “I thought betta fish lived in rice paddies with plenty of shade. Besides, the lamp gives off light, not heat.”

“Yes, but they still give off a little. That might help in case… in case something happens.” Silver Spoon checked the tank thermometer a fourth time. Still a balmy eighty-one degrees. Good.

She angled the get well card so Ferdinand could see it. A seapony doll leaned against the glass, in case he felt lonely. “We’ll be back soon, okay, Ferdinand?”

Ferdinand’s tail fins drooped over the castle spires. He lay in his hammock near the water’s surface, still asleep. The lamp’s light reflected against his dull blue scales. A patch of uneaten food flakes drifted above his head. If he didn’t eat it soon, the water would get dirty and Ferdinand might get sicker.

Silver considered changing the water when they returned, but that ran the risk of stressing the poor betta even more. Besides, she needed Brass Tacks for that.

Echoes of a Colt Rain record drifted down the hall from the dim room where the Silvers’ butler rested. Mother, Father, and Doctor Stable had all insisted—and it had required a great deal of insistence—that Brass Tacks take two weeks off to recover from his concussion.

Performing one of the strongest spells in his arsenal after thirty hours without sleep would put down the best of unicorns, and he’d done it twice. The intense expulsion, drainage, and return of magic—to say nothing of the journey to and from the Rich house—disagreed with Tacks greatly.

The soft frog of Silver’s hoof pressed against the warm fish tank. “I should have stayed home.”

It wouldn’t have happened if she’d stayed home. A lot of things wouldn’t have happened.

If they’d stayed, Silver Spoon and Brass Tacks would have been home to board the windows ahead of time, like Pinkie told them to. If the windows had been boarded, the bedroom window wouldn’t have broken, or if it had, somepony would have been home to turn Ferdinand’s heater on.

Silver checked the temperature again. Still eighty-one degrees. It did little to shoo away the image of coming home to sixty-two. The image of Ferdinand—a perfect gentlefish who knew tricks and came...
when called and never hurt anybody—lingering in the chilly water for hours. *Hours.*

“Brightness, you can’t continue fretting this way.” Father wrapped a foreleg around Silver Spoon’s shoulders and guided her out of the room. “What’s passed has passed. You can’t change that, can you?”

“No, sir.” Not unless she got somepony to pull some strings and cast a time travel spell.

Father adjusted his collar and smoothed his gold cravat in a hallway mirror. “Is there anything else you can do for your fish that you haven’t already done?”

“I don’t think so. Fluttershy and the vet told me to warm the water slowly and not stress him out. I did that part.” They stopped at the door with the Colt Rain music. Silver Spoon cracked the door open to wish Brass Tacks goodbye, but he’d fallen asleep on the chaise lounge. She whispered it instead.

Closing the door shut, Silver added, “And though Ferdinand’s sick, at least he’s still here. We found him in time.”

Indeed, Ferdinand was still alive. So were Mother and Father. Brass Tacks might have gotten hurt, but he’d be alright soon. Of all the Silver Clan, only Cousin Silver Lining had sustained serious damage—a broken wing from an attempted attack on Tirek, and a broken leg from the tailspin afterwards—but Mother said he’d be out of the hospital in three weeks. As far as Silver knew, nopony in town had been badly hurt. Scathed, rattled, and possibly swamped with repair bills, but still alive and here.

“I guess I’m happy things worked out the way they did,” said Silver Spoon. “It could have been worse.” In the foyer window, the charred gnarl of what used to be the library twisted over Town Hall. *Much worse.* Silver flattened her ears and looked away.

Mother tapped her hoof, her lips and patience thin. “There you are. Stars’ sake, Laurel, did you two stop for brunch or something?” She kissed Father’s cheek and adjusted Silver Spoon’s pearls. “Come on, I won’t have everypony gossiping that we left a princess waiting. Silver Spoon, you put your book in already, right?”

Silver double checked the saddlebag waiting beside the door. Her own library copy of *Letters, Notes, & Memoirs Of The Conemara Ice Cream War: Vol. II* wedged between Mother’s *The Unicornian in Captivity* and *Bow Tie In Blinders.* “Yes, ma’am, but do you really think she’ll want mine back? It’s the middle book of the set, and the rest of it…” Blown halfway to the Crystal Empire, probably.

“It’s the gesture that counts, dear.”

After nearly two full days indoors, the cloudless day struck Silver square in the face. The rolling scent of browning leaves, early rainfall, and harvest pumpkins had washed away the ash and smoke. The songs of birds and ponies alike threaded through the streets, jubilant and alive, almost as if the past week never happened at all.

Before Silver Spoon’s eyes could adjust to the blinding sunlight, she felt herself being hoisted up and over Father’s back. They sped for the castle at a lively trot, much faster than Silver expected. The last time she’d seen Father trot, he’d had to catch the museum director and even that was half this pace. “If we’re late, I can still keep up with you. I don’t mind running, Father.”

“Why, what a fascinating coincidence!” He laughed, jumping into a canter. “I don’t mind carrying you.” Father glanced back to Mother with a wink. “Fancy you can match our pace, Pitch?”
Mother caught him at the shoulder. “Now, Laurel, you must be reasonable. You’re a doughy forty-seven year old Canterlotter carrying an entire pony on his back.”

“Are you implying I’m old?” Father nickered under his breath at Mother’s smirk. “Need I remind you, my dear Pitch Perfect, that you are three years my elder?”

“True,” said Mother, “but I’m also a native Manehattanite.” She kissed him quick on the cheek and reared with a toss of her head. “My darling, I warmly invite you to eat my dust. Ha!” She broke from them, tearing down the path.

Silver Spoon’s braid whipped in the air and she wrapped her forelegs tight around Father’s neck. Mother’s scarf streamed inches from her nose; he’d already closed the distance. “Father?” she called over the wind. “Are you sure this is alright?” It seemed like a good way to arrive sweaty and out of breath.

“Come now, Brightness, it’s only a short run to the castle. Why, look around you.” Father nodded in the direction of Mr. Davenport, who moved just ahead of them at Father’s speed while carting a weighty bookcase. “We’re earth ponies, Silver Spoon. We were built for this!”

As they drew closer to the castle, Silver realized Mother and Father weren’t the only ponies taking advantage of their tribe’s special traits. Minuette juggled library books with her magic for no discernable reason other than she could. The Cake twins cheered as their parents sped them down a hill. White Lightning and Cotton Cloudy loop-de-looped around Blossomforth, Thunderlane, and Rumble in some sort of impromptu air ballet.

Silver Spoon stretched her neck toward the crowd gathered around the crystal castle. Come to think of it, she couldn’t find any pegasi—not counting Scootaloo—with all four hooves on the ground.

Mother and Father slowed to a trot, then a walk as the crowd thickened around them. Silver waved to The Dink and Berry Pinch, who played levitation catch with Snips and Snails on the sidelines. They’d arrived too late for a place up front, but standing on Father’s withers, Silver still had a great view of Princess Twilight.

Towards the front of the crowd, light glinted off a little spike of steel and diamonds. A red hair bow bobbed past it. Squinting, Silver Spoon wobbled on her hind legs to see.

Diamond Tiara stood a few ponies away from Apple Bloom and her fellow Crusaders. Silver couldn’t tell if they ignored each other, hadn’t noticed the other party yet, or simply had better things to occupy their attention.

Scootaloo caught Diamond’s eye for a fraction of a second. The fillies looked at each other and turned back to the castle.

*Looks like the truce is holding.* Silver smiled a little. *That’s good, at least.*

The crowd’s separate conversations tapered off from each other. A great cheer rose into the air as Princess Twilight Sparkle approached the podium to give a speech Silver barely heard.

If Silver Spoon stretched her neck, she could spot Diamond’s expression: smiling, though not too occupied by the speech itself. She held the smile of a filly attending a wine tasting or tagging along on an errand trip. Glad to be out of the house, but gladder to finally go somewhere else.

Diamond Tiara had never been a dedicated library patron; any book she wanted she bought, or else had Silver borrow a book on her behalf. A re-opening/dedication/book memorial wouldn’t remotely interest her, which probably meant…
Silver scanned the crowd again. *Yep.*

Spoiled and Filthy Rich stood together a few feet away. Mr. Rich carried a small stack of shiny new encyclopedias with him. They’d come to donate, not return.

Diamond Tiara began to fidget as though she’d gotten a tick in her coat. Seconds before the rainbow sprang triumphant through the sky, all pastels and twinkles with a promise of better days, the magic of friendship, and the glory of love, Diamond turned around.

Under the rainbow of harmony and friendship, the fillies met eyes.

Silver Spoon waved over Father’s hat.

Diamond slowly blinked at her. She turned back around.

Twilight Sparkle approached the end of her speech. “…and new beginnings. So everypony, please join me in celebrating the grand reopening of the Ponyville Library!”

The crowd erupted into thunderous applause. Silver’s hooves clacked together and joined it. Her smile didn’t waver.

_Today’s for celebration. Here I am, celebrating._ Silver applauded harder, happy for the opportunity and fortunate to attend.

Fortunate, also, to have a friend like Diamond Tiara to protect her. Silver reminded herself to thank her friend later. Perhaps it would have been better to stay at home in the first place, but Silver counted herself fortunate to find shelter where she did, despite some… discomfort within said shelter.

She’d escaped the ordeal intact, and never knew the trauma of her internal magic being siphoned out of her. Not everypony could say the same.

Aside from a spare anecdote about the traffic, Mother and Father never spoke of their ordeal in Canterlot. Silver Spoon didn’t dare ask them. She didn’t have to. They both seemed alright now. Except for sometimes.

Sometimes, Silver Spoon found Father sitting in the drawing room, looking into the flames in the fireplace. One of those times—early yesterday morning, to be exact—Mother joined him. She’d taken Father’s hoof in hers and they’d stayed that way until breakfast time, hooves clasped and not saying anything. That afternoon, they’d planted snowdrops in the front yard, and seeds of lungwort in the back garden. Silver couldn’t recall Father planting a thing in his life, but he’d grown a bouquet’s worth of lungwort before the end of the day.

The corners of Silver's mouth dipped into a frown. That wouldn’t do at all. She propped the smile back into position. What right did she have not to smile? Everypony here was smiling, and most of them had endured far worse than Silver had. Besides, how else would Princess Twilight know how grateful she was for saving all of them?

“Hey, Silver. Did you finish those charts yet?” Diamond Tiara stared up at her from the ground.

“What?” Silver glanced at the thinning crowd. Her parents had shifted into the single-file line of library patrons leading to the castle doors. Gently, she signaled Father to let her down.

“Oh, I… yes. Mostly.” All four hooves back on solid ground, Silver got a front-row view of Diamond’s souring frown. “I mapped out the school’s student population by clique and rank, and gathered the numbers. Class doesn’t start again until tomorrow, though, so I can’t finish the—”
Diamond glared. “You said you’d take care of the data stuff, Silver Spoon, but if you don’t think you can handle it, I’ll find somepony who can.”

“I can handle it, but I need more time for the numbers to be accurate. At least until tomorrow afternoon.”

“We’re meeting tomorrow morning, though. I need it then.”

“I know, but all the info I’ve got right now won’t…” She was only digging herself deeper. Silver sighed. “I’ll take care of it.”

An educated guess of the potential polls would have to do. Even without knowing for sure who currently ran for class president, she could always run with the popularity scale as she knew it from last month and guesstimate. Maybe catch up with some of the foals who came to the library re-opening. Yes, that could work.

“Do you want to come back with us after this is over? I’ll show you what I have so far.”

Diamond shrugged. “I’ll see it when it’s finished. Me and my parents saw the princess already, so we’re going home.”

“Well, we could still do something else.” Out of the corner of Silver’s eye, Mother turned a gold-studded ear in their direction. She didn’t seem happy. “I think the movie theater opened again; we could see something.”

“Time is money, Silver.” Diamond turned away with a flick of her tail. “I’ve got stuff to handle, and you have a chart to finish. Maybe later.”

“Oh, okay.” Silver pulled her book from the saddlebag so she could give it to Princess Twilight personally. The gesture would mean more that way. “So, a movie later this week, maybe?” When she looked up from the bag, Diamond Tiara had already slipped back into the crowd.

“Silver Spoon.” Mother regarded her with modest concern, but her face betrayed nothing. She held herself with the stately composure that had sailed their family through the storm of financial crisis. A mare who knew the omens of a hurricane on sight. “We’re nearly at the front of the line, my darling,” she said. “Don’t slouch.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Whatever had gone through Mother’s mind just now—something either inappropriate for current company or too detailed for immediate discussion—they would revisit somehow at a later date. Silver Spoon would bet money on it.

The last pony ahead of them, Miss Rainbowshine, returned her book and flew off without staying to make conversation.

Father bowed while Mother approached and offered her borrowed books. “Good afternoon, Princess Twilight Sparkle. I hope you don’t mind they’re a few days overdue.”

“Good afternoon! And that’s all right, Silver Laurel.” Princess Twilight shrugged with a polite chuckle. “We didn’t exactly have a book return.” The pages fluttered as the princess magically flipped through them, smiling at the return stamps on the back. “It certainly looks like you enjoyed it.” She turned the books over to Rarity to sort. For some reason, Rarity flushed.

“We did,” Father said. He side-eyed Mother with a smirk. “Immensely.”

Mother blinked impassively and ignored him.
I don’t see what the big deal is. It’s just a couple of history books. Silver Spoon glanced at Rarity’s valiant effort not to crack a smile while sorting *The Unicornian in Captivity*. Adults were weird, sometimes. She shrugged and offered her own book.

“The epistolaries from the Ice Cream Wars, I forgot we loaned this out!” Princess Twilight hugged the tome to her chest like an old friend. “Thank you so much, Silver Spoon. I hope it helped you with your paper.”

“It did, Princess, thank you.” Silver peered at the stack of books Rarity sorted. Behind her, Spike assisted with shelving them on the book trolley. Despite the large crowd, they’d only collected about sixty books. A far cry from the original eighteen-thousand or so. “I’m only sorry now that I didn’t borrow all three volumes.”

“I’m just glad you managed to save even part of it. It’s a rare volume.” Twilight skimmed one of the early sections—the part containing Smart Cookie’s early letters to a town mayor, if Silver wasn’t mistaken. The princess seemed tempted to reread the whole thing then and there.

Behind her, Father discussed the castle architecture with Mother, indicating the tall roof and a large table at the back of the room. Neither of them paid attention to Silver Spoon, much less her topics of discussion.

*Now or never.* Clearing her throat, Silver stepped closer to wave the princess down. “Excuse me, Princess Twilight? I’m sorry if this is a bad time to ask…” She glanced at the patch of grass where Diamond stood a few moments ago. “…but would it be okay if I scheduled an appointment with you for later?”

Twilight’s ears twitched as she nosed through the history book. “Absolutely. I’ll just need to ask Spike to check my schedule first.” She mumbled dates and events under her breath. “Summit’s next Friday, can’t do it then…hmm. What did you want to see me about?”

“I have a friendship problem.”

The book snapped shut. “Spike, can you give me my schedule book, please?” The princess craned her elegant wings, leaning down to inspect Silver Spoon more closely. Silver shifted uncomfortably and fiddled with her braid. Dozens of follow up questions danced in Twilight’s eyes, but she thankfully opted not to voice any of them. “It sounds serious.”

Silver glanced at the approaching dragon. She lowered her voice. “Yes. I think it might be.”

Princess Twilight nodded. “In that case, I’ll set aside a day for you. Is the Sunday after next alright, or do you need me to move it closer?” She tapped her quill against her chin. “I wish I could get you in sooner, but between your classes and my summit next week, I don’t think we can help that.”

“A whole day?” It sounded so drastic, especially for a princess who must have had dozens of better things to do. Silver didn’t know if Di would be willing to lose an entire day of election prep, either. “Do you really think that’s necessary?”

“For a friendship problem? I can’t think of anything more necessary, Silver Spoon.”

Silver Spoon peered through the stained glass of the schoolhouse window. Two silhouettes bounced
on the other side: one soft and round, the other framed by a frizzy, uncombed mane. Bingo.

“Well?” In the shade of the dogwood tree a few feet away, Diamond Tiara sat up and swished her tail. She examined the image of herself in the stained glass with disinterest. “Are they in there?”

Pressing closer, Silver noticed a third, taller figure towards the back hunched over a desk. Grading papers, if she had to guess. “Even better, they’re with Miss Cheerilee.”

She still wished she could have convinced Diamond to hold out until tomorrow. It’d be better to announce this during next Wednesday’s official student council meeting—both to demonstrate commitment to the position and to smooth the transition of power. Then again, with two-thirds of the council and Miss Cheerilee present, this may as well be a meeting anyway.

As a mild bonus, approaching the council now also provided a clear demonstration of Silver’s perceptive skills. “I told you they’d be there.” The low-tier, nerdier foals usually took shelter indoors instead of stumbling through sports or trying to navigate the social scenes.

In the distance, Snips and Snails cried out as the jungle gym collapsed under their weight. A round of disappointed groans traveled through the playground.

_That’s the second equipment failure this week, not counting the melted slide and scorched baseball field._ “It’s not like there’s a bunch of options for playing outside at recess now. We should have plenty of time; I bet they’ll stay there till—hey!”

Diamond shouldered Silver Spoon away from the window to confirm. “At least you got that part right. For once.”

What, did she expect Silver to go knock on doors and take polls when Ponyville still hadn’t fully recovered from Tirek’s rampage? A move that insensitive would kill their momentum before it even started. “I told you the popularity graphs wouldn’t be totally complete until school started, Diamond. I did the best I could do.”

“Please. You call spending four days at home sniveling over some dumb fish and trying to kiss up to a princess ‘your best’?” Diamond arched an eyebrow. “You should have been able to pull this off without me having to hold your hoof all the time. A real friend would—”

“Okay! Okay, I get it, I’m sorry about the graphs. For now, can we move on to the next stage?”

“Sorry’s a worry word, Silver Spoon.” Diamond Tiara settled into a spot by another window. “Signal me when you’re ready.”

“Right.” After a quick spot check for split ends and scuffs, Silver Spoon circled around the building and approached the door.

A couple of the new kids played cards by the front steps—friends of Boysenberry, if Silver remembered correctly. That meant today’s news could spread faster than expected. Bubblegum Brush—a filly with a mane so absurdly long it had to be the result of either bizarre genetics or a botched mane extension job—waved to her. “Hi, Silver Spoon. Are we still helping my sister with her tea party later?”

“Naturally.” Silver nodded to Bubblegum’s friend—a pigtailed filly whose name escaped her at the moment—and reached for the door, taking care not to step on any cards. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m meeting someone.”

At the center of the classroom, Truffle Shuffle and Twist shared a laugh over a baked tomato.
sandwich. They’d combined their desks (and part of Rumble’s) to form one large table, complete with an appetizing spread of cookies, flower blossoms, and cupcakes.

Miss Cheerilee briefly looked up from grading essays. “Why, hello there, Silver.” She didn’t seem surprised by her arrival.

“Thilver Thpoon! Over here!” Twist grinned with a mouth full of half-chewed sandwich. She swung her hoof over her head as if Silver couldn’t find the only occupied desks in the room. “Hiya!”

Politely ignoring the chunk of tomato that flew past her nose, Silver nodded to them both. “Hello, President Twist.” She smiled and took a seat next to the pudgy colt. “Vice President Shuffle.”

“Heh, not for much longer. We’re having a party to celebrate the end of Twist’s presidency. I sent an invitation, but I think it got lost that day the mail got all messed up.” Truffle Shuffle pulled a small plate of cucumber sandwiches out of his cooler. “I brought these in case you still showed up.”

A party might be an even better place to announce Diamond Tiara’s candidacy. She could invite more foals—and butter them up in advance—and top off the end of the old regime by introducing the new one. *Yes, much better plan than before.* Silver glanced at the tiara shining in the window. *Not that there’s anything wrong with the current plan.*

Silver wondered why they didn’t try inviting her at school instead. It would have been much easier. “Party, huh? When are you having it?”

“Right now, you thilly!” Twist laughed and slid a juice box across the table, along with some napkins.

“I… oh.” Silver looked again at the spread and laughed at herself. Yeah, this seemed about right for a Twist party. She favored little get-togethers like this. “Duh, Silver Spoon.”

“Glad you could make it, Thilver Thpoon.” Twist patted Silver’s back. “We really mithed you around here.”

Silver took a small bite of cucumber sandwich. The dill and cream cheese melted beautifully with just a touch of lemon. She devoured the rest in two bites. How had she forgotten how good Truffle’s cooking was? Silver put together a decent plate of cucumber sandwiches herself, but they didn’t have the smooth pops of flavor Truffle teased out of a meal.

“Yeah, I—wow, Truff, this is amazing, can I have another one of those?—I missed you guys, too.” To Silver’s mild surprise, she realized she meant it. Truffle’s cooking skills aside, nopony Silver’s age shared her appreciation for protocol and rules, even if he leaned more on laws than decorum. Twist didn’t know insecurity from an iguana; the filly never met an idea she didn’t like, and on a good day her enthusiasm matched Pinkie Pie’s. How anypony managed to be that optimistic twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, Silver had no idea. They might have been dorks, but they were Silver’s dorks.

Twist giggled and poked Truffle’s nose. “Toldja she’d like your thandwicheth.” Leaning over to Silver, she not-whispered, “He thought you weren’t gonna like ‘em.”

Truffle poked her back. “I didn’t say she wouldn’t, I said she had a… sensitive palate. I mean, you do tea parties for a talent, Silver. If anypony knows cucumber sandwiches, it’s you.”

“How to serve them, maybe, not how to make them.” Silver polished off a third sandwich. Would it be uncouth to have more? Whatever, it wasn’t a formal party. She snapped up a fourth. “I’ve given
some thought about what you said before. About the council, I mean.”

Truffle Shuffle’s ears stood straight up. “And?”

“I’ve decided to return as class secretary.” The huge grins of her fellow council ponies coax out a smile of Silver’s own. She tossed down her copy of the council charter to punctuate the statement. “Officially.”

“That’s awesome! Great to have ya back, Thilver.” Twist raised her juice box for a three way toast. “The next two themetherth are gonna be great, right Truff?”

Truffle’s laughter put dimples in his cheeks. “Oh, you bet! I was starting to think I’d have to sit at meetings all by myself, you know? I mean, Twist’ll still be here, but she’ll be a regular council pony.”

“Well, the class president will need a competent pony backing her, right? Returning to the post seemed like a given.”

“Nice to know I’ll have your support. With you here, I know we’ll get some real progress with—hold on.” Truffle realized they were having different conversations at the same instant Silver did. “Did you say ‘her’?”

So, Vice President Shuffle went forward with his plan to run for office after all. What a pity. Silver Spoon sighed and flicked her tail for the signal. Maybe next year, Truff.

“I did, yes.” Silver’s smile toed the line between diplomacy and apology.

Miss Cheerilee’s hoofbeats echoed as she crossed the empty classroom to join them at the table. A small black ledger and her own copy of the council charter nestled in the crook of her foreleg. “Now, Truffle Shuffle, let’s remember to be good sports. I know you’ve been on the student council for a long time, but it’s not much of an election when only one pony runs.”

“And,” added Silver, “the more ponies running for office, the more involved other ponies will be. Foals around here will finally realize we have a student council.” At the very least, they’d know who the student president was. “We might even get new members.”

“That’s true, Silver Spoon. It’s always good to give new faces a chance at the democratic process.” It might have been Silver’s imagination, but she could have sworn Cheerilee’s smile stiffened, then. Her green eyes gave the briefest flicker towards the door. “No matter who they might be.”

Truffle felt the subtle shift in Cheerilee’s tone. He turned from Cheerilee to Twist to Silver to Cheerilee again. Slowly, he turned around. His disappointment congealed into horror. “…tell me it’s not…”

A familiar silhouette appeared in the door’s window.

“No. Ohhh no.” He gaped at Silver Spoon as if she’d stomped his blue ribbon quiche in the mud and spat on it.

Silver cleared her throat and folded her hooves upon the table, eyes straight ahead. “Come now, council, let’s… all remember to be professional about this.”

The knob turned.

The empty juice box crumpled in Truffle’s grip. “Silver Spoon, no!”
Diamond Dazzle Tiara crossed the room, wielding the grin that had deflected detentions, annihilated rivals, and steamrolled a decade of beauty pageants. She tossed her flawless mane and spared a glance at Truffle’s drop-jawed horror. “I know. It’s hard to believe how lucky you are to soon have me for student pony president.” She popped his jaw shut with a flick of her hoof. “It’s enough to leave you speechless.”

In the two seconds it took for the rest of the council to digest the announcement, Silver met Diamond’s eyes from across the table. The fillies considered each other.

Silver’s folded hooves tensed, but her expression didn’t waver.

Diamond’s pageant grin shifted into something softer. Something thankful and ambitious and full of hope. Something real. She offered Silver a brief—almost invisible—nod. Praise without fine print.

This, they both realized, could work. Perhaps their friendship sailed rough waters right now. Perhaps rougher waters awaited them. Right now, none of that changed the fact that, even fractured, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon formed a schoolyard superpower.

“Yes, yes, it’s true!” Diamond pulled a fountain pen out from behind her ear and approached the registry Miss Cheerilee had already laid out. “I, Diamond Tiara, have finally decided to announce my candidacy for Ponyville Schoolhouse’s Student Pony President. Try to hold your applause.”

Nopony had to try very hard.

Not that she’d expected a standing ovation, but Silver suspected some Windigos had received warmer receptions. *Di’s unbridled egotism might fly onstage, but not here. Not now.* Not with dozens of Diamond’s bridges still burning in the background. Silver adjusted her glasses. *We’ll have to do something about that.*

President Twist rose from her chair and offered her hoof out to shake. “That’s great, Diamond. Good luck.”

“Won’t need it, but thanks!” Diamond gave the hoof a mild pat. She glanced over the registration document Silver had already shown her over the weekend. The fountain pen slashed her name in one smooth stroke.

So. There it was in official black and white.

Silver Spoon steepled her hooves, watching the signature’s ink dry. Solidify. She kept her eyes on the signature. Not on Diamond Tiara’s preening, not on Cheerilee and Twist’s cautious optimism, and certainly not on Truffle Shuffle who would not stop staring.

Alright, fine. *It could have gone better. It could have gone worse. It doesn’t matter now. What’s passed has passed, and I can’t change it.*

Nowhere to go but forward.

Not far away, something crashed and a couple of fillies outside yelped for Miss Cheerilee. When the teacher opened the door to investigate, she found Sunny Daze already there and in tears (what else was new?) over a bruise on her leg. Another piece of the playground must have broken.

Truffle Shuffle watched Cheerilee lead the sniffling filly to the first aid kit, frowning. “Well. Whoever wins, we’ll at least have a better chance of talking to the schoolboard.”

Before Silver could ask him to clarify—for nopony had ever really mentioned the schoolboard before
Diamond Tiara snickered under her breath.

Twist nocked an ear back. She almost looked annoyed. “What’th tho funny?”

“Right, ‘whoever wins’.” Diamond casually leaned on the back of Cheerilee’s desk, examining her hoof polish. “Like we don’t already know who that’ll be.”

Truffle flattened his ears. “Wait ‘till the election’s over before you start writing your victory speech, Diamond Tiara.”

“Why should I? Like, no offense, Truffle, but if you’re my competition, I’m pretty much running unopposed. I mean…” In a sweep of her hooves, Diamond summed them up: the polished, popular princess versus the fat, forgettable tattletale. She nickered under her breath, a brush-off that didn’t even give the colt the dignity of her malice. “…like, come on.”

“Yeah, well, I… You…” A response struggled on Truffle Shuffle’s tongue, but couldn’t make it out. What could the poor kid possibly say?

Silver Spoon would be hard pressed to find somepony who could say they hated Truffle, but harder pressed to find somepony—barring Twist—who’d pick him first for anything outside of (maybe) a cooking contest.

Even when nopony had anything nice to say about Diamond Tiara, everypony always had something TO say about Diamond Tiara. New foals knew Truffle Shuffle as That-One-Colt-Who-Does-Food. Everypony else knew him as The Snitch or The-Wet-Blanket-Who-Killed-Battle-Tag or worse. Bearing that sort of multi-semester reputation—a reputation that could be easily twisted into something uglier—a light poke might tailspin him into pariah territory. And Diamond poked with sledgehammers.

Adults liked to say elections were about the issues. Adults liked to say it wasn’t a popularity contest. Adults also liked to say that Santa Hooves delivered Hearth’s Warming presents.

Four semesters of student council experience, genuine passion for the school’s well-being, and loads of good intentions might have made Truffle the best student president in recent history, but it wouldn’t get him elected. At least, not without a campaign manager to work P.R. and polish his finer qualities. Fat chance of that. The only foals Truffle Shuffle associated with were Twist and…

And me. He planned on asking me to manage his campaign. Under different circumstances, Silver probably would have. Facing somepony like Diamond, Truffle still might not win, but he’d have a chance. Silver Spoon finally lifted her head and turned to face him.

Truffle Shuffle had never learned how to craft a poker face. His disappointment hit raw. “Is that the only reason you came back? To help Diamond Tiara?” He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “You get the chance to do some real good for this school and you bring in that?”

Diamond flicked her tail and glared at him.

Truffle met it with a glare of his own and didn’t blink. “The only reason she’s here is to puff up her own big, fat, bloated ego and you know it.”

Poor choice of adjectives. Silver jumped in before Diamond could take the easy shot at a fat joke. “No, Truffle, I actually don’t know that. Neither do you.” When he snorted and rolled his eyes at her, Silver straightened to address the rest of the table. “Okay, then let me ask something else: do you
know where Diamond spent her work study project last summer?"

Both council ponies had to admit they didn’t, though President Twist had heard of Diamond’s masterful surfing escapades.

“She worked at Town Hall, learning legislature under Tall Order. Diamond’s seen how government works—the real stuff.” The reveal raised a couple of eyebrows. Silver offered a smile. “You can’t assume she’ll be a bad president if you don’t even give her the chance.”

“She’th got a good point, Truffle,” added Twist. She met Silver’s smile with optimism. “I mean, you didn’t think Thilver would be a good thecetary, but look how good that turned out.”

“Right.” The vice president’s soft face wrinkled with a sneer. His gaze flicked from Silver’s dimming smile to Diamond’s smug grin. “Look how that turned out.”

Silver’s ears drooped. “It’s not like that, Truffle.”

“Really? What’s it like, then?”

“Yeah, Silvie.” Diamond Tiara reached over Silver Spoon’s shoulder to grab a cucumber sandwich. She propped her elbows on the table and chewed slowly. “What’s it like?”

“It’s…” Silver pulled her hooves into her lap and stared at the council charter’s publication information. “It’s complicated.”

Diamond smiled. “Sounds like.”

Truffle twitched his ears in thought. He looked at the two of them again, then at Silver’s hooves clasped tightly in her lap. Some of the hurt faded from his eyes. “Yeah, it kinda does. Silver, maybe I wasn’t being totally fair. It’s not like I ever actually asked you to manage…” He tried to scoot closer, but the curtain of Diamond’s hair fell between them. “…uh. Never mind.”

“Like, honestly, I dunno why you’re even surprised.” Diamond stepped away from the desk with a shrug. “It’s not like you guys were ever friends. You’re co-workers or whatever—associates, if we’re being generous—but that’s all. Who wants to be friends with a fat, sniveling loser besides other losers?”

Silver’s ears dipped lower. “Diamond, come on.”

“‘Come on’, what? It’s true.”

Twist’s head snapped up, glaring. “Hey, it ith not! Truffle ithn’t any of those thingth!”

Diamond Tiara rolled her eyes. “I rest my case.” She slung a foreleg over Silver’s shoulder and patted. “But I know Silver Spoon’s no loser.” Pat pat. “Right, Silvie?” Pat pat.

“…right, Di.”

“Good. ‘Cause we both know I don’t hang out with losers.”

“Yeah. I know.”

Satisfied, the future student pony president nodded. “C’mon, we’re leaving.” She trotted for the door without waiting for a response.

“Excuse me, I’ve got to go. It was a nice party, Twist; congratulations on a really good presidency.”
Silver cleared her throat and began to gather her things. Without looking up, she added, “Truffle Shuffle… look, you’re really nice. I like you, and you are my friend.” She glanced towards the door. “But Diamond is my best friend.”

The window rattled with Diamond’s knock. “Hey. We’re leaving today?”

“Um.” Twist sucked her juice box. She raised a curly red eyebrow. “You sure about that?”

“Like I said, it’s complicated.” Silver flinched at another knock on the glass and rose from her chair before the council had another window to replace. “I know one day you’ll be an amazing president, Truffle Shuffle, just not now. You should sit this election out. You’re a good pony. I don’t want to see Diamond ruin you.”

Truffle flicked his stubby tail and drained the rest of his juice box. “I’ll think about it, Silver Spoon.” He tossed her one last cucumber sandwich for the road. A quiet smile crossed his face. “I can’t make any promises for Pipsqueak, though.”

Silver Spoon missed the War Room. True, the spotlights ramped up the tension and the trophies walled them in, but the place retained the comfort of history. Even after a brutal loss, returning to the War Room reminded Diamond and Silver that if a filly could win a trophy once, she could do so again. It was a place of strategy, a place where past victories laid the blueprints of new ones.

The Rich Conservatory held no such comfort. From all sides, the sun beat down on a modest collection of flowers, ferns, shrubberies, and stunted trees too proud to be labeled shrubberies.

Sitting at the little marble table at the center of the conservatory, Silver Spoon watched at the world beyond the glass walls and the glass roof. She suddenly understood why Ferdinand hated his travel bowl so much. Without his castle or little jungle of plants, he’d nowhere to hide. In the shade of a mighty ficus, a bead of sweat slipped down Silver’s back.

“You said nopony cared about student government.” Diamond Tiara paced a third lap around the table. “You said I’d be running unopposed.” Despite her harsh tone, little heat backed it: a strong wind, not a hurricane.

“I know what I said, Diamond.” Silver squinted in the sunlight as she wiped condensation from her lenses. The humidity in here fuzzed her braid like a dandelion. She glanced at the white hydrangeas bobbing over Diamond’s head. Not that Mrs. Rich would ever grow anything so common as dandelions in here. “I also said that was an estimate. An educated guess.”

In the corner of Silver’s eye, Mrs. Rich watered a miniature juniper tree. She’d been there since they’d arrived, clipping leaves, plucking stray petals, and turning soil in her gardening outfit. Every so often, her ear turned in their direction, but thus far she hadn’t said anything beyond the obligatory exchange of hellos. No commentary was good commentary; Silver intended to keep it that way.

“Besides, running unopposed is like buying a trophy.” Thus, not a win at all. By Di’s standards, only the condescension of a participation ribbon could be worse. “At least this way, there’s some sport in it.” To say the least.

Diamond flopped into the wicker chair opposite Silver Spoon. “Hm. Guess that’s true.” She scooted closer to see Silver’s notes.
A food-web of the school’s societal ecosystem took up most of the table, a map arranged and color-coded by social rank, personal animosity, likability, and drive. It measured not only a foal’s popularity with potential voters, but also the likelihood of dropping out mid-game to go play tetherball or something.

The tip of Silver’s pen tapped Pipsqueak’s picture, centered in the web and ringed with red and orange. “Pip was always a strong possibility. He sounded interested in the presidency before, and the colt’s got enthusiasm for miles.”

Mrs. Rich looked up from her juniper tree, brandishing pruning shears. “Who?”

“Pipsqueak. He moved here from Trottingham last year with his older sister,” Silver said. “He’s the little one with all the spots.”

“The one with the accent? That sickly little seedling?” She turned back to her juniper with a dismissive sniff. “Surprised he’s even allowed to run; he’s not even from here.”

Diamond Tiara sniffed. “In class, he has to sit on a box so Cheerilee can even see him.”

Silver chewed her pen cap thoughtfully. Pip’s altitude and nonnative status wasn’t the part they had to worry about. “He’s popular, too, and not just with the colts.” A candidate that crossed gender lines was a rare boon. Truffle Shuffle—who’d surely encouraged him to run—picked a good pony to bet on.

Mrs. Rich humphed. “Not more than Diamond Tiara, I’m sure.”

Silver hadn’t seen any official polls yet, but she remembered pools of ponies evaporating to a droplet the second Diamond’s shadow hit the pavement. She couldn’t remember the last time a foal smiled at them when they passed.

She marked herself lucky that Spoiled’s assessment of Pip’s popularity had been a statement, not a question. One did not need to respond to statements, and Spoiled Rich seemed adept at sniffing out lies.

“You know Nightmare Night’s not for, like, another couple weeks, right?” Silver Spoon crept around the chalk glyphs and symbols etched onto the hardwood floor. Thanks to Dinky’s illegible penmanship, Silver couldn’t tell if she walked over a spell, a summoning ritual, or a recipe for rhubarb soup. “Wouldn’t that be when you’d get more spirits or whatever?”

The Dink sprinkled something white and powdery in her coat. “Exactly. The barriers between worlds are thinnest, then. Everypony’s gonna try and talk to ‘em, and all the spirits will be runnin’ around. It’d be like trying to flag down Celestia in the middle of the Summer Sun Celebration. We’re trying to get one ghost, not sixty. Also, it’ll be too late by then.”

“The deepening sunset shone through the dilapidated roof above them. Silver wrinkled her nose at the cobwebs in the corner and searched a place to sit.

“Because the test is the day after tomorrow. Duh.” Dink reached into her pockets and pulled out a notebook, five candles, three pencils, a yo-yo, an apple core, and a baby blanket with winged muffins on it. The Dink wrapped the blanket around her shoulder like a scarf, glaring at the room,
Silver nodded and laid out her supplies: thyme, apple seeds, an assortment of used tea leaves, and her first teacup. She still didn’t see the point of the cup, but The Dink had firmly insisted that everypony bring a sentimental object from their preschool years. “Not to tread on your tail, Dink, but…” She gestured to the chalk runes, candles, and the circle of mirrors positioned around the room. “Wouldn’t it be easier to, you know, study for the geography test instead?”

The unicorn blinked at her.

“You know, study? Like with a textbook? And notes?”

The Dink mouthed the word as if it didn’t fit in her muzzle. She turned to the blue colt cleaning camera lenses next to her. “Shades, you getting any of that?”

Shady Daze screwed a green lens on his camera. “Not a word, Dink. I think she’s speaking some kinda Zebrican.” The camera snapped a test shot of the floor. “Hope I can get a decent shot of Mrs. Hackney’s ghost with this. Pip was supposed to help get me a ride to Canterlot so I could buy a night lens, but he had election junk to do.”

Perfect. Silver didn’t even have to fish for an opening. “That’s a shame, Shady. Diamond’s been busy with the campaign, but she still always has time for me.”

“Yeah, pretty sure that’s ‘cause you’re on the campaign, Spoons,” The Dink pointed out. “Who else would she have?”

Shady Daze slung the camera around his neck with a snort. “Who else would put up with her?” He shrugged off Silver Spoon’s disapproving frown. “Hey, I don’t make the news, I just shoot it. Everypony knows she just wants to be president so she can boss more ponies around.”

Silver rolled her eyes. And Pip wants to be president because he’s got nothing better to do, what’s your point?

Unless she remembered wrong—and Silver didn’t—Pipsqueak more often than not formed the fourth member of Dinky’s mystery crew. The other members were Berry Pinch (thankfully still too busy helping her mom repair the house to come and potentially ruin Silver’s efforts) and Shady Daze. Mudslinging the opponent wouldn’t do any good here.

Just as well. Everypony’s probably expecting that, anyway.

“What’s wrong with that? Somepony has to take the lead, and it just so happens that Diamond’s talent is directing other ponies.” Above them, the red sky faded to light purple. The summoning began at twilight; Silver’s time ran thin. “As far back as kindergarten, every class project Diamond’s ever been part of gets A’s across the board. She gave The Foal Free Press record sales.”

Shady Daze crossed his forelegs. “She gave everypony some record headaches, too. Face it, Silver Spoon, Diamond’s a—a—”

“A first class, Grade-A certified butt trumpet, full stop.” The Dink checked the glyphs on the floor as she lit and arranged the candles. “I could call her some other stuff too, but we’re calling up a teacher, and I don’t want… like… ghost detention.”

Eyeing the lit candle right behind her head, Silver pinned her braid up. “Dink, c’mom, she’s not that bad.”
You think that ’cause you’re too close to see it, Spoons. Or because you haven’t pushed the right buttons yet. Maybe Tiara was cool a long time ago, but...” The last candle stick slammed onto the floor, splattering wax over the chalk. “I’ll tell ya this: your friend’s lucky Pinchers didn’t knock her teeth out.” The Dink snorted. “I know I would’ve if she’d said something like that to me.”

Silver had never heard Dinky Doo snort before. Seeing an angry Dinky was like seeing Applejack grow pears. Fur prickled on the back of Silver Spoon’s neck. “What did she say?” The question rolled out before she could stop it. It wasn’t her business. It would only stir bad feelings. More importantly, she didn’t want to know. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry—”

“She called Berry Pinch a lowlife.” From the expression on Dink’s face, that had been the least of what Diamond called her. The least of what Dinky could share without Pinch’s say-so. “She told her that one day she’d end up in jail, just like her dad—she said that already knowing what Pinch’s dad is like, and it—it’s not cool, Silver Spoon. It’s beyond not cool.”

“Oh,” whispered Silver Spoon. So much for The Dink’s vote. At least a fourth of the overall vote went with it, too.

“Sometimes I dunno what you’re doing hanging around a pony like that, Spoons.”

“Dink, it’s not that simple—”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure it is.” The Dink shoved her hooves deep in her pockets, scowling at one of the broken windows. “I know why she did it, Spoons. Pinch told me all that stuff about the Press and fine, whatever. I get that you can be a sneak sometimes and Tiara gets... the way she gets. Doesn’t matter. There’s just some stuff you don’t do.”

The old candlelit shed fell silent. The roof creaked and moaned. A rotten plank crashed to the floor, letting in the starlight.

“Great, now we’re bugging the spirits.” The Dink took her place in the circle and took a deep breath. “Look, let’s just axe the subject and get to business. This bad mood’s no good for summoning.”

Shady Daze nodded and happily took Dinky’s outreached hoof. “This is exactly why Dad says ‘no politics at the dinner table’. Everypony gets angry and spins their wheels.”

“Everypony hold hooves.” The Dink gripped Silver’s hoof tight. “Remember, we don’t break the circle for nothing. You got it?”

“Loud and clear,” said Silver Spoon.

Warm glass pressed against Silver’s back as she reviewed her schedule book. Not that she needed to. The election monopolized virtually all the spare days and hours outside school and Silver’s apprenticeship. She frowned at the little X’s that crossed through the past few afternoons. Sometimes, not even the apprenticeship.

Miss Tealove insisted that she understood and wasn’t the least bit put out by the cancellations. Just like how she’d understood when Diamond tied Silver’s hooves with election prep last week. And during the pageant prep in May. And all the rest of Diamond Tiara’s massive projects. At this point, Silver Spoon had to wonder if somepony had paid her mentor to keep her around.
Voices muffled inside the conservatory’s glass walls. Silver dared a glance over her shoulder. Inside, Spoiled Rich spoke sternly and even while she arranged the white hydrangeas. Most likely a preparative lecture. To Silver’s knowledge, nothing had happened to justify an angry lecture. Yet.

Whatever it was, Diamond didn’t appear thrilled with it. She kept fussing with her tiara and twirling her mane the way she did when Cheerilee kept the class late for recess. Snippets of protests disguised as questions leaked through the glass with increasing volume. “…weeks left…” and “…we have to….”

Mrs. Rich turned, frowning.

Diamond cut her volume in half.

Deciding this would be a remarkable time to continue minding one’s own business, Silver turned her head back towards the lawn and the schedule book in her lap. She flicked out her green highlighter and underlined this Sunday’s tea (technically a meeting, but what kind of savage held meetings without tea?) with Princess Twilight Sparkle. It sat dangerously close to Speech Strategy Hour.

* Tight fit. Silver clicked her tongue. Real tight fit. *

The Princess’s time ran limited that day. There would be a wedding late that afternoon between Pinch’s grouchy mentor and Miss Matilda, the kind jenny who visited the teahouse Wednesday mornings and took her tea with lots of lemon. Surely Princess Twilight planned to attend.

Unless Silver bumped up her meeting time to the early morning, that only left a few hours to talk. “Can I reschedule to come earlier?” she wondered aloud. “Or would doing that so close to the date be rude?”

Before Silver could think too deeply on it, the back door to the conservatory opened. “Trust me, Diamond; it will be good for you.” Mrs. Rich trailed out, sipping a fennel tea blend Silver Spoon had given her earlier that week. She smiled and patted her stepdaughter’s shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll love it.”

“Yes, Mother.” Diamond waited for Mrs. Rich to go back in before she signaled Silver with her tail and trotted across the yard. “Change of plans, Silver Spoon. We’re doing the speech stuff today. I’m going to Canterlot on Sunday.”

Silver clamped her schedule book in her teeth and scampered to meet Diamond at the shoulder. “Oh, is your stepmom working on the Jet Set and Upper Crust wedding?”

“Well, what you’ve got so far on the polls and we—” Diamond Tiara paused at the gate. “How’d you know that?” Her eyes squinted into slits.

*Great. What’d I do this time? * “My parents know those two from… I dunno, high society stuff? They run in the same circles or something.” Silver shrugged as they rounded the corner. “The invitations arrived a couple days ago, but Mother and Father didn’t want to leave me by myself again—not when Tacks is still recovering—but it turns out that my granddad knows the groom for the Ponyville wedding, so he’s coming down to—”

“Silver, it’s a simple question, I didn’t need an essay. You get the outline done for the speech yet?”

“I finished it this morning.” It had gone through four rewrites, three editing sessions, and a trial-run through Brass Tacks. At this point, the outline was practically a speech already, and a good one, if Silver had anything to say about it.
A large shadow passed overhead, along with several little ones. Silver looked up.

Cotton Cloudy and Tornado Bolt pushed a small cluster of cumulus through the sky. Featherweight shadowed them, corolling stray bits of cloud. When Featherweight skirted down to check the underside for stragglers, he rotated his dinner plate ears towards Silver Spoon and began to lift his hoof.

Diamond followed Silver’s gaze and frowned.

Featherweight put his hoof down. The colt beat his wings, swinging to the other side of the cloud in one smooth swoop. Tornado Bolt followed him with her ears pinned. Cotton stayed put and glared.

Silver Spoon waved to them and smiled her kindest, most sincere smile. “Hi, guys. What are you up to?”

Featherweight’s ears pricked up behind the cloud. Cautiously, he peeped over the edge. “Oh, uh, hey, Silver. And… Diamond.” His spindly legs braced against the cloud fluff, as if prepared to launch himself into the stratosphere. “We’re moving these to Tornado’s place.”

“Are you doing repairs?” When an answer didn’t come right away, Silver tilted her head and gently prompted, “Or is it something else?”

“We’re building a fortress,” said Tornado Bolt. She skimmed around the edge to even out the west side of the cloud before it detached. “Like in issue thirty seven of the Power Ponies—not the reboot, but that one spinoff arc after the trans-dimensional rift when the team split up into parallel universes—and Zapp went to that one universe where High Heel’s a good guy and she helped her gang and built a fortress to keep out the Nega Power Ponies.”

“Oh!” said Silver Spoon. Her mind flipped through multiple hours of Tornado’s past comic book talk until she found something relevant. “The fortress with the... zodiac statues?”

Tornado Bolt’s feathers fluffed proudly. “Yep! We’re almost done with the walls, right Cotton?”

“Yeah. One more left.” Cotton Cloudy flicked her tail and went back to pushing. “We’ve gotta get these clouds moving, so… later.”

“Bye.” Anypony would think Cloudsdale brinded on a collapse from how fast they pushed that cumulus. Silver rubbed the back of her neck as they passed into the shopping district. *That really could have gone better.* “Hey, Di?”

Diamond’s pace fell harder on the path. “What?”

“I’ve just been thinking, and…”

Diamond Tiara rolled her eyes.

The pegasus foals faded higher into the sky and out of sight. “Maybe you should consider apologizing to Rumble.”

A coarse, disdainful sound scuffled in the back of Diamond’s throat. “Why?”

“You know…” Silver edged closer, lowering her voice as they approached the vendor stands. “…for that prank we pulled after we found out he’s scared of thunder?”

“Wait, you mean the thing with—are you serious?” Diamond scoured the lines of flowers in
Roseluck’s stand. The wild tansy brushed under her chin, the petals vibrant but the leaves curling and wilted. “That happened, like, a year ago, Silver Spoon. If it’s been that long and he’s still not over it, that’s his fault. The kid needs to learn how to take a joke. And what do you mean I should apologize?” One blue eye rolled up to glare at Silver. “You were there, too. Why don’t you apologize?”

“I did.” Two weeks ago, a few hours after she’d returned her book to Princess Twilight. After an hour’s honest talk over orange soda floats—the colt said that tea tasted like mud and if certain young ladies didn’t have jobs to do, certain ladies might have demanded satisfaction—Rumble had fully accepted Silver Spoon’s apology. Just Silver’s.

“If Tiara wants to say she’s sorry, she can come talk to me by herself.”

“He wants—” Silver frowned as her friend reached to gather a spray of flowers. “Di, that tansy doesn’t look too good. What about these instead?” She motioned towards the fresher lilies and hazel blossoms. The hazel looked especially vibrant today. “Rumble wants to hear it from both of us.”

The hazel received a quick sniff. Diamond flicked her tail and turned towards the columbines instead. “A lot of ponies want a lot of things. Rumble needs to quit being a wet-feather baby and get over himself.” She bought the columbines, along with a couple tansy stems. “I mean, really, who even cares what he thinks?”

“Maybe you should. You’re the one running for office.” Silver flinched at her tone. That came out too firm, too bossy, and way too contradictory. She turned her eyes towards a scorch mark in the dirt. “Uh, that is—”

“No, what is it, Silver Spoon?” Diamond Tiara leaned against the stand’s broken wheel and slipped the tansy in her mouth. Her teeth shaved the blossoms off the stem in one smooth stroke. “You think you know better, so tell me. I’d hate for you to go behind my back to poke into my business.”

“That’s not—”

Wait. No, that’s a trap. A trap that Silver might have already sprung; more resistance would only tighten the snare. More importantly, it was a derailment neither filly had the time for.

Silver’s eye flicked up towards Roseluck. The vendor quickly ducked her head and pretended to examine her violets. Two stands over, Boysenberry slowed her raspberry arrangements, tilting her ears towards something juicier.

Bad time, worse place, and no choice. Silver met Diamond Tiara’s eye and lowered her voice to a near-whisper. “Di, listen. It might be nice to have Rumble on our side. He’s really big with the other pegasus foals, the sporty kids, and most of the colts.” Possibly even more than Pip, but Silver preferred not to voice that call without solid numbers. “It’s three for three.”

Diamond slowly chewed her columbines. For a little while, she stared at a broken weather vane and didn’t say anything. “You really think it’ll even matter?”

“No,” said Silver Spoon. “I know it will.”

Unless somepony worked a miracle in the next two weeks, Cotton Cloudy’s vote was as good as Pipsqueak’s. She hadn’t forgotten the rude dismissal Tornado Bolt received after the flag competition, and Diamond’s recent behavior didn’t garner much favor, either. A good word from Rumble would match or even overpower a bad one from Cotton.

Between Berry Pinch and The Dink, the core unicorn vote had capsized. Only Luna knew how the
earth pony tides turned. They needed the pegasi, and badly.

Diamond’s back pressed against the broken wheel. She hadn’t taken her eyes off the weather vane. “If he’s been that mad since last fall, what makes you think he’ll even listen to me?”

“It didn’t stop him from listening to me, right?” Springing for that orange soda float hadn’t hurt, either. Silver smiled. “I don’t see why he wouldn’t do the same thing for you. If nothing else, you can honestly say you did everything you could.”

“Mm.” Diamond sucked her teeth and popped the rest of the tansy stem in her mouth. She wrinkled her nose a little when the leaves hit her tongue. “I’ll think about it.”

Encouraged by this rational display, Silver Spoon pushed on. “I’ve done some thinking, and I think it’d help if you showed everypony some commitment to the school. Maybe a plan to fix up some things.” That part ought to be easy. The old place had been falling apart even before a giant hoof stomped on it.

Silver raised her eyebrows with an encouraging grin. “In fact, a general theme of improvement might be a really good platform?”

A thought waned and waxed in the quick flick of Diamond’s eyes. She tucked the rest of the columbine behind her ear and approached Silver’s bag. “Let me see your notes. The speech ones.”

“Sure, they’re right—” The folder got snatched up before Silver even finished pulling it out. “… here.”

Diamond’s mouth flattened into a grim slash. Storm clouds solidified with every line she skimmed. “This is a joke, right?”

Not unless Di had somehow grabbed the list of ice-breakers by mistake. “No?”

Silver checked the pages in Diamond’s hooves. Bullet points covered themes of humility and new beginnings before shifting into the main We’re-All-In-This-Together talking point. She lifted a corner to check the page detailing the burned roof of the Rich estate. No, all in order.

She braced herself. “Is there something wrong with—”

“Everything is wrong with it!” Four sheets of paper and six hours of hard work flew into the air. Diamond ground the introduction page into the dirt with her hoof. “I can’t believe you, Silver Spoon. I thought you were supposed to be helping me. I thought you were my friend!”

“I am!” Above the berry stand, a tattered page of the speech fluttered, caught in the bare branches of an elm tree. The sight of it sank her heart. Silver wrapped her tail tight around herself. “I am,” she repeated, quieter this time.

“Then why did you write a speech that makes me sound like a total dirtbag? No, even worse—a pleading, pathetic dirtbag! A real friend would be trying to make me look better, not worse!”

“No! No, it’s… it’s supposed to show you’re relatable to the other ponies.” The strategy Silver built over the past two weeks melted under Diamond’s ferocious glare. Suddenly, she wasn’t sure if she believed in what she’d written anymore. Maybe she did write a bad speech. “That you have flaws, like everypony else…”

“Yeah, that’ll make for a great slogan. ‘Vote for Diamond Tiara: She’s a Jerk, Like You’. ‘A vote for Diamond is a vote for flaws’. ‘Vote Tiara: She Totally Sucks!’ If I didn’t know better…”
Diamond Tiara stepped back, sizing Silver up. “...I’d think you’re trying to sabotage me.”

“Diamond, I’m not.”

“I know.” Diamond Tiara’s eyes hardened. “You’re not that obvious.”

Activity buzzed in the corner of Silver Spoon’s eye. Boysenberry hung on the edge of her vending stand, flicking her ears like a telegraph knob, and completely unaware that she had a customer. She’d tell half the foals in town before nightfall. The other half could hear for themselves.

Not far from Honeybuzz’s stand, Scootaloo slowed the Crusaders’ scooter ride. She hovered a few inches off the handlebars, trying to listen in until Apple Bloom pulled her back down and fussed at her, probably for either eavesdropping or making them late to whatever shenanigans occupied their time today. Sweetie Belle shot Silver Spoon a sympathetic wince that Silver couldn’t acknowledge.

Under the burning spotlights of dozens of eyes, Silver straightened her withers and steadied herself. A small voice called her to fight for the speech she’d written; she could still save it, the rough drafts still remained in her desk. She could try to clarify the reasoning behind her plan. She could explain the schoolyard’s near-universal impatience with Diamond’s ego and explain the value of humility in a hostile market.

A louder voice told Silver she wouldn’t. She already knew that any arguments would be lost in the roar of the hurricane, and she’d have to wait for the winds to settle before trying again. She also knew that she didn’t have that kind of time. Not in this social climate.

She dared another glance at the crowd. Carrot Crunch and his awful teeth murmured something to Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie. Sunny bowed her head in... was that pity?

Nothing good could come of this for either of their reputations, especially Diamond’s. *Forget the speech*. Silver Spoon flattened her ears. *This public spat has to end. Now.*

“I’ll rewrite it, Diamond. Maybe try a different angle this time.”

“You better.” Diamond snapped her tail, signaling them to get a move on. Silver gladly complied. “You’re lucky there’s an extra Sunday for you to clean up the mess you made.”

“I know.” Also extra time for Silver to analyze the polls and, with luck, mend some burnt bridges.

At the edge of the shopping district stood Bon Bon’s Sugar Shack. A cozy if somewhat unremarkable little place that usually didn’t stand out from any other residential shop in Ponyville. But today, when Silver Spoon rounded the corner, she couldn’t help but notice it.

Miss Bon Bon’s thatched roof fluffed with healthy, lush hay. Flowers bloomed in the window and a wind chime clinked in the breeze. Blue shutters and pink accents popped against the beige paint job. Twist had helped Miss Lyra paint those very shutters a week before Tirek came to Ponyville; the paint hadn’t even been chipped.

On the same street where every house suffered broken windows, twisted fences, burnt rooftops, and snapped weathervanes, Bon Bon’s candy store—as far as Silver could see—still stood cozy, pretty, and pristine. Completely unharmed. Aside from a weedy lawn, the place didn’t have a thing wrong with it.

Outside the front door, Twist and Truffle Shuffle played checkers. Twist’s ears twitched as Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon passed by, but she hunched her shoulders and didn’t look at them.
“You’ve even luckier I’m giving you this second chance, you know.” Diamond fell into a canter, with a little humph under her breath. “Lucky I’m letting you help my campaign at all, really.”

Truffle Shuffle lifted his head from the board with a stare Silver felt from across the street. Not a harsh or unkind one, but something worse: a stare that said “You’re better than this.” A stare that said, “I feel sorry for you.”

Silver didn’t let it bother her. Truffle was a lovely colt with only the best of intentions, but he simply didn’t understand the particulars and complicated nuances of the situation. Maybe someday Silver would explain it to him.

“I know, Di.” Somepony like Palanquin or Toplofty would have seen fit to let Silver Spoon dangle in the wind. Diamond not only was allowing her to stay, but keeping her as a campaign manager. Despite everything, they still had their friendship, and Princess Twilight said friendship was the most important thing in the whole world. “I’m grateful for it.”

Diamond Tiara smiled, satisfied. “Okay, let’s get the lead out. We’ve still got other work to do, and I won’t let your lame speech make me late.”

Maybe their friendship sailed through choppy waters now, but it was only another hurricane and nopony knew how to sail through hurricanes like Silver Spoon. All hurricanes eventually blew over. All wounds could heal, and all holes could be fixed.

On the brighter side of things, at least Silver still had a friendship left to fix. Proper young ladies, after all, understood the value of gratitude.

Not everypony knew the good fortune that had been blessed upon the Silvers. Not every filly could possess Silver Spoon’s luck, and she had been quite lucky, indeed.

“I’ll have the revised version ready before Monday, Diamond.”

“And you’ll have it done right this time?”

Even if at times, Silver did not always feel exceptionally lucky.

“Absolutely.” Silver Spoon smiled in the manner that fortunate young ladies were meant to smile. She kept her eyes on the lovely horizon and counted her blessings.
Concerning the Proper Alignment & Dispersal of Lifeboats

Numbers didn’t lie. With the right words supporting them, numbers could be molded into half-truths, stretched into educated guesses, or else stripped of meaning by lies of omission. Raw numbers in themselves, however, did not lie. Numbers also didn’t tell a pony what she wanted to hear, despite Silver Spoon’s best efforts.

Despite the insinuations of Silver’s carefully worded reports, the polls came in thirteen days ago, roughly two hours before Diamond announced her candidacy to the student council.

Displeased with the… less than ideal initial results, Miss Silver Spoon had opted to stall for seven days’ time. A week offered plenty of time to play the field and adjust some numbers.

Last Friday, in the sliver of time between school and The Dink’s summoning, Silver re-analyzed the numbers. Twice.

The results returned worse than before. She’d doubled down and played the field again.

Now, as she shivered in the pink-skied Sunday morning, out of time to stretch and ponies to poll, Silver Spoon crunched the numbers one last time. The pencil bobbed in her mouth as it skimmed down the open notebook.

Father told her once that things often looked better in the morning. Sadly, poll results did not count among those things.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Number of Potential Voters</th>
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<td>30</td>
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**Demographics**

- 20% unicorn
- 20% pegasus
- 60% earth pony
- 70% filly
- 30% colt

**Straw Poll Results**

Technically, it hadn’t been a true straw poll. Silver had quietly collected the informal information and opinions floating around her, though at the end of the day, the results of either one would be the same.

Silver gritted her teeth.
Nineteen foals would almost certainly vote for Pip, or more specifically, would vote against Diamond Tiara. Eight undecided foals could be coaxed either way, but still currently leaned away from Diamond Tiara. Presuming that he didn’t skip school, one colt would run for the arcade the second the bell rang, and ignore the voting booth altogether.

That left two guaranteed votes in their favor: Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara herself.

Frowning, Silver chewed the tip of her eraser. *I should’ve been upfront about the polls from the start.* If anything, the tweaks and double checks made everything worse.

Two weeks ago, Silver could at least argue a margin of error or theorize that the schoolyard passed through an Anti-Tiara phase. Average turnover rate for popular opinion ranged from three to eight days—the same time frame of the Mare-Do-Well fad—to premiere, peak, and peter out. However, if popular opinion at Ponyville Schoolhouse stayed constant for at least nine days, that opinion stuck for at least two months.

Diamond’s social credit tanked with a continuing decline during the two weeks Silver took polls, but it had begun a downward slope weeks before that. At best, it had been in flux. Silver couldn’t remember the last time a classmate held Di’s gaze for more than ten seconds. August, perhaps. Or July. Foals had actually smiled at them in July.

Rolling onto her belly, Silver pulled Ferdinand’s bowl closer. “Two years ago, foals bent over backward for a chance to get on Diamond’s guest list. Now they all run to keep off her hit list. Honestly, Ferdinand, I…” Silver’s tail swished uncertainly. “Can you keep a secret?”

Ferdinand drifted to the top of the bowl with wide fishy eyes. That meant yes.

A quiet Sunday morning outside Miss Fluttershy’s cottage was the last place for spies to be lurking about, but with election day a week away, one could never be too careful. Silver Spoon sat up to check the perimeter for eavesdroppers.

Squirrels and chipmunks scurried up and down oak trees, gathering nuts and berries. A family of raccoons washed their paws in a nearby stream while a duck bobbed in the water, quacking merrily to himself. A goat lifted its head from a bale of hay and glared back at her. Several bunnies hopped across the expansive lawn surrounding the cottage, washing their faces, munching grass, and not paying any mind to the gray filly at all. Bunnies had better things to do than worry about politics. Most of the bunnies did, anyway.

One white rabbit with nothing better to do balanced on its hind legs to sniff at Silver’s notebook. It stared at her with little black eyes that shone with more interest than they ought to.

Silver Spoon held the notebook out of reading (and chewing) distance. “Shoo.”

The rabbit stamped at her. That did not count as shooing, but chasing it off didn’t seem worth the effort.

Silver leaned over the fishbowl and readjusted the scarf she’d double-looped around the glass. The bowl already had a heater installed, but she didn’t want Ferdinand to risk another chill. Besides, scarves were in this year.

“I can’t deny it anymore, Ferdinand,” she quietly said. “Diamond Tiara’s going to lose this election.”

Ferdinand peeped over the scarf and bubbled worriedly.
The white rabbit crossed its paws and rolled its eyes in a “Well, duh” gesture.

“Excuse me, but nopony was talking to you.” Silver put her hoof on her hip, frowning. “I’ll ask you to kindly mind your own business. Go back to your carrots or whatever.”

The rabbit stuck its nose in the air and stamped its foot.

*Good thing nopony besides Fluttershy speaks bunny.* Silver’s gut told her this fluffy little annoyance would blab to everybody in town, given half a chance. That, or extort a princess’s ransom of carrots in exchange for silence.

“Can you make yourself useful and tell Fluttershy that Ferdinand’s here?” Silver Spoon considered the rabbit’s put-out expression and added, “Please.”

Politeness, as always, did the trick. The white rabbit hopped off towards the chicken coop.

Now with room to think, Silver turned back to the merciless numbers. A pony with a cutie mark in persuasion might have been able to spin the polls to not look like a total dumpster fire. If their positions were reversed, Diamond could do it.

“At least I rewrote the speech.” Even storm clouds had a bright side or two. “If she sees that first and likes it, there’s a chance she won’t get too upset about the polls.”

Ferdinand stared with unblinking amber eyes. He blew a ring of skeptical looking bubbles.

“Hey, a low chance is still a chance. Pessimism is not becoming of ponies and fishes of high society, Ferdinand.”

Before the betta could respond, Fluttershy appeared. She stood atop the chicken coop, carrying an egg basket and shading her eyes with her hoof. With a little jump, she went aloft, glided across the grass, and touched down beside them.

She set the basket down, waving at the fishbowl. “Why, hello there, Ferdinand! Don’t we look handsome today?” Fluttershy smiled at the white rabbit sitting in the egg basket and picking chicken feathers out of her mane. “Good morning, Silver Spoon. I didn’t think I’d see you this early—oh, dear. I’m not late am I?” She turned towards the coop. “I didn’t think feeding the hens and gathering eggs would take so long, but Elizabeak is having a little fight with Eggwina and I must have lost track of time. I’m so sorry, Silver Spoon!”

“Don’t be, Miss Fluttershy, you’re not late. Ferdinand and I arrived a half hour early.” Since evaluating the polls didn’t take as long as Silver thought it would, they were probably *still* early. Silver pulled a raspberry leaf from her saddlebag and offered it to the rabbit. Promptness deserved a tip.

“There, you see, Angel? I told you Silver’s a nice little pony.” Fluttershy tapped the rabbit—Angel, apparently—on the ear as he mowed down the leaf. “What do we say?”

Angel twitched his pink nose and placed a paw on Silver’s leg. The gesture could have actually meant anything between a thank-you, an apology, or a subtle request for more raspberry leaves.

“No trouble,” Silver told him—a utilitarian response which covered all those bases—and the four of them went inside.

Considering Fluttershy’s personal calling and choice of profession, the first time Silver Spoon set hoof in Fluttershy’s cottage she’d expected it to smell like a barn, or a zoo, or a second-rate pet store.
It didn’t. Of all the eight times she had visited, the place never smelled the same way twice.

Today, Silver’s nose caught whiffs of wet dog, lemongrass, birdseed, skunk, turtle water, fresh hay and oats, goat milk, buttercups, and wood chips. However, another familiar undercurrent ran through all of these scents. The lemongrass threw her off a bit, but after another sniff, she felt certain of it.

“You’ve made tea!” Silver put the fishbowl on the coffee table and sniffed the air again. “Honeysuckle and lemon, right?”

“Yes, I did. Oh, but I’m afraid we’ll have to wait a little bit until it’s ready.” Fluttershy brushed her mane back, hovering over the fishbowl. “How are we feeling today, Ferdinand?” She laughed at whatever his answer had been and went to work.

Silver hopped onto the couch and propped her back against a pile of tasteful accent pillows.

“MREOWR!”

Or rather, accent pillows and one exceptionally angry cat. Silver ducked out of reach from the tangled pile of orange fur, teeth, and claws now glaring at her from the bottom of the couch. “Uh, sorry.”

The cat hissed and stalked away.

Without looking up from the bowl, Fluttershy tisked. “You know it was an accident, Grundlewhiskers. Be nice.” She dipped her nose into the lip of the bowl, nodding as Ferdinand did a little twirl. “Very good. Can I see your gills, please? Thank you.”

While her fish went through his check-up, Silver ran her hoof along the edge of her notebook and looked out the window. Outside, the pinks and purples of the sky faded to pale blue. The sun winked fierce and blinding between the Everfree’s branches.

If Silver squinted, she could see the tall shadow of a unicorn turning away from the forest and back towards Ponyville. Naturally, Brass Tacks would never let Silver and Ferdinand travel so close to the Everfree unaccompanied, especially not when Celestia hadn’t raised the sun yet. He might have waited out there for the remainder of Silver’s visit, if not for Granddad’s arrival this morning. Somepony still had to help with his bags, and Mother and Father would be too busy handling bags of their own.

Silver hoped Tacks would still have time to cook breakfast; it would save her a good twenty minutes or so.

Upon the wall, Fluttershy’s clock read seven-twenty-five. *Okay, if I’m meeting Princess Twilight around one, that’s not so bad. Fluttershy’s checkups never go past an hour. Let’s see, with travel… Worst case scenario, I’ll be home at nine.* That meant a minimum of two and a half hours for breakfast and to catch up with Granddad Silver Tongue. Plenty of time.

Presuming all went well, Silver Spoon would still arrive at Twilight’s castle at noon, right on schedule. (The appointment book read one, but for young ladies, early meant punctual, on-time equaled late, and actual lateness was a travesty.)

Activities, planning, and appointments packed Sunday from end to end with little time to rest. Good. If left idle, a young lady’s mind meandered into dangerous territory. Trivial terrors. Impractical worries. Anxious wonderings.

Silver rested her chin upon one of the throw pillows, watching the animals eat their breakfast. In the
peace of her own silence, worries—practical and impractical alike—whispered in the back of Silver’s head.

She checked the clock again. Seven-twenty-six.

*Maybe before I meet Princess Twilight, I should write some notes.* Taking notes displayed thoughtfulness and organization skills, and it could help untangle Silver’s thoughts in advance. Plus, it never hurt to have backup. The last time she’d been in Twilight’s home, she’d been struck tongue-tied, and that absolutely could not happen again.

Silver clamped her pen between her teeth and flipped to a blank page in her notebook. *This meeting’s too important to waste on distractions and fluff.* Every single minute spent with Twilight had to be economic. Every question needed precision and solid functionality.

*I’ll write a list.* Silver smiled. Perfect. She’d draft up of all the questions and observations bumping around in her head for the last few weeks, then sort them by importance, or else cut the fat.

Silver Spoon curled in the crook of the couch and scribbled a list of queries. The pen flew across the page with no pause for spelling, neatness, or politeness. No dwelling upon the gravity or insignificance of what she wrote. No rechecks, rewordings, or edits. Raw words from brain to page, full stop. After all, she still had plenty of time for a final draft, and besides, nopony but herself (and maybe the princess) would ever see it.

When she could think of nothing else to add, Silver capped her pen. She skimmed the page front to back, squinting through the ink smudges and raggedy bullet points.

Her eyebrows rose. She skimmed the list again.

Silver Spoon’s shoulders went limp. …*Oh.* She put a hoof to her mouth. *Oh, dear.*

Just to be certain, Silver’s eye traveled down the page a third time.

$I$: *How do you make up for something bad you did?*

$III$: *How long does it take somepony to stop being mad at you?*

$V$: *What happens if somepony is always mad at you?*

$VIII$: *What if somepony is always mad*

Silver Spoon’s ears drooped. *I don’t have a friendship problem.*

$XIII$: *Can I be friends w/ Twist and Truffle, but still be friends w/ Diamond?*

$XVI$: *How am I supposed to manage a campaign when she won’t listen*

$XX$: *why won’t she listen to me she asked me for help but I can’t do it if she doesn’t listen*

$XXIII$: *How When should I tell her she will may will probably could will might is going*
to lose the election?

I have thirty.

Silver’s eye paused towards the bottom of the page and stared at the second to last question. A small sentence cramped in the corner of the margin and crawling up the border of the page. It had no number. She underlined it twice and circled it as if extra emphasis might lead her to some sudden enlightenment. (It didn’t.)

Silver Spoon did not recall writing this question—which was not at all a question—nor did she recall actively thinking it. But she had to have thought it, otherwise it wouldn’t be here.

nopony likes Diamond Tiara

“But that can’t be right,” Silver whispered. “Di’s one of the most powerful fillies in the whole school.”

Her frown deepened. “Powerful,” she’d said. Not “popular”. Not “liked”. Not “favored”. Powerful. Diamond—despite a long and storied history of proving otherwise—did not have appeal or charisma, nor did she attract envy. She inspired fear, but that wasn’t the same thing.

Indeed, Diamond Tiara held power, but power without solid allies or friends meant power supported by fear and only fear. A table couldn’t stand on one leg. Silver Spoon recalled Toplofty’s razor-edge giggles and dictator grin. Silver had known fillies who ruled by fear before. She also knew what inevitably became of them.

Fear had an expiration date. When that date came up, the power structures at Ponyville Schoolhouse would shift. Hard. So hard that it could drown a pony in ill repute for semesters, if not years. Diamond’s social credit might stay in the red until graduation, if not longer, unless she performed a drastic turnaround.

Could Silver say that foals hated Diamond the way fillies secretly hated Toplofty? She didn’t think so. No true allies, though. Di had a cluster of neutral, fraying connections—mostly newbies who hadn’t built a history with her yet—and those connections could snap any second.

The only ally she has who isn’t an adult is... Silver glanced at the window to discover her reflection staring back at her. She groaned inwardly.

This goes beyond the election. In fact, this problem overtook the election ages ago. Silver just didn’t—or wouldn’t—see it.

Hurricane Tiara churned the social waters and rocked too many boats. Once upon a time, Diamond captained their ship through those churning waters at a clip. Now, that vessel lingered dead in the water—no crew, no sails, no lifejackets, and hurricane damage blasted through the hull. Now, the sea rushed in.

Silver’s gaze settled upon the toy luxury liner at the bottom of Ferdinand’s tank.

The boat would capsize any moment with Captain Tiara and First Mate Silver still clutching the
wheel.

Her eye trailed to the tiny lifeboats painted on the side of the sunken ship. Silver flicked her tail.

*Unless…*

“All done!” Fluttershy’s cheer snapped Silver back into the real world. “You did a wonderful job, Ferdinand.” She fanned her wingtip above the bowl with a grin. “Hi-fin?”

Ferdinand bubbled happily and bopped the feathers with the fans of his tail.

Silver scooted closer for a better view. “Is he feeling better, Miss Fluttershy?” She propped her hooves on the coffee table and poked her muzzle into the bowl. “I mean, I know, he seemed better, but…”

“Oh yes, he’s made a full recovery. In fact, I think his scales look even shinier than they did before he caught that awful chill.” Gently, Fluttershy smiled down at the filly who still desperately gripped the edge of the bowl. “He said he likes the new tank temperature and all the new water plants Mrs. Perfect put in.” She twitched her ears. “Oh, and he wants to thank you for the get well card, too.”

“He does?” Silver glanced up at the pegasus, then back to her fish. “You do?”

Ferdinand popped his face out of the water and booped the tip of Silver Spoon’s nose. An absolutely perfect gentlefish.

It took a moment, but the smile returned to Silver’s muzzle. If nothing else, at least she’d done right by her pet and best non-pony friend. “You’re very welcome, Ferdinand. I’m so glad you feel better.”

“You’ve done a wonderful job taking care of him, Silver Spoon.” Miss Fluttershy rubbed her chin, tilting her head so that her long pink tresses of mane coiled upon the coffee table. “But…”

Silver’s smile shrank a centimeter. “But?”

“Oh!” Fluttershy’s wings arched with a nervous little flutter. She immediately backpedaled with her most delicate I-Promise-I’m-Not-Mad-So-Please-Don’t-Be-Mad-Either smile. “Ohhh, no, no, it’s nothing you did. It’s only that I’ve been thinking... um…”

Fluttershy dared a quick glance at Silver to confirm no hard feelings. “Well, you’re not home for most of the day, and I think little Ferdinand gets lonely sometimes. Have you thought about adding a couple of little friends for him?”

Silver blinked, surprised. “You mean in his tank? I thought you said betta fish couldn’t have neighbors, because they’d fight and hurt each other.”

“Oh my, no; I should have been clearer, Silver Spoon. Male betta fish can’t live with other male bettas, or any other fishes with long fanning tails, or aggressive tank mates, but that doesn’t mean sweet little Ferdinand has to be in that great big fish mansion all by himself. Ooh!” Fluttershy’s feathers fluffed with enthusiasm. “If you want, I could introduce you two to the cutest little water froggie who’d love to be somepony’s pet. Or a school of pretty neon tetras, or shiny little minnows, or some teeny tiny little ghost shrimp friends, or a charming zebra snail!”

“A… snail?” Though Silver didn’t want to be rude, she didn’t know if an elegant animal of Ferdinand’s caliber ought to be rubbing metaphorical elbows with the likes of snails and shrimps. They weren’t even fish.
“Yes, aquatic snails are perfect. They live nice and quiet in the tank, and they don’t bother anybody. Some can even help clean the water!” Fluttershy perked her ears, turning towards the kitchen. “I think the tea is ready.”

A quartet of squirrels approached the table, carrying a fully loaded tea tray between them. A mouse bearing a small jar of jam followed close behind, though it seemed to have trouble with the weight.

Fluttershy kneeled and gladly relieved all the animals of their burden. “How considerate! Thank you all very much.” Still on the floor, she glanced up and added, “Maybe you could ask your little friend Snails about it, Silver. Gastropods are his specialty, after all.”

Snails barely counted as a fifth-tier associate, much less a friend—did he actually favor Pipsqueak in the election, or would he end up voting Trixie again?—but it sounded worth looking into. Silver jotted a few notes in her notebook. “I just might do that. Thanks for the suggestion, Miss Fluttershy.” Building new bridges couldn’t hurt, and Snips and Snails never struck her as the type to hold a grudge.

Silver flipped her notebook closed and slipped it into her saddlebag. Business could wait; teatime was now. She clasped her hooves, admiring the spread as Fluttershy poured her a cup from a ceramic tea set that matched the color of her eyes.

“Would you like any sugar?”

“No thank you, ma’am, I think the honey will keep it sweet enough.” Silver Spoon hadn’t been on the receiving end of teatime since Wisteria’s Winter Gala, and she welcomed the novelty of not having to guide conversation or coordinate tea and cake preferences.

Silver’s tail curled with contentment at the first sip. Gentle, soothing, and mild, but enough spunk to keep one from falling back asleep. Perfect for the early morning, and ideal for the impending chaos of an election. “It’s wonderful.”

“Glad you like it!” Fluttershy brushed her mane out of her face and settled in a chair to pour a cup of her own. “You see, I’ve never tried a flower tea before. I usually like to stick with regular tea bags…”

The teapot tilted into a cup. A few drops of tea dripped in, then stopped.

A white tuft of fur popped out of the spout. Something long and red and scaly snaked out after it. Silver frowned. Fur didn’t go with scales. Tufted, scaly tails did not belong in teapots.

“…but I know that you don’t like teabags very much, Silver, and I wanted to be polite. I’m so glad it turned out alright.”

Two little legs that didn’t match the tuff or the red scaled tail waggled in the lip of the spout. The legs didn’t even match each other—the brown one clearly belonged on a cow, and the other should have been attached to a green lizard or a dragon or something, and neither should have been attached to that tail OR in a teapot in the first place!

The teacup shook in Silver’s hooves. Brass Tacks once told her that a good way to tell the difference between dreams and reality was to examine a clock, because clocks didn’t read normally in dreams.

Fluttershy’s cuckoo clock read seven-forty with regular hands on regular numbers.

Silver glanced back at the teapot. “Um…”
A long winding body, beaver-furred and slithering—also in complete disjunction with the awful tiny legs and freaky tail—poured into Fluttershy’s cup. A dark bat wing unfurled on one side. A blue feathered one twitched on the other.

“Um, M-Miss…” Silver glanced at the clock again so she wouldn’t need to look at the cup anymore. Still a normal clock. This was not a dream.

A lion’s paw and an eagle talon gripped the sides of the cup.

Her teacup shook harder. Silver’s voice squeaked in a tiny whisper. “Miss F-Flutters-s-shy?”

“Hm?” Fluttershy blinked at Silver Spoon, then at her cup. She burst into a grin and giggled the way one might giggle at a baby chick. “Hi there!”

The teapot chuckled back. “Why, hellooooo, yourself.” The rest of the… the thing poured itself out in some sort of ghastly parody of tea.

By the merciless sunlight of morning, Silver Spoon finally saw the full scope of its horrors: Gangly goat beard. Fearsome six-point deer antlers. Twisted antelope horn. A single filly-stabbing fang curved out of the horse’s mouth. It waggled its pointy donkey ears at them. A pair of mismatched bloody pupils floated in the pools of its jaundiced yellow eyes.

None of those chunks of creature parts could attach to each other. None of those parts should have ever been that small and weird and… wrong.

The weight of the top half against the thinner bottom half should have snapped the twisted, slender spine in two, but it didn’t. It stepped out of the tea cup and began to walk around. It shouldn’t have been able to walk.

Silver’s bottom lip trembled. It shouldn’t be able to function—it shouldn’t even be alive.

A disgusting snake tongue darted in and out of the horse mouth

She couldn’t bear to look, and yet Silver couldn’t turn her eyes away from this… this… she didn’t even have a word for it. What word could be used for it?

Only one: Wrong.

Silver Spoon’s heart drummed in her throat.

She couldn’t bear it. The joints and limbs and hooves and horns and pelt and spine and teeth and tail and fur and scales and eyes and mane that didn’t fit together, all of this THING—this carriage crash of a creature—wrong, wrong, wrong, WRONG!

A throaty laugh rippled out of the horse’s mouth attached to the elongated head attached to the bristle-maned neck. “Fluttershy, this isn’t your normal brew at all!” The ghastly dragon tail flicked honeysuckle tea off the fluffy white tuft that didn’t even belong there. It smacked its mouth and said, “Needs sugar.”

Why did I ever decide to send Tacks home? Silver pushed her spine against the couch and pulled all her hooves tight against herself. Stupid, stupid, so stupid, Silver why don’t you think? Now Tacks is home and I’m locked in here with this thing. Her open jaw trembled and a squeak of horror tumbled out.

The larger egg-yolk eye rolled towards her. “Company!” it cried. “And me without my good face
The lion paw gripped one side of the horse head, while the eagle talon grabbed the other. The creature rotated its head around and around as if it were a giant crank. The horse mouth full of fangs curved upwards into what it probably considered a smile. The brown torso stretched up and up and up until the tines of the deer antlers bumped the ceiling.

"Hmm. Looks a smidge smaller than your usual friends—she’s travel size!" Blood colored pupils focused on Silver’s drop-jawed horror. “One who obviously appreciates an impressive draconequus when she sees one. Yes, I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s true, little filly! You’re in the presence of none other than ME!" Fireworks and confetti showered from its horns.

The fanged smile stretched as the thing’s spine contorted in a low bow. The lion paw gripped the antler and removed the top of the thing’s head the way a gentlecolt would tip his hat. “You’re honored, I’m sure.”

It came off. Silver blinked. It. Came. Off. She stared at the thing’s empty neck. No rips or tears, no blood or bones, nothing. It had popped off like the top of a cookie jar.

The head popped back on and cleared its throat. “Well?”

Did that thing expect her to actually address it? Was it mocking her before it ate her or whatever mismatched abominations did with small foals? “Uh, I…” Silver Spoon’s knees buckled. “I…”

Desperate, she turned to Fluttershy, wondering if she saw the malignant thing in her cottage. But the pegasus still held a pleasant—if slightly awkward—smile upon her face, so she must have not been able to see it, because who could ever smile in the presence of that?

Oh blessed sun and stars and sacred earth, does that mean I’m the only one who can see this thing? Am I going crazy? I’m too young for the asylum!

Fluttershy met Silver’s eyes. Her smile dropped like a stone. “Oh… oh, dear.” Her eyes trailed from Silver Spoon to the monstrosity’s broken face—apparently she could see it after all—and back to Silver. She put a hoof to her mouth. “O-oh dear. Oh no, no, Silver Spoon, it’s okay.”

Lies. “Okay” was stubbing a hoof. “Okay” was parasprites. “Okay” was a train set on fire and full of orphans careening down the Canterlot mountains. Silver could call this patchwork of parts a lot of things, but the one thing it was absolutely, undoubtedly not was “okay”.

A soft wing draped across Silver’s back. “Silver Spoon, this is Discord. Don’t worry, I know he looks a little scary—”

To say the least.

“—but he’s perfectly harmless, I promise.”

The collection of fangs morphed into a pout. “Well, I don’t know if I’d say perfectly harmless. There’s still some spunk left in the old gizzard, you know! Humph.” The lion paw reached down and the eagle talon reached down and they both TOUCHED Silver Spoon and lifted her into the air before she had time to run away.

It pinched Silver’s hoof between two of its filthy lion toes—Oh Celestia, why did it have to touch her? Everything about this was wrong and bad and awful and antlers did not belong there and its breath smelled like a subway and it was still touching her!—and shook it.
“Hmm, Silver Spoon, is it?” Merciful heavens, it knew her name now. “I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced. ‘The name’s Discord! I’m sure you’ve heard of me.’”

Silver stared at him with watery eyes.

“Discord, I don’t think she likes that,” said Fluttershy.

“NONsense, I’m Discord!” It sprouted a peacock tail and preened. “Master and spirit of chaos? Freshly reformed and beloved by all? Delighter of all creatures small and fuzzy—” An eagle talon shut Silver’s mouth for her. “—that includes you, by the way—and twister of dimensions. I don’t do windows or birthday parties; I find the balloon animals personally offensive.”

Another terrible laugh tittered through the cottage. Its breath smelled of poison joke this time. It paused and waited for something.

Silver’s face crumpled.

The creature pulled a script out of its torso and flipped through the pages. A set of reading glasses flashed upon the horse muzzle. “Ahem—this is supposed to be the part where you introduce yourself.”

Silver’s bottom lip trembled.

“Uh, hellowoooo?” The horse head with horns and antlers tilted to the side. The snake tongue clicked against the fangs. “Hey Fluttershy, what’s with this kid?”

“Discord, I really think you should put her down befo—”

Silver Spoon burst into tears.

“Whoa!” The awful monstrosity yelped in surprise and nearly dropped her. “Hey, what are you doing? You’re going off script.” It shook her a little. “Stop that, you! Fluttershy, it’s not cooperating.”

Silver’s head rolled back and she sobbed harder. Great globs of tears rolled down her face, mussing her coat.

Fluttershy snapped something harsh, but Silver didn’t catch what it was.

“But it’s not MY fault!” The creature frowned, more than a little uncertain. “I didn’t do anything, she was always this gray!” It cringed and drew back, leaving Silver to sob in the open air. It wiped mismatched paws on its furry, emaciated body. “I didn’t—this foal’s broken! She was like that when I got here.” A talon poked Silver’s braid. “Stop being broken, you’re upsetting Fluttershy.”

Fluttershy stomped her forehooves. “Discord! Put her down this instant, can’t you see she’s upset?”

“But—oh, fine.” The lion paw snapped its toes and Silver Spoon found herself in Fluttershy’s armchair. “You big crybaby.”

Silver snatched Ferdinand’s bowl from the table and huddled sniffling against the cushions. “I am not!”

The snake tongue flicked out and gave her a raspberry. The raspberry sprouted legs from its stem and ran off. “You are so!” It stomped its cow hoof and swung around to Fluttershy. “You saw, she started the whole thing by herself. I didn’t do anything. I’m TRYing to be nice, but apparently
SOME fillies don’t know good manners.” It crossed its mismatched arms in a huff. “It’s obviously all her fault.”

“That’s not true, and you know it. You shouldn’t have picked her up without asking first; she was already scared half to death.” Fluttershy’s wings wrapped Silver in a hug. “There there, it’s okay, Silver Spoon. He doesn’t mean any harm, I promise. Discord doesn’t always know how to act around other ponies.” She nudged a box of tissues forward.

Silver sniffed and dabbed her eyes. She’d stopped sobbing, but tears kept rolling down her face. Why wouldn’t this awful thing stop looking at her? Why couldn’t it go bother somepony else?


Fluttershy flinched back.

The vile patchwork creature pulled a face and put a paw to its chest. How dare it pretend to have any right to be offended?

Well, fine. Let it be offended. Silver Spoon didn’t care. She felt her heartbeat return to normal. The fog of her terror settle. Discord. She knew that name. “H-how is that your friend? How can he be anypony’s friend? He—he’s bad! He’s ugly and terrible and bad and I hate him!”

Young ladies did not scream indoors. Young ladies did not lose composure in the presence of elders. Young ladies knew how to pick their battles. But those rules were never intended for abominations of harmony, and anyway, Discord didn’t follow rules, so it didn’t count.

Silver swallowed hard and hugged Ferdinand’s bowl close to protect him. Her poor betta huddled next to the sunken ship; he must have been terrified.

“You didn’t need to introduce yourself; I already know who you are. You’re the one who teamed up with Tirek.” The full scope of what this monster had done settled over her like a shroud. Rage welled in Silver’s chest until it pushed up her head to stare Discord in its disgusting, snaggletoothed, lopsided face. “You hurt ponies.”

Discord flexed its claws and looked away. Almost as if it had the decency to be ashamed. Almost.

“You hurt a LOT of ponies, a-and not just ponies in Ponyville—you hurt everyone! You’re the reason everything’s broken. You’re why Mother and Father and Cousin Silver Lining lost their magic. If it hadn’t been for you, Tacks wouldn’t have gotten hurt. My fish almost DIED because of you, and I bet you’re not even sorry about Ferdinand or Tacks or anypony else! You don’t even care!”

The draconequus said something in its defense while Silver rubbed her eyes. She wouldn’t have any of it and refused to look at him anymore. Silver stared at the spilled birdseed on the floor instead.

“You’re the ugliest, worst thing that ever existed. Everything about you is warped and bad and wrong. Go away.” Silver sniffed and took another tissue. “Fluttershy, make him go away.”

“He’s already left, Silver Spoon,” sighed Fluttershy. Indeed, not a trace remained of the draconequus, save the vague scent of subways and poison joke. Fluttershy tried offering Silver a cup of honeysuckle tea, but Silver didn’t want it anymore. “I don’t think he’ll be back for a while.” Her wings gave a nervous little twitch, and she stared at the teapot sadly. “I think you hurt his feelings.”

“Good.” Maybe now Discord would know how it felt. Maybe next time it would think twice before
hurting other ponies. Silver didn’t want to, and she didn’t mean to, but she began crying all over again. “I hate him, Fluttershy.”

Fluttershy perched on the armrest of the chair, one wing still wrapped around Silver’s shoulder. She waited patiently and had the kindness not to look at the filly’s tears. “I’m sorry, Silver Spoon. I had no idea Discord would upset you this much. If you want, I can ask him to please not come by when you have an appointment with me.” Fluttershy offered a gentle smile and brushed one of Silver’s tears away with her feathers. “Would that be okay?”

It would be better for Discord to go to Tartarus and stay there forever. But Silver realized that Fluttershy was trying her best—despite an exceptionally bad choice of friends—and nodded anyway.

“And you know—and I’m sorry, I know it’s a bad time to point this out, but it has to be said—Discord isn’t the one who hurt your loved ones, Silver. Tirek did that.”

“Maybe.” Silver sniffed hard. “But none of it would’ve happened if not for him. That makes it Discord’s fault at least a little bit.” Plus, Tirek didn’t tromp around Ponyville taking bubble baths and interrupting tea. Locked up in Tartarus, Tirek couldn’t hurt anypony anymore. “Sweetie Belle says he was supposed to be helping you guys catch Tirek, but then he turned on you. Is that true?”

“It is,” Fluttershy said without pause. “He also learned a valuable lesson from that, and he’s very sorry. I know he is.”

As if that actually fixed anything. If Discord really felt any remorse, then he’d help fix the broken buildings instead of letting other ponies clean up the mess he helped make. “How can you be friends with him, even after what he did to you?”

“Because I know everybody makes mistakes. Discord realized his mistake, apologized to us, and we forgave him.”

It could not be that simple. Silver didn’t know an exceptional amount about Miss Fluttershy, but she knew for certain that an Element of Harmony couldn’t be that naïve or foolish. She’d been given a tidy, simplified answer: a pacifier. Silver Spoon had outgrown pacifiers.

“If someone realizes they’ve done something wrong, but still wants to become better, I think they should have the chance.” Fluttershy considered the filly frowning up at her, all fuzzed up and nestled in an armchair twice her size. Sighing a little to herself—out of disappointment, frustration, sadness, or some combination of the three—she folded her wings and grew quiet for a little while. “Discord’s never had a friend before, so he doesn’t know how to be one. In fact, I don’t think he truly realized what our friendship meant to him—to all of us—until he betrayed it.”

She stooped to pet a robin who’d come to perch on the chair. “He’s still learning, Silver Spoon. Like we all are. Have you ever done something you weren’t very proud of?”

Silver flattened her ears and looked away. “Maybe.”

As much as that amalgamation of fur and scales turned her stomach, Silver had to admit that he probably hadn’t meant to hurt her family. More likely, he just hadn’t cared. It didn’t matter how sorry he supposedly felt; he still deserved to be yelled at.

In all her life, Silver Spoon had never yelled at anything or anybody that way. It had drawn from wells of hurt and rage and fear Silver didn’t know she possessed. If Discord hadn’t left, she could have screamed his ears off for hours.

Silver’s eyes trailed down to her saddlebag. Does Diamond Tiara feel that way sometimes? Or all the
time?

Fluttershy shifted off the armrest, one hoof still resting upon the chair. “Silver Spoon, may I ask you something?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Are you sure it’s Discord you’re upset with?”

Silver’s gaze snapped up from the saddlebag. Her stomach clenched a bit. “Do… I have to answer?”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to.” Fluttershy offered another hug. Silver took it. “Oh, you’ve been through a lot lately, haven’t you?”

Instead of answering, Silver Spoon counted all the bands on the armadillo sleeping under the table. It had nine bands and a scar on its belly. “How do you know Discord won’t do it again? How do you know he won’t go back to hurting you someday?”

Another short pause. “I don’t. Not for sure.” Fluttershy shrugged her wings. “All I can do is trust him.”

“Why?”

“Well, that’s easy. It’s because we’re—”

Somepony knocked on the door. After half a second, the knock came again, faster and harder. The white rabbit jumped up and pulled the door latch.

An incredibly sweaty Applejack panted upon Fluttershy’s doorstep. Steam rose off her haunches, and she had crumbs from breakfast sprinkled across her muzzle. “Fluttershy! Twilight needs all of us t’meeet her at the castle. We got us a surefire mountain of a monster problem comin’ in, and—oh.” She blinked at Silver Spoon, who stared back from the chair. “Didn’t know you had comp’ny.”

A monster attack? Today of all days? “Is it bad, Miss Applejack?”

Applejack wiped her brow with the back of her hoof and fanned herself with her hat. “Naw, t’aunt nothin’ to worry your head about, Silver Spoon.” She gave Silver a friendly wink. “Don’t look so glum! Us six’ll sort that crabby critter out in three shakes of a rattler tail.”

“Could it be two shakes, instead?” Silver followed Fluttershy and Applejack outside, frowning at the crystal spires shining above the Ponyville skyline. “I have a meeting with the princess today. It’s important.”

“We’ll do our best, Silver.” Fluttershy gave her one last hug for the road, then frowned in thought. “Ooh, your butler’s not back yet. I don’t want you walking home alone when there’s a monster out.” She waved at the bear dozing in the shade. “Excuse me, Harry? Could you do a teensy little favor for us?”

Of all the ways the Silver family expected their youngest to come home, arriving via grizzly bear surely hadn’t been among them.
Brass Tacks, who had been in the middle of loading luggage into the air-carriage, nearly dropped Father’s bag in the street. Poor Father stared agog inside the carriage and suffered a minor conniption behind the soundproofed windows.

Silver Spoon waved over the bear’s furry arm. “Hello, everypony.” She waved down Brass Tacks, who’d lit his horn and adopted a battle stance. “I’m fine, don’t worry! Ferdinand’s appointment ended early, so Fluttershy asked Harry to give me a ride home.”

Brass Tacks snorted, and after a nod of confirmation from Mother, returned to loading bags.

“Well. This is a… surprise.” Clutching her shawl, Mother approached the bear warily. She glanced back to Father—who still looked two seconds from a heart attack—and motioned for calm. It did little to help. “Thank you, er… Harry, was it? Please pass our family’s gratitude on to Fluttershy when you have the chance.”

Harry blushed through his fur.

The fourth and eldest present member of the Silver clan sipped his coffee beside the fence. He observed the morning’s goings on with little reaction, save a slight elevation of his snowy eyebrows. A standard reaction from Granddad Silver Tongue.

“Good morning, Silver Spoon.” Granddad’s pale gray eyes blinked at the bowl in his granddaughter’s hooves. “And… Ferdinand, I believe? I see you’ve both returned early.” The fluffy beard trailing his jawline twitched with his smile. In the sunshine, it shone bright against his storm-gray coat. “Excellent.”

“Yes, we—” Silver Spoon turned to Harry. “You can let me down, please.” The bear obliged and shuffled off down the road. Silver dusted herself off, smoothed her mane, and approached.

“Good morning, Granddad.” She smiled and bowed low to him. “I apologize for my unorthodox entrance. An emergency arose for Miss Fluttershy, and she had to arrange an escort.”

Silver Tongue met the bow with a respectful nod. “How considerate of her. Well, better early than late, yes?”

“Yes, sir. This way, I’m home in time to see Mother and Father off to Canterlot.” Silver Spoon approached the air carriage and rose to her back legs.

Father—still somewhat pale from fright—rolled down the window and met Silver with a nuzzle. “Oh, Brightness, are you sure you’re alright?” He stretched his neck out to search for scratches or signs of a sprain. “I don’t know why Fluttershy couldn’t have chosen a less predatory escort.”

“I’m fine, thank you.” Silver’s ears twitched and flicked as Father inspected her mane for any bear fleas that might have hitched a ride. His nose tickled, and she did her best not to laugh. “Goodbye, Father. I’ll see you guys tomorrow morning, right?”

“Tomorrow morning, without a doubt.” A near-invisible frown rested upon Mother’s face, pretending to be a smile. It didn’t appear to be an expression of disapproval, and it didn’t seem like Silver Spoon had done anything wrong. Nonetheless, Mother had watched closely since her daughter arrived, and not because of the bear.

“Goodbye, Mother.” Silver Spoon kissed her lightly on the cheek. “Have a good time at the wedding.”

“So long, my love. I’ll try my best, but no promises.” She pursed her lips. “I hope Upper Crust keeps
Father laughed at the very idea.

“Let’s hope it’s under six hours, at least. Canterlot weddings go on for decades, I swear.” Mother picked up the ends of her dress so it wouldn’t catch in the door and slipped into the carriage. She nodded towards Granddad. “Beau-Père, are you sure you don’t want to trade? You know Jet Set from Frames’s art auctions, right?”

“Nice try, but I’ve had my share of Canterlot weddings for the year, Perfect.” The seasoned attorney smoothed his mustache. In the space of a blink, something loud and unspoken flickered between the three elder ponies. “Besides, I welcome a quiet time in the country and a chance to catch up with family. And Cranky, too, of course.”

The cab climbed into the clouds. Silver Spoon leaned on the fence, watching Mother’s handkerchief wave from the window until it became a green pinpoint in the blue. Out of the corner of her eye, Granddad admired the new snowdrops in the garden. “How do you know Mr. Doodle Donkey, Granddad?”

“An old client.” Before Silver Spoon could ask how Cranky could have possibly afforded a defense attorney of Silver Tongue’s stature, he added, “My good deed for that year. Wonderful fellow, Cranky; his steadfast romanticism puts me in the mind of our dear old Silver Swift, may she rest in peace. But nevermind me, Silver Spoon.” Granddad plucked a snowdrop and stepped closer. When he spoke again, the bass of his voice rumbled through the yard, kind but intent. “How have you been?”

A loaded question with an extensive answer, intricate and branching in ways Silver couldn’t possibly detail. Not in the few seconds she had to think about it, anyway. Not for the first time, she wondered what everypony had been talking about before the bear appeared.

“I’ve been well, Granddad.”

“Oh, I see.” Granddad bent down and tucked the snowdrop behind Silver Spoon’s ear. “Am I to presume, then, that your eyes are red from tears of joy?”

Silver curled her tail with a wry smile. “I have been well. Several times.” They shared a small polite laugh at her icebreaker before she continued, “I saw something… unseemly this morning. It upset me a little bit, but I’m feeling much better now.”

Granddad accepted the answer with a nod. “Then let us hope the trend continues.”

The tumult of politics and the fickle balancing act of the schoolyard fell into the background and settled into something smaller and manageable. In Granddad Silver Tongue’s presence, everything snapped together, clean, smooth, and sensible. A perfect balm to Discord’s… everything.

“I’m glad you finally came to stay with us—oh!” Silver Spoon pranced up the path to the front door. “I can finally show you the new house!” She flicked her tail in thought. “That is, if it still counts as new; we’ve been here a year. Mother and Father didn’t show you already, did they?”

“Only the foyer and the guestroom. I would be honored to have you as my guide, Silver Spoon.” Granddad finished his coffee, gave the cup to Tacks, and let his granddaughter lead him inside. “Shall we, then?”

If Silver Tongue held any strong opinion of his son’s humble little home in the country, he betrayed none of it. He observed the miniaturized museum of art pieces and heirlooms, remarking now and
then about a particular vase that had long been a favorite of Father’s, or a painting that Aunt Frames had suggested. Granddad smiled at the foyer’s masterwork crystal chandelier (a wedding present from Grandmare Shady Hollows, who sadly had to remain at the manor today, due to her eye condition) and agreed with Silver Spoon’s high opinion of the cozy living room.

“Your drawing room,” Granddad Silver Tongue declared, “is a precise copy of the one in Manehattan.” His gaze lingered on the pair of rapiers crossed above the fireplace. “Remarkable.”

“Yes, we got to keep all the furniture from the old drawing room.” Silver Spoon knocked upon an elaborate armchair leg. “I mean, if it’s not baroque, don’t fix it, right?”

“Ha, what a fitting joke for the room.” Granddad winked at her. “It’s an antique.”

He brought his head higher as they crossed the threshold into Silver Spoon’s room, listening intently while Silver explained how she’d begun saving her apprenticeship money to buy a special tea table that could fold out to sit more attendees. However, Granddad’s gaze lingered not upon the current (and sadly one-size-only) table, but the line of dolls upon the bookshelf.

Peering at the florid ruffles of Gingerbread’s country dress, Granddad Silver Tongue frowned a little. “I thought you had a larger collection than this.”

“Oh, I did at the penthouse, but Father said we all had to downsize.” Silver nodded to the cabinet of tea sets tucked to the left of Ferdinand’s tank. “I decided to prioritize.”

“Mm. Indeed. The importance of appropriate prioritization cannot be overemphasized. You have always been well aware of that fact—a great deal more than many fillies your age.”

Granddad gently tilted his head towards the atlas of popularity maps, straw polls, and schedule drafts upon what ought to have been a tea table. Hardly any room remained for a thimble, much less a teapot. “I admire your diligence. It is a remarkable quality in any pony, but especially in a young lady of the earth pony tribe.” His whisker fluff twitched in a smile. “I take great pride in you, my beloved granddaughter. We all do.”

“Thank you very much, Granddad Silver Tongue.” Silver Spoon smiled at the praise, but couldn’t help but feel that it spun a path towards a deeper subject. “However…?”

Granddad’s eyes sparkled. “You catch on fast. However, we have become somewhat concerned, as of late.”

_Keyword: “We.”_ The smile drained from Silver’s face. “This is about Diamond Tiara, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” He knelt, close enough for her to count the dark rings beneath his eyes. “I shall ask you once more: how have you been, Silver Spoon?”

“Busy.” Several words could have answered him and still been truthful, but that one fit best. “I’ve been so, so busy. I think it’s starting to get to me. I’m managing Diamond’s campaign for student pony president, and she’s not making it easy.”

“Not easy to win, or not easy to manage?”

“Both.” Silver set her saddlebag upon the floor and pulled out a schedule book bursting with bad news and unfavorable statistics. “The other foals don’t like her as much as they used to; Di’s reputation isn’t the best.” She ruffled her hoof through her bangs. “Awful, in fact. And I… I don’t know if I can fix it this time.”
Granddad’s eyebrows lifted and he blinked at “this time”. “A repeat offender, then.”

“Yes, sir.” Although Silver Spoon personally wouldn’t have phrased it that way. Yes, Diamond had her bad habits and unwieldy moments, but she wasn’t a criminal or a bad pony.

Not a bad pony, but…

“Granddad? Di…” Her ears wilted into her mane. “Diamond’s a bad connection, isn’t she?”

Her grandfather turned towards a framed photo of Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon posing outside the new Silver Ballroom at the Wisteria Annual Winter Gala. The gala where Diamond nearly went down in flames, no thanks to her new money heritage. No thanks to any help from Silver Spoon, either.

“Diamond Tiara.” He closed his eyes the way he often did when contemplating and untangling the specifics of a new case. “Daughter by marriage to the eldest daughter of the Rotten-Milk family, if I am not mistaken. Which I am not.”

Silver Spoon could understand Mrs. Rich’s name change. *Spoiled Rotten-Milk. Gross.* “Is it a good family?”

A row of bright teeth glimmered in what could have either been a smile or a sneer. One couldn’t tell with Granddad, sometimes. “It is a line of passable wealth and age—technically old money, though none can tell.” The curl of his mouth flattened into a neutral line. “A stench of desperation clings to that house; the Canterlot Rottens are not misnamed. In recent memory, I struggle to recall a single favorable word outside, perhaps, a commendable career performance. Of the Ponyville Riches, I have heard little. Business, nor the affairs of the new money set, is not my concern.”

Outside, a crowd of ponies passed the window. They seemed in a rush to get somewhere, though the wedding wouldn’t be for several hours. Granddad watched their silhouettes through the curtain. An eternity passed before he spoke again.

“My beloved Silver Spoon, understand that reputation is not self-contained. Reputation is inherited. Reputation is contagious. A pony may break away from ill repute—fairly earned or not—but only through a great amount of effort. Your associate is still a filly; I cannot and will not call judgment on a child’s reputation.” Finally, he turned towards Silver Spoon again. “However, from what I have heard thus far of this filly’s history, heritage, and habits, no. I do not believe Diamond Tiara to be a bad connection. She is a potentially ruinous connection.”

A hard lump crystallized in Silver Spoon’s stomach. Ruinous.

When Diamond Tiara sank—not if, but when—she would surely drag Silver down to the depths of ruination with her.


Potentially, they’d both sink to a place so far below sea level, not even sunlight reached it. No hope of rescue, no hope of news until the day some lucky excavation team uncovered the wreck and made a killing off the tell-all book. By then it’d all be far too late.

Unless…

“Oh, I am sorry, sweet child. I never wished to upset you, but you did ask and you’re old enough to know the truth. Come.” Granddad knelt and gave Silver Spoon a nuzzle. He smelled of zebra espresso and aftershave. “Would you like to help me choose a vest for the wedding?” He clicked his
tongue at his current outfit, better suited for closing arguments than a wedding feast. “This is too formal, isn’t it?”

“For Ponyville?” It would pass, but he’d stick out like a diamond dog at a debutante ball. Silver Spoon nodded. “A little bit, yes.”

“Knew it.” Granddad stamped his hoof and tisked again. “I never know how to dress for country affairs.”

“The ponies here don’t wear much at all,” said Silver Spoon. She took Granddad’s hoof and escorted him to the guest room. “I think you’d do fine if you ditched—um, if you went without the suit jacket. If you want, I could help you pick a lighter waistcoat color if you want. And a tie.”

The small talk barely provided a distraction. “Unless” throbbed in the back of Silver’s brain ever since she’d listed her questions for Twilight back at Fluttershy’s house. Now, it drummed so loudly she thought her skull might crack.

_You’re going to capsize, Silver._

Silver Spoon examined the alternate vests laid out in Silver Tongue’s suitcase. “I like the brown pinstriped one.”

_The lighthouse is right there, but Diamond doesn’t see it. She’s going to ram your social standing into the rocks. And you’re going to let her._

“I also think the light pink one pops nice with your dark coat, plus it’s a spring color.”

“And the color of love, no less—ah, and the original color of your Grandmare Hollows’s mane. Marvelous choice, Silver Spoon!”

_You are going to drown. Unless..._

_Unless..._

Unless Silver Spoon took up a lifeboat and abandoned ship. Now.

The lump in her stomach sagged harder. “Granddad Silver Tongue?”

The old stallion’s eye didn’t leave the rainbow of ascots laid out across the bedspread. “Yes, love?”

“Did you ever have a problem like this with any of your friends?” Silver nosed the beige and gold ascot forward.

“With mine? Can’t say that I have, Silver Spoon.” Granddad smiled at her choice, holding the ascot against the waistcoat and nodding to himself. “I never made a habit of forming unwise alliances or friendships, and swiftly dismantle the ones that prove unwise.” He lightly kissed the tip of Silver Spoon’s nose. “I concern myself more with family. The answer is no, by the way.”

Silver Spoon tilted her head and blinked. “Beg your pardon?”

“The real question you want to ask concerns whether or not you should sever your connection with Diamond Tiara. My answer is no; I won’t tell you.” He buttoned up the waistcoat and looped the ascot around his neck. “The choice is yours to decide, and your burden to bear. Ladies and gentlecolts of society fight their own battles, Silver Spoon.”

A sour, rebellious part of Silver Spoon complained that it didn’t seem fair that she’d helped
Granddad with his wedding outfit when he refused to help her back. She never asked much of him, did she? The natural and sensible course of action for a pony in Silver’s position would be to ask one’s elders; that’s what elders were for.

However, it was also not the place of fillies to question or contradict their elders, so she only bowed her head and replied, “I understand, sir.”

“For fifty-six thousand bits’ worth of Wisterian education, I expect that you’ve developed some skill in the art of problem-solving, yes? Here is the time to put it to good use.” Granddad’s comb threaded through the fluff of his sideburns until they curled lush and full. It looked as if a pair of ermines clung to his cheekbones. “I trust you are already aware of the potential consequences of your actions?”

“I am, sir.”

“In that case, I do hope you remember what happened the last time a Silver favored a poor connection.”

The unspoken weight of the implication rumbled through the walls of the house. The smaller residence that Father purchased because they could no longer afford a Manehattan penthouse.

“I do, sir.”

While Granddad snapped on his spats, Silver Spoon looked out the window.

Outside, Mr. Time Turner rushed down the road. A green suit bounced upon his back, the sleeves flapping behind him like a pair of tails. The suit looked a far cry from Granddad Silver Tongue’s casualwear, much less his wedding ensemble. On a local eccentric scientist’s salary, Mr. Turner likely couldn’t do any better.

“Connections cannot be made lightly, Silver Spoon.”

A set of hooves clicked behind her. Silver Tongue’s reflection joined Silver Spoon’s in the window. Together, they watched Mr. Turner until he vanished into the distance. When Granddad spoke again, his voice was soft. “There are those who presume we do the things we do for selfish ends. They believe we see other ponies as tools—ladder rungs upon which to elevate ourselves, and nothing more. We know that isn’t true at all.”

“No, it’s to survive.” Silver Spoon glanced back towards the hallway full of histories and legacies. “For all of us to survive.” Social connections threaded farther than one could see. The aftershock of strumming or cutting one could rattle walls miles and miles away.

“They’re kinda like a web or a little ecosystem; if you cut one thread, the whole thing could fall apart.” Silver fiddled with her braid. “We studied biomes and ecosystems when I first got to Ponyville. I got an A on that report.”

Diamond Tiara hadn’t wanted to do a report. She’d convinced Cheerilee to let her create a model and narrate it instead; Silver had helped gather materials and check the research. In the end, Diamond had gotten an A, too.

Granddad Silver Tongue gave one of his rare grins, so wide the molar fillings shone. “Precisely, and each web is unique to the place it is located, yes?”

“I suppose so. Yes.”

“My webs are not your webs, Silver Spoon. I do not know what cutting Diamond’s thread will do,
“Excuse me, Vinyl Scratch!”

The unicorn (who couldn’t hear through her headphones in the first place) waved to Silver Spoon and stepped out of the way as the filly raced past.

At the last second, Silver remembered that Miss Vinyl lived with the sister of Diamond’s opponent. Too late to double back for a kind word or two, she made a mental note to swing by Pipsqueak’s place before the end of the week. Common courtesy dictated the opponents should meet before the election as a show of goodwill, but if Di didn’t feel up to it, Silver Spoon could always share a cup of tea. Trottingham ponies valued teatime almost as highly as Silver did. Besides, the sooner the class secretary shook hooves with the potential class president, the better.

No time to worry about that now. Silver’s hooves skidded to avoid a passing mountain of baking supplies. A box tumbled from the top but got caught at the last second. “Sorry, Mr. Cake!”

In the midst of brunching with Granddad, the clock had struck twelve. The route from home to the library took fifteen minutes (without traffic) but all too late, Silver remembered Princess Twilight’s library didn’t sit in the center of town anymore.

_The castle’s at the north edge of town, so that’s, like, five more minutes?_ Silver ducked to avoid a passing set of ladders. _Eight? Ten?_ Her heart skipped fast. _Too much extra time. Way too close to late._ Silver Spoon tucked up her braid and kicked into a gallop.

_This’ll pick up the lost time. Straight line from here to the castle if I cut through the market and I’ll still be on—_

A solid wall of pony backs and tails blocked the main road.

Silver threw back her head and pawed the air. “Oh, for crying out loud!”

The crowd amassed around the mouth of the town square, murmuring to themselves and watching something. Wood snapped several feet away. Something scraped along the dirt, roaring and snuffling. It sounded kind of like a bear if it gargled a gallon of acid.

_Smells like it, too._ Wrinkling her nose, Silver Spoon tried to map out the rest of Ponyville in her mind. _Okay, maybe I can detour through town hall if I cut through Berryshine’s?_ She rubbed her temples and groaned. _No, it’s closed today. What if—_

Sweetie Belle’s head poked out from the middle of the crowd. “Hi, Silver Spoon. Wait up, I wanna talk to you for a sec.” She wormed her way out into the open, squeezing between Mr. Breezy and Lemon Hearts. When she finally reached Silver and noticed the breathless fidgeting, however, whatever she’d planned to say fell to the wayside. “Something wrong?”

“Running late.” Silver reared to see over the crowd, but only got a better view of Minuette’s ears. “Do you know a shortcut to the castle from here? I have an appointment with the princess at one.”

“I dunno what clock you’re using, Silver Spoon, but it’s only twelve fifteen. You still have half—”
Silver Spoon pinned her ears.

Sweetie rubbed the back of her neck with a sigh. “I guess you could cut through the Boutique. It’s locked, but I can let you in; Rarity won’t mind if it’s for an emergency. But I hope your meeting’s with Princess Cadance or Luna, ’cause…” she motioned towards the square.

The black and white head of a vicious panda drew back and roared. Foam dripped from its jaws, dripping across Applejack’s back as she rushed it. Her hooves smashed its nose, and the creature rose into the air on giant bumblebee wings, trying to simultaneously swat Rainbow Dash buzzing around its back. Rarity ducked a nasty looking stinger and doubled back with Fluttershy.

As it buzzed into the sky, Silver Spoon caught a good look. The Elements of Harmony battled some sort of bizarre half-bee, half-panda…. thing.

“…yeah, I think Twilight’s kinda busy right now,” Sweetie Belle finished.

Silver’s ears drooped as she watched Princess Twilight swoop overhead to blast a shower of magic from her horn. “I’d still like to be there early. You never know, she could always finish early with the….” She squinted at the garish stripes on the monster’s abdomen. Rings really did not belong on a panda. “What is that, a pandabee? Bumblebear?”

“Amethyst Star called it a bugbear.” Sweetie tapped Silver’s shoulder with her tail. “C’mon, I’ll walk you to the castle. I gotta return a book, anyway.”

“It couldn’t hurt,” said Silver Spoon, “but don’t slow me down. I want to be there at twelve thirty.” She twitched her ears, squinting at the unicorn falling in step beside her. “Since when do you walk me places?”

Reaching into her mane, Sweetie Belle pulled out a little brass key as they approached Carousel Boutique. She shrugged with a little too much nonchalance and unlocked the door. “Ohhhh, no reason. I wanted to return a book, like I told you.”

Silver raised an eyebrow. Didn’t she say she wanted to talk like, two seconds ago? “Where’s the book, then?”

“Pff, in the house, obviously. Here it is!” Sweetie Belle swiped a dog-eared copy of Zippy Long: Stalk King from the table and held it up, triumphant. “See?”

“That doesn’t belong to the library. There’s no sticker.”

“We’re donating it.”

Silver glanced at the inside cover. “Rarity’s name is written in it.” From the looks of it, she’d marked it over a decade ago.

“Oh.” Sweetie blinked. “It’s also a collector’s item. That’s why we’re donating it?”

The back door lay somewhere in the inventory room, if Silver remembered right. Navigating through Rarity’s new winter line—apparently, legwarmers came back in style—she ducked around the clearance shelf. “Sweetie Belle, just tell me what you want to tell me. I have to get somewhere.” Silver pushed through a pile of undyed fabrics barring the inventory door. “Also, you’re a bad liar.”

“I am not! It’s called ‘easing into the subject,’ so there.” More like dancing around the subject, but whatever. “Anyway, Silver Spoon, we thought… well, actually, I thought that maybe I should warn you.”
Under the shadow of a suddenly ominous ring of headless ponquins, Silver tensed. “About what?”

Abandoning all pretense of a library trip, Sweetie left the book on the floor. “Pipsqueak asked me and Apple Bloom and Scootaloo to be his campaign managers yesterday.”

“Oh.” That could potentially mean a lot of things. Not many of them good. “Who was his manager before?”

“I don’t think he had one.” Sweetie Belle led them through the maze of inventory at a reasonable pace, weaving around a haphazard trail of belts, bobbins, and bonnets. Before long, they stood before the back door. “Why?”

Silver shrugged. “Curious.”

*Pip didn’t even bother getting campaign managers until the weekend before the election? That didn’t bode well for his planning or management skills. It’s sloppy, inefficient, and means he’s either a procrastinator, has bad foresight, or both. Terrible qualities in a president.* Silver Spoon sighed. *And if Ponyville Schoolhouse actually cared about any of those things, it might matter.*

At best, Silver and Diamond could use it to cobble together an ill-advised smear campaign. That might have worked for a boost six months ago, but now…

Gritting her teeth, Silver glanced at Sweetie Belle. *That’s not even counting the new wild cards on the table.* With Diamond Tiara already strung tighter than a corset, the mere presence of the Crusaders could careen her into catastrophe. *For all I know, they already have a devastating counter campaign ready to go.* Crafting one wouldn’t be hard, either.

Still, at least now Silver could batten down the hatches and toss down some sandbags ahead of time. “Thanks for telling me, Sweetie Belle.”

They stepped into an overcut lawn webbed with clotheslines. Overhead, half-dyed tunics dripped into the grass, some still half hung in the dye bucket. Rarity must have left in a rush.

True to Sweetie’s word, the castle of friendship waited just a block away. Silver could make that in under five, no problem. “And thanks for the shortcut, too. I owe you one.”

“Sure thing, Silver Spoon.” An orange dollop landed on Sweetie’s shoulder. She glanced at it, shuffling her hooves and bouncing on her knees. “Hey, are you guys, like… okay? You and Diamond?”

“Of course we’re okay.” An automatic response, but judging from Sweetie’s skeptical frown, not a convincing one. “Well, I mean we’re going to be, after I see Princess Twilight.” A hopeful smile twitched at Silver’s muzzle. Of course she’d fix it; a princess of friendship not being able to solve a friendship problem would be like Celestia not raising the sun. It simply didn’t happen.

“She IS pretty good at this type of thing,” Sweetie Belle agreed. “Good luck, Silver Spoon. See you at the debate.”

“Try not to cry too hard when we beat you.”

Sweetie smirked. “We’ll try.”
Nothing in Equestria quite matched the Castle of Friendship. Although nopony could argue against the sleek majesty of the Empire’s Crystal Castle’s spires, nor the ancient power of Canterlot Castle’s rounded architecture, they still didn’t compare. Like a tree, Twilight’s castle twisted and branched into narrow curves and stark boughs of glass. A place that had been grown, not constructed. The architecture promised blossoms and fruit.

Standing before the tall doors of the castle, the fur between Silver Spoon’s shoulders fuzzed. A jolt of unpredictability—too close to chaos for Silver’s taste—ran through the contours of this place. For the first time that week, she realized that she didn’t quite know what would happen once she stepped in.

Glancing at her reflection wrinkling along the dark walls, Silver realized something else. “I look terrible!” Silver rubbed the dye and wet grass off the bottom of her hooves, slicked back her windswept bangs, and brushed the dust from her coat. “A little better, but…”

She checked her reflection again in the window. Nothing could be done about the bags under her pinkish eyes, nor the miserable hollows in her cheekbones. How long had she looked this way? Why had nopony told her?

“I can’t meet royalty like this.” But she couldn’t go back home so close to appointment time. What if the princess came looking for her? “Maybe if I—”

The door opened a crack, and a slitted green eye blinked at her. “I thought I heard someone out here.” The little purple dragon—Spike, right?—shoved the door all the way open with his shoulder. He held a roll of sparkly tape in one claw and clutched a giant sapphire in the other. A string of yellow ribbon spiraled up his left leg and around the base of his tail. “Didn’t you hear about the bugbear, Silver Spoon?”

In the distance, the monster roared as hooves bucked, horns flashed, and the party cannons boomed. Spike jabbed his thumb towards the commotion and chomped into the sapphire. Little blue sparkles tinkled down his chin. “It’s kinda hard to miss.”

“Yes, I saw it on the way here.” Silver rubbed a stray bit of fur that wouldn’t stay flat.

“So… you know Twilight’s busy right now, right?”

“Of course.”

Spike scratched the ridge of spines on his head. “Then, uh… why are you here?”

Silver Spoon tilted her head to the side and blinked at him. “Did she tell you she’d canceled my appointment?”

“Not exactly, but—”

“My appointment’s still at one, Mr. The Dragon, is it not?”

“But Twilight’s not even here! She might not be back for hours.” Spike looked over his shoulder, as if he might find somepony to back him up, but he only found an empty foyer.

“It’s alright, I don’t mind waiting,” Silver told him. “When the princess finishes fighting the bugbear, she’ll probably be wondering about me. This way, I’ll be easy to find.” She lifted her head and nodded, settling the matter.
Granted, a far better plan would be to turn around and go home. Silver’s home would be the most logical place to find her, and that way she wouldn’t be intruding upon the princess’s personal space. Appointment or no appointment, skulking about somepony’s home—to say nothing of royalty’s home—grossly violated proper decorum.

The rules of conduct had mapped out this exact situation: If, for whatever reason, the host cannot accommodate the meeting, thank them for their time and attempt to reschedule. A young lady, having done all she could, ought to accept her ill luck with grace and manners.

The rules of conduct also stated that in times of emergency, a young lady could ignore her manners. This counted as an emergency.

“Spike, I can’t reschedule, I HAVE to see Princess Twilight today! Di comes back tomorrow, and there won’t be any time between all the election stuff. I’ve run out of time, and…” Silver’s tail curled around her flank. “…and besides, I don’t really know what else to do. I’ll wait quietly, that’s all. Please?”

The sapphire crunched in Spike’s jaws as he considered it. “Ehhhhh… I guess it might be okay. C’mon in.” He stepped back and waved her through. “Thing is, I gotta lock up and leave at four. You’ll have to go if Twilight’s not back by then.”

“I understand.” Silver glanced at the door shutting itself behind them. “Are you going to the wedding, too? You’re normally not so… shiny.”

In the soft light of the castle, Spike’s polished scales twinkled like a nouveau riche jewelry drawer. Buffed, embossed spines flared down the ridge of his back. Spike tapped his claws along his belly scales. “Do you think I overdid the scale polish?”

“I don’t know, but I kind of like it. You’re like a crystal dragon.” He looked far more presentable for a wedding than Silver, in any case. For the third time that week, Silver Spoon found herself glad that she hadn’t received an invitation.

They followed the burgundy carpet down the hall, while Silver admired the handsome wall hangings and tall curvature of the ceiling. With the sea-green windows and crystal pillars, the castle reminded her of the hotel from the Crystal Empire, except stretched over the skeleton of the Golden Oaks Library. As a result, the place felt far and away from both of those places.

It didn’t feel much like a palace, either. Even walking on carpet, Silver Spoon’s hoofbeats echoed through the barren halls. Castles and palaces were supposed to buzz with activity; they were supposed to have dozens, if not hundreds of ponies working and living within the walls—why else have so many rooms? Yet, the echoing Castle of Friendship sat hollow, stiff, and unused; a home with the price tags still attached. It didn’t look ready to welcome dignitaries or host a gala.

Silver felt the fur between her shoulders prickle again. “Didn’t you move the furniture in here already? It feels so… so…”

“Empty?” Spike shrugged. “Yeah, the castle didn’t exactly come fully furnished. We’ve got the rooms and stuff set up pretty nice and cozy, but nobody’s really gone through the rest of the place yet. Speaking of which…” They stopped at a set of double doors and he looked about, perhaps noting the lack of benches or sofas. “Not really sure where I oughta put you. I guess the thrones room, since that’s where I’ll be.” He tapped his chin in thought. “At least, I think it’s a throne room. Or maybe it’s more like an office? I gotta ask Twilight about naming this stuff.”

Silver Spoon raised her eyebrows at the tall set of doors before her and took a small step backward.
She’d never been inside a throne room before. “Are you sure it’s okay?”

Spike’s skinny tongue swiped some sapphire dust off the tip of his nose. “Might as well; you already invited yourself in.”

“Oh. Sorry about that.” Goodness, she had invited herself in hadn’t she? Not only that, but if Princess Twilight walked into her throne room only to find Silver waiting, she might end up feeling guilty about being late, and then their meeting would start on an awkward foot. “I could always wait outside, if—”

“Joking, Silver Spoon. Joking. I’m sure Twi won’t mind.” Spike chuckled and patted her on the back. “Sheesh, every time you come over, you look like you’re gonna eat your own tail. Relax, it’s just Twilight; it’s not like she’ll banish you to the dungeon for using the wrong fork or tracking mud into the castle.”

He bobbed his head towards the rug. “Seriously, though, do NOT track mud into this castle. I just cleaned that, and velvet’s no picnic to clean.”

“You clean the castle, too?” Silver knew the dragon acted as Twilight Sparkle’s major (minor?) domo, secretary, and mail service, but she hadn’t known that Spike also handled cleaning duties. It sounded like Brass Tacks’s itinerary, except with less bodyguarding and more note taking. “So, like, you’re her butler?”

One claw on the open door, Spike glared back at her.

“Um—not that there’s anything wrong with that! Some of my best friends are butlers.”

“I’m her Number One Assistant, thanks.” A jet of smoke shot from his nostrils. “A butler. Really.” He crossed his arms and marched inside, still grumbling under his brimstoney breath.

“It’s only a question; you don’t need to get all huffy about it. Cleaning rugs is usually a butler’s job, so—oh.” The doors opened in full. “Oh, wow.”

Warmth pulsed from the crystal walls. The scent of ozone, incense, and peat crackled through the air and bit at Silver’s nose. Great Uncle Silver Chalice’s workroom smelled the same way: of magic. Though much smaller than Silver expected, the thrones room didn’t feel cramped. Its businesslike coziness reminded her of their drawing room or Mr. Rich’s study.

A circular table dominated the room. Six tall chairs surrounded it, each one of equal size and tall enough to accommodate Celestia herself. The cutie mark of an Element of Harmony marked each one. Silver Spoon now understood why Spike called it a thrones room. A grand chandelier bedecked with dozens of strange crystals branched overhead. The room possessed a humbled and welcoming dignity that fit Princess Twilight Sparkle perfectly.

Silver Spoon twitched her ears at the sound of something crinkling underhoof. Her eyes followed vines of yellow ribbon across the floor, over a throne, and across the table to the jungle of wrapping paper, ribbon, and tape surrounding a plain white box. “So, this place is a… multipurpose thrones room?”

“Kinda, yeah. This is where you’d come to talk about your friendship problem anyway, so I figure it’s fine for you to hang out here ‘till Twi comes back.” Spike pulled himself into the chair with Rarity’s cutie mark, where the nucleus of wrapping supplies awaited him. His claws drummed across the top of the white box as he lifted it to show. Whatever it held inside sounded heavy. “You want to help me wrap Cranky and Matilda’s present?”
Silver paused to consider the austere seats. Feeling a bit awkward about imposing upon somepony else’s chair, she chose to sit in Applejack’s. Applejack always seemed like the type who’d gladly sit on an apple crate, and never cared who took whose chair.

She shied from the bits of tape and paper stuck to the bottom of Spike’s palms. “Thanks, but if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather sit and go over my—” Silver’s hoof hit thin air when she reached down. “I left my saddlebag!” It must have still been at the tea table in her room, where she’d set it down talking to Granddad. “Could today get any worse? All my notes were in there.”

“What do you need notes for? All you need to do is tell Twilight the problem—trust me, she’ll take enough notes for the both of you and then some—and then she helps…” Spike tisked under his breath and tried to unspool the ribbon from his tail. His claws kept poking through the ribbon, and it ripped into yellow confetti by the time he got it off. It could fill a gift bag, but did no good for wrapping boxes. “…and then Twilight helps you solve it. Maybe you’ll also sing a couple of songs or have a wacky detour thrown in along the way to top it off.”

“But that’s the thing: I’ve got lots and lots of little friendship problems that’s really all part of one big friendship problem, but I’m not sure what that problem even is.” Silver slumped until her cheek pressed against the warm crystal. “I wrote everything down to sort out my thoughts, and it almost worked. Then new stuff came up.”

“What, in the past couple hours?” Spike frowned and lifted an arm. A string of white ribbon stuck fast to his elbow.

Okay, this bordered on sad. “Here, I got it. Stay still a sec.” Silver took up a pair of scissors, pinned the ribbon to the table, and sliced through it with one stroke. “My granddad’s in town for the wedding, but I’m starting to wonder if the real reason is because my parents wanted him to talk to me about Diamond.”

“Oh, because of how Diamond Tiara started giving you the business in the market the other day? Something about a speech or something?” Spike abandoned the ribbon and focused his efforts on wrapping. Reaching into a supply box, he pulled out a ruler and began measuring the box. A green eye slid up to Silver, who frowned indignantly at him. “It’s a little town, Silver Spoon; news gets around fast. Besides, Diamond doesn’t exactly have what you’d call an inside voice.”

Spike flexed his claws. “Lemme get those scissors, please? Thanks.” He double checked the measurements and sliced off a panel of wrapping paper. “Roseluck says Diamond Tiara actually made you cry.”

Glaring, Silver lifted her head. “Well, she didn’t, first of all. Like, I didn’t enjoy it and maybe I felt a little upset, but I did not cry, because young ladies don’t cry in public, and I’ll thank you not to go around spreading slander, Mr. The Dragon, because slander’s totally illegal—don’t you roll your eyes at me!”

Spike took a sudden interest in re-measuring the box. “I dunno what you’re talking about.”

“You did so, I saw you.” Silver pursed her lips. The nerve of some dragons. “Roseluck needs to keep her nose in her flowers and out of other ponies’ business, because she doesn’t even know what’s going on.” Silver’s hooves braced hard on the table. Her legs trembled. “Neither do you, or Sweetie Belle, or Mother or Truffle, o-or anypony. They all think she’s mad at me because of the election, but that’s not it!”

Without looking up, Spike carefully wrapped the south side of the box and taped it down. For all the chaos of the wrapping space, the box itself didn’t have a single crease so far. “It’s not?”
Silver took a breath and thought about it. “Okay... it’s a little bit because of the election. I’m her campaign manager, and Di’s been… stressed lately.” What would poor Diamond say to her parents when the election results finally arrived? She’d bounced back from all the other losses, true, but a filly could only take so much. “She’s under a lot of pressure.”

“I don’t know, Silver Spoon.” Spike turned the box over in his claws to inspect his work thus far. Satisfied, he gently flipped it over and went to work pinning down the edges of wrapping paper on the north side. “Twilight’s stressed pretty much twenty-four-seven, but she never yells or insults me when I mess up.”

A proud smile flashed across his face. “Of course, when you’re as good as I am at assisting, there’s not much to complain about.” Spike shrugged, and slowly, the smile sagged into a frown. “On the other hand, when I do mess up, I mess up hard. Real hard. Like, for instance when I, uh...” He fiddled with the end of his tail and looked away. “I sorrrrrrta kinda almost broke the Equestria Summit last week.”

“How do you break a whole summit?”

“By not remembering to buy earplugs.” Spike sighed and massaged his forehead. “It’s a long story.” The paper crinkled as he went back to work. “The point is, I almost wrecked a huge event, flooded the castle, and hurt Twi’s rep, but she still never yelled at me. She barely raised her voice, and she’s never ever made me feel bad for messing up. At least, not on purpose.”

“It’s not the same thing, Spike. Twilight’s a princess and a grown-up; she’s supposed to be patient. Besides, it sounds like you just had an accident.”

“Yeah, but still...”

“But still’, what? I told you, you can’t compare the two.” Silver snorted. “Not unless you ever sabotaged an amazing opportunity for her—one that Twilight really needed. Not unless you also never fessed up to it, and then you went ahead and let her ruin another friendship for no reason because you were too busy trying to save your own skin to do anything about it because you’re a big fat coward!” Silver leaned in so close, she could see herself in Spike’s shiny scales. “Well? Ever do anything like that?”

Silence settled over the throne room.

Silver glared, waiting.

“Um.” Spike fiddled with his tail and cleared his throat. “No, not anything like that.” His eyes darted elsewhere, and his muscles tensed under his scales.

This conversation had gone too far for the both of them.

Silver withdrew to her chair. “I’m sorry, Spike. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. It’s not your problem.”

“No, it’s okay, Silver Spoon. I’m the one who brought it up, and you already looked upset.” Spike bared his fangs in a sheepish apologetic smile. “How about I just go back to wrapping this and we’ll forget the whole thing?”

“Alright.”

Silver Spoon folded her hooves and leaned back in Applejack’s chair, listening to the paper crinkle. In the silence, she heard the table’s nearly inaudible hum of magic. Curled against the backboard, she
laid her chin upon the armrest. Her eyes trailed upward, tracing the wood vein paths in the chandelier.

Again, she couldn’t help but notice the chandelier’s uncanny resemblance to tree roots. Its organic look would fit better in a rustic hotel lobby, or a quirky clubhouse. She pricked her ears, squinting at a fat root dangling above her head.

_Wait. Is that…?_

A string of orange crystals shifted. Light washed across the wood, and she saw it: a crude little carving of an hourglass, drawn by an amateur horn or a young hoof. Above it, somepony else had etched two linked horseshoes. On a fatter root, Silver found a cluster of candies, a scroll, and a trio of smiling flowers. Cutie marks. Dozens of them.

“Spike…” Silver blinked, still searching for more cutie marks. “Did somepony make this from the library tree’s roots?”

“Yeah,” said Spike, “how’d you know?”

“I saw it underground during Winter Wrap-Up. It’s the only one with all the cutie marks and stuff drawn into it.”

“Oh.” The rustling paper paused a moment. “Yeah, we wondered what was up with that. Twilight said it looked like a code, but Applejack thought she’d heard something about ponies marking trees a long time ago.”

“We found tons of cutie marks under there. I think Dinky led a bunch of kids down there after winter so the rest of us could leave something. Not all of them got carved in the tree. Some ponies drew on rocks or the walls.”

That’s what Silver Spoon had done. Her cutie mark sat upon a rock in the dark, underground and far, far away from the Castle of Friendship. Maybe it belonged there.

A string of pink crystals shifted. For some reason, somepony had placed pictures from the talent show inside them. “Di’s not a bad pony, Spike. I know it doesn’t always look that way, I know she’s got a bad reputation, but she’s not bad.” Silver squeezed her eyes shut, slumping deeper into Applejack’s chair. _But I might be._ “I messed up. I had one job and I didn’t do it.”

The paper rustling stopped altogether. “You mean the election?”

“No. Connections. Make good connections.” Silver dabbed the corner of her eye with a handkerchief and sat up to look back at the little dragon.

He’d finished wrapping the gift. Despite the chaotic mess around it, the present itself could have come straight from a catalog. No wrinkles in the paper, no bumps in the ribbon, no signs of struggle at all. One would never know the trouble Spike took to wrap it.

A little card dangled from the yellow ribbon. Silver wondered whose name Spike had written on it. “You’re originally from Canterlot, aren’t you? Spike, how much do you know about society? Like, I mean, _real_ society?”

Spike’s snout wrinkled a bit at the mention of “real” society. “I do okay at black tie parties. I can get a decent laugh out of a few fancy ponies, and I know where all the knives and dessert spoons are supposed to go—more or less—and this one time, Hoity Toity called me classy, so I must be doing something right.”
“I didn’t know you’d met Hoity Toity. What’s he like?”

“Eh, he’s okay. Got good taste I guess.” Spike reconsidered the length of the ribbon and bit off the end. “I dunno much about all that pecking order stuff with contacts and reputations and stuff, though.” He twisted his face. “From what I’ve seen, I don’t think I want to. Stuff sounds brutal.”

No argument from Silver Spoon. She could only shrug. “I don’t think anypony at school likes Diamond Tiara besides me. It’s going to cost her the election, which will only upset her more, and that’ll push everypony away even farther, and it…” Silver wrapped her tail around herself and stared at the table. “It makes me look bad.”

Now that she said it out loud, Silver couldn’t help but notice how shallow that sounded. Her hoof idly fiddled with her pearls. “Bad reputations are contagious. When somepony’s contagious, you quarantine them. You cut them off.”

Not for the first time, Silver longed for Manehattan. Lose one pony and millions more waited for you. Even more, she longed for Wisteria Academy, where something like this never ever would have happened. Ever.

Fluttershy’s voice echoed in Silver’s ears. “Two fish can’t share the same tank.”

At Wisteria, Diamond would have conquered the New Money crowd, while Silver hobnobbed with the Old Money, and never would the two cross paths. In time, both of them might have risen to the top of their respective pools. On the chance they did decide to join forces—for such things had been rumored to happen in the senior classes—the two of them might have formed an alliance. A powerful alliance bedrocked in experience and fostered by guile, without any emotional hurricanes churning the waters. A merger, not a friendship.

Mergers could break without anypony’s feelings ever getting hurt, because feelings never entered the equation. I think I like mergers better.

“Then how come you didn’t?” Silver Spoon jumped. She’d almost forgotten Spike sat in the same room. “How come I didn’t what?”

“How come you didn’t cut her off?” Spike pushed off the chair and hopped onto the table, folding up slices of wrapping paper that could still be used. “Sounds to me like you didn’t figure out Diamond Tiara’s bad rep just this morning.”

“I don’t know.” Working by Wisteria’s standards, Silver had sought out Diamond’s friendship in the first place. The knot in her stomach tightened. Friendship. Not alliance. “Maybe I didn’t realize how bad it had gotten.”

On the other hoof, if she’d truly been working by Wisteria standards, Silver Spoon wouldn’t be bobbing in stormy waters and debating getting into the lifeboat at all. By Wisteria standards, she should have thrown Diamond Tiara overboard after the first hurricane. She should have gone solo the second she realized she didn’t need Diamond’s support to stay afloat. Gone solo, or else allied herself with a better choice.

A clever pony would have united with the Cutie Mark Crusaders—an ounce of pain in the short run, but pounds of payoff in the long run—ages ago. Or at least done so after realizing how stupid she’d been to attack family members of the Elements of Harmony.

Silver Spoon frowned at the trio of apples engraved in the top of her chair. At the very least,
becoming friends with Sweetie Belle would have pleased Mother.

“My parents never did like Diamond Tiara very much. They never said it, and didn’t tell me to stop hanging out with her—except maybe that one time—but I could, like, feel it, you know?” Silver wrinkled her nose and stretched out in Applejack’s chair, two hooves flopping over the edge. “That or they just never liked Spoiled Rich very much.”

A flat laugh from Spike. “Big surprise. Who would?” He paused for a split second, perhaps realizing he’d said that out loud. He seemed to consider adding something to soften the comment, but in the end, Spike shrugged and went on gathering up the wrapping materials.

“On the other hoof, I don’t think they knew Mrs. Rich was Di’s stepmom until later. It might have been some other reason… Father’s always been an awful worrier.” Despite her mood, Silver smirked. “If he knew Diamond snuck me out on Nightmare Night, he would have totally lost it.”

A roll of ribbon bounced out of Spike’s arms and unfurled at Silver’s hooves in a little river of gold. Silver wound it up and knocked it back with her tail. It slid across the glossy table like an air hockey puck.

Moving fast, Spike caught it before it hit the floor. “You snuck out on Nightmare Night.” His arid stare could have evaporated Cloudsdale. “You. The filly who showed up a half-hour early for an appointment she knew Twilight’s not even here for.”

“Hey, being punctual doesn’t mean I don’t know how to have fun. I’m loads—TONS of fun!” Silver Spoon turned up her nose with a humph. “I’ll have you know I’m a certified party pony. Pinkie Pie said so.”

Spike blinked.

“It’s regulated fun, that’s all.”

“Uh-huh.” A cat’s cradle of ribbon stretched between the dragon’s claws. He smirked. “So, Diamond Tiara’s the one who decided to sneak you out is what I’m hearing.”

“Technically, we both decided to use the wagon, so we both had a hoof in the decision.” Silver crossed her hooves. After a few seconds, she added, “But yeah, Di came up with it at first. She showed up at my house with a heist crew and everything.” In retrospect, Berry Pinch’s sad attempt at a gangster motif kind of made sense.

“What’s a wagon got to do with anything?” asked Spike.

Right, details. “Nightmare Night happened the same month I got pneumonia. I felt a lot better, but couldn’t get out of bed, so Di put me in her candy wagon and snuck me out that way.” Silver Spoon grinned. “We ran her candy map and got a huge haul. Mine couldn’t even fit in the pillowcase.”

A spot of sunlight caught one of the pink crystals in the root chandelier. Sitting up for a better look, Silver realized somepony had placed a photo inside. Not-Yet-Princess Twilight Sparkle, dressed in a wizard robe, gathered around an apple bobbing game with Applejack and Spike, respectively dressed as a scarecrow and a—

Silver squinted. Did Spike the dragon go dressed as a bigger dragon? Weird.

In the background, Princess Luna played a spider toss game with Pipsqueak. Princess Luna only got back from the moon the summer before last. This picture had to be from that same Nightmare Night.
“My parents ended up coming back early that night. We had to rush back really, really fast so we wouldn’t get caught.” Silver Spoon’s eye didn’t leave the pink crystal. “We both could’ve gotten in big trouble, but since I was the one stuck in bed, Diamond could have gotten in way, way bigger trouble.”

Wondermint had been one of Silver Spoon’s closest friends since diapers, and Silver missed the filly deeply. However, Wonder wouldn’t have taken a risk like that in a million years. She might have brought back some candy, or opted not to go in a show of solidarity, but not snuck her out.

“I don’t think anypony’s ever done something like that for me before. She really didn’t have to do it, either.”

Brights Brightly and Primrose Path would have sent get-well presents and cards. Fair Weather would have offered an apology and well wishes when Silver got back to school. Though if Silver had offered a bribe, or if somepony needed her to win first prize in a costume contest, one of them might have suggested it. Maybe.

“Di could have gone out with Pinch and Featherweight and still had fun. But she didn’t.”

In the same situation, Twist and Truffle Shuffle would have probably stayed in Silver’s room and played a board game. That might have been nice. Wonder sharing her candy would have been nice, too.

*Nightmare Night’s not about the candy, though. It never is.* Nightmare Night needed the thrill of adventure. It needed the creepy shadows of the trees, the scent of pumpkins and the glow of Nightmare lanterns. Without the almost-risk of sort-of-danger and spooky costumes and a full moon climbing over the horizon, it wasn’t Nightmare Night. It was Friday with extra candy.

Diamond Tiara didn’t want Silver Spoon to have Friday night with extra candy. In the name of a proper Nightmare Night, she’d risked life and limb… or at least a serious lecture and maximum sentence grounding.

Silver Spoon twitched her ears in thought. “I know Diamond’s not an ideal connection, but…”

But how many times had Diamond Tiara stuck up for Silver Spoon? Even against older friends like Berry Pinch, or older ponies like the Flim Flam Brothers? Diamond went to bat against her own stepmother for Silver’s sake. Even when they were right, even when Silver didn’t deserve it, Diamond had defended her.

Until Silver Spoon proved some of those ponies right.

“…but I never had a best friend like Diamond before. Not ever.” The clock struck four. Spike would have to lock up soon. Silver slid out of the chair with a sigh. “I don’t think cutting ties with somepony like that just because they’re bad for your reputation is what friends are supposed to do.”

“Friends aren’t supposed to yell or be nasty jerks to each other, either.” Spike crushed the remaining trash in a ball and tossed it into the air. A blast of fire breath incinerated it. “Just sayin’.”

*Maybe some friends have a good reason for it.* On the other hoof, Silver didn’t think that mattered. Nopony could change who’d done or deserved what. She could only deal with the situation now.

Nine hours after the realization that nopony liked Diamond Tiara, Silver Spoon found herself in the same position she’d been in at the start of the day: in a leaking boat en route to a massive crash. Could the boat sail on without sinking? With work, maybe. Maybe.
Spike and Silver Spoon passed through the long, lonely halls of the Castle of Friendship. Their shadows arced behind them, stuck fast to their feet and billowing over the carpet like smoke.

“I don’t know why this has to be so hard,” sighed Silver Spoon.

If his claws weren’t busy carrying a wedding present, Spike might have patted her on the back. Instead, he only offered a sympathetic, noncommittal shrug.

The solution ought to be simple. The solution ought to be clear. Even if not, a young lady could always turn to her peers and betters for advice. Silver’s peers and betters all told her the same.

“My family wants me to make good connections. My other friends think Di’s a bad pony. Wisteria says new and old money don’t mix.”

“Okay.” Spike shifted the present to his shoulders and felt around for the doorknob. “So, then, what about you?’

Silver’s ears flicked. “What?”

Spike’s claw finally found the doorknob. “You already know what everypony else wants you to do.” Fresh autumn air rolled through the castle, brushing stray leaves into the hall. In the light of the late afternoon, Spike’s eyes sparked. “So, what do you want, Silver Spoon?”

“I—” Silver slowly closed her mouth. She paused in the doorway, staring at him.

What an odd question.

With no time to stand around and wait for an answer, Spike quietly went his way down the road. His pace marched quick enough to get where he needed to go, but gave space for Silver to catch up. Without so much as a glance, he let her know she could follow along if she wanted to.

Silver trailed behind him in a trance. She unpacked the question and examined it.

Spike hadn’t asked what Silver had to do, nor what she ought to do. He hadn’t asked what the easiest, most logical, moral, or beneficial path of action ought to be. It wasn’t a question of safety or wisdom, nor cleverness or duty, nor foresight.

A simple question. A question of want.

Nopony had asked Silver Spoon that question in years, and she found herself out of practice.

The road held no sign of the bugbear, nor the battle. The crowd had dispersed, save those on their way to the wedding. Somewhere in the distance, the heavy bass of a stereo pulsed through the ground and rattled Silver’s horseshoes.

Slowly, she stepped up to Spike’s shoulder and met his eye. “But it doesn’t matter what I want.”

Spike peered at Silver as if she’d worn a ballgown to a roller derby. “Well, it’s your friendship. I’d think what you want matters kind of a lot. It’s nopony else’s friendship but yours, right?”

The dragon had a point. Silver Spoon thought about it. “Well…” she spoke slowly, giving herself time to change her mind mid-sentence. “I’m pretty sure I know what I don’t want….”

“Hey, it’s a start.” Spike smiled with all of his sharp little teeth. “Let’s hear it!”

“I don’t want to stop being friends just because Diamond’s a bad connection. Even though she’s got
a bad reputation, Di’s still my friend, and I’m hers.” Silver’s gaze drifted to the unoccupied town square. Indents of market carts marked the dirt.

At a glance, Silver could name the flower cart where they’d go buy snacks after school and review game plans. A few paces to the left stood Honeybuzz’s cart, where they’d gossip about whose hair looked dumb. There, where Big Macintosh parked the apple cart, Diamond once laughed at an inside joke until her face flushed bright red and she couldn’t breathe. Diamond Tiara had introduced Silver Spoon to Ponyville in this spot.

Above her head, the tatters of Silver’s speech struggled in the branches of a barren elm. “At least, I think so.”

“Sure sounds like a—” A block away, the bell tower chimed four times. Spike gasped and scrambled into a sprint. “Oh man, it’s gonna start soon! Sorry Silver, I really gotta go. Look, when Twilight…” He searched the sky, in case Princess Twilight had decided to swoop in last minute. No such luck. “Um, when Twilight gets back, I’ll tell her to drop by your place, okay?” Without slowing down, Spike pulled out a notepad, complete with pen. “She’ll wanna help with your friendship problem, first thing. You weren’t kidding, Silver, it sounds like a doozy.”

Silver shook her head, letting him pull ahead. “That’s alright, Spike. I think I’m actually good.”

“Oh.” Spike slowed a second. “Are you sure?”

“You go on ahead to the wedding, Spike. Congratulate Matilda and Mr. Donkey for me, okay?”

“Sure thing, Silver Spoon.” Spike waved as he turned the corner. “See ya!”

The bass thrummed louder. Something crashed about a block away.

Turning to go home, Silver looked up in time to see an entire gallery of Ponyville’s best and brightest tossed into the air. She blinked. Had that been a… flying stereo?

Silver rolled her eyes and went home to finalize the election notes. Ponyville. Sheesh.
THURSDAY AFTERNOON: 14:40 HOURS

“Aw, come on!” In case nopony had heard her, Sunny Daze shuffled her hooves in the grass and whined even louder. “C’moooooooooooon! What’s taking so long?”

“Yeah, you’ve been in there for like, a month and a half or something!” Peachy Pie poked at the curtain while her classmates murmured their agreement.

*Oh, I have not, you exaggerator. It’s been fifteen*… Silver Spoon checked her watch. Okay, twenty-two minutes.

Outside, more hooves pressed against the red curtain billowing against the grass. Silver edged farther into the voting booth until her back pressed against the wall. Thank goodness Truffle Shuffle suggested that privacy curtain. Nopony could even see her hooves in here.

“Are we sure somepony’s even in there?” asked Tornado Bolt. “Maybe somepony closed the booth by accident.”

Cotton Cloudy hummed. “Can’t be. Listen, you can hear somepony moving.”

“Well, whoever it is, they’re even slower than Snails.”

“Yeah, they’re even slower than m—hey!”

“No offence, buddy.”

Silver couldn’t hold out much longer. Eventually, somepony with brains would suggest a headcount and smoke out the culprit by process of elimination. When they figured it out, somepony with a bone to pick—Pinch or a Crusader, probably—would start throwing accusations of vote tampering. At the very least, they’d demand an explanation.

*I think I’d prefer the false accusation.* Silver curled in a ball, her chin on her hooves.

Hooves clapped for attention. “Alright, alright, settle down, everypony!” An island of reason and fairness, Miss Cheerilee’s voice rose above the commotion. “This is an election, not a mob. Featherweight, get away from that curtain. You too, Sweetie Belle.”

The noise died down.

Cheerilee waited a moment, then continued. “Now, if one of you still needs to vote, we still have an alternate voting booth inside, or you can always give your vote directly to me. If you haven’t, you’d better get a move on, there’s not long left. Otherwise, we can all wait quietly and let the democratic process take its course. Until the polls close, ponies can take all the time they need to vote.”

“They don’t gotta hog the booth for ten hours, Miss Cheerilee,” argued Berry Pinch. “If they have to think about it, why can’t they think about it out here?”

The mob cried out in agreement.
“She’s right!”

“That pony’s had enough time!”

“What if it’s not a pony in there at all? What if it’s a Yakyakstanian spy?”

“How long does it possibly take to check a box?”

“Democracy is a sham!”

Cheerilee waved them down. “Well, I know that rushing them won’t make them vote any faster—
whoever it is.” She clicked her tongue thoughtfully. “But if you need something to pass the time
before the polls close, we could always have a pop quiz…?”

Instant silence. Hooves shuffled away, some foals still muttering about conspiracies and ponies
taking too long.

After a heartbeat, Cheerilee’s muzzle poked through the curtain. “Silver Spoon?” When no answer
came, she eased her head into the booth. “Are you okay in here?”

Silver Spoon wiped off a blade of grass stuck to her wet cheek. She nodded without looking up.

“Have you voted yet?”

Silver shook her head.

“Okay, take your time. You still have fifteen minutes before the polls close. I’ll keep watch out
here.” The curtain fell back into place.

Silver Spoon rose and shook herself off. She approached the ballot, eying the red marker next to it.

Four options. One marker. One anonymous decision.

_The mob’s right. This ought to be easy._ Silver rubbed the sore spot at the root of her braid. _But a lot
of things aren’t the way they ought to be…_

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**MONDAY AFTERNOON, 12:00 HOURS**

Autumn air brushed through the schoolhouse window. A maple leaf, golden as a pocketful of bits,
fluttered across Cheerilee’s desk, danced over Featherweight’s chair, and breezed past Dinky’s desk
until it finally landed in Silver Spoon’s tail.

Silver Spoon didn’t notice. She didn’t dare tear her gaze away from Diamond Tiara.

Placid and expressionless, Diamond’s eyes raced down page after page of the new speech. Her
mouth pinched and twisted, silently testing the words on her tongue. Ten minutes into reading and
not a word, a scowl, or an ear twitch.

No news was good news, but if this went on any longer, Silver would need to see a dentist about her
clenched teeth.
The shuffling papers paused a moment. “Hm.” A faint blue number marked the top corner of the page: the speech’s midpoint. Diamond must have cycled through the whole thing twice. She set the papers down and steepled her hooves. Her eye never left the page. “‘A diamond is perfection’…that comes up five times in this thing. Is it supposed to be my slogan?”

“More like a refrain. Repetition helps it stick.” Silver angled her neck to check for eavesdroppers by the window. “The opening speech needs to last through the whole afternoon, maybe the whole day, and the polls don’t close until the bell rings at three. Even if everypony forgets the small stuff, they’ll remember the main thing.”

With Miss Cheerilee so enthused by her classroom’s newfound interest in politics, all signs pointed to either a postponement of official classes or calling a half day in favor of an “active learning” day. The same thing happened when she’d taken everypony on a tour of Whitetail Woods for their ecology unit. That also meant that everypony would have more time to vote, and more importantly reconsider that vote.

“But yeah, it’s pretty much the campaign slogan. I also rhymed it a couple of times to help it stick even more.”

Diamond nodded with a yawn. “Yeah, ‘it’s natural selection’. I saw that.” She didn’t smile, but ambition sparkled in her eyes. “I like it, Silver Spoon. I like it a lot.” Yet, she said it like a tax report.

As a young lady ought, Silver smiled. “Good, glad you like it, Di.” She tilted her head while Diamond yawned again. “Are you feeling alright? It’s a couple days until showtime, and you’ve been kinda out of it.” Downright sluggish, in fact.

They should have met this morning before class, but according to Randolph, Diamond had decided to sleep in. Diamond Tiara had never slept in during a project before, not even when she’d stayed up half the night practicing dance moves.

Diamond’s head snapped up. Baggy eyes shadowed her scowl, and Silver braced for impact. It didn’t come. Diamond’s head lolled towards her desk with a dreary blink. “M’fine. A little tired. I didn’t sleep that great last night. We got back late, and then I kept having these weird dreams.”

“Huh. What about?”

Shaking herself off, Diamond straightened in her seat. Back in business at ninety percent capacity. Her eyes sloped in another sleepy squint. Okay, maybe sixty percent. “Something about the election…some stuff turned into other stuff…rats everywhere. I think you and Mom were in it, maybe? Luna, too. I remember that part most, it came towards the end.”

Silver Spoon pricked her ears. “Princess Luna? Did she say anything to you?”

The shadowed look returned. Diamond Tiara gripped the side of her desk and looked Silver Spoon in the eye for the first time that day. Her stare held all the desperation and hunger of a scholarship student during finals week. “She…” Diamond coughed into her hoof and let her gaze fall back to the speech. “Doesn’t matter; we don’t have time to waste on stuff that didn’t even happen. You ever get that straw poll finished?”


“Yes, I did.” Silver pulled her notebook from her lap to the desk, one hoof on the top to keep it from being snatched. “Before I show you, though, you need to understand that—”

“Hey, there you are Silver Spoon!” Cotton Cloudy perched in the windowsill. Leaves and tiny bits
of cloud tangled in her wind tossed mane; she must have come back from sky tag or something. “Twist and Truffle Shuffle are looking for you. Something about student council, or…?” She shrugged and bit into a sugar cookie—probably her messenger fee. “I dunno, I forgot, but it sounded important.”

Setting up for the next student pony president, Silver supposed. With interest in student government at a record high, Truffle expected more ponies coming into the council soon, too. “Alright, tell them I’ll—”

“You should tell them that Silver Spoon’s busy with my campaign right now. Obviously.” Diamond turned away from the window with a toss of her mane. “If you brushed that rat’s nest out of your face once in a while, maybe you could see that for yourself. Like, anypony with a brain and two eyes in their head could figure that out.”

For a filly who worked with rainclouds, Cotton Cloudy shot the driest look this side of Dodge City. “Yeah, well, anypony with ears could tell I wasn’t talking to you. Guess it’s hard to hear when your head’s stuffed so far up your butt.”

Diamond slammed both hooves on the desk and whipped around. “I wouldn’t be talking if I were you Cloudy, because I’M not the one who—”

“This afternoon!” Silver popped up between them, practically falling out of her chair to keep Cotton out of Diamond’s line of sight. “I can meet them this afternoon after class, but I’m a little busy right now.”

The waters churned harder. “Uh, I dunno if it slipped your mind, Silver Spoon, but you’re busy this afternoon, too. We’ve got election prep, remember?”

“But wait, I thought—then what are we doing here?” In the corner of Silver’s eye, Cotton’s feathers flared, still raring to fight if Diamond would give her one. And Diamond would. “I thought we were in the middle of election prep stuff right now.”

“No, this is us doing what we should have done this weekend.” Diamond Tiara thought about it, then frowned. “Actually, no, this is what we should have done like, four days ago, but somepony fumbled my speech and had to rewrite it. Sheesh, no wonder we’re so far behind!”

So much for student council today, then. “Tell them I’ll try and get to them before lunchtime tomorrow, if I can’t get there before then. Oh!” Silver waved before Cotton Cloudy turned away. “Apologete to Truffle and Twist for me too, please?”

Cotton shrugged. “Sure.” With one last dirty look for Diamond, she shook the leaves out of her mane and left.

One pink ear turned towards the creaking window pane as Cotton pushed off. “We need to do something about that.”

“Yes we do,” said Silver Spoon. “And soon. Di, listen…” Now or never. She wouldn’t get a prime opening like this again. “The polls aren’t good.”

The storm clouds darkened.

Silver kept her cool. “In fact, if I’m being honest, the polls are terrible, and it’s all because of stuff like what you pulled just now with Cotton. Do you realize how much voter influence she has? If you want any hope of winning this thing—”
“IF?!” Diamond Tiara spat the word like moldy oats. A dash of panic lurked beneath the outrage. Good, she ought to be panicked. “Are—are you actually saying you don’t think I’ll win?”

Yes. “That isn’t what I said.” *Don’t push too hard. Reel it in slow.* “It’s only that I think your more…” Silver’s hoof twisted through the air, searching for the right word. “…assertive qualities might be giving off the wrong impression. Ponies vote for appeal, and biting heads off isn’t that appealing, you know?” She smiled. “I think it might be better if you, like… talked less and smiled more.”

Diamond’s posture relaxed, though the skies hadn’t cleared yet. “I know how to win a contest, Silver Spoon.” The words rattled under her breath. It didn’t sound like a whisper or a grumble, but something else. A hairline crack in Diamond’s voice. “I do. I’ve done it fifty-six times.”

Concerned, Silver leaned forward. “Diamond, I think we need to reconsider our strategy, that’s all. Our conditions changed, so it’s time to adapt.” Her hooves clasped inches from Diamond’s, but didn’t reach out to them. “I’m not just your campaign manager, I’m still your friend, too. I want to help you win.”

“Yeah, well.” Diamond Tiara locked Silver Spoon under her gaze and held her there. “First time for everything, I guess.”

Silver drew back. “Diamond, that…that’s not true and it’s not fair. I’ve helped you with almost every project you’ve had since I moved here, haven’t I? From the talent show to now, all I’ve done is try to help you win.”

“Right, and we came home from that talent show empty hooved. We lost to a joke act, Silver.” She went back to reviewing the speech. The papers wrinkled in Diamond’s tight grip. “An *accidental* joke act. And who suggested we perform a boring opera nopony in town ever heard of?”

“But Diamond, I—”

“I know, Silver, you tried. Everypony tries. Winners succeed. When’s the last time you did that?” She didn’t sound angry. Somehow, that made it worse. Diamond didn’t look up, though her ears drooped several inches. “When’s the last time either of us succeeded?”

Silver toyed with the pearls around her neck. High above them, laughter echoed down from a game of air tag. It sounded like Featherweight was it.

“Look. I’ll think about what you said.” Diamond sank into her chair, waving a limp hoof. “Go meet the dork and the butterball. I’m fine here.”

“What about election prep this afternoon?”

“I think I want to do that tomorrow, instead. My house at three.”

“Got it, Di.” Silver zipped up her saddlebag. “I’ll be there.”

“You better.”

*TUESDAY MORNING: 07:05 HOURS*
The house thumped and thrashed like a washing machine full of cinderblocks. Silver Spoon wouldn’t envy the neighbors if this house had any; she felt the vibrations underhoof from over a block away. It had to have been a custom built place, but looking at it, Silver swore that a construction team just stapled a nightclub and a bank together and told them to be a house. Two foals crammed in a turtleneck sweater had more symmetry.

Wonder which side Pipsqueak lives in. Silver tilted her head at the banklike half. Octavia’s, I bet. Thankfully, the house only had one door, so she didn’t have to risk a guess. After a last-second note review, Silver reached up and rang the bell. Can anypony even hear it over all that racket?

The racket stopped as if it had heard her.

A yawning Vinyl Scratch opened the door, squinting through bleary red eyes. Without her shades, the unicorn’s face seemed half-finished. Blasts of mane plastered against her face like an exploded blueberry, with little strands poking into her mouth. Vinyl lifted a headphone from her ear and nodded to the filly on her doorstep.

“Good morning, Miss Vinyl Scratch.” Silver glanced from the sleepy eyes to the open Neighponese kimono draped over Vinyl’s withers. “Sorry if I woke you up.” Had she gone to sleep with those headphones on? “Did Pipsqueak leave for school yet? I need to talk with him, please.”

Miss Scratch nodded with a drowsy smile and waved her in. Before closing the door, she double checked the road, as if expecting more foals to come barging in.

The house’s interior matched the façade perfectly: two separate spaces split down the middle. Silver noticed the orderly half, lined with bookshelves along the walls and with clean stacks of music sheets upon the coffee table, was absent one cello. Miss Octavia would be taking her earl grey (one lump, no lemon, and a splash of cream) at Tealove’s about now.

Vinyl led Silver Spoon through the snaking wires, discarded energy drink cans, and towering recording equipment on her side of the house until they came to a small door in the wall.

Silver adjusted her glasses, examining what appeared more like a cupboard or a crawl space than a little colt’s room. “In there?”

The unicorn nodded.

“But that’s a basement.” Spiders and roaches and creepy noises lived in basements. Silver still hadn’t dared go into hers.

Vinyl nodded again.

Two strings of Hearth’s Warming lights lit a narrow stairwell sloping down into the bowels of the house. Silver’s nose twitched at the scent of pizza crusts, sweat, and filthy socks. Yeah. That’s a colt’s room, alright. “Thank you, I can take it from here.”

Halfway down the stairs, Silver Spoon hesitated. Maybe it’d be better to get Diamond Tiara for this after all. She IS his actual opponent. A goodwill gesture went only so far on somepony else’s behalf. It wouldn’t be too late to go back and get her.

No. No, nothing could come of it unless they aimed to talk Pip out of the running or into a surrender, neither of which would happen. Besides, Mr. Rich said Di needed her sleep and Diamond herself seemed like she needed space.

That said, it still felt weird being in the opposition’s house without her. Especially in this dark,
narrow hallway. *I’m already halfway there. I might as well.* Natural light bloomed at the bottom of the stairs. *I’ll give her the rundown this afternoon.*

Before Silver reached the bottom stair, a shadow slid into the sunlight. It didn’t have Pip’s stubby ears or shrimpy silhouette. Something sat atop the shadow’s head, tall and pointed like a crown or a pair of horns. Or a bow.

_Horseapples._ Silver gritted her teeth.

Apple Bloom stood in the doorway, smiling like a fruit bat who got the fig. “Well looloo here who showed up.” Her grin grew as Silver’s frown soured. “Mornin’ Silver Spoon. How y’all doin?’”

“Oh, um.” Silver cleared her throat. “Good morning, Apple Bloom. I’m having a lovely morning, thank you for asking. What are you doing here?” Stupid question. Nopony grinned like that unless they’d sprung a trap.

“We could ask you the same thing.” Scootaloo lounged in a beanbag chair, munching a breakfast bar. She had her filthy hooves propped up on a milk crate. “Me and Apple Bloom are Pipsqueak’s campaign managers.” She rolled off the beanbag and hit the floor with a hard clack. “What’s your excuse?”

No sign of Sweetie Belle, but that didn’t surprise Silver much. She would have softened the attack, if she were here.

Despite her efforts for peace, Silver Spoon had to face the most unfortunate fact that truce or no truce, connected or unconnected, nothing in the universe mitigated the immensity of Scootaloo’s big stupid mouth. If any justice remained in the world, the Crusaders’ political careers ended at the election and they wouldn’t follow Pip into the student council.

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“Hmph. I don’t need an excuse, *Miss Scootaloo,* I have my reasons.” Secretary Silver Spoon marched past the beanbag, casually taking in the décor. Pipsqueak had a taste for scary movie posters —no wonder The Dink liked him—and rock bands Silver never heard of.

Apple Bloom and Scootaloo shadowed her at the haunch.

_Somepony ought to tell them they’re campaign managers, not bodyguards._ Without looking back, she continued, “It’s customary to meet an opponent before you meet on the field. Haven’t you two ever heard of goods sportsponyship?”

Apple Bloom flicked her tail. “In that case, shouldn’t it be Diamond Tiara over here, ‘stead of you?” She looked over Silver’s shoulder. “Where is she anyway?”

As a proper campaign manager with better things to do than answer stupid questions, Silver ignored her. “Good morning, Pipsqueak!” she called to the room. He had to be somewhere in this mess.

“Oh, ‘ello, Silver Spoon!” called a pile of laundry. The polo uniform slid to the side and Pip’s head surfaced over a hill of socks, ties, and ascots. A tartan sock flopped over his left shoulder. “Come to help me pick a tie for election day, did you?” He laughed at his own joke. “We were wond’ring when you’d stop by. Welcome to my room! Sorry ‘bout the mess.”

Silver pulled up an upturned trashcan for a makeshift chair, curling her tail upward and out of the clutter. She gave the room an innocent, neutral head tilt. “You were expecting me? Why?”

“’Cause Berry Pinch says you’re a sneak and Sweetie Belle says you’re desperate.” Apple Bloom’s nose twitched as if she could sniff out Silver’s scheme. Too bad for her, Silver Spoon stood upwind.
“That could only mean that eventually one of y’all was gonna go try somethin’ sneaky.”

“And we were right! Here you are being a sneaky sneaking-type…sneaker!” Scootaloo zoomed in, buzzing centimeters above eye level. Silver’s bangs fluttered in the breeze of her wingbeats. “We know what you’re up to, so don’t even bluff!”

Silver Spoon placed her hooves in her lap and regarded the filly as she would a mildly interesting leaf. “Really. And what, exactly, am I up to, Miss Scootaloo?” She smiled.

“You’re…” The scruffy interrogator snapped her wings shut and dropped to the floor. “You’re trying to dig up dirt, so you can fight dirty at the debate this week.”

An immense amount of restraint held back a quip about how Scootaloo kicked up enough filth on her own. “Oh, dear. You’ve figured out my fiendish plan. The Cutie Mark Crusaders have beaten me again.”

With a toss of her mane, Silver turned back to Pipsqueak. “As I was saying, I wanted to shake hooves, be good sports, all that nicey-nice fair play stuff. No matter what happens this week, I’ll still be working with you, so we might as well get to know each other. If nothing else, I’d like to know what tea to bring to meetings.” Pip struck her as a Deerjeeling type of colt, or cardamom spiced chai—something exotic and adventurous.

“Tea?” Pipsqueak glanced at Silver’s cutie mark and smiled in understanding. “Oh, well, I usually have whatever Octavia’s having. Never quite thought about it much, but I never tried tea I didn’t like. I s’ppose I’ll like whatever you bring, as long as you don’t forget the biscuits. Or do you call them cookies over here?” He paused while his brain caught up to Silver’s earlier statement. “Wait, why would we still be working together if Diamond Tiara lost?”

In the peanut gallery, Scootaloo whispered, “And why would he be there if Diamond won?” Apple Bloom shrugged.

“Because I’m class secretary of course.” Silver glanced at Scootaloo, who’d already opened her mouth. “And no, you can’t vote me out.” Not until next spring, anyway. “Whoever comes in second gets to be vice president. Didn’t you guys know that?”

From their expressions, they clearly didn’t. That meant they likely didn’t know how the rest of the student government worked either. Silver filed that information away, just in case. “If the worst case scenario happens and Diamond loses—and she won’t—I’d like to know what I’m in for.”

The splotches on Pip’s face wrinkled in thought. He nodded to himself. “Makes sense to me.” He turned to Scootaloo, who still braced for another attack. “You know, I do remember Truffle saying something or other about you helping with a bake sale last year. A fundraiser for the new window, was it?”

“The gourmet bake sale, yes.” Silver Spoon couldn’t help preening a bit.

“Yeah, I remember that. Almost everypony in town came and I ate all those, um…what do call ‘em…petty-fors. Hey, d’you think you might help my plan to get some new playground equipment? Or putting in the arcade? Button really wanted one of those and I promised him I’d try to get one.”

“It’s not impossible,” said Silver Spoon. And it’s petit four.

Technically, Cheerilee assigning every foal a trip to Whinnyland for homework wasn’t impossible either, but no more likely than the school getting an arcade. A new slide or swing set might be doable, however. “We raised the money for the new window in a couple of weeks, I’m sure we
could do something like that again.”

“New window, huh?” Apple Bloom sucked her teeth. “That wouldn’t be the stained glass one with Diamond Tiara plastered on it?”

Silver flicked her ears. “Uh.”

*Okay, options. What are my options?*

Obviously, she could tell the truth: admit the stained glass window had nothing to do with Silver or the council, and that Spoiled Rich donated it. However, that implied ineptitude on the student council’s (and Silver’s) part. Worse, it implied that Diamond already had her claws in student government. Diamond Tiara had enough real problems to fix without imaginary ones gumming up the works.

Or, Silver could move with the second option: dodge and press onward. “Apple Bloom, a window is a window. So long as it keeps the rain out, it doesn’t matter whose face is on it. Anyway, that—”

“Actually, I think I heard Miss Cheerilee say something about the schoolboard helping with that window.” Scootaloo scratched the back of her head. “Yeah, they donated it or funded it or something?”

Apple Bloom rolled her eyes. “Well, if that don’t explain all of it. Best friend on the student council and her Ma headin’ the school board. No wonder Diamond Tiara thinks she can just walk in an’ be president.”

“Betcha that’s how she got to be editor of the paper, too,” put in Scootaloo.

Silver Spoon jumped up so fast the trashcan went sprawling in the laundry pile. “You shut up, that’s got nothing to do with it! Mrs. Rich wasn’t even in town when Diamond became editor for the Press, and Di barely knew I became secretary in the first place.”

Spoiled’s being on the schoolboard might have greased some wheels, but if so, Di didn’t know about it. If she did, Diamond “only losers need to cheat” Tiara would have thrown a fit.

“And YOU can stop smirking like you played some winning trump card Apple Bloom. Hmph, as if either of you even knew we had a student council until two weeks ago. I bet you don’t even know who our current president is!”

Pip raised his eyebrows, leaning over to his campaign managers. “I think you lot might have hit a nerve.”

He wasn’t wrong. A month of high-stakes and fraying friendships did no favors for Silver’s stress levels. Unchecked, that could lead to trouble. Silver Spoon took a breath. The candle flicker of her tail went still. “Call me crazy, but I don’t appreciate ponies bad-mouthing other ponies who don’t deserve it.”

Scootaloo glared. “Since when?”

“Uh, guys?” Pipsqueak waved his little hoof for attention. “I don’t think I want to go about spreading rumors.” His ears twitched out of sync, and he put a fetlock to his mouth. “It seems a little…mean. Do we know for sure if that’s how Diamond Tiara got to be editor?”

At least somepony in this room had some common decency. *He’s fair, too.* Shame the Crusaders undercut a real one-on-one with Diamond’s opponent. They might have gotten somewhere.
Her gaze lingered on the messy clipboard on a milk crate. More ideas for school improvement ran down the front page in two uneven columns, starting with new playground equipment, and ending with a longer lunchtime/recess proposal, a no-homework-until-June plan, and something called “Pudding Month”.

_The colt still can’t plan for beans, though._

Dust flurried up from an old record collection as Scootaloo buzzed her wings. “I—” Second thoughts flickered across her face for a split second. “Fine, maybe we don’t know a hundred percent if that’s how she got to be editor. It probably is, though—I mean it’s Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon. ‘Nuff said.”

Not enough for Pipsqueak. “I know those two aren’t very nice sometimes, but that doesn’t automatically mean Silver Spoon came over to be a cheater. At least, I don’t think so.”

“That’s ‘cause you haven’t been here that long, Pip.” Apple Bloom squinted at Silver Spoon, who shot back a sneer. “You’ve never been their target.”

Scootaloo’s undersized wings flared. “You’ve never been after something they want.”

Silver Spoon snorted and looked away.

“Diamond Tiara thinks the whole darn world belongs to her, and she wants to bowl over anypony in her way.” Apple Bloom glared at her, but it didn’t have much bite. “Sweetie Belle might see somethin’ decent in there, an’ maybe she’s right, but don’t y’all get fooled. Silver Spoon’s been Diamond’s lackey since the day she moved in. We might as well be talkin’ to Diamond’s butler.”

Silver Spoon clutched her pearls with an incensed gasp. “A butl—I—” She drew herself up and stamped her hoof. “How dare you!”

Scootaloo drank in Silver Spoon’s outrage like a tall glass of cider. “Sounds like somepony’s grouchy because she got found out.”

To think she ever tried to make peace with this pack of miscreants and hayseeds! To think she actually tried to give them the benefit of the doubt and think they’d act civilized for once! Why, she ought to…

_Step back. Time and place, Silver; you don’t have the time and this isn’t the place. Step back._ “Fine. It’s clear this is getting us nowhere.” Miss Sterling Silver Spoon gathered her dignity, brushed off her coat, and took the high road. She offered her hoof to Diamond’s political rival. “Nice talking to you, Pipsqueak. Good luck Thursday.”

Pip hopped up on a milk crate to meet her at eye level. He shook her hoof with a weak but steady grip. “Thanks, you too, Silver Spoon.” He had a gap tooth at the back of his smile. “Let’s all just try and have some fun, yeah? No ‘ard feelings?”

“No hard feelings, Pip.” At least Silver could promise that last part.

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**TUESDAY AFTERNOON: 17:45 HOURS**
“Oh.” Silver Spoon blinked. “It certainly is… something.”

As one, Spoiled Rich and Diamond Tiara turned to face her, both of them clearly expecting a continuation.

Normally, Silver Spoon could pull shallow praise out of her pocket without trying, but eventually everypony met their match. She looked again. There had to be something nice to say about this… thing. “The gems on the tiara add a nice splash of color to the stone. That’s, uh, granite, right?”

Diamond Tiara shrugged.

“Please. As if Diamond’s visage would ever touch something so common and rough as granite. That’s alright, dear, I suppose talent in appraisal doesn’t run in the family.” Spoiled Rich gave a soft, patronizing smile that flattened Silver’s ears. “This is the finest limestone Equestria has to offer. We wanted the platform engraved, but they said it wouldn’t be ready until Friday, and it’s far more important that it’s ready on time. We can always get a plaque later.”

“Oh. I see.” At least the whole thing wasn’t polished alabaster, and they’d chosen a subdued tannish color instead of Celestia-white.

Above them towered the sculpted limestone statue of Diamond Tiara sporting a game face frozen in time, confident and bold. Silver Spoon had to agree that the Riches had bought a beautiful representation of Diamond on one of her good days, but it wouldn’t stay beautiful for long. The weather and Ponyville’s parade of yearly disasters would wear down the finer details in a decade. In thirty years, nopony would know what pony stood on this platform at all.

Silver peered at the other sculptures on the showroom floor: cloudstone fish ponds, bronze Twilight Sparkles, a pair of interlocked soapstone swans, carnelian dragons, and jade seapones with golden fins. None of them had price tags, because anypony who came here didn’t need to worry about price.

“It’s very imposing,” Silver said, for she’d gone too long without saying something, “but where’s it supposed to go? The front lawn? I don’t think there’s room in the back yard.”

“It’s not for the house.” Diamond Tiara examined her limestone clone and nudged her tiara higher on her head. “It’s for—and don’t spread this around—it’s for the school.”

Silver ducked out of the way while Mrs. Rich moved to discuss something with the clerk. “Our school?”

“No, Ponyville Community College.” Diamond rolled her eyes. “It’ll probably go in the back area, near the playground.” She sighed sadder than Silver expected. “There’s plenty of room there. Or, there will be soon.”

“After all the broken equipment’s cleared out.” Though it was impolite, Silver Spoon couldn’t help wrinkling her nose. Perhaps she hadn’t inherited Father’s gift for appraisal, but she guessed this monolith had at least a five digit price tag. How many new swing sets could this thing have bought?

Diamond huffed under her breath. “I don’t know what you’re making that face for. You got an entire ballroom at your old school.”

*You can’t dance in a statue.* “Wisteria’s full of fancy buildings, Di. I’m not sure if our school is the ‘fancy statues’ type. We’re more about slides and battle tag.” Though Silver still wasn’t totally clear what battle tag entailed.

“Yeah, well…” Diamond lashed her tail and sat on a nearby bench. “Playground stuff is Pipsqueak’s
plan, not mine.”

Silver flicked her tail with a derisive sniff. “ Barely. Pip has an idea, not a plan, and it’s an idea literally anypony would have come up with if they looked at the school for two seconds. He moved on it first, that’s all.” She hopped up to join Diamond on the bench. “Listen, the colt’s likeable, he’s popular, he’s athletic, and he’s got spunk for days—”

Diamond Tiara arched an eyebrow. “Is this supposed to be your idea of a pep talk?”

“—but Di, I guarantee you the second he gets into that chair, he won’t have a clue how to get that playground. This sort of thing is way above his head.” Above any foal’s head. The magnitude of a project like this would be out of anypony’s hooves. Anypony without connections or the means to use them, that is. “And you know, I can’t help but think…” Silver waved her hooves over the edge of the bench with an innocent smile.

Diamond pricked her ears, pretending not to smile back. “What?”

“Oh, I’m just thinking that a statue all by itself might get a little lonely.”

“So you’re saying instead it should be a playground centerpiece.” Diamond propped herself up by her forelegs, squinting at the statue. “I dunno, Silvie, it’d look sort of dumb next to regular old playground stuff.” The seed of an idea twitched in Diamond’s smile. “We shouldn’t replace the playground equipment. We should get better equipment!”

Silver Spoon scooted closer. “Like what?”

“For one thing, tetherball cords that don’t break every five seconds; they did that even before Tirek came to town. Oh, and you remember how the slide would get so hot in the summer it’d burn your coat off? We could fix that, too! Ooh, and merry-go-rounds that don’t creak and silk seats for the swings!”

“Wouldn’t silk seats get all messed up by rump sweat?”

“Details, Silver—oh! Silver Spoon, we could build a little um, uh…that thing that sits in gardens and stuff. No, shut up, don’t tell me.” Diamond turned in circles, trying to remember the word. “A gazebo!” she shrieked.

Silver winced and rubbed her ear. “For a playground?”

“Well, more like for us, so we finally have a real place to talk and have tea—no.” Diamond kicked her heels, leapt off the bench, and wheeled around with dozens of bright ideas shining in her eyes. “No, nope, uh-uh. A gazebo would have to be built far away. That’d take us out of the action, that’s no good.” She clicked her tongue, squinting at the crystal leaves clinging to a moonstone tree sculpture above her head. “What we need is high ground.”

“What, you mean like a watchtower?” Silver tilted her head. Not that she objected to some high-rise teatime, but it struck her as a little odd.

“No—well, kind of—but no, I mean we need to go bigger. We need to cover a bigger base.” The tip of Diamond’s tail gave a little squirrel-like twitch as she circled the tree statue. Diamond grinned wider than she had in days. “Think, Silver. What’s the one thing everypony likes to play on and also the one thing you can hang out at? Literally.”

Before Silver could answer, Diamond did it for her.
“A jungle gym! Oh, but not like those boring old monkey bars we used to have. I’m talking a four story, fully climbable multifunctional playground experience with slides and ladders and stairs and those rope bridge things, and our fancy watchtower at the top—complete with telescope and an icebox—and we can add those zipline thingies Pinchy likes, and…” Diamond tapped her chin.

“We could have part of it underground, maybe?” suggested Silver Spoon. “The Dink would love that. When it rains, or it’s too hot outside, foals could still go out and play. We could have landing pads for the pegasus ponies, too.”

“Right, and you and me could have our watchtower-slash-gazebo-slash-teahouse at the top, where we could see all the action!”

That all sounded a little chaotic for teatime, but it certainly beat having tea indoors or on the splintery picnic tables. “It’s also just the thing to attract new voters.” Silver Spoon grinned. If Diamond Tiara showed half this gusto on Thursday, maybe this election wouldn’t be a total wash after all. If she could get everypony else on board with this idea, maybe—just maybe—they might even win.

“Probably. I mean, I’d vote for it.” Diamond waved her hooves, drawing out imaginary blueprints. “Oh, and what about when winter comes? Imagine the snowball fights!”

“And imagine the lawsuits when somepony inevitably does something stupid and breaks their neck.” Spoiled Rich idly blinked at the moonstone tree, unimpressed. How long had she been standing there? “Because I guarantee that’s what will happen. A metal construction taller than the schoolhouse, full of rambunctious little children? That’s a hospital visit waiting to happen. If not worse.”

Silver Spoon exchanged a frown with Diamond Tiara. “Well,” Silver offered, “maybe we could put in some safety features?”

“Such as?” Mrs. Rich didn’t seem surprised that Silver Spoon couldn’t answer her. “Besides, a foal’s job at school is to learn, not…” She wrinkled her exceptionally pointed nose. “…zipline. Honestly, Diamond Tiara, you need to be realistic. We’re not daydreaming here; these decisions have real-life consequences.”

“I understand, Mother, but—” Diamond sighed in frustration. “Well, what if we downsized it a little? I mean, it’s, like, not even a blueprint yet, right?”

Silver nodded her encouragement. “Maybe we could ask somepony like Mr. Hard Hat for suggestions?”

Mrs. Rich shook her head with a little sigh. “Honestly Diamond Tiara, after all the work we’ve done and all your father’s told you about finance, you ought to know better. A project like that would hemorrhage money the school board doesn’t have. The schoolhouse would be in debt for moons.”

“Okay…well…” Diamond tried to hold on to her idea, but under Mrs. Rich’s gaze, her enthusiasm drained like water through a sieve. “Maybe if we asked for donations or for some help from Princess Twilight…”

“Is being student pony president the princess’s job or is it yours, Diamond?”

Diamond’s tail swept between her legs. “It’s mine, but I thought it might, you know…get more votes.”

“By piggybacking off the piebald immigrant’s plan?” Mrs. Rich dismissed it with a wave of her jeweled hoof. “Diamond, no filly in Equestria has your raw charisma and leadership skills. This sort
of thing’s right in your wheelhouse. A little school election should be an easy win, right?”

Diamond nodded. “Right.”

Mrs. Rich nodded, satisfied, and led them out the door. “There we are. Come along girls, it’s nearly sunset, we need to head home.” She sighed again. “I don’t know where you get these ideas sometimes.” Her eyes met Silver Spoon’s.

Silver edged close to Diamond and averted her gaze. They walked home in silence.

By the time they approached the brass gates of the Rich residence, the reds and violets of sunset climbed into the sky. One by one, little spotlights in the grass lit their path to the door.

“Silver Spoon, you’re a party pony, right? That means you know almost everypony in school.”

Silver braced against a chilly shot of autumn air. “Except for a few of the younger new kids, yeah.” They crossed the threshold into the house. Out of the corner of her eye, Mrs. Rich broke off to speak with Randolph. “What about it?”

“Nothing about it.” Diamond paused at the dining room door and nudged the door open. “Hi, Dad.”

Mr. Rich and a small militia of his employees gathered around the long dinner table plastered with pie charts, files, forms, folders, and dozens of Hearth’s Warming sale ads. He smiled and twitched his ears in his daughter’s direction. “Morning, Diamond.”

A mare dotted in freckles gestured toward the hall. “I think it’s evening now, sir.”

“What? But we only just—” Mr. Rich blinked at the sunset and long shadows in the hallways. “Oh, so it is, Peppercorn. Say, did we ever hear anything back from our Hollow Shades branch about the new…”

Diamond closed the door behind her. “So, if you know everypony in school, that means you know a lot of secrets about everypony in school, right?” She turned towards Silver Spoon, but her gaze moved over Silver’s head and into the dim War Room across the hall. “I bet most ponies want those secrets to stay secret.”

“Diamond, I don’t think that’s the best way to—”

“Silver Spoon.” Diamond rubbed her hoof through her bangs with a groan. “It’s been a long day. Can you just give me a straight answer for once? Please?”

“Yes. I’ve got dirt on everypony.” If not dirt, then information that could be twisted until it became dirt. “But you’re already on thin ice with the voters, Diamond. Do you really want to run a campaign based on blackmail and threats?”

Diamond pressed against the doorway of the War Room, staring at the darkened skylight at the top. She left the lights off. “Funny, you didn’t have a problem with blackmail before.” Shadows curled in the crooks of the banners and played along the glistening trophy cups. Sunlight skimmed across the steel tiara. It glowed a dull, wounded red. “If I remember right, it was your idea.”

Silver joined Diamond at the shoulder. “Yes, and it was a bad idea.”

“But an idea that will work.” In the back of the War Room, thirty-eight pageant crowns twinkled in the lights of their display case. “I’m not a loser, Silver Spoon.” She clenched her teeth hard. “I’m not.”
Mrs. Spoiled Rich reached over the fillies’ heads and pulled the door shut. “No, of course you’re not.” She reached a hoof around Diamond’s shoulder and pulled her close. “Not now, not ever. Don’t believe anypony who tells you different.”

“I know.” Diamond nodded and puffed her chest, resolute and trembling. “Because there aren’t any losers under this roof, right Mother?”

Spoiled Rich smiled and untangled strands of mane out of the tiara tiers. “Not a single one, Diamond Tiara.” She laughed—a short, breezy sound. “And just think: this little election will put your best hoof forward for even bigger and better things. Ivy Leaf colleges, law schools, maybe even a mayoral election. Or Celestia’s parliament!”

“Parliament?” A small smile twitched on Diamond’s face. It grew. “You really think I could?”

“If you keep it together and play your cards right, I know you could. Knowing you, maybe even further.” Mrs. Rich laughed again. “Now, doesn’t that all sound so much more exciting than another beauty pageant?”

Diamond glanced at the closed door behind her. “Uh. Sure it does.”

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**WEDNESDAY EVENING: 17:00 HOURS**

Boysenberry took a long drag of her elderberry blend, both to get the full flavor of the tea and to stall while she tried to remember her next interview question. “So, Miss Cheerilee says the council’s got their first schoolboard meeting this Friday.”

Cheerilee had told the school no such thing; she’d likely complained to somepony about it while Boysenberry hovered in the backdrop.

Silver Spoon nodded. “Yep. Hopefully Truffle Shuffle will be feeling better by then.” He’d picked a fine time for a tonsillectomy. Silver didn’t fancy the thought of facing the schoolboard without reliable backup. “We’ll need all the ponies we can get to back up the new student pony president.”

“No matter who wins tomorrow, you and Diamond Tiara are probably gonna be there. Are you nervous?”

Silver walked a tightrope holding her cards close while also giving an interview that didn’t need spicing up. She watched the reporter’s notebook, but couldn’t decipher the messy mouthwriting from the other side of the tea table. Boysenberry’s articles told the truth, but a juicier version of it. Featherweight ran the Foal Free Press honestly, not stupidly.

“Oh, absolutely!” Silver stirred her tea with nonchalance. “I always get butterflies before a big event; that’s part of being a pony, you know? It’s a good thing, I think.” She smiled as Boysenberry’s ears pricked. “There’s a reason ponies get nervous; it’s how we stay alert and stay alive. It means I’m awake and ready to go to work, and there’s plenty of work to do. We’re expecting a huge turnout tomorrow. Anything else?”

“No one.” Boysenberry rolled her pen in her teeth with an anticipatory grin. “There’s been a lot of rumors about you and Diamond Tiara lately. Sources say you’re on the rocks. Others say the presidential hopeful is turning into a total butt trumpet blowing hot air out of her butt and you’re only
putting up with it because if you don’t she’ll feed your fish to her cat. Any truth to that?”

“First of all, Diamond Tiara doesn’t have a cat and never will; her mother’s allergic.” Silver Spoon laughed it off. “Second of all, all best friends get tense every now and then, and everypony reacts to stress differently.” She leaned forward, and steepled her hooves toward the teapot. “No, Boysenberry, Diamond and I are not on the rocks; it’s smooth sailing from here to the presidency, and you can quote me on that.”

Boysenberry sipped her tea.

“By which I mean, quote me on that.” Silver fixed Boysenberry with a hard stare. “Right now would be good.”

“Oh! Oh, right.” The filly quickly scribbled the last few lines and flipped her notebook closed. “M’kay, I gotta go home for dinner before my daddy gets worried. Featherweight says we’ll publish this, um… at lunchtime?”

“I’ll walk you to the door.” Silver followed close behind. It manifested as innocent curiosity, but Boysenberry, by nature, was the nosy type and prone to wander. Luckily, the Silvers kept their doors closed by habit.

The skinny braid of Boysenberry’s tail dragged behind her as Silver Spoon escorted her through the hall of portraits and breakable antiques. By some instinct, she knew to keep her hooves to herself. “Hey, has anypony told you your house feels like a museum?”

Silver Spoon turned to her. “Once,” she said.

“That’s my fault, I’m afraid.” Father stepped out from the drawing room and approached them. “My trade is in museums, so I suppose it came naturally when the time came to decorate.” He smiled at a millennia-old saucer, circa the Paradise Estate years. A gift from Grandmother Shady Hollows’ side of the family. “We’re lucky everything isn’t marked with plaques.”

Silver Spoon chuckled. “Yeah, because Mother stopped you.”

“Guilty.” Father lifted his head. “Oh, Brass Tacks?” He nodded as the butler appeared before them. “Please escort our young guest to the door—that is, if she doesn’t mind?”

Boysenberry stared up at the unicorn, wide-eyed. “No, I don’t mind.” She especially didn’t mind Tacks’ elegant physique or fancy mane.

Father didn’t watch them leave. “Silver Spoon, do you have a moment?”

“Yes, Father.” Silver tried to read Father’s expression, but couldn’t pick up on anything specific. “May I ask why?”

“Don’t worry, it’s a good thing. I have something to show you.” He led the way into the drawing room, where a healthy fire roared in the hearth. A small table to the side had been set for dinner. Mother would have objected to eating in the house anywhere besides the dining room, but she couldn’t do much about it all the way from a Canterlot opera house.

Some sort of case lay upon the coffee table. At first glance, it appeared to be a case for a violin bow or a flute, but as she drew closer, Silver realized that couldn’t be it. A flute wouldn’t require cleaning supplies and special care hoof covers.

Drawing closer, her eyes widened. The blue velvet case was marked with the family crest: two
crossed rapiers. Silver Sword’s cutie mark.

Father took a seat on the chesterfield, patting the spot beside him. “I meant to do this a few years later, around your debut party. I was fourteen when your granddad had this talk with me.”

“This isn’t about blossoming into a beautiful young rose, is it?” Silver Spoon hopped up to join him. “Because Great Aunt Mossback already told me about that stuff.” Though she hadn’t been entirely sure what that talk was really about through all the blushing and stumbling metaphors.

“No, nothing like that. It is something we normally save for later, but with all that’s happened in the past couple of years…” Father’s monocle glinted in the firelight as he looked at the family crest, then the golden laurel upon his flank. He frowned. “I’ve realized that the way things are aren’t always meant to be the way things stay. And there may not always be a later. Come a little closer so you can see.”

Father wrapped his hoof in the soft cloth and opened the case.

Silver Spoon gasped. She’d already guessed it, but she never thought she’d actually be right.

There, cushioned in fine silks and satins, rested a long rapier, slightly rusted by the passage of centuries, but still sharp. It had a sturdy, unremarkable hilt without any of the swirls or embellishments normally befitting a sword this age. A hilt not meant to be gripped with magic, but with teeth. Battle scars shone grimly in the metal.

“Father, is this…?”

“Yes.” He grinned. “Silver Spoon, my brightness, this is the dueling rapier of our very own Silver Sword. It’s older than Equestria herself.” Father flicked his ears in thought. “At least I think so. Hmm, she fought Hurricane’s envoys with it in the Ice Cream War, so…” He did the math. “Yes, at least a month before the first Hearth’s Warming.”

Silver Spoon drew back as Father lifted the rapier out of the case, afraid to even breathe on it. “Does it have a name?” All at once, it struck her how little she actually knew about the most important figure in her family and a cloudburst of questions tumbled out. “Did she really take it into the Ice Cream War? Did she ever kill anyone with it? Shouldn’t this be in a museum or something? Is this the sword she fought Knight Shade with? Did she teach Princess Luna to fence with it?” Her mouth opened wide. “Or Princess Celestia?”

With a snort, Father adjusted his monocle. ‘First of all, you’ve got it backwards: the museum keeps it on loan from us. As for the rest, let’s see…” He set the blade down and stroked his chin. “Silver Sword had it when she defected to the Earth Nation, so this likely killed at least one pony in the war. Celestia’s never liked swords, and if I recall, she prefers the saber. Luna—if she trained with her at all—would have faced a foil, the kind we use for fencing. Speaking of which, we need to start your fencing lessons soon, Silver Spoon.”

Silver flattened her ears. She certainly hoped Father hadn’t dragged this sword all the way from a museum for another lecture about fencing lessons.

“As for your last question, no. I don’t think this rapier has a name.” Gently, Father angled the pommel toward her. “Do you notice anything unusual about this hilt, Brightness?”

“Well, it’s a swept hilt, so it has to be meant for an earth pony, but it’s not as fancy as the other old swords I’ve seen. Even the average swords have—oh!” Adjusting her glasses, Silver Spoon double-checked the pommel and handle to be certain. “It doesn’t have a cutie mark!”
“But do you know why?”

“I… don’t think so?” She flicked her tail and thought about it. “It’s a peasant sword?”

“Close, but not quite. Noblemares in the Unicorn Kingdom put their own cutie marks on their swords, but the ponies who worked under them or lived under them used swords marked with the seal of their House.” Father’s hoof indicated a blank black oval on the pommel. “Now, our own Silver Sword served House Gusty, so we ought to be seeing a maple leaf here. That would mean…” He trailed off to let his daughter fill in the blanks.

“If it had the leaf, that would mean, um…” Silver ran her tongue along the edge of her teeth. She hadn’t expected a pop quiz of all things before dinner. “It means the sword wouldn’t have really been hers. It would belong to the unicorns she worked for, right?” At Father’s nod, Silver Spoon examined the blank seal with new eyes. “It’s blank on purpose. It means she didn’t serve House Gusty anymore.”

“Exactly. This sword is like her resignation letter.” The rapier tip winked in the firelight. Father grinned a wicked little grin. “She wanted to make a point, as it were.”

“Father.” Silver Spoon rolled her eyes. “That’s not even clever.”

“Young lady, I waited over a decade to tell you that joke, don’t belittle your hilarious father.” He lowered the blade to Silver Spoon’s eye level. “Would you like to hold it?”

“Can I? What if I break it?”

“Brightness, it’s lived through ten centuries and three museum raids. I think it can survive a filly. The worst you’ll do is smudge it, and that’s what the cloths are for.”

Silver took it into her hooves, astounded at how light it felt. Light, but incredibly sturdy. She lifted it up and down a couple of times. A thrust into somepony’s heart wouldn’t take more effort than a decisive pen stroke. “Father, Silver Sword served the Gustys for a really long time, right?”

“For the better part of twenty-five years,” said Father. “Lord Trueheart spoke highly of her dedication to their House.”

Silver’s hoof breezed over the unadorned pommel. Its curve rested perfectly in the frog of her hoof. “Then, why did she make this sword? Why did she leave?”

“I don’t know, my Brightness. Nopony does. She didn’t keep diaries, and if she ever gave somepony a reason, that pony kept it to themselves.”

That didn’t surprise Silver Spoon. According to the history books, Silver Sword had been a mare of few words and kept to herself. As a unicorn’s swordsmith there wouldn’t be record of her before the Equestrian migrations.

“I do know one thing: it had to have been an extraordinarily strong reason.” Father glanced at the scars marring the edge of the blade. “Silver Spoon, we earth ponies are a sturdy, stubborn tribe. We can and will put up with a great deal, but everypony has a limit, and I think she found hers. I think that reason stayed with her for a long, long time.”

Cradling the rapier in her hooves, Silver recalled the tapestry at the end of the hall. She thought of every portrait, drawing or woodcut she’d ever seen of her ancestor. Silver Sword didn’t smile in any of them, and was almost never depicted at rest; she fought or ran or leaped, save for one portrait. In that one, she stood as one shivering earth pony among twenty-four others gathered around a table.
“Do you think that’s the reason she voted the way she did?”

“Perhaps, but I don’t think so. If the Earth Nation hadn’t been dead split on the decision to strike out alone, she might have not voted at all.” Father took the rapier back, looked it over for smudges, and laid it back in its case. “However, I do think that’s the reason she broke the tie.”

Chancellor Puddinghead wrote volumes upon volumes of quotes, letters, and weird poetry. Smart Cookie’s journals and philosophical musings could fill a bookshelf. History only kept four sentences from Silver Sword.

When Treacle Tart, a fervent loyalist to the old treaties, begged the delegates to consider what would become of the other tribes, Silver Sword had been the only pony with a response:

“We are but pointless earth ponies, what need have they need for us? The unicorns raise the sun; let them raise their crops. The pegasii tend the rains; let them tend the fields that drink them. The high-born tribes see no value for our toils; let them starve.”

The sword case snapped shut.

Flames snapped and crackled in the hearth. Silver Spoon folded her hooves in her lap, quite still. In the background, Brass Tacks wheeled in their dinner. It smelled amazing, but Silver didn’t feel very hungry. “Father? Why did you choose tonight to show me this?”

Father shrugged. “It felt appropriate. You’re not the first one in our family to step into politics, and I doubt you’ll be the last. And I think,” he said, “In order to know where you’re going, you must know where you’ve been.”

He clapped his hooves and rose from the couch. “But as for now, it appears dinner is served. Silver Spoon, what do you say to hearing the history of Canterlot Castle’s stained glass windows over our soup?”

“That depends,” said Silver Spoon. “How much choice do I have?”

“Not much, which is exactly how Royal Pane must have felt when he’d been commissioned by a representative of their Majesties to commemorate…”

THURSDAY AFTERNOON: 11:30 HOURS, ELECTION DAY.

The heart of fear rooted deep in the unknown. Ponies feared the dark, for example, because they didn’t know what dangers lurked there. Because Silver Spoon already knew the dangers of election day, she knew she had nothing to fear.

“Ready to help me win this thing?” An updraft caught Diamond’s mane, and strands of lavender twirled and tossed over her face.

The two little fillies huddled together beside the schoolhouse, near the end of a long and arduous campaign. Silver’s calendar told her they’d been at it for a month, though it felt like five, and Cheerilee’s half-day of class had stretched for what felt like eons.
In only a few more hours, it’d all be over and Silver could get back to something like normal. Praise the sun.

“Born ready, Diamond.” They bumped hooves and exchanged a nod. “Let’s move.” Silver Spoon trailed in Diamond Tiara’s shadow, ready to launch the lifeboats. Ahead, a small armada of campaign signs bobbed across the playground. Pipsqueak’s crayoned face smiled on each one.

Young ladies knew when to cut their losses, but more importantly, they recognized the big picture. The election might be sunk, but not Diamond. Not us. The sun skipped bright across Silver’s lenses. She lifted her head high. Not yet.

Silver’s hackles rose as they eased into the crowd—or rather, the crowd eased away from them. I can’t fix a reputation in one afternoon. Nopony can. Boysenberry raised her head and nodded to her as they passed. Silver nodded back with a friendly wave. But I can salvage it.

Beside her, Diamond Tiara stiffened. Her eyes darted from the Crusaders to the Pro-Pipsqueak propaganda to Silver Spoon and back to the Crusaders. A head shorter than everypony else, her tiny opponent usually vanished in a crowd, but she had no trouble finding him today. Nopony did. Who could miss the eye of the storm?

Three minutes to the debate.

Silver glanced up from her watch. “Stay cool, Di.”

“Pff, whatever. I’m a total iceberg right now.” Diamond pawed the ground, gauging her point of entry. “Follow my lead and back me when I need you, okay?”

Two minutes.

“I gave my word, Diamond. I’m still right behind you.” Silver Spoon flipped her braid into place, checked her fetlocks for stains, and shook off the last of the jitters. “Okay! Lemme see your game face.”

Somepony had worn whiteners to bed. Diamond Tiara’s brilliant smile could draw a magpie from the nest. At a glance, it almost looked genuine.

Former president Peppermint Twist reared on her back hooves and rang her little brass bell. The crowd grew quiet. Showtime.

Earlier this morning, Pipsqueak’s team had won the coin toss—and four out of seven do overs—so they got to go first, much to Silver’s chagrin. With rights to a first strike, they could have strategized how to offset the Pip’s platform before he proposed it, or psyched him out before he hit the stage. At the very least, Diamond wouldn’t have a tough act to follow.

No use crying over cold tea. We’ll just need to deal with the cards we’re dealt. Ladies displayed strength and dignity in the face of adversity. The tip of Silver’s tail twitched while she watched Sweetie Belle set up a box for Pip to stand on. Literal height to back the high ground he’d already taken. Silver restrained a sigh. And we’ve got our share of adversity.

Pip got a leg up on the box with Scootaloo’s help. He dusted off the playground grit in his mane and blinked at the audience, frowning. The easygoing cheer and confidence seen throughout his campaign ran like the sweat upon his coat. Giving out flyers at recess or talking to his friends after class was one thing, but an actual speech was another.

Diamond Tiara exchanged a glance with Silver Spoon. “Think he’s gonna choke?” she whispered.
“Alone, he might.” Silver frowned, watching Apple Bloom’s approach out the corner of her eye. “But he’s got backup.” Darn it, why hadn’t she considered stage fright? I could have used that. She lashed her tail. Might have, if not for his entourage. Caught off-guard by the Crusaders on the opposition’s turf, she hadn’t even had the time to consider sabotage. This, of course, had been the point.

Apple Bloom cleared her throat and led Pip back with the overstated, over-practiced voice of a greenhorn hypemare. “So, Pip!” She beamed at him with confidence. “How would YOU help the school if you were elected student pony president?”

It worked. Not only did her bullhorn voice wrangle everypony’s attention, but it also snapped her candidate back into place.

“Our playground took quite a beating during Twilight’s fight with Tirek.” The colt recovered fast. Not a shake or stammer in that sentence. Concise, too. He couldn’t paint a portrait with words, but he knew how to work a foal’s short attention span. He’d practiced.

Diamond’s salesmare grin tightened like a vice. Too quiet for anypony else’s ear, she hissed, “So this is what your Crusader truce looks like, huh?”

“It’s all business, Di. Nothing personal.” Judging by Apple Bloom’s bloodthirsty gusto, however, Silver Spoon wouldn’t bet money on it. “Remember, he asked them, not the other way around.”

“…we all remember how the slide broke last month, don’t we? The roundabout’s on its last—” Pip turned to a whispering Scootaloo and nodded. “That is, the merry-go-round’s on its last legs, and look there! One of the swings back there snapped a second ago!”

Silver tilted her head. “Hm.” Come to think of it, why did he choose them? Except for a Nightmare Night candy quest, she’d never heard of Pip hanging out with the Crusaders. Why hadn’t he chosen somepony in his own circle, like Rumble or The Dink? Why choose not one, but three fillies he barely knew with a history of disasters?

Pipsqueak grinned, riding high on a wave of new confidence. “Why, if it goes on like this a moment longer, we’ll have no playground left at all. If I’m voted student pony president, I’ll go straight to the schoolboard and right this wrong!”

The words barely left his mouth before Diamond jumped in for her counterpoint. “Well, I think that’s a ridiculous waste of money!” That argument sure sounded familiar. “It’s just like that when Twist proposed to repair that window Discord destroyed.”

Ow. Silver Spoon didn’t shift her gaze, but she still felt Twist’s injured expression from across the playground. She and Truffle had worked all year for that window.

“She just wanted to replace it with an ordinary schoolhouse window, but as you all know…”

Wait. Silver’s mind raced back to the sculptor’s shop. Her ears flew straight up. An improvement on an existing plan. An expansion! She glanced back to Pip, who’d started to feel the heat of Diamond’s counterattack. Silver didn’t know what he’d planned for—if anything—but it hadn’t been this. He wouldn’t expect Diamond’s jungle gym idea either. Nopony would.

Meanwhile, Diamond Tiara paved the way for the lead in beautifully. “…and naturally, I convinced the schoolboard to give that window visual appeal!”

Evidence of the work Diamond had already done (or influenced) didn’t hurt either. Silver grinned at the stained glass above Pipsqueak’s head. Moon above, this might work. Okay, if I give an obvious
cold lead-in with the statue, that should leave an opening for Di to counter me with the jungle gym. No time to strategize, but with the conversation still fresh, Di would catch on quick.

Apple Bloom eyed the stained glass window, unimpressed. “Course, it doesn’t hurt that her mother, Spoiled Rich, is head of the schoolboard.” She stage-whispered loud enough for the front rows to pass it on to the foals in the back.

So much for it not being personal.

Diamond Tiara’s multi-million bit smile crashed. Regardless of step-parentage, regardless of any personal issues they might have had behind closed doors, regardless of the fact that Diamond would drop Spoiled for Golden in a hot second, Spoiled Rich was still part of Diamond Tiara’s family. An attack on family was, to borrow a Ponyville term, “fightin’ words”.

Silver Spoon didn’t know what Diamond’s arsenal held for the Apple family, but with Bloom’s parents missing in action, she had a few ideas. All of them bad.


“Exactly!” Ignoring the dirty looks from the opposition, Silver slipped into the debate. Did her smile stretch wide enough? She reared to her hind legs to be certain everypony could see. “Which is why when Diamond Tiara is voted student pony president, the school will be putting a statue of her in the center of our schoolyard!”

The crowd murmured to themselves. Sunny Daze, Cotton Cloudy, and Button Mash appeared confused. Even better, Peachy Pie and Featherweight actually didn’t seem to hate the idea of a fancy new statue. Everypony had forgotten the implications behind the window.

Silver Spoon grinned and clasped her hooves. So far, so good. Now, for Diamond to take the reins and—

Pain jolted through Silver’s scalp. Diamond Tiara snatched Silver’s braid hard and yanked her down to all fours.

“Silver Spoon!” Her fierce whisper hissed between gritted teeth, but Silver barely heard through the effort not to yelp. “That was my announcement for when I won!” Her grip eased up.

In the background, Sweetie Belle flattened her ears, bristling and whispering into Scootaloo’s ear. Scootaloo seemed uncertain, though not unmoved.

“I—” With a pull, Silver’s defense unraveled at her hooves. She couldn’t remember her strategy, the counterattack for Pip’s proposal, or even the reason to counterattack in the first place. Her scalp throbbed. “I was just trying to help.” Biting back a wince, she tried again. “Look, if you’d let me explain…”

“Don’t bother.” Diamond snorted. “I don’t need that kind of ‘help’.”

Silver wrapped her tail close and rubbed the back of her head. “…fine.”

Meanwhile, Apple Bloom—who couldn’t have gotten a better opening if Diamond had giftwrapped it—launched back into the debate, teeth bared. “Haven’t we all had enough of Diamond Tiara?”

Scootaloo jabbed an accusatory hoof in their direction. “Do we really need a big statue of her?”
“Especially where our playground equipment should be?” Sweetie Belle topped off the argument while Scootaloo nudged Pipsqueak atop a higher platform. The shortest colt in Ponyville now overlooked the entire schoolyard.

The schoolyard murmured in uncertain agreement. So much for winning back the crowd. Silver rubbed her chin. Maybe Diamond could still recover if…

“A vote for Diamond Tiara is a vote for more Diamond Tiara!”

If she didn’t keep doing stuff like that. “That’s not in the speech,” Silver Spoon muttered. Not only was that the worst slogan she’d ever heard, it fed right into the Crusaders’ rhetoric. If Silver didn’t know any better, she’d think Diamond actually wanted to lose. Maybe she had another trick under her tiara? Silver rubbed the base of her braid. Either way, it seemed best to sit this round out.

Twist approached from the crowd to stand beside her. “Heya, Madam Thecretary.” She smiled and tossed Silver a peppermint stick.

“Hi, Twist.” Silver rolled the candy stick under her tongue and took her place in the sidelines.

Above them, the Cutie Mark Crusaders shifted into a rallying speech about new changes, new leaders, opportunity, hope… the usual vague politician starter-pack stuff. They didn’t name any specific goals beyond the playground equipment, Silver noticed. So far, the best argument they’d presented for Pipsqueak’s was not being Diamond Tiara. The Crusaders didn’t have anything else. They didn’t need anything else.

Twist adjusted her thick lenses, squinting while she took in the scene. “You know, for a debate, Pip’th not doing much talking.”

Silver nodded. “Yeah, I noticed. He smiles a lot and only talks when he needs to.” His three filly hype machine practically ran itself. “Running against Diamond Tiara, I don’t blame him. He knows he can’t face her alone.” She frowned. “Which is why he asked them to manage his campaign.”

“Yeah, that’th what Truffle and me decided, too.” Apple Bloom and her friends know all about fighting Diamond Tiara ‘cause she’th their nemethith.”

“Exactly.” So, the little Trottinghammer knew how to strategize after all. Silver looked over her shoulder at Berry Pinch, who waved a campaign sign over The Dink’s head. That, or he’d asked a consultant. Either way, it had worked.

“Uh… I don’t wanna butt in or anything, Thilver, but…” Twist jutted her head towards Diamond Tiara, who sang her own praises down the grassy field. “Shouldn’t you be doing some of that, too? I know Diamond’th usually good at convinthing ponieth on her own, but today, she’th kinda…”

The ego ship blasted full steam ahead, and damn the advisory board. A light smile twitched at Silver’s muzzle. “Pip’s weak,” that’s catchy. Ill-advised, but catchy.

“Slipping?” Silver Spoon rubbed the back of her neck sighed. “I know. She’s been slipping.”

“You know what happens to weak presidents?” Diamond fixed the short candidate with a sneer. “They shatter.” Prettier than a pageant routine, Diamond Tiara glided across the grass. “On the other hoof, a diamond is the hardest mineral on the planet—look it up, nerds, it’s true. A diamond never breaks, because a diamond is perfection.” For an instant she met Silver’s eye. She didn’t signal her, though she did shoot a grin.

Silver Spoon applauded and smiled back. “I also wrote her speech, though, so…” The smile dimmed
a bit. She tried to shrug it off. “I guess my job was pretty much done before we even got here.”

Twist wrinkled her nose at Diamond’s line about Pip being a weak link in the presidential chain. “That’s the speech you wrote last week?” Quickly, she averted her eyes. “I mean, it’s nice and all, don’t get me wrong. I’m sure you did your best, and that’s all that really matters!”

Not a terrible save, but Silver had lost her appetite for platitudes. “That’s the new speech. Diamond didn’t like the old one much.” The story about the Rich house’s roof catching fire would have fit perfectly right now. It derailed the opposition’s smear campaign, attracted sympathy, made Diamond relatable, and led into an amazing metaphor about forging something new and strong from the flames of hardship. “The old speech worked way better, but try telling her that.” Sulking helped no pony, but that didn’t stop the bitterness coiling in Silver’s chest.

“Truff should really be here; he’s on the ballot, after all.” Twist stepped back to give space for some foals heading for the voting booth. “I never saw too many ponies excited about council politics.”

“Neither have I.” The appeal of politics didn’t hold a candle to a clash of the cliques, nor the potential downfall of a powerful pony. After all, no pony drew crowds like Diamond Tiara.

Back in the ring, Diamond switched strategies. “Everypony has their little secrets you know.” She smiled and whispered something inaudible to Bubblegum Brush, who recoiled and tried to hide in her long mane. Only the stronghold of fear remained in Diamond’s empire, and she grasped it for dear life. It wouldn’t hold.

Fear had an expiration date.

Apple Bloom snorted with a toss of her head. “C’mon, ponies! Don’t y'all let her scare ya, not for one darn minute!”

That date was today.

“Wait!” And judging by the desperation in Diamond’s voice, she knew it, too. “Wait, wait—everypony who hasn’t voted yet, listen up!” Every few seconds, Diamond Tiara’s eyes darted between the voters and the ponies leaving the booth: a revolution in slow motion. For the first time, the realization hit her, and hit her hard. No pony liked her, and everypony here knew it.

“Twist, I gotta go.” Silver weaved and darted through the crowd, noting the foals wearing “I Voted” stickers. At a glance, she counted seven. Can’t be more than two ponies voting right now. That’s nine lost votes, tops. Almost a quarter of the school. She pushed into a canter, ears pricking at the sound of her own notes read back to her over the playground.

“My fellow ponies, Pipsqueak’s made a lot of promises today, but I guarantee you he can’t keep a single one! Getting something like brand new playground is way over his head. Like pretty much everything else.” Diamond smirked with a little chuckle. “I, on the other hoof, know how to actually put a plan into action. I can do so much more, and I guarantee my checks won’t bounce.”

Sunny Daze took a small step backward as Diamond Tiara moved in, circling her. She gulped.

“You’ve had that saddlebag for like, two years, right?” At Sunny’s nod, Diamond grinned. “I bet you could use a new one. Know where? From me, ‘cause I’m a mover. Know why? ‘Cause I can actually make things happen, things none of you can afford to do, like, ever.” She tossed a gourmet candy over her shoulder and into Twist’s hooves. Twist didn’t seem overly impressed.

“Finally!” Silver could have wept. Oh, Sweet Celestia in summertime, Diamond had finally, FINALLY seen some sense.
With a flick, Diamond hoof spun the propeller on Button’s hat. “I mean, who says I can’t be nice, right?”

Yes. Good. A softer approach. More honey, less castor oil. True, it edged closer to outright bribery, but close enough. Besides, Silver could spin bribery into philanthropy, no problem. _Forget the statue introduction; this is the perfect place to mention the jungle gym! If we spin it right, she might even win by the skin of her teeth!_

Silver Spoon slipped in just behind Diamond as she wrapped up her argument. _She’ll get vice president at the very least._

“…and you’ll get all this and more with the low, low price of voting for me: Diamond Dazzle Tiara!” The candidate spared Silver an irritated glance.

Before Di could turn away, Silver zipped in to whisper in her ear. “You’re doing a lot better, but one suggestion?” Since Diamond didn’t say no, Silver moved in closer. “Remember your fancy jungle gym idea?”

Diamond pawed the grass. “I already told you, I’m not copying that shrimp. Not when I’m already—ugh, I don’t have time for this.”

“Like there’s gonna be a better time later? Listen, you need something better than a bribe; you need to connect. You need to make it personal.” Silver glanced at the lines for the voting booth. Plenty of ponies still hadn’t voted yet. Good. “You could win this election, if you showed them all you really—”

“I don’t recall asking _you_ to speak!”

It echoed from the schoolhouse to the fencepost.

A collective gasp rose from the crowd. The election screeched to a standstill. Twist flinched as if she’d been struck herself. Berry Pinch narrowed her eyes and muttered something to The Dink, who nodded sadly. Boysenberry, Tornado Bolt, and Rumble made a beeline for the voting booth. Miss Cheerilee put covered her mouth with hoof.

Silver Spoon stared.

Vaguely, Silver realized that everypony was looking a them. Everypony had heard. She knew she ought to do…something besides stand here like an idiot. Her withers trembled, and she blushed hot under her coat. Why couldn’t she just go home? If only her hooves remembered how to move, she’d run home, crawl under a blanket, and never come out.

But shocked beyond words, beyond tears, Silver Spoon could only stare. Stare and wait for something—ANYTHING—to happen so everypony would stop watching the world crumble under her hooves.

Sweetie Belle’s rallying cry bannered over the schoolyard. “Well, if that's how you treat your best friend, then I choose Pipsqueak!”

Silver owned that filly a sundae, big time.

“PIP! Vote Pip!” A great cry shook the schoolhouse to the rafters. “For Pip!” It rose from the burnouts and the overachievers. “Pip, Pip, Pipsqueak for president!” It rose from the athletes and the apple polishers. “He’s it—vote for Pip!” It rose from the colts and the fillies; the unicorns, the earth ponies, and the pegasi; the blank flanks and the cutie marked. The schoolyard fell together, united
beneath a call for revolution, justice, and a new swing set. “Pip, Pip, Pip, PIP!”

It was over.

The tsunami of voices drowned the tatters of Diamond Tiara’s presidential campaign, along with any hope of saving her social standing. Granddad Silver Tongue—as always—had been right. One never had to ask if they’d been ruined; one just knew. Diamond knew.

A series of emotions—despair or regret or rage or existential dread—fluttered across the candidate’s face. It switched back to anger in a blink, and Silver Spoon ducked away before she got cut by the shrapnel.

Without a word and without meeting anypony’s eye, Silver slipped through the cheering crowd and came out on the other side, by the voting booth. The lines had died down already.

Away from prying eyes, with space to hear herself think, Silver came down to earth.

"I don’t recall asking you to speak." The words sank into her chest and stayed there, heavy and waterlogged. "I don’t recall asking you to speak."

Behind her, the road wound a straight path back to Silver’s cozy bed, a sympathetic ear, and a hot mug of emergency tea. The school day ended hours ago. She could leave. Nopony would blame her, save one. And that one blamed her for everything lately.

In the center of the playground, the Cutie Mark Crusaders beat the election drum, singing to “let honor win out against the tyranny”. Sweetie Belle had cracked open a thesaurus recently.

Silver Spoon glanced at the road behind her, and then turned away. Not yet. The election didn’t end until Cheerilee announced the winner. I said I’d be here for the whole campaign, and the Silvers keep their word. No matter what.

Besides, she still had one thing left to do. Ahead, the empty voting booth waited for her.

THURSDAY AFTERNOON: 14:55 HOURS

“Five minutes!” called Miss Cheerilee. “Polls close in five minutes!” True to her word, she’d kept the crowd away from the voting booth to give Silver Spoon some breathing room. She needed to thank her teacher for that, later.

The felt-tip marker rolled in Silver’s teeth. She examined the candidate options front to back. For safety, she checked again.

It boiled down to two questions: Who is the best pony for the job? and Who do I want for president? When she thought of it that way, the decision wasn’t hard at all. Both questions had the same answer.

Silver Spoon voted in one smooth stroke. Examining her handiwork, she nodded to herself and slipped it in the ballot box.

Done, and with three minutes to spare. Silver felt her cheeks for wet spots, smoothed her mane and
tail, and stepped back out into the world.

By now, the school had plenty of time to figure out who’d been hogging the booth. Several foals who’d conveniently just so happened to be walking by quickly looked away from the booth. Others didn’t even bother pretending to have manners and stared anyway.

The Dink moved to approach, but Berry Pinch—appearing more sympathetic than Silver thought possible—caught Dinky’s shoulder and shook her head. Pinch glanced at Diamond Tiara, who sat beside the schoolhouse door with pricked ears, then at Silver Spoon, and muttered something. The Dink shrugged.

Silver Spoon found a spot beside the broken merry-go-round and settled there to wait out the results. Normally, it would be the class secretary’s job to help count the votes, but in this case it would be a conflict of interest. She guessed Cheerilee had chosen Twist to help. Twist didn’t have a dishonest bone in her body, and besides, Silver couldn’t spot her on the playground anywhere.

Hopefully the count wouldn’t take long. Then Silver could shake the winner’s hoof, turn around, go home, and go to bed. Everything else could wait until tomorrow. She checked her watch and settled against the warm metal with a sigh.

Ten minutes later, Councilpony Peppermint Twist opened the door and skipped out into the grass. Miss Cheerilee followed close behind. Showtime.

Silver Spoon took her place right behind Diamond Tiara. Diamond murmured something to herself under her breath and didn’t seem to notice Silver’s approach at all. Neither of them acknowledged the budding crowd.

While they waited for everypony else to get here, Cheerilee took the opportunity for a speech about citizenship, the electoral process, and how delighted she and the student council were to see such an enthusiastic turnout. “Let’s hear it for Ponyville Schoolhouse, huh?”

The students cheered and stomped and applauded themselves. Silver offered a small golf clap. *Hopefully some of these cheering ponies stick around after the election’s over.* She glanced at Twist, the only other current student council member besides herself. Including the new president, that gave them three guaranteed foals on the council. *We’ll need more than that for even a chance at the schoolboard meeting.*

To their left, Pipsqueak trembled between Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle. The colt looked like he’d been sweating bullets since the debates ended, though for the life of her, Silver didn’t know why. Had he not heard everypony cheering his praises an hour ago?

“It’s been a long road to this point class, but now the results are in, and the votes have been counted. Fillies and gentlecolts, your new student pony president is…” Miss Cheerilee paused for dramatic effect. “Pipsqueak!”

No surprise there. *Cue the celebration.* Silver Spoon nodded politely to the awestruck new president and his squealing campaign managers. She flicked an ear at Diamond’s gasp of horror. *And the drama.*

President Pipsqueak kept his victory speech short and sweet. “Thank you, thank you, everypony! I couldn’t ‘ave won without the ‘elp of my campaign managers, The Cutie Mark Crusaders!”

*I doubt it.* Silver Spoon managed to suppress a snort. His opponent dug her own grave before the debates even started. The Crusaders just piled on the dirt. Even so, Silver could appreciate the
president’s humble gesture. Nice to know some ponies appreciated their campaign managers.

Okay. Almost finished. Silver tried to offer a conceding smile to her own candidate. Now all Diamond Tiara has to do is shake Pip’s hoof, give a concession speech, and we can go home.

Sweetie Belle, Apple Bloom, and Scootaloo turned expectantly toward their flanks for brand new campaign managing cutie marks. To the surprise of nopony ever, nothing appeared. Did they do that literally every time they finished doing something? Did Apple Bloom look for a taste-tester cutie mark every time she ate breakfast?

Diamond glared with a little smirk.

So, no hoofshake. Okay. That’s fair. Silver frowned and gave Diamond a look. Walk away. Just accept the vote and walk away without a fuss.

“Ha.” Diamond tipped her nose in the air. “Guess you’re not as good as you thought you were, blank flanks!”

Of course. Silver Spoon slowly dragged her hooves down her face. Diamond Dazzle Tiara, I swear.

“In fact, I demand a recount!” Because of course she did. So much for going home without another scene.

Honestly, Silver didn’t know why she’d expected any different. By this point, she could set her watch to Diamond.

“Trust me, Diamond Tiara.” Miss Cheerilee tried to let her down as easy as possible. “Pip won.” By a landslide, probably. Twist and Cheerilee counted the votes twice during the ten minute wait, and spent at least three of those minutes getting the ballot boxes.

Diamond barged her way past the teacher and into the schoolhouse. “I’ll be the judge of that, Miss Cheerilee.”

Now for extra flailing against the jaws of defeat.

In a blink, Silver Spoon saw the future. Diamond would go home, lick her wounds, and lash out at whoever stood around to be lashed out at. Silver would attempt disaster control, and to some degree, she’d be successful. Eventually, they would approach peace or something like it.

Until the next time. Until pressure built in the atmosphere and the storm rolled in all over again.

Inside, papers shuffled. The ballot box dropped to the floor. Papers shuffled again. And again.

A beat of silence. Another.

Silver Spoon braced herself. Three, two…

“What?!”

Yep. Silver blinked slowly. Like clockwork.

Diamond Tiara reappeared on the schoolhouse steps, completely aghast. “One vote?!” She scrambled to Silver’s side.

Nopony in this schoolyard, not even Cotton Cloudy, knew storm warnings the way Silver Spoon did. Taping up windows and arranging sandbags came second nature to her by this point. Silver
knew Diamond’s hurricanes.

This was not a hurricane.

“Silver Spoon?” The winds had gone out. No indignation. No rage. Diamond’s voice pinched tight and squeaky. “You didn’t vote for me?!”

_Are you—?_ For a split second, Silver searched Diamond’s face. _You’re honestly surprised by this._ Shocked, in fact.

_“I don’t recall asking you to speak.”_ The phrase boomeranged and hit Silver hard in the mouth.

How dare she.

This, after humiliating her in front of the entire school. After the hoof cramps writing and rewriting speeches. After a month combing the schoolyard for some way to salvage the election, only to get spat on in the home stretch. This, not even an hour after _“I don’t recall asking you to speak.”_

And still. Still, Diamond Tiara had the audacity—the sheer _audacity_ and _entitlement_—to demand Silver’s vote. Not even a real vote; she knew darn well she’d lost the presidency. No, she’d expected a vote of solidarity. Diamond _entitled_ herself to Silver Spoon’s solidarity.

How. Dare. She.

“No,” said Silver Spoon. She stared, corrosive and unblinking. “I didn’t.”

Diamond Tiara winced. She bit her bottom lip, staring back as if she didn’t comprehend what she’d just heard. “But…” Her eyes widened with what almost resembled regret. Almost didn’t cut it anymore. “But you’re my best friend!”

The last time Silver checked, friends didn’t throw friends’ speeches in their face. Friends remembered to say things like “thank you,” “good job”, or “nice try” once in a while. Friends let their campaign managers do the job they’d been asked to do. Friends—especially best friends—did not treat friends this way.

_“We might as well be talkin’ to Diamond’s butler.”_ Apple Bloom was still wrong; Silver Spoon wasn’t Diamond Tiara’s butler. Butlers got paid for their effort.

Silver narrowed her eyes. She spoke softly and did not shout. “Am I?” Ladies did not shout because ladies had composure and knew better than to throw a tantrum when they lost an election. “Cause I tried to help by mentioning your ‘surprise’ statue, and suddenly I wasn't even allowed to speak!”

Too little, too late, it clicked. Diamond Tiara’s mouth sagged open. No apology came out. Not even an attempt.

All those wasted hours of work. All that time trying to atone for one mistake Diamond wouldn’t even let her atone for. And what had it amounted to? What _could_ it amount to? Silver didn’t know and she didn’t care. She’d done more than enough.

“You actually could have won this election if you’d just _listened_ to me. You wanna know how?” Silver leaned in close. “Sorry,” she whispered, “I’m not allowed to speak.” A flick of her hoof shut Diamond’s big mouth before a bug flew in it. Let _nopony_ say she never did Diamond any favors.

Diamond Tiara blinked. She mouthe a string of silent not-words and aborted comebacks that built and built until it exploded in a shriek of rage.
Silver raised an eyebrow.

Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Pipsqueak collectively stared. Sweetie Belle seemed to struggle for something to say.

While Diamond turned tail and stormed off to lick her wounds, or plot revenge, or launch a generational blood feud or whatever, Silver Spoon glanced at her small audience. “What? I don’t have to follow her drum anymore.”

If they insisted on rubbernecking, she might as well get something done in the meantime. Silver beckoned the new president with her tail. “Pipsqueak, there’s a schoolboard meeting tomorrow afternoon. The student council needs to meet before then if you want your new playground.” She thought a moment. “Oh, and congratulations on your win.”

“Oh, thanks. Tomorrow, you said? Um…” He looked for his campaign managers, but they huddled elsewhere, deep in some other conversation. Councilmare Twist offered him an encouraging smile. “Yeah, I expect we ought to. When did you want to do it? Recess? Maybe early in the morning?”

In the corner of her eye, Silver spotted the Crusaders hot on Diamond’s trail. Maybe they wanted to gawk at the carnage. Maybe they wanted to earn their pep-talk cutie marks. Or maybe they just headed in the same direction and it was a coincidence. Didn’t matter.

*Let her starve.*

“Either one’s fine with me. Or we could do both.” Silver Spoon shrugged. “My schedule’s wide open.”
Silver Spoon took the old route back: a straight shot from school to home. No meanderings. No pit stops. No short-cuts. No temptations to stop and chat, and no real place to see or be seen. Aside from an appealing nap under an almond tree, the path held no distractions.

Despite weary hooves and the tired ache in her chest—the result of a long day’s work and nothing more—Silver slipped into a trot. The sooner she got home, the sooner she could lie down. Ahead, glimpses of Davenport’s Quills and Sofas poked through the trees. How in Equestria had Silver Spoon ever been so silly, taking that meander all over town every day? Maybe there’d been a point to it once upon a time, when she needed to find her bearings around town, but not now.

“Dumb waste of time, that’s all it ever was. I was right all along; my old route is perfect.” Silver brushed off the memory with a flick of the tail. “Perfect if somepony doesn’t want to be a tacky little showhorse waving her dumb tiara all over the place.”

Silver rounded Davenport’s, smiling at the sight of home and her lovely little tea roses in the garden. She paused at the gate. They had a visitor.

A slender unicorn with the softest white coat Silver had ever seen laughed with Brass Tacks in the gazebo. If memory served, this unicorn traveled with significant company. Company the Silvers couldn’t afford to ignore, regardless of how much one would rather shelter in one’s room wrapped up in a blanket with a cup of tea. Even tired young ladies had their duties. She owed it to Auntie to say hello, at the very least.

“Welcome home, Miss Silver Spoon.” Brass Tacks opened the gate with his magic. “You’re home a bit early today.”

Was she? Silver supposed that added up, since they spent half the school day with the election, and the results couldn’t have taken more than a half hour.

The mare smiled, kind but a little too coy for comfort. Silver couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d been watching her. “Good afternoon, Silver Spoon. Brass Tacks here tells me you’re the one who grew these beautiful roses.” Her magic twirled a pink tea rose that matched the color of her mane. “You’ve done a magnificent job with them. Well done.”

Well done. Two words—not much to ask, not much to give, and all she’d wanted to hear today. “Thank you.” Silver’s shoulders sagged with her smile. “Thank you very much.”

Indeed, despite the early autumn frost last week, the roses still had a full blush in their petals. They’d last the winter with little trouble and flourish next spring. Silver had succeeded on that front, if nothing else.

Under better circumstances, Silver would have offered a cup of tea. A curtsey and a hoofshake would have to do. “It’s nice to meet you again, Miss….” She glanced at Brass Tacks, who mouthed a name. “…Fleur de Lis. I saw you at my cuteceañera, didn’t I? With Mister Fancy Pants?”

At the name, Miss Fleur turned toward the house, where Father and Mr. Pants held a discussion on the upstairs balcony. The coy socialite smile returned, and the toned muscles in her neck tightened. “Yes, that’s right, but I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced.” The unicorn curtseyed low enough for her horn to tap Silver’s shoulder. “Belated congratulations on your cutie mark, Miss Silver Spoon. May you always bear it in health.”
“And you as well, ma’am.” Silver examined Miss Fleur’s elegantly muscled frame, then turned to Brass Tacks. They had a similar body type, though she stood a couple inches shorter than Tacks. Her longer horn made up for it. “How do you two know each other? Are you related?”

He’d never mentioned any cousins or sisters, but Brass Tacks never talked about himself much. To the extent of Silver’s knowledge, he favored jazz music, wore flat caps on his days off, and owned a trumpet, although she’d never heard him play it.

Brass Tacks tossed his head with a laugh. “We are thankfully unrelated, young miss. My word, I’d have torn my mane out decades ago.” He cheerfully ignored Fleur’s eye roll. “No, we went to school together. She was a pain then and she’s a pain now. How Fancy Pants tolerates her company all day, I’ll never know.”

Above them, Mr. Fancy Pants appreciated the balcony’s view. He caught Fleur watching him and lifted his glass to her. She waved back.

Tacks clicked his tongue. “Though I’ve got a few ideas.”

Silver Spoon looked between the three unicorns. “Miss Fleur, are you…” She checked the perimeters and reconsidered her phrasing in case ears might be listening. “Are you Fancy Pants’ companion the same way that Brass Tacks is my butler?”

“Something like that, yes.” Fleur winked and whispered, “Your butler’s still jealous he never made valedictorian at the guard’s academy. Sad, really.” Her pink eyes snapped to Tacks. “And I don’t see what you’re smirking about; I’m doing my job, thanks.”

“Yes, that’s certainly one way of putting it.” Brass Tacks innocently coughed into his hoof. “One could say you’re married to your work, as it were.”

“In any case, Silver Spoon, it’s lovely to finally meet you. Silver Frames has told us so much about you—oh, but she never mentioned your impeccable taste!” A glow of pink magic lifted Silver’s pearls. “Goodness, are these Seaquestrian? You can’t even get these anymore! Wherever did you find them?”

“They’re a cuteceañera present. I got them from…” Silver’s polite smile lost its luster. She swallowed hard. “…uh, from a friend. So, what brings you to Ponyville? We don’t get many Canterlotters in town.”

Miss Fleur pricked her ears. “You mean you don’t know? The Riches invited us to some sort of party, a… victory party, I think?” Somehow, she even managed to make furrowing her brow elegant. “Oh, I do hope I haven’t confused our appointments. You know the Riches’ daughter, don’t you?”

Silver dropped her smile entirely. “Yeah. I know her.”

Did Spoiled Rich plan a surprise party, or had she simply “forgotten” to extend an invitation to the Silvers? Either way, dozens of social resources and favors must have gone down the drain getting somepony like Fancy Pants all the way to Ponyville.

*I bet Diamond’s getting the riot act right about now.* Silver Spoon curled her tail with a disdainful sniff. “I’m sorry to say you’ve wasted a trip, Miss Fleur de Lis. There won’t be a party this afternoon.”

The casual amusement faded from Brass Tacks’ face. He and Fleur traded a frown.

“What makes you say that, Silver Spoon?” Fleur’s tone softened to the patronizing brand of concern
adults only used for stupid foals who’d tumbled down the stairs and hurt themselves.

There were no such foals here. “Oh, it’s quite simple: there can’t be a victory party without a victory. Miss Diamond Tiara ran for student pony president today, but instead of campaigning she decided that the best course of action would be to stuff all four hooves in her mouth, ignore her campaign manager, and go down in flames.” Silver idly investigated her hoof polish. Not a scratch. “You know, like she always does.”


“Hmph. I wouldn’t call it a fight. Diamond got eviscerated by the election results and decided to throw a tantrum about it, that’s all.” Silver shrugged. “I’m too old for tantrums. Anyway, that’s why there won’t be a party.”

“That is a pity. Still, I wouldn’t call it a waste.” Tacks gave a meaningful glance toward the house. “At least Fleur and Fancy Pants still have a chance to take in the country air, yes?”

“Oh, yes! In fact, this is the perfect time of day for it. I think I’ll suggest it right now.” Fleur bowed to them both and took her leave. “Lovely seeing you, Miss Silver Spoon.”

Tacks cleared his throat and adjusted his tie. “Would you care for a cup of emergency tea, Young Miss Silver?”

“Thank you for offering, but it won’t be necessary because there’s no emergency. Diamond’s not my problem.” She rolled her stiff shoulders and remembered her sore hooves. “But if it’s not too much trouble, I wouldn’t mind a rosewater bath. And maybe early dinner?”

“Of course, Silver Spoon.” He waited for her to join him on the lawn and the two of them made their way across the garden. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“No.”

Pip’s scrambling hooves slipped short of the edge. “Whoa—oof!” He plopped into the grass with a wet splash.

Silver Spoon popped open her umbrella and peered over the edge of Bon Bon’s porch. “You know there’s stairs, right? You don’t need to jump up here.”

“No, no, I’ve got it. Stand back—I’m gonna give it another go.” Pipsqueak shook the rain off his coat and took a running leap. All four hooves landed clean on the porch. “Ha! Easy as pie, what’d I tell you?” He beamed with all his teeth and way too much enthusiasm for somepony who’d fallen in a puddle three times. “G’morning, Silver Spoon! Sorry you had to come out so early.”

“No problem. Seven in the morning’s still better than six.” Compared to Diamond’s usual hours, Silver had practically slept in. “I wish we had better weather, though.”

Rain pattered against the dripping awning of Bon Bon’s Sugar Shack. Hooves stomped and ponies fussed inside while furniture scraped against the floor. From what Silver could gather, somepony had left their dirty dishes all over the couch last night and the whole living room still had to be dusted.

“By the way, why are we doing this here and not at, like, your house?” Silver paused, remembering what Pip’s room looked like. “Actually, this is fine.”
“Twist says her house is too little for comp’ny, and Truff’s is too far away.” Pip leaned against the house, smiling at nothing in particular. In the gray morning, his spotted coat gleamed, and the mud stains blended in with his natural markings. He faintly smelled of the pomade that slicked back his mane.

“I like your hair,” said Silver Spoon. “Very presidential.” Too bad the rain would wash the pomade out before lunchtime. “Do you know if Truffle Shuffle’s coming today?”

“Depends how he’s feeling. I asked Twist to tell his grandma that it’s very, very import for him to come to school, but with all this rain I dunno if—oh! Oh, there they are!” Pip waved both hooves over his head at the pair of raincoats headed up the path. “Hullo, guys!”

“Hiya!” Twist slung her foreleg around her companion. “Lookit who I brought!”

The round yellow raincoat looked up, and a round muzzle poked out from under the bucket hat. A muddy rainboot waved to them.

Silver Spoon wiped the fog off her lenses. “A mushroom with feet?”

The mushroom with feet stuck its tongue out at her.

“Manners, Mr. Truffle Shuffle.” Silver winked at him. “That’s not very becoming of a vice president.”

The bucket hat popped up to reveal a pair of wide eyes. Truffle squinted at Secretary Silver, then at President Pipsqueak and Councilpony Twist. His brow furrowed in confusion. Slowly, he pointed to himself.

“Yeah, mate, it’s you!” Pipsqueak laughed and shook Truffle’s withers. “Assuming that is you under all that rubber. You look like you’re about to go on one of The Dink’s lake monsta hunts.”

The front door swung open. “There is not now, nor has there ever been a monster living in Sweetshine Lake. I don’t know where you foals get these crazy ideas.” Bon Bon smiled down at them, mane bouncing on her shoulders, fresh from their curlers. “Come on in, the living room’s all set up for you. Wipe your hooves, please.” She bent down to give Twist a nuzzle. “Morning, Twist-a-loo.”

“Hiya Auntie Bonnie! Thorry we’re late, but Truff couldn’t find hith left rainboot, tho we had to look all over…” Twist and Pip headed for the living room while Silver Spoon shook the rain off her umbrella and Truffle stayed behind to get rid of their rain gear.

The cool air of the house hit Truffle Shuffle’s bare fur and his shoulders slacked with relief. He kicked off his last rainboot with a snort.

“I’m glad you came,” Silver told him. “We really missed you yesterday.” She pointed to the tartan scarf double looped around his neck. “Isn’t that kind of hot under your raincoat?”

“Mm-hm.” An ultimatum from his grandma, judging by the face Truffle pulled. He cleared his throat and motioned Silver Spoon closer. “How?”

The sandpaper croak gave Silver goosebumps. That voice didn’t sound close to healed. “How what?”

“The election,” he rasped. “How am I vice president again?”
“You came in second, of course.” She shrugged off Truffle’s skeptical expression. “Okay, fine, not by a lot. Three votes, counting yourself, but it’s still two more votes than Diamond got. A win’s a win.”

Truffle Shuffle mouthed a silent “oh.” After a moment of thought, he pointed a questioning hoof at Silver.

“Excuse you, it’s supposed to be a secret ballot.” Considerably less secret after bad losers had rooted through it, but still. Silver examined the paisley wallpaper, the tip of her tail swishing against the welcome mat. “I chose the best pony for the job, Truff; that’s you. It always was. If you want, next year I can help you run a campaign—a real one.”

Truffle smothered her in a bear hug.

“Uh.” Silver blinked. Were politicians allowed to hug on the clock? She settled for a pat on the back. “You’re welcome?”

The grin faded. “Hey, Sil—” Truffle winced, massaging his throat. He pulled a notepad out of his coat pocket and wrote, “Twist told me what happened with Diamond Tiara at the election.”

Silver drew back. “Lots of things happened at the election, you’ll have to be more specific.”

Not in the mood for games, Truffle sighed and added to the paper, “You know what I mean, Silver Spoon.” He underlined “know” twice. “You ok?”

“More or less.”

Last night’s bath lasted an hour and a half. Silver Spoon spent the better part of twelve hours drifting in and out of a (mostly) peaceful and dreamless sleep. Neither had especially helped. The exhaustion had faded, but her withers still ached, and sometimes she felt a phantom tug at the base of her braid. The tartar of I didn’t ask you to speak still coated her ribs, and if Silver Spoon thought about it too long, her chest felt tight and waterlogged all over again.

She’d tried herbal teas to perk her up, but tea only went so far. There was only one real remedy for an earth pony in pain. “Alright.” Silver narrowed her eyes. “Let’s go to work.”

Two halves of a circular couch dominated Bon Bon’s living room, with a round coffee table centered in the middle. The area more resembled a fire pit than a lounge area, perfect for groups of ponies to gather and talk. Everypony could see and hear each other without stretching their necks or reaching across the world to get something on the opposite end of the table. Silver could see why Twist insisted on this spot; Bon Bon’s living room could support a council meeting twice this size.

A smaller table sat in the far corner, where Lyra struggled with a bottle of ketchup and a small pile of pancakes. “Hi, kids. Don’t mind me, I’ll be out of your hair in a sec.” Ketchup spluttered and coughed over the short stack.

Silver Spoon turned grayer than usual.

Another note slipped into Silver’s hoof: “I know. I saw it, too.” Truffle gave her a sympathetic pat and joined Twist on the left side of the couch. The notebook flipped to a fresh page, and he switched to a marker to write with. “Can’t talk at the school board meeting, but Gran says I can still come.”

Pipsqueak took the opportunity to sample the butterscotch while Silver joined him on the right half of the couch. Hopefully he didn’t count this bowl of candy as his breakfast. “That’s great, Truffle. With the whole council together, we match the board’s numbers four to four. Maybe we’ll even
outnumber ‘em if we can get some more ponies to sign up before class ends today.”

Even numbers or not, Silver still didn’t like those odds. Still, a fuller council would look better, if nothing else. “Can foals really walk in and get a council seat? Just like that?”

“Yup, if there’th till th that open for ‘em.” Twist leaned on the edge of the couch, waving her hooves over the side. “That’th how we got you, remember?”

“Huh. So does that mean we could get more council officers?” Silver’s back sank into the soft upholstery as she thought. “We could use a treasurer, or a…what do you call it, a sergeant at hoof. I know it’s last second, and they’d have to learn everything fast, but Pip’s still learning this stuff too, so maybe they can learn together. It’s tough, but still possible.”

Silver smiled at the room, but only Pipsqueak smiled back. “Isn’t it?”

Truffle Shuffle rubbed the back of his neck with one hoof, and gave her a wobbly sorta-kind-not-really hoof gesture with the other. “Ehhhh…” He thought about it a few more seconds, then shook his head.

“Not nine hourth. You chose to be thtudent thecretary, remember? We didn’t have to come looking for you. We could athk Cheerilee, but even if we found a foal, it’d be kinda awkward, ‘cause, uh…” A thunderhead of red tangles sagged over Twist’s glasses. She twiddled her hooves and looked down. “Technically we, um…already have a treasurer?”

Silver Spoon pieced it together. She scowled.

“Ohhh, right—Diamond Tiara came in third, so she gets the next seat down, after Silver Spoon.” Pip smiled atop his small mountain of accent pillows, proud of himself for remembering. “But she never claimed it, right? Does that even count?”

“Hm.” Truffle flipped open the council rulebook and searched for an answer. In the meantime he wrote, “What do you think Diamond will do when she shows up?”

“That’s IF she shows up,” said Silver Spoon, “and it’s a pretty big ‘if’. When Diamond Tiara loses this hard she usually sulks in a corner somewhere to lick her wounds for a couple of days. She doesn’t start plotting vengeance for, like, a week, at least. Usually.”

But this hadn’t been a usual loss. Before yesterday, her defeats were mostly private affairs—even if she’d lost the prize in public, Diamond vented behind closed doors. Opportunities for a solid counterattack normally didn’t surface for days, if not weeks, but today it sat square in her lap.

Then, there’s the biggest missing factor: me. Without Silver for moral support and a grounding tether, who knew what to expect? Considering how unhinged Diamond had been yesterday, that didn’t bode well. Silver Spoon flattened her ears. Sun above, I hate wild cards!

Regardless, Silver knew one thing for sure: either nothing would happen at all, or they’d see a maelstrom to shame Commander Hurricane himself. “Diamond Dazzle Tiara doesn’t do fourth place. If she does show up, she won’t come to be treasurer.” She leveled her gaze at the president. “She’ll be after you, Pip.”

Pipsqueak shrugged. “I already got elected, what else could she even do?”

“Plenty.”

In fact, with Diamond’s stepmom leading the school board and a special talent tailor-made for verbal
teardowns, nopony held a secure seat in the council. If it were Silver, she’d accept the treasurer position, rot Pip’s administration from the inside out, and stage a takeover come next spring’s school board meeting. Thank goodness Di didn’t have that kind of patience.

“Look, I don’t know what Diamond Tiara will do this afternoon.” Last night’s headache came roaring back for round two. Silver rubbed her temples. “I do know that she’s not the pony we need to worry about, though.”

Truffle nodded with a frown. With his hooves full cross-referencing the rulebook, he rasped, “Mrs. Rich is rough, and the budget’s—” Flinching, he rubbed his throat. “—still tight.”

Silver shuddered. “Okay, new rule: you don’t get to talk until you quit sounding like you swallowed a cactus farm. Here.” She slid a thermos across the table.

Grinning, Truffle Shuffle unscrewed the cap and sniffed the iced tea inside.

“We thought of trying to get a look at what the thchool’th money lookth like ahead of time—to figure out thome kinda budget plan, you know?—but Mith Cheerilee thaid it’th over our headth. We’d have to go to town hall for that, I think.” Twist cuddled against the sofa, chewing a stray strand of hair as she thought it over. “We’ve got all the bake thale money we never uthed. That oughta help a lot!”

Miss Cheerilee kept the council record books at a cabinet at school, but Silver still remembered most of the numbers. “We raised around five hundred, counting the gourmet bake sale and the talent show, right? Why don’t we suggest another school activity and pool the bits with whatever we make from that?”

A grimace twisted the vice president’s face. He glared at Silver Spoon, who motioned him to keep drinking. If the herbal blend didn’t agree with Truffle Shuffle, too bad. If he wanted his throat to heal faster, he’d have to deal with it.

After another dirty look in Silver’s direction, he wrote, “Could work with support. Council gets to sit in on school board meetings, but we don’t say much.”

“But last year, only you two sat on council,” President Pipsqueak pointed out. “It probably looked like nopony cared about stuff that ‘appened with the school, so maybe…” As he glanced between the other foals, a smile dawned across his face. “If everypony shows how much we all want a new playground, the school board will have to see how important it is!”

“Yeah!” Twist banged her hoof on the table. “Power to the ponieth—that’th what democrathy ith all about!”

That sounded more like what mob rule was all about, but Silver conceded Twist’s point. “Even if Mrs. Rich heads the board, the other members could still outvote her. I’m sure we can guarantee Miss Cheerilee’s vote, so we’ll need to convince the other two.”

Truffle nodded without enthusiasm and slid his note pad across the table. “Better than nothing. Let’s try it.”

The eyeball cracked between The Dink’s teeth. Gum oozed from the pupil and mashed into a sticky red pulp. “Mm, raspberry. You bet I can, Spoons.” Her hoof toyed with the bag of novelty gumballs Silver had slipped under the desk. “In fact, I’ll do you one better—yo, Shades! Heads up!” The Dink magicked a paper bird over the rows and onto Shady Daze’s desk. “He can run off a flyer or two, I bet.”
“Thanks.” Silver Spoon motioned towards the desk next to her, where Pip chatted up Rumble, Snips, and Snails. “Our president thanks you, too.”

Last year’s seating rearrangement had been a blessing in disguise. Silver sat adjacent to two of the most popular fillies in school and beside the new student pony president. A web of acquaintances and friends-of-friends rippled from here to every desk in the classroom. If needed, Silver could ferry notes across the aisles in seconds.

*Just like real estate.* Silver waved at Shady’s nod of acknowledgment. *Location, location, location.*

Beside Shady’s desk, a pair of pink ears twitched and perked. Diamond Tiara lifted her head from her desk, following the trajectory of Dinky’s paper glider.

The two fillies made eye contact.

Diamond shifted higher in her seat, chewing her bottom lip and tapping her polished forehooves together.

Silver stared back.

Diamond’s ears drooped. She attempted a smile.

Without breaking the stare, Silver Spoon opened her notebook and pulled her textbook out of her desk. She felt the eyes of the classroom upon them. The stare went arctic.

Diamond Tiara folded first. Her eyes darted down and across the rows, scouting a path to Silver’s desk. No deal; other foals walled her from all sides. If she wanted to talk, Diamond either had to talk over somepony’s head or squeeze behind Berry Pinch. Indeed, Silver couldn’t have picked a better location. A pencil bounced between Diamond’s teeth while she ripped a sheet of paper from her notebook. Did she plan a paper glider of her own, or expect the class to pass it along?

*No.* Silver Spoon narrowed her eyes with an unmistakable frown. *Whatever it is, the answer is no.*

“Hey, Spoons.” A red bubble ballooned and popped by Silver’s ear. “How you holding up over there?”

“Never better.” Silver didn’t break the stare until Diamond Tiara flattened her ears and turned away. “But I’d keep that gum out of sight if I were you; Miss Cheerilee will be here any second.

The gumballs quietly slipped into Dinky’s giant coat pocket. “Hm.” She scratched a sweaty spot under her collar, glancing between the front and middle rows and never lingering on anypony too long. “Good call.”

Whispers wriggled through the rows. Foals shifted in their seats for a glimpse at two halves of a cracked friendship, armed with “looking for my pencil” or some other excuse in case anypony called them out on their rubbernecking. If she didn’t need the student body’s goodwill today, Silver Spoon would have done exactly that. Ponies needed to mind their own stupid business and do their schoolwork.

Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle either didn’t have the tact or the subtlety to pretend not to stare. Scootaloo seemed too busy whispering in their ears to stare at anypony. Didn’t those three have better things to do, like getting their cutie marks in lava surfing?

Berry Pinch turned around, one hoof lazily dangling over the back of her chair. A peppermint stick—one of Twist’s incentives—bounced between her teeth. “Silver Spoon.” When Silver doubled
down on skimming her geography notes, Pinch knocked on the desk. “Hey. I’m talkin’ to you. Don’t you know it’s rude to ignore ponies?”

“What is it, Pinch? I’m trying to study.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s last week’s Badlands notes, right?”

“Oh!” Silver blinked a couple of times. “Um, yes—yes, it is.” She flipped her notebook around to show bullet points from Cheerilee’s lecture. A map of the scarce landmarks in San Palomino Desert decorated the margins, complete with cacti, coyotes, and mysterious temples.

“I guess you want to copy them for next week’s test?” Though Silver had no clue why Pinch wanted Silver’s help, of all foals.

“Hey Pinchers, check it out!” The Dink pulled a grapefruit-sized parasprite made entirely of chewed gum out of her pocket. She spat out her fresh red wad of gum and added it to the pile. “The eyes are almost done, see?”

…Okay, maybe Silver had some idea why. Dinky’s findings on local monsters, magical anomalies, and Twist’s auntie left no room in her notebook for schoolwork.

“Aw, that’s radical, Dinkster!” The unicorns bumped hooves. “At this rate, you’ll get the wings done before the new moon.” Turning back to Silver’s notes, Berry Pinch pulled out her own. “Nah, I wanted to double-check my stuff is all.”

Silver slid the notebook with a shrug. “Knock yourself out.”

“Good morning, class!” On the doormat, Miss Cheerilee wrung the water out of her mane. The ceiling hissed and rattled under a cloudburst of rain and hail. “Ha, that’s one good reason to get to school on time, right? I hope any tardy ponies know how to swim to class.”

Only Truffle Shuffle chuckled at Cheerilee’s little joke.

“Rumble? Cotton Cloudy?” Their teacher smiled at the two damp pegasi. They’d probably helped herd the clouds in this morning. “Thank you again for asking the weather team to postpone the storm until after the election.”

Cotton’s feathers fluffed until she looked like a happy, soggy cauliflower. “You’re welcome!”

“Y-yeah…” Rumble sank into his chair with a shy little smile. Thunder clapped hard. He gripped the edge of his desk for dear life. “No p-problem, Miss Cheerilee.”

“Speaking of which, we had an amazing turnout yesterday—the biggest I’ve seen since…” Cheerilee tapped her chin. “Well, I can’t even remember! For those of you who couldn’t join us on Thursday, I would like to introduce you all to our newest Student Pony President, Pipsqueak!”

Pip stood atop his booster and waved to the applauding classroom. “I jus’ want to say thanks again to the Cutie Mark Crusaders for helping me with my campaign.”

“YAY PIPSQUEAK!” Somepony really needed to explain the concept of indoor voices to those three.

“And let’s hear it for our two runner-ups, who ran a great race and held an exciting and unique debate!” One had to admire Cheerilee’s skill for lying through her teeth in the name of her students’ egos. Certain incumbents’ bloated selfish egos didn’t need a boost, but whatever. “Truffle Shuffle
and Diamond Tiara really gave it their all.”

Cheerilee’s applause echoed alone in the schoolhouse. After a moment, the weak patter of student applause joined it, along with murmurs of “Did you know the tattletale was even running?” and “Still can’t believe she did that,” and “Did you see the way Silver Spoon looked at her?”

In the top corner of the class, a little tiara sank behind an open textbook with an audible groan.

Silver folded her hooves and gave the teacher her full attention as any good little student ought.

Everypony who voted yesterday, it turned out, would get extra credit to bump up their lowest test grade. Even better, the candidates and their campaign runners received an additional ten point boost on the upcoming social studies exam.

Nice. Silver Spoon preened. *It’s been a while since I got a hundred-and-ten to show off.*

“With that settled,” said Miss Cheerilee, “let’s get to today’s lesson, shall we? Yesterday, we talked about the cities of southwestern Equestria, which includes…?”

Peachy Pie raised her hoof. “Dodge City?”

“That’s southeast, Peachy, but good try. Anypony else?” Cheerilee nodded. “Silver Spoon?”

“Las Pegasus floats fifty miles north and two miles high of San Palomino desert.” Silver flipped her braid with a prim little smile. “It’s a tourist city, and they have more imports than exports.”

“Yeah,” added Pip, “cause whatever happens in Pegasus stays in Pegasus!” The class laughed.

“Oh! Oh!” Apple Bloom waved both hooves in the air. “Applewood’s in the southwest, too; it’s a little ways outside Las Pegasus, nestled right in the big hills.”

At the mention of Applewood, Diamond Tiara gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut. If she kept that up, Cheerilee would get on her case for sleeping in class.

“Wonderful, Apple Bloom—you too, Silver Spoon. I’m glad to see you all turning into such talented geographers. Let’s see how all of this looks on the map, shall we?” Without looking, Cheerilee pulled down the scroll behind her. Instead of the usual map of Equestria, there was only a blank white sheet. “As you can see, plenty of landmarks can be found—oh, yes, Tornado Bolt?”

“I think you forgot to put the map up, Miss Cheerilee.”

“Oh? Did I?” Cheerilee tilted her head with a perplexed squint. “Hmm, that doesn’t sound right. Are you sure?”

“Yes!” cried the class. Foals pointed at the wall calling, “It’s gone!” and “Look behind you, don’t you see it?” and “I bet burglars stole it!” and “Miss Cheerilee, maybe you should think about getting thome glatheth?”

Their teacher turned with a fake gasp of surprise. “You’re right, class! The map’s completely disappeared. Huh, whadda you know?” She put a hoof on her hip, tisking as if somepony had left their wet towels on the sink. “Well, I suppose we’ll just need to draw a new one!”

Silver didn’t like the sound of that. It sounded suspiciously like they’d have to—

“Pair up, everypony!” Cheerilee did a quick head count. “Featherweight’s not here, so we’ll need one group of three—”
The Crusaders pushed their desks together.

“—but I don’t think that’ll be a problem. Let’s get to it, everypony!”

Crud. Silver scanned the foals adjacent to her: The Dink and Berry Pinch, Sunny Duze and Peachy Pie, Cotton and Tornado Bolt, Pip and Shady Daze. All sets of besties and guaranteed partners. That cut more than half of Silver’s options.

Diamond Tiara rose from her desk. She’d be at Silver’s in seconds.

Truffle Shuffle and Twist had already paired up—not that Silver could have reached them in time anyway. Okay... okay, other options?

She could flee all the way to Rumble’s desk up front, but that would be too obvious. Plus, he sat dangerously close to Diamond who’d be here any moment and then Silver really couldn’t avoid talking to her anymore and she couldn’t even say no because it’d be rude and not many partners were left, and besides, Silver Spoon didn’t even really know if she really wanted to say no or what to say at all.

“Hey, you got a partner yet, Silver?” Berry Pinch snapped off her peppermint stick and stuck the rest behind her ear for later. “You can work with me if you wanna. The Dink’s already decided to work with Rumble, right Dink?”

This was clearly news to Dinky Doo, but she took it in stride. “Sure have.”

“Sounds good, Berry Pinch.” Silver Spoon made a point of not listening to the pause of polished hoofsteps, nor their slow retreat back to the front row. She didn’t look up when Diamond asked if she could work without a partner, and Silver certainly didn’t care how sad she sounded.

“Hmph. I don’t know what she’s moping about. As I recall, Diamond Tiara would rather ignore everypony and do it all herself anyway.” Silver’s muzzle curled into a sneer. “What’s she need a partner for?”

Berry Pinch aligned their desks together with a satisfying clack. “I dunno. Helps to have another set of hooves to draw stuff, I guess?” Her magic flipped Silver’s notes to the page with the San Palomino map. She stared at it and clicked her tongue. “I’m doing that part, by the way, ‘cause you draw about as good as you throw a hoofball.”

“I do not!”

“I dunno if you think being from the big city gives you some kinda edge in the art world, but we ain’t doing abstract Coltlocks or Pinto Picasso over here.” Her hoof swept the desert border. “This looks like an amoeba pooping another amoeba—and what’s up with this fountain in the corner? Fountains don’t belong in the desert.”

“It is a cactus, thank you.” Silver Spoon snorted at Pinch’s snickering. “Oh, like you can do so much better.”

A hoard of stubby crayons, faded markers, and smudged inkwells clacked on Berry’s desk while Silver arranged the poster paper Cheerilee had given them. “Uh, yeah I can—that’s why I’m doing it.” Teeth gleamed in Pinch’s playful smirk. “I thought you could’ve figured that out on your own, Little Miss Smarty Smart Let’s-Name-All-The-Imports-Of-Los-Pegasus Smarty-pants.”

“Whatever, less work for me. I’d rather plot out the cities and write the information, anyway.” They’d been assigned the mid-north, along with the mountains and city-states clustered within it.
Silver rooted through her notebook for the Neighagara Falls page. If she remembered right, Cloudsdale parked itself mid-north of the Falls when not delivering winter or gathering reservoir water. Hollow Shades tucked itself in the mountains south of that.

However, she couldn’t do much of anything until Berry Pinch finished drawing the borders, so Silver Spoon rested her head in her hooves and watched. “Not bad.” Excellent, actually, but Canterlot would crumble before Silver admitted it.

Pinch grinned. “Told ya. I draw all the comics and illustrations in the paper, too.”

“Aren’t those, like, literally stick figures?”

“It’s called having a style. Try it sometime.”

It must have been hard to talk and steady a pencil with magic at the same time. Sweat beaded on Berry Pinch’s neck, and she squinted with effort. “I used to draw all the posters and blueprints and stuff for Diamond, too, before she decided to be the biggest butt in the universe blowing her butt trumpet all over the place.” The landmark waterfalls rippled under her sigh. “That’s the thing about butts: you get close to them, you try to help and then the butt does what it’s meant to do and then you’re sitting in the middle of an outhouse without an umbrella.”

Silver Spoon wrinkled her nose. “Ew.”

“You’re telling me.” Berry Pinch paused. The metaphor seemed to have gotten away from her. “Anyway, that’s sorta why I didn’t get mad at you about the Press thing. The filly’s stubborn and mean, and sometimes she gets madder than the drunks Mom kicks out. But Diamond Tiara’s not dumb. I knew she’d accept the truth eventually, and then you’d get as good as I got.” She lashed her raggedy tail and shot a glance at Diamond working alone on the Griffish Isles. “My mom says it’s not worth it to get mad about this kind of stuff, cause everypony gets what they deserve in the end.”

“Do they?” asked Silver Spoon.

“I dunno, but that’s what she says.” Pinch wiped her forehead and set the pencil down. “I hope she doesn’t screw up your student council thingy. I really want my swings back.”

“Yeah, but if I know Di, she’s got a full schedule of moping this afternoon. I’m not worried. Are you finished drawing?”

Berry Pinch nodded. “Still needs to be inked, but we can do that part together. You can draw the rivers, too, if want. Here’s some blue.”

The stub of cerulean crayon barely fit in Silver’s mouth, much less left anything to draw with. “That’s okay, you can do it. Pip thinks we’ll be okay if we can get at least half the class to show up to the school board meeting.” Silver glanced at Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle working on the Ponyville and Canterlot section of the map. “Although we don’t need everypony to show up.”

Following Silver’s line of sight, Pinch raised an eyebrow. “So, what the hay’s your deal with the Crusaders, Silver Snob? They didn’t do nothing to you, and besides, Shady says that Rumble says that Scootaloo says that you guys have a truce going on.” She nudged the inkwell in Silver’s direction.

“Yes, but that has nothing to do with liking them.” Besides, Apple Bloom had all but disintegrated the truce in yesterday’s debate. “Some ponies get under your coat, that’s all. Sweetie Belle’s okay, but the other two are so… so…” Silver stamped her little hoof. “Rude!”
Berry Pinch stared.

“Well, they are.” Silver Spoon dipped her calligraphy pen and began labeling Cloudsdale’s imports.

“Silver, The Dink put an entire tarantula in her mouth once.” Berry Pinch nodded at Silver’s skeptical expression. “I saw it. The spider freaked out and shedded all these weird hairs in her mouth and she had to go to the hospital and Fluttershy got real mad at us.”

Dinky Doo punched the air. “Worth it!”

“That’s different. Dink’s not rude, she’s…” The calligraphy pen rolled between Silver’s teeth. “…eccentric.” And way, way less annoying. Dinky never went out of her way to throw a wrench in Silver’s plans.

The pen went limp in her jaw. Silver set it down and rubbed her withers. They felt sore again. “Okay, look. Maybe the Crusaders aren’t the worst ponies in the world—or even the school—but I’d rather not deal with them. When they’re not stirring up trouble, then they’re dragging me into Diamond’s trouble and right now, I’d rather…”

For some stupid reason, Silver’s throat grew tight and her breath drew short and that didn’t even make sense because Diamond’s trouble wasn’t Silver’s problem anymore. She didn’t care at all—at ALL—about Diamond Tiara or whatever stupid quagmire she’d pushed herself into. She didn’t.

“Pinch, I’d just rather not, okay?”

“M’kay.”

When Silver Spoon finished labeling Cloudsdale’s exports, Berry Pinch dipped her own quill and went to work inking the map. For a scruffy little jerk with no manners, she drew beautifully clean lines. “So, I’ve got a dentist appointment, and I can’t get to the board meeting today, but I’ve been wondering.”

Silver pricked her ears.

“What are you going to do about Spoiled Rich?”

The fountain pen balanced precariously between Silver’s teeth as she traced the border of Hollow Shades. Little flecks of ink smudged her nose. “My best,” she said.

“The rain messed it up.”
“—and now I need to sort it out again.” Silver spread pomade over the colt’s mane until it smoothed. Inside, the clock read a quarter after three. Fifteen minutes left. “Who’s the foal allowed to speak, Pip?”

“Whoever’s holding the white stick.” Pipsqueak flattened himself against the ground. What, did he want grass stains on his belly, too? “Silver Spoon, is all this really necessary? It’s only hair; it’s got nothing to do with the playground plan.”

On the sidelines, somepony snickered. Silver spared a glance towards the broken merry-go-round, where Snips, Snails, and Button Mash watched them. She rolled her eyes. Colts. “It’s got everything to do with it, Pip. How can anypony believe you’ve got your plan straight if you can’t even keep your mane together? Appearances matter, Mister President. A lot.”

“Well, I think that’s stupid.” Pip crossed his forelegs, twitching his tail while the other colts kept snickering. “Good hair doesn’t fix roundabouts. It shouldn’t matter at all.”

“Maybe not,” Silver said, “but it does, so we have to accommodate like ladies and gentlecolts.”

“Blech, you sound like my sister.”

“Good.” Against Mrs. Rich, a handsome figure could be Pip’s only shot. If she didn’t approve of Berry Pinch—who had scruffy split ends and dirty hooves at worst—then she surely wouldn’t approve of Pip’s mane.

Silver Spoon stepped back to look him over. “Better. Could use some flair.” She cupped her hooves around her muzzle and called, “Anypony have a spare bowtie?” Nopony did, of course.

“Yeah, Pip. Bowties look great on puppets.” Diamond stalked past without looking at them. “You’ll be so handsome when Silver cuts your strings.”

“Oh. Did somepony say something?” Silver Spoon smoothed Pip’s mane around his ears and glanced at the sky. “Must’ve been the wind. Or some other blowhard.”

Diamond stomped off with a halfhearted snort.

Twist came to join them, Truffle Shuffle following close behind. “Tho, uh. Should we be worried about her?”

From a distance, Silver caught the weak anger flaring from Diamond’s voice; flames with no heat. The Cutie Mark Crusaders had caught her by the schoolhouse fence. “No. Diamond Tiara has enough to deal with. She’ll leave us alone.”

A twinge of sympathy nipped at Silver Spoon. She didn’t know what Apple Bloom’s crew had planned, but it had to boil down to either vengeance or pity. It couldn’t possibly be anything else. For Di’s sake and the shreds of dignity she had left, Silver hoped it was vengeance.

Forget it. It’s not your problem. Silver Soon adjusted her pearls, polished her glasses, and swallowed the lump bubbling up her throat.

Inside Ponyville Schoolhouse, wood creaked and scraped and groaned across the floor. Voices mumbled amongst themselves. The school board had arrived.

A healthy sample of foals hung around what remained of the playground, with no sign of leaving soon. “Look at all the thupport we got!” Twist waved at Tornado Bolt sitting on the roof.
The president and vice president exchanged hopeful looks. Secretary Silver smoothed Pipsqueak’s mane again and peeked through the window.

School desks lined along the wall to form a bullpen in the center. The council’s four small desks stood opposite of two long ones. Tall Order spoke with Miss Cheerilee beside the left table while she set up a water pitcher and a plate of crackers.

A yellow unicorn stallion with a sensible haircut—Pencil Pusher, Truffle had called him—had already seated himself at the far right of the desks. He flipped through a novel and looked like he’d rather be rearranging his socks. Mrs. Spoiled Rich took a seat beside him. Ears twitching, she turned her head towards the window.

Silver Spoon gulped and ducked out of sight.

“O-kay!” Miss Cheerilee stepped out of the schoolhouse, smiling the same up-and-at-’em-try-not-to-die smile from standardized test week. “We’re all ready for you, student council.” She smiled at the massing crowd. “Goodness, I didn’t think there’d be so many of you here. You know, only the student government is allowed to attend the meeting.”

“We know, Miss Cheerilee, but everypony felt so strongly about the playground, they all wanted to come out and show their support.” Pip grinned to his classmates. “Right, guys?”

“Yeah!” the crowd roared back.

With a crisp new manecut and optimism practically radiating off of his coat, Pipsqueak looked every bit the students’ president. There could be no doubt he had total faith in his proposal, his council, and the knowledge that everything would work out in the end.

Watching him, Silver’s jittery nerves settled and steeled. She grinned back. “Let’s go get our playground.”

It became devastatingly clear they were not going to get their playground. Not a full one, at least.

Silver Spoon ran both hooves through her mane, staring into the budget book’s wasteland of figures, footnotes, and technical jargon.

Truffle Shuffle squinted at it as if his eyelids could squeeze sense out of numbers like juice from a grapefruit.

Pipsqueak’s mane clung to his neck in sticky strings. He stank of sweated out pomade. Chewing his bottom lip, he turned to the class secretary. “Well? Find anything?”

“No,” Silver whispered. Lines upon lines upon lines of microscopic text tangled together in a mass of black and white. She couldn’t find a single context clue to get bearings. Numbers—dates, money, populations, taxes, and Luna knew what else—blurred until her head hurt. “I mean, maybe… maybe I could, but I don’t understand any of this.”

At best, she recognized a word or two from Diamond Tiara’s pep talks. “I’m sorry, Pip. Maybe if we could’ve seen it before the meeting I could have gotten a dictionary and worked something out, but…” Silver rubbed the bridge of her muzzle.

“That’s alright, Silver Spoon, I know you tried.” Pip looked to Councilpony Twist. “How ‘bout you?”
Twist pushed her glasses up and wrinkled her muzzle. “I think I kiiiiinda get it?” She tapped the rightmost column on the left page. “If we thretch a little bit, the thchool budget’th a little under forty thousand?” Frowning, she checked the work in her head. “Thirty foalth attending, twelve hundred for each…yup, forty. Right?”

Truffle Shuffle nodded with a “close enough” gesture.

Mrs. Spoiled Rich watched from her bench. “You wanted to see the Ponyville Schoolhouse Budget; there it is in black and white.” She shrugged. “If you can find room for new playground equipment in there, be my guest.”

The president lifted the birch. “Excuse me, but there wouldn’t be a simpler version of this for us to read, would there?”

Tall Order shook his head. “I’m afraid not, son.” He didn’t speak unkindly, but a dash of patronization peppered his voice. “It’s been written specifically for the school board and town legislation. Nopony quite expected children to be reading this material, you understand.”

Truffle slid his notepad over: “Children, nothing. I don’t think most adults understand this stuff.”

Silver agreed. Even if they’d gotten the budget book early, nothing would have come of it. Not without a prerequisite in legalese or number jargon.

“I don’t see a reason why we couldn’t write a simplified version of the budget book.” Miss Cheerilee examined her own copy, though she didn’t seem especially encouraged with the contents. “If I put one together tonight, we could reconvene on the issue?”

Pencil Pusher sighed. “Cheerilee, we don’t need to schedule a new meeting out of rotation just for a couple of swings we already know we can’t afford.” He tapped his watch to check if it worked properly. “Honestly, I don’t know why this is even a discussion.”

Pip reviewed Truffle’s notes and lifted the birch to speak. “But don’t we ‘ave over thirty thousand in the budget as is? Couldn’t that at least buy a new slide and swing set? Maybe some new balls?”

“New balls, maybe.” Tall Order pushed his spectacles higher on his face. “But I’m afraid your calculations are a little off, son. Thirty-eight thousand was the original budget at the start of the schoolyear, but we’re now approaching the mid-point. In a good year, at least third of the budget’s gone by now.” His shoulders sagged. “Moneywise, it has not been a good year. The Tirek incident also meant repairs to the roof, the siding, the fences…”

“Exactly,” said Mrs. Rich. “Not to mention the cost of the usual necessities: updated textbooks, salaries, groundskeeping, art materials, school supplies for foals who can’t afford their own, transportation fees for field trips, and a debt we still need to pay off.” She shrugged off the council’s visible despair. “You asked a grown-up question and got a grown-up answer. That, Mister President, is the simplified budget. Take it or leave it.”

Something tapped Silver under the desk. Watching from the corner of his eye, Truffle pressed a note in the frog of her hoof.

One word unfolded in Silver Spoon’s lap: “FILIBUSTER.”

“What?” Silver pressed both hooves to her chest. “But—you don’t mean me?”

Twist and Truffle Shuffle nodded grimly.
“Pip’s the president, why can’t he do it?” As one, the secretary and vice president turned towards Pipsqueak. The poor colt trembled so hard Silver thought she heard bones rattling. “Point taken, but what’s a filibuster supposed to do? Let us die slower?”

Truffle snorted in frustration and flipped the note over. “We need outside help. Get Crusaders. NOW.” The note slid across Silver’s desk to Pip’s.

Pipsqueak blinked at him, more than a little lost, but he settled himself and gave a wobbly nod.

Truffle nodded back sharp.

What on Celestia’s yellow sun can the Crusaders do to save the playground proposal? Give moral support? Rally the foals outside? Burn down the school? Silver Spoon stared at the twenty pages of bureaucratic red tape on her desk. Whatever it is, it’ll be big.

Normally, Silver fine-toothed these issues with diplomacy and tact, but she couldn’t get traction in this jungle of policy and numbers. Jungles needed a machete. And we need extra time to fetch one. “I’m on it,” she whispered. “Go, Pip.”

“Right!” He hit the ground running.

Pencil Pusher raised his eyebrows—the most engaged he’d been all day—at the fleeing president. “Seems we’re ending our meeting early.”

“He’th taking a quick bathroom break,” Twist explained. “He’ll be back in no time if we wait a little bit.”

“No need for that, I think.” Spoiled Rich eyed the meeting’s minutes. “We’ve covered all points of the matter, so if nopony has anything further to add—”

Silver Spoon raised the white birch.

“Ah. The school board recognizes Class Secretary Sterling Silver Spoon.” Mrs. Rich turned to her, the portrait of glacial professionalism. Danger lurked beneath that stare, immeasurable and impassable. “You may proceed.”

A sweaty coat itched under Silver’s pearls. “Um.”

Miss Cheerilee smiled at her. “Did you have another idea for the budget problem, perhaps?” Bless that mare.

“Yes, ma’am, we did.” Breathe and plow through it. Buy time. Don’t change the world, just buy time. “The student council discussed this issue at length earlier today, and we believe that we may have arrived at a solution. Due to current and unforeseen circumstances, as the pony next in rank, I will be speaking on the council’s behalf.”

Her shoulders relaxed at the sight of Tall Order leaning forward on the bench. Bigger words always got adults’ attention, and more importantly, stretched minutes.

“Our vice president, you see, is currently recovering from a tonsil removal and cannot speak for any substantial length of time, and our standing president has taken a...temporary leave. Under normal circumstances, it would be the duty of the student treasurer to cover issues of bits and budgets.” Silver Spoon met Spoiled Rich’s gaze head on. “However, she has declined to attend.”

The head of the school board flicked an ear. “Has she?”
“I don’t see her here, ma’am.” Silver blinked first. “Do you?”

Spoiled Rich slightly narrowed her eyes, watching Silver Spoon the way one would watch a viper in a crib. Father held the same expression when he spoke of Manehattan’s crime rings and the importance of not talking to strangers. A line had been crossed. Maybe several lines. Yet, Mrs. Rich had never looked more relaxed. Not happy, but wholly unsurprised. She’d expected this.

No fixing it now. Silver could only push forward. “The Student Council of Ponyville Schoolhouse, District Four-Seven-Four-Two-Eight proposes another fundraiser to...” She pawed through her mental thesaurus. “…to support expenditures for new playground equipment.” She turned to her fellow council ponies, hoping she’d used “expenditures” the right way. “If we use the—five hundred?”

Twist nodded. “Five hundred and thirty-five altogether.”

“If we combine the five hundred sixty-five bits from last year’s fundraisers with the, um, proceeds from a new fundraiser, we, the students, could provide the bits to help pay for replacement equipment.” Silver grinned to drive the point home. “After all, it’s our playground; who better to fund it than us?”

The members of the school board looked at each other, tugging at their collars and clearing their throats.

“I’m not saying it would be easy, of course,” Silver quickly added, “and maybe we’d need two or three events to pull it off, but we could do it. We did it for the window repairs, after all.”

“No doubt you could, Madam Secretary,” said Mrs. Rich. “You were the one who championed the bake sale last year. To great success, as I recall.” Her face stayed placid, and Silver swore the temperature dropped two degrees. “Even more successful than The Foal Free Press that year, in fact.”

The tip of Cheerilee’s tail tapped against the floor. Her eyes wandered between the class secretary and the head of the school board. She frowned.

Tall Order cleared his throat. “Young lady, I know you have good intentions—we all want to help this schoolhouse, believe me—but you really have to understand.” He unfolded his hooves with a sigh. “Student councils simply aren’t responsible for these sorts of projects. Dances and field trips, sure, but… Do you realize how many bits it takes to order and install a brand new playground?”

“No, sir.” Silver tapped her forehooves together. “Not exactly.”

Tall Order wrote down two numbers. He passed it to Cheerilee, who delivered it to the student council. “An estimate range,” he gently told them. “Rounded down.”

The council looked at it.

Truffle Shuffle’s ears went completely flat.

“That,” Twist whispered, “is a lot more than five hundred.”

Silver put a hoof to her mouth and nodded.

“I’m sorry, children, but with the current budget, it’s not feasible to—”

“Tall Order, don’t be so discouraging. If the student council really wants to try and raise the money, I
think we should let them.” Mrs. Rich’s smile bordered on pleasant. “It would be a good learning experience.”

The five digit numbers turned Silver’s stomach. “We couldn’t.” Even if they held fundraisers every month and pulled in five hundred every time, it would take six years to meet their goal. They’d all graduate before anypony saw a new slide.

Best case scenario, they could get the equipment piece by piece, but Pip promised a whole playground, not just one teeter totter. That would mean everypony shared one thing, and under constant strain, that thing would wear out within the semester. Silver Spoon didn’t even want to consider the fights over who got to play on what in their small amount of recess time. It could be worse than getting nothing at all.

Either way, their playground plan nosedived into a volcano. True to Diamond’s word, the president’s check had bounced into the stratosphere. Silver’s own words echoed with a bitter aftertaste: This kind of thing is way over any foal’s head. At least, any foal who didn’t already know how to budget big numbers, spoke fluent business jargon, and studied under Tall Order all summer.

The branch strained in Silver’s grip. “We can’t raise that kind of money by ourselves—no pony can!” Young ladies didn’t raise their voices to their elders, especially not when one’s success entirely depended on said elders. But Spoiled Rich wouldn’t and couldn’t be convinced, no matter how politely Silver spoke. “This is impossible, and you know it! I-I mean, we—” Despairing, she spread her hooves to her fellow council ponies. “We’re eleven, for Celestia’s sake! I don’t understand, Mrs. Rich. Why did you let us try when you knew we couldn’t do it?” She sniffed back tears of frustration. “Why are you doing this to us?”

Spoiled Rich rolled her eyes with a put-upon sigh. “Children. They think everything is always about them.”

Cheerilee’s hooves dug into the desk and she pushed herself up with a glare to melt the Frozen North to puddles. “Let me remind you, Mrs. Rich, that this board meeting determines the fate of the school and the quality of education—including the emotional and physical education—these foals receive.” The water jug shook with the force of her hoof upon the table. “It has everything to do with them.”

“True, but that doesn’t mean anything about this is, you know, personal.” Pencil Pusher folded his supplies into his attaché case. “Look, the budget is what it is. The emotional kid with the glasses has a point: this was a waste of everypony’s time.” He flicked his short tail and checked his watch again. “Don’t know why we let foals in a board meeting in the first place. You kids should be out playing or something.”

“We might be if we had a playground,” Twist shot back.

Truffle Shuffle swallowed a snicker.

Mrs. Rich regarded them both with mild irritation. “If I remember right, the student pony president—who’s run out of his own meeting and still hasn’t returned—was the one who insisted upon approaching the school board with his playground idea. Furthermore, it was his class secretary who insisted on arguing a budget we already explained was unworkable. We didn’t do a thing to you. However.” She cast a venomous glance. “If Secretary Silver feels so strongly about a new playground, she is more than welcome to fund it.”

Silver’s eyes fell to the floor.
“In that case, I don’t know what else can be done. I think it’s time to call it, don’t you?” Mrs. Rich shrugged. “All those in favor of the new Ponyville Schoolhouse playground equipment?”

One single, firm “Aye” from Miss Cheerilee. She offered the council a soft, consoling smile.

“All opposed?”

A round of neighs from Tall Order, Pencil Pusher, and Mrs. Spoiled Rich. The meeting adjourned.

Sometime within the past two hours, the crowd of supportive students had all but evaporated. Perhaps asking everypony to sit through a bunch of dull legislation before anypony breathed the word “playground” had been asking too much.

Looking over the ponies who had remained—Snips, Snails, Button Mash, and a few low-tier newbies with nowhere better to be—Silver Spoon didn’t know if that was a good thing or not. They swarmed the council ponies as they exited the schoolhouse.

“So, um, uh…” Snails searched the crowd, waiting for somepony else to take the lead instead. Nopony did. “What happened?”

Snips tried to look over Silver’s withers. “Yeah and where’d Pip go?”

“Here! I’m right here!” Pipsqueak stumbled onto school grounds, gasping for breath and sweat steaming off his spotted coat. “Am I back in time?”

“They had to hear it sometime. ‘I stretched as long as I could, Pip, but… no. The meeting ended a few seconds ago.’ They could have stretched a few minutes longer if Silver hadn’t gotten so upset. Why hadn’t she done a regular filibuster and talked about the inferiority of tea bags over tea leaves for an hour? ‘We didn’t get it.’ A collective groan sagged through the small crowd. ‘I’m sorry, Pip. Sorry, everypony.’”

“Oh. Well, you all did your best, I’ll bet.” Pip rubbed the back of his neck with another little sigh. “But we knew it’d be a long shot; you lot told me so.” He perked up a little. “Good try anyway, yeah?”

About as good as a bunch of eleven-year-olds without any real power could do. Silver pursed her lips. Might as well thank a bug for trying to lift a castle. The colt meant well, she supposed. “Thanks. What happened with the Crusaders?”

The president suddenly took keen interest in the topography of the clouds. “Yeeaaaaaaaahhhhh, about that…”

Twist tilted her head. “Couldn’t you find ‘em at their clubhouth?”

“No, they were there.” The hoofbeats got louder. “But they weren’t exactly alone.”

Diamond Tiara came plowing into the schoolyard like somepony lit her tail on fire. Sheens of sweat glistened on her flanks, but she didn’t look half the mess Pip did. Her hocks trembled beneath her; had she run all the way from Sweet Apple Acres? She glanced at Silver Spoon, then the schoolhouse, Pip, and back at Silver again. “Everypony, I have an announcement.”

Silver wheeled on Pip with clenched teeth. “What is she doing here?” Truthfully, she didn’t think Diamond knew the answer to that either. For somepony who’d stormed in with an announcement,
the filly ran awfully low on words.

“It’s not my fault!” Pipsqueak slid between Silver Spoon and Cheerilee, watching Diamond as if she’d bite him any moment. “She overheard the budget problem and ran on ahead of the Crusaders. I only even beat her here myself ’cause I hitched a ride from Rumble’s brother.” He shot Silver a defensive frown. “How’s I supposed to know she’d be at the clubhouse?”

Fair enough; even at the peak of Diamond’s anti-Crusader stints, she never stepped on their turf. The one time she did, it had been Babs Seed’s idea. “I guess it’s not really your fault, Pip.” Silver sighed and side-eyed Diamond hovering in the background. “You’re here to finish us off, I guess?”

Diamond lashed her tail close and didn’t answer.

“You might as well go ahead. Your mother already did most of the work for you, Madame President.” The whole thing tied up in a neat little package. It wouldn’t surprise Silver Spoon in the least if the two of them planned the school board fiasco from the start. “Easy win, like she said.”

Diamond Tiara’s ears shot up twitching. “What?” Staring Silver in the face, she drew herself up and took a small step forward. For a quiet moment, she scanned the schoolyard, the paltry number of classmates, the crestfallen student council, and an oddly un-perky Miss Cheerilee. Her eyes narrowed and she twitched her ears again. “What do you mean ‘did most of the work for—’”

“DIAMOND TIARA!” Apple Bloom’s cry rocked the schoolyard. She caught up on Diamond’s shoulder, with Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle right behind. “Think hard about the choice you’re makin’ right now!”

The volume was hardly necessary, but it caught the attention of everypony on school grounds who hadn’t already been listening. Truffle poked his head out of a window, sipping the tea from this morning.

“We know you’re better than this, Diamond Tiara,” said Scootaloo. “You can be a better pony.”

Silver tensed. **Something’s weird here.** She might have expected this busybodying from Sweetie Belle, maybe even Apple Bloom, but since when did Scootaloo give half a horse apple about Diamond Tiara? “What in Equestria happened at that clubhouse?”

Twist scratched her head. “No idea. Lookit Apple Bloom, though. She lookth real worried.”

“Not surprised. They managed Pip’s campaign, remember?” That explained it. They had the biggest stakes in the playground plan aside from the council ponies. Silver couldn’t blame them for trying to stop Diamond from kicking over the board meeting’s rubble, but it was still only rubble. “I don’t think there’s much they can do at this point, th—”

“Diamond Tiara.”

Two words from Spoiled Rich split the crowd in half. The scent of groundings and lectures drifted through the air. The student council shrank against Cheerilee’s legs, but Mrs. Rich hardly noticed them.

“I just happened to be here for the school board meeting, and *this* is what I see when we adjourn?” She tipped her nose in the air and passed the Crusaders with the barest minimum of her attention. The three fillies blinked back at her, perplexed. “My daughter associating with confused, insignificant, lowlifes?”

A thoughtful frown crossed Diamond Tiara’s face. Her eyes fixed upon Spoiled Rich before
wandering to the student council, the Cutie Mark Crusaders, back to Spoiled, and then down, down to Diamond’s hooves. They stayed at her hooves.

Mrs. Rich led the way to the fence, with Diamond trailing several steps behind. “Socializing with their kind is not how you move up in Equestria.”

At “their kind,” all three Crusaders turned to look at their bare flanks. Their confusion vanished. Sweetie Belle’s head snapped around as if she’d been struck and Scootaloo’s stink-eye could sour a dairy farm.

Apple Bloom stared hard at Diamond Tiara, who still hadn’t stopped looking at her hooves.

Mrs. Rich ignored all three of them and turned toward the road. “Come, Diamond Tiara.”

The frown crystallized. Diamond Tiara raised her head with all the regality of an eight-time national pageant champion. An old, familiar flame flickered in her eyes. Not a wildfire, but a controlled burn. “No, Mother.”

Silver Spoon raised her eyebrows. “Whoa.”

“I know, right?” Pipsqueak balanced on his hind legs to see better. “I can’t imagine talking to a grown-up that way.”

“Especially not in public,” Silver agreed. Her ears twitched at Spoiled’s indignant shock and Diamond’s smooth dovetail into calling out her own elitism. No pause, no hesitation. No hurricane blusters. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this before.”

The power didn't lie in Diamond’s words, but in how she said them. This was not the frothing, helpless rage of a filly who’d lost a competition. It didn’t quite sound like rebellion, either. Silver couldn’t name the steadied force rooting Diamond Tiara’s hooves to the ground, but she knew it won debates.

“I finally realized I wanted something you don’t have.” For a split second, Diamond and Silver locked eyes. “Friends.”

Silver Spoon’s eyebrows lifted higher. She smiled.

A crack ripped through Mrs. Rich’s armor. The arctic poker face crashed into what could have been doubt or confusion or hurt—who could honestly tell with her?—before she regrouped. “That’s enough, Diamond Tiara.” Too little, too late. The damage had been done, and everypony had seen. “Get away from those blank flanks.”

Pipsqueak blinked in surprise. “I didn’t know grown-ups used that word.”

After an hour of getting roasted over the school board’s coals, Silver couldn’t help but smile wider. A young lady deserved her moments of catharsis, after all. “They usually don’t, Pip.” Anypony who resorted to baseline insults had already lost.

“These are the Cutie Mark Crusaders.” Diamond Tiara turned to Apple Bloom and her friends with a smile. A smile sweeter, softer, and more genuine than anything Silver had seen from Diamond in weeks. Months, even. “And they are my friends.”

Silver Spoon’s grin collapsed. “What.” Friends? Since when, five minutes ago? “She can’t be serious...”
“Why not?” asked Twist. “They’re really nice and helpful. Maybe they helped her out the way they helped Pip?”

“It—” Silver reined her volume and flattened her ears. “It’s different, Twist.”

“How?”

“It just is.”

“They’re working harder to get their cutie marks than anypony I’ve ever seen!” Diamond marched up to her stepmother in her trademark showmare’s trot. “And they will get them exactly when they discover their true talent, which I guarantee will be amazing!”

The meaningful look between (apparently) former rivals turned Silver’s stomach.

*They’ve been friends for what, an hour, and suddenly they get a passionate defense? In front of the whole school?* Memories of Mrs. Rich’s glacial stare burned under Silver’s coat. *And I never even got an apology! Not even an attempt!* Some stupid, sensible part of her argued that she’d never given Diamond the chance. Silver ignored it because that wasn’t even the point and this whole day was dumb and stupid anyway.

Watching the student council’s main roadblock crumble should have brought some satisfaction. If the sight of a humbled Spoiled Rich slinking into the sunset didn’t bring Silver’s smile back, then Diamond’s motion to donate funds for playground equipment should have.

The Ponyville Schoolhouse Student Council got to keep their positions and President Pipsqueak successfully instated his first order of business. They’d won. Winners were supposed to smile. So that’s what Silver Spoon did. Proper young ladies did not let personal resentments impede everypony else’s good day.

Never one to neglect an audience, Diamond Tiara turned and approached the student council. “You were worried for a second, weren’t you?” She brushed off Pip’s instinctive flinch with flash of dazzling teeth and a salesmare’s wink. “Well, I think it’s all gonna work out just fine, Mister President.”

Pip blinked. He blinked couple more times at his fellow council ponies. “Well!” A startled laugh popped under the word. “That’s one way to do it, I guess!”

“Goodness, I’ll say.” Miss Cheerilee smiled back at Truffle, who stared gobsmacked in the window. “I suppose we got our class treasurer after all!”

Which meant avoiding Diamond Tiara would be next to impossible. “Yeah, we really lucked out.”

Equestrians, by nature, favored forgiveness, but rolling up with five figures to spare didn’t hurt, either. Neither did a talent for getting other ponies to follow one’s lead. In two minutes everypony forgot the past five months ever happened. Diamond included.

“Well, so I hope nopony minds, but I already have a couple ideas for a new playground. I brought sketches!” Everypony circled around the treasurer apparent while she whipped out her notebook and a clutter of messy notes from last Tuesday’s impromptu planning session. “I’m thinking, new jungle gym?”

“Say, is that a spy tower up there?” Snails breathed over Silver’s head, mussing her hair. “Oooh and check out those bridges connecting all the stuff!”
“I really like it, but…” Twist pushed her glasses higher on her muzzle, squinting. “Can we really afford all of this? I know you’re rich and all, but…”

Diamond shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. We can work out the details later; these are only a few ideas me and Silver Spoon were spitballing a few…” Her eyes trailed up to meet Silver’s. “Uh… a few days ago.”

Silver looked away and pulled out of the circle. “I’m… going to go get Truffle Shuffle. The vice president should be here for this. Excuse me.” She turned for the stairs at a canter.

“I’ll be right back, you guys.” Diamond never could leave well enough alone, could she? “Wait—hold on a second, Silver Spoon.”

Silver paused on the top stair. She blinked slowly and waited.

“Um. Silver, I just wanted to say—like, I mean, I wanted to tell you that you were right, before. About a lot of stuff. And I’m… I’m sorry I said that you weren’t allowed to speak.” She crept up the stairs until she stood just below eye level. Diamond gently smiled up at her, droopy-eared, remorseful, and sincere. “I’m really sorry.”

Silver Spoon ran her tongue along the edge of her teeth. The tip of her tail twitched. She didn’t smile back.

“I—” Diamond’s façade shattered. “Silvie I can’t stand this, talk to me! If you hate me forever, that’s fine, but for Celestia’s sake, just tell me so.” She shrank back with large eyes. “Please don’t hate me?”

“I don’t.” Silver adjusted her glasses with a sigh. “Look, I’m happy you showed up, Diamond Tiara. I really am. We needed a class treasurer, and even if the budget could handle a new playground, I’m not so sure Pip could. You messed up—and messed up super hard—but you also cleaned up your mess. So, good work with that.”

“Oh.” Whatever response Diamond had expected, this hadn’t been it. “Thank you.”

Silver smiled at her. “You’re welcome. And I acknowledge your apology, Diamond Tiara.”

They hadn’t spoken loud enough to be overheard, but everypony in a five yard radius felt the pressure pulsing from their conversation. The best course of action would be to drop the whole thing, but if Silver did that, it would follow her all the way home and into bed for the next two months.

“I do not accept.
The candy bouquets arrived—by Silver Spoon’s humble estimation—at seven-thirty, after the schoolhouse doors opened but before the first bell. Not a single deliverypony entered or left, nor had anypony seen a student carrying them in. No wagons, no carriages, no carts. Nothing.

In a rare display of insight, Snails theorized the candy had been teleported in. Berry Pinch and Rumble agreed, though everypony else found themselves too occupied with stuffing candied flowers, lollipops, and butterscotch in their faces to care one way or the other where their great bounty had come from.

The scent of multiple candies swirled together in a wave of sweetness that tickled noses and tempted bellies. Silver Spoon circled the long way around to her desk, eyeing individual baskets of arranged sweets as she passed. Not a single generic basket in sight.

A peppermint skyscraper cocked to the left of Twist’s saddlebag, structurally reinforced by two peppermint bark bridges and a frothy marshmallow river. Twist edged a tenuous hoof toward a bridge spire, paused, and chewed her bottom lip. She went for one of the marshmallows instead.

“You know, it’d be better to eat the peppermint first.” Silver pointed at the base of the skyscraper. “It’s what’s holding up the rest of it, see?”

“But it’s so pretty! I don’t want to hurt it.” Twist opted to put the marshmallow back where it came from instead.

“That’s silly. You’re supposed to eat candy, not look at it.” Two desks away, President Pipsqueak nosed through the rubble of what had once been an elegant Buckinghoof Palace built from candy bars. A minor avalanche of chocolate tumbled into his mouth. “Goow mownin Filfer Ffoon!” He waved her down with a sticky brown hoof.

Eyeing the chocolate splattering Pip’s cheeks and muzzle, Silver opted to keep a healthy distance. She couldn’t tell where the stains ended and the president’s natural coat pattern began. Hopefully Shady Daze wasn’t snapping photos for the Foal Free Press today. “Good morning, Pip.”

“I’ll say it is! Blimey, this is the best, innit?” He mowed down another bar in four bites. “I haven’t had these chocs since we moved to Ponyville—maybe even longer!”

Silver adjusted her glasses and bent her neck to examine one of the wrappers. She didn’t recognize any of the brands or labels, but they all bore strange fonts and the quality seal of Trottingham’s world-famous candy shops. They had to be imports—if not overseas, then from a high-end specialty store in Manehattan or Canterlot.

“Yes,” said Silver Spoon. “It’s a... thoughtful present, isn’t it?” Not to mention expensive. How many bars had built this basket? Fifteen? Forty?

Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie sat by the bookshelves with little pails of jellybeans in their laps. Sunny had a bucket of Peachy’s favorite flavors, while Peachy had Sunny’s. They tossed candy into each other’s mouths, giggling when they caught a jellybean and giggling harder when they missed. Miss Cheerilee would be picking candy out of dictionaries for months.

Silver passed quickly to avoid getting caught in the crossfire. The custom jellybeans had been thoughtful, but nowhere near as impressive as the peppermint skyscraper or candy bar clocktower.
The same could be said for Featherweight’s one-of-everything Sugarcube Corner sampler, or The Dink’s skull-shaped basket of gummy worms, candy corn, and gumball eyes.

Truffle Shuffle, on the other hoof, beheld his golden pyramid of chocolate truffles as if the lost treasure of Griffonstone had dropped into his lap. Gently, he unwrapped one and nibbled its shell. His eyes got very, very big. Apparently, what the display lacked in style it made up for in substance.

Thus far, all the student council’s gift baskets sported headier price tags, which probably meant… Silver finally approached her own desk, withholding a long sigh. *Yep.*

A tower of imported teas from Trottingham, Zebrabwe, and Neighpon awaited her, along with at least twenty-five bags of fresh flower petals. At a glance, Silver found peonies, fennel, raspberry leaves, yellow roses, zinnias, filbert, and a host of exotic petals she’d never seen before at all. A blue jade teapot formed the basket’s centerpiece: a masterwork of blue-gray marbling in an elegant slender build, accented in sterling silver to match the handle and spout. A brand new tea ball dangled from the silk ribbons that tied the arrangement together.

Three sets of shadows fell over the teapot. Heavy breathing over Silver Spoon’s shoulder ruffled the ribbons. Staring straight ahead at the chalkboard, Silver took her seat as if nothing unusual had happened this morning at all. “Good morning, Crusaders. Is there something you need?”

“Us?” asked Sweetie Belle. “No, but it’s nice of you to ask.”

Scootaloo hovered into Silver’s line of sight. “But speaking of nice…”

“That sure is one pretty teapot!” Apple Bloom’s smiling face poked over the ribbons. “Gosh, an’ would you look at all that fancy tea? Why, I’ll bet nopony in Ponyville’s ever seen tea that fancy an’ foreign-ey before, outside Zecora. Ain’t it a right nice thing for somepony to do?” A most unwelcome yellow foreleg wrapped around Silver’s withers and squeezed. “I bet whoever put this together must’ve gone through a lot of trouble and likes you an awful lot.” Subtle as a sledgehammer, that Apple Bloom.

“I suppose.” Silver wriggled out of Bloom’s grip, frowning at the Crusaders’ close proximity to the new and breakable teapot. “It’s certainly an expensive apology.” The teapot alone was the stuff of weddings and cuteceañeras. It had to be five hundred bits at least.

“Wha—apology?” Apple Bloom fluttered her eyelashes in some garish imitation of innocence. “Who said anything about an apology?”

Sweetie Belle nibbled on her butterscotch wafer, getting crumbs all over the floor. “Yeah, it doesn’t even have a card attached, see?”

“So you don’t even need to worry about thankin’ anypony!” Apple Bloom grinned wider, ignoring Diamond Tiara, who’d just come through the door. “It’s an anonymous present.”

Indeed, none of the gift baskets had come with tags attached. No obligation to thank, accept, or reimburse through gratitude, favors, or otherwise. An automatic “out” came prepackaged. Not a bad gesture; too bad it didn’t matter when the giver couldn’t be more obvious.

“Apple Bloom, come on.” Silver let her voice raise high enough to be heard. “How many ponies in class—in all of town, even—can afford imported chocolate truffles or jade teapots for themselves, much less for the whole class?”

The Dink chewed her gummy bat wing a little slower and glanced at Berry Pinch. Pinch felt at the sealed envelope between her hooves, ears flat and trying to concentrate on her sketchbook drawings.
“We all know these are from Diamond Tiara, so I don’t know why anypony bothers pretending they’re not.” Silver scoured the gift basket for flaws in the jade or an oversight in the flower petals. To her great annoyance, she couldn’t find a single one.

The cheery façade dropped from Apple Bloom’s face. ‘Ya know, even if it was from Diamond Tiara—an’ nopony’s sayin’ it is—you don’t hafta act like somepony spat in your applesauce when they only tried to do somethin’ nice.”

“First of all, ‘hafta’ isn’t a word.” Turning her nose in the air, Silver tossed her braid. “And second of all, I don’t have to do a lot of things.”

An unspoken murmur of disapproval rippled through the classroom. Cotton Cloudy, who couldn’t stand Diamond’s face a week ago, shook her head and exchanged a frown with Tornado Bolt and Rumble. Rumble—who’d cost Diamond’s campaign the pegasus vote solely due to his grudge—shrugged sympathetically.

Diamond Tiara herself twitched her ears, frowned, and went back to rooting through her saddlebag. Naturally, she couldn’t meet anypony's eye after being called out on her dumb shallow bribe.

A young lady bore no obligation to accept an apology in any form, from anypony. Acknowledge the pony’s efforts and remorse, yes. Drop aggressions, yes. Call off a duel, certainly. Last Silver checked, forgiveness didn’t come with the package.

None of that, however, changed the fact that Silver Spoon ended up looking like a jerk. Diamond Tiara’s sad-sack face didn’t help, either.

If anything, not labeling the gift put more pressure on Silver to bend, not less. She’d been backed into a corner. “It’s still nice of her, though. You’re right, Apple Bloom, the teapot’s beautiful, and I’ve never tried zinnia in a tea before.” All technically true, and nothing absolved the guilty parties. Not a perfect response, but it would do.

The classroom pressure waned, though foals in the epicenter of the drama still watched from the corners of their eyes. Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo glanced at each other, less than thrilled.

“Hey, I only pointed out what’s obviously happening.” Silver laid out her notebook and pencils, and slid the gift basket under her desk. “Nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“No, but you don’t need to be so snippy about it,” grumbled Scootaloo. Her wings twitched at Silver Spoon’s frown. “Well, you don’t.”

“And you don’t need to stick your nose into other ponies’ business, Miss Scootaloo, and yet here we are.”

Scootaloo’s wings flared. “Hey, we only—”

“You caught me!” Diamond Tiara shrugged and smiled with a casual little giggle. “Can’t get anything past you, Silver Spoon. Yeah, these are from me, everypony. I, um…”

Now with all eyes on her, Diamond cleared her throat and adjusted her tiara. Lavender coils of her mane tangled in the spires, and it cocked sideways like an ill-fitting party hat. “I know last Thursday got kind of… the worst. I’m sorry if I hurt anypony’s feelings that week. Or ever. But I’m tryi—” She dared a glance in Silver’s direction, gulped, and refocused. “—I’d like to be a better pony than I’ve been. I know candy and stuff doesn’t make up for everything, but it’s the least I can do?” Her hooves shuffled under her desk. “For now, anyway.”
Button Mash dumped five more marshmallows in his mouth. “Hey, it’s a start! Too bad you didn’t bring any of those little marshmallow birds they sell after Winter Wrap Up.”

“I could still bring you some, if you want.”

“Sweet. Thanks, Diamond.”

Diamond’s sappy little smile returned. “You’re welcome!” She stretched her neck to see the rest of the room. “Are all the other baskets okay?” Her smile grew with the round of nods. “Okay, great. Hey, Truffle?”

“Yeah?” Truffle Shuffle kept one ear on Diamond and both eyes on Featherweight.

The skinny pegasus hovered three desks away, staring at the gourmet pyramid on Truffle’s desk. Featherweight’s double-sized basket of pastries and candy had vanished into his stomach sometime between first bell and Silver’s confrontation with the Crusaders.

Diamond Tiara stepped in to block the hungry pegasus’ view. “Excuse me, Vice President, but when’s the next student council meeting?” Behind her, Featherweight’s ears slowly rose above the tiara.

Truffle wrapped both hooves around his basket. “Thursdays, why?”

“Do you think we could move it to Tuesday? Or even this afternoon?” Cheerilee’s dog-eared copy of the council guidebook flipped under Diamond’s hooves. “If we’re going through with the playground idea——”

Pipsqueak popped up on the other side of Truffle’s desk. “You mean you got the money for it?”

“Yeah, but it’s complicated. That’s why I want to meet sooner rather than later, and we’re going to need more than just the student council.” Diamond skimmed the classroom end to end. More than half the class still watched her. “If anypony can maybe find time to come to a student council meeting this week, that’d be really great.”

So the candy and presents didn’t just buy everypony’s forgiveness, it also buttered them up for a meeting. Silver couldn’t fault Diamond’s logic, considering the pathetic turnout for last Friday’s school board meeting. The election drama had long since passed, and student government still had all the appeal of extra-credit homework.

Cotton Cloudy fluffed her feathers. “Oh, I actually have cloud duty on Tuesday and Thursday. So does Tornado Bolt.”

Rumble nodded. “Me too.”

“That’s okay.” Diamond’s sugary smile could put a dentist’s colt through college. “We can meet Wednesday.”

The Dink swallowed her gummy worms. “I’ve got a stakeout that day.”

The sugary smile faltered. “Couldn’t you reschedule? This is kind of important.” She thought for a moment. “Aren’t you supposed to do stakeouts at night?”

“Sure, if you want to be obvious about it.” The Dink thought it over and shrugged. “I guess we could move it around.”
“I can’t move mine. The Foal Free Press meets Wednesdays,” said Featherweight. “Sorry.” His soft brown eyes trailed down to Truffle’s gift basket. “By the way, Truffle Shuffle, are you gonna eat all of—”

“Yes.” Truffle flattened his ears.

If Featherweight couldn’t do Wednesday because of the paper, that meant Boysenberry, Shady Daze, Berry Pinch and at least five others couldn’t come, either. This project could use extra hype from the press; it’d be best to leave the newspaper staff be.

Diamond’s tail flicked. “Alright, that’s… fine. We can work with that. What about later this afternoon?”

Silver Spoon narrowed her eyes. “Monday’s my apprenticeship at Tealove’s, remember?”

Of course she didn’t remember. Why would Diamond Tiara ever bother keeping up with somepony else’s schedule when they always bent around her own all the time? No wonder she sprung this on everypony at the last second; Diamond probably assumed they’d all drop everything and fall in line like always.

On the other hoof, everypony else shouldn’t suffer just because of Diamond’s garbage time management. “I guess I could move my apprenticeship around. Again.” Silver flipped open her schedule book. “However, I think it’s a better idea if we held an emergency meeting today at recess. That way, everypony’s already here.” And they couldn’t sneak off without looking like a jerk.

Pip jerked his head toward the window. “We might as well. It’s not like there’s anything better to do when the playground’s broken, ‘cept play tag again.”

A recess meeting also meant they could rope in Cheerilee’s afternoon class, who wouldn’t hear about the meeting at all, otherwise. “So we meet at recess, then.” Silver Spoon turned to face Snips and Snails, who were already fishing for excuses. “Unless some of us have something better to do than help get a new playground.” She blinked slowly. “We’ll understand if you do.”

Snips and Snails glanced at each other, then at the rest of the class. They shook their heads and returned to their taffy and chocolate raisins.

“Wonderful.”

“And the sooner we can get everypony in on this, the better,” added Pipsqueak. “Secretary Silver Spoon motions that we shift this week’s Ponyville Schoolhouse Student Council meeting to recess—er, that is, school recess, not like a taking-a-break recess.” For a newbie, he got the hang of political ritual fast. “Does anypony second the motion?”

Diamond’s hoof shot in the air. “I second it! Oh, and we could have lunch while we do it. With tea!”

Scootaloo wrinkled her nose. “Tea? At recess? I’m cool with a meeting, but that sounds kinda—ow!” She rubbed her fetlock, glaring at Sweetie Belle. “What was that for?”

“Shut up, you featherbrain.” Sweetie made an effort to stare straight ahead, not looking at anything.

“You know, it’s fine when a pegasus calls another pegasus a featherbrain, but—”

“The motion is seconded.” The president clapped his hooves in lieu of a gavel. “Let’s put it to vote: all for?” Ayes all around. “Okay! See you all at recess. Oh, and um…” He pointed to their teacher outside talking with the gardener. “Maybe somepony ought to tell Miss Cheerilee what we’re doing.”
“Right, then. Everypony here?” Atop his humble throne of stacked encyclopedias, President Pipsqueak sipped his tea and took in the gathered assembly.

The student council assembled around a rickety picnic table, with Pip at the head and a modest tea party in the center. As tradition dictated, the vice president and secretary gathered on the right side of the table, while the new treasurer and Councilpony Twist sat opposite left. Everypony else gathered where they could, sitting in the grass, the trees, or perched on the shambles of broken playground equipment.

Truffle took a quick head count, cross-referenced the detailed roll taken by Secretary Silver, and stood. “Bubblegum Brush is home sick. The rest of Cheerilee’s morning and afternoon class are present, Mr. President.”

“In that case, this emergency meeting of the Ponyville Schoolhouse Student Council will now come to order.” Pipsqueak set down his teacup and pulled the white birch out from under his copy of the guidebook. “Now, for everypony who couldn’t be here for the board meeting yesterday, which is… most of you, Secretary Silver Spoon will read the minutes before we start.”

Twist whispered in the president’s ear.

“Right, right—Silver Spoon will read the minutes.” He passed the birch over to her.

“Thank you, Mr. President.” Silver Spoon cleared her throat, turning to last week’s notes. “Friday afternoon, at about sixteen-hundred hours, Ponyville’s student council—excluding the not-yet-treasurer Tiara—met with the Ponyville School Board, staffed by Miss Cheerilee, Tall Order, and Pencil Pusher, and led by one Mrs. Spoiled Rich.”

Silver paused to pour herself a cup of Deerjeeling tea, adding a few drops of lemon juice. For a moment, she met Treasurer Tiara’s gaze over the simple blue ceramic teapot in the center of the table. The fancy jade pot still sat wrapped beneath Silver’s desk.

For the sake of time and short attention spans, Silver skipped the bulk of the board meeting and jumped to the chase. “The president motioned to request new playground equipment, with intent to follow through with his campaign promise to improve the school playground. Board member Mrs. Rich argued budget limitations.” She peered over the rim of her glasses.

The class blinked back at her with blank stares.

“Pip wanted to build the playground, but Mithuth Rich thaid we didn’t have the money for it,” clarified Twist.

Miss Cheerilee’s class smiled and nodded with a collective “Ohhhh.”

“Sheesh, why didn’t she just say so?” Snips muttered.

“Council motioned to request details of the budget.” The tip of the white branch tapped each bulletpoint as Silver ran down the page. “Board member Mrs. Rich released a budget book way too complicated for the student council to understand. Board member Mrs. Rich then refused to explain a word of it for purposes of undermining the student council and on the basis of being mean and rude to somepony only trying to do their job and who didn’t need to be embarrassed that way in public.”

Vice President Truffle Shuffle slowly cut himself a slice of the mediocre quiche Diamond Tiara had brought for their lunch. He exchanged a troubled frown with Twist, though Silver couldn’t imagine why. Whatever it was, it didn’t trouble him enough to speak up; not that he could. Silver still claimed
the birch.

“President Pipsqueak excused himself from the meeting to seek outside help. Secretary Silver moved to filibuster for time, and to find another way around the budget problem. Motion passed, with board member Rich fully aware there was no possible way for schoolfoals to raise forty-thousand bits all by themselves, w-with… with intent to embarrass certain members of the student council and make them feel weak and silly.” A vile unpleasantness bubbled in Silver’s stomach. She took a moment to compose herself. “Motion for new playground equipment failed to pass in a three-to-one vote. Miss Cheerilee voted in favor. Meeting then adjourned.”

Confused murmuring threaded through the crowd. Sunny Daze wondered why they had to meet here if the board denied the request. President Pipsqueak tipped his head to the side and sat up, waiting for the rest of it.

Technically, the minutes ended with the meeting’s closure. If it were up to Silver, she’d close it there and let the meeting move to new business. It wasn’t, however, and special circumstances called for exceptions. She switched notebooks.

“Post-meeting minutes.” Silver Spoon gripped the birch between her teeth and breathed slowly through her nose.

In.

Out.

Okay.

“At seventeen-hundred hours, President Pipsqueak returned with Diamond Tiara and school ponies Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle—otherwise known as the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Tiara informally approached the council and board member Mrs. Rich with a three-item proposal.”

Students shifted and murmured beyond the council’s table. The Crusaders began whispering amongst themselves. Diamond Tiara twitched her ears and sat higher in her seat.

Silver kept her eyes on the page and her voice calm, professional, and neutral. “Item One: Opposition to board member Mrs. Rich’s general position of being a high horse-slash-annoying browbeater-slash-the literal worst all the time. Item Two: Opposition to calling said Cutie Mark Crusaders ‘blank flanks,’ and defense of the Crusaders as friends, despite Tiara’s long history of being enemies with the Crusaders and despite Tiara’s actual friendship with Secretary Silver.” Her voice wavered. She cleared her throat, but it did little good. “No motion proposed to defend Secretary Silver whatsoever even though she’d just had the absolute worst meeting ever.”

Pipsqueak leaned down to address Truffle. “Are those the actual minutes?” he whispered.

Truffle glanced at Silver’s notebook. “…Actually, yeah, they are.”

“Are meetings always this juicy?” Boysenberry climbed higher on the broken teeter-totter, listening with pricked hungry ears. “Gosh, I need to pay more attention to politics.”

The Cutie Mark Crusaders shifted awkwardly at the sudden attention they’d attracted. They ought to get used to it; that perk came free with Diamond’s friendship package. Apple Bloom held a steady stare towards the council table, waving the red brush of her tail through the grass. She whispered something to Sweetie Belle, who nodded.

Silver adjusted her glasses, searching for where she’d left off. Before she found it, a pink hoof raised
in the air.

“Uh, excuse me, please?” Diamond waved her hoof harder. The other hoof flew through the student handbook. “Please?”

Interrupting the reading of the minutes was highly unorthodox, especially when one did not hold the birch twig. Or when said member had held her position less than a week. But Diamond did say please. Silver brushed a stray strand of mane out of her face. “Fine. The student council recognizes Treasurer Diamond Tiara.”

“Okay, let’s see, um…” The frantic page flipping slowed to a crawl. Diamond’s hoof landed towards the middle, in the parliamentary procedures section. “Emergency motion for Class Secretary to recognize the fact that Treasurer Tiara wasn’t present and didn’t know any of that stuff at the board meeting happened, and that the Class Treasurer would have said something if she did.” Diamond flipped a few more pages. “And uh… additional motion to say sorry about that?”

Silver sipped her tea. “The motion is under consideration.”

Apple Bloom’s head popped over the edge of the picnic table. Her bow upset the jam on Pip’s mini toasts. “Motion to say that it ain’t fair to go blamin’ other ponies for not apologizin’ about somethin’ they didn’t even know happened.”

“Motion to counterpoint that I said the motion is considered, not rejected.” Silver’s tail whipped against the edge of her seat. “Additional counterpoint: Miss Apple Bloom is not a member of the student council, was not recognized to address the student council, and did not raise her hoof. Which is rude. Also, it’s none of your business.”

Scootaloo raised both hooves. “Uh, counter-counterpoint: You’re the one who brought it up, so you kinda made it our business?”

Loathe as Silver Spoon was to admit it, the raggedy filly had a point. Young ladies didn’t let their emotions get the better of them. Professionals knew how to separate personal and official business. That second part would be much easier if the personal stuff stopped crossing over all the darn time.

She knew she’d have to sit at the same table with Diamond eventually, but did it have to be today? It hadn’t even been a week since the election. Sun’s sake, why couldn’t they have met on Thursday’s recess with a normal schedule? But no, Diamond Tiara couldn’t let anything be easy, could she?

Truffle Shuffle cut himself a new slice of quiche. “Could we get back on topic, please? We only have until the end of recess, you know.”

Silver nodded. “Of course, Mr. Vice President.”

Deep breath.

Hold it.

Okay.

“I’m sorry, everypony. Where were we?” She bypassed the half-page of bribery complaints. *Stick to the facts and get this over with.* “Item Three: The newly appointed Treasurer Tiara motioned to request funding for the playground equipment from her father. Base plans shared, with little detail. Meeting for Friday then adjourned.” The white birch passed back to the head of the table. “Over to you, Mr. President.”
A colt never looked so relieved for the end of the minutes. “Thanks, Silver Spoon. I don’t think there’s any new stuff, so Diamond Tiara?” The birch exchanged hooves again. “What’s the word on the playground?”

Diamond pushed a plate of scones to the side and tossed down a manila folder. It flopped open in the center of the table where everypony could see and reach it. “The good news is we’ve got twenty-two thousand bits for brand-new high quality playground equipment.” She pulled out a checklist, pointing items out as she went along. “It’ll cover a new tetherball court, slide, swings, teeter-totter, two picnic tables complete with stools, new balls, a new fence, merry-go-round, and a net for volleyball or badminton or whatever. And if we all play our cards right, we’ll also get…” She paused for effect. “Project X.”

The congregation leaned forward with a collective “Ooooh.”


“What’s ultra battle tag?” Truffle Shuffle wrinkled his nose. “It doesn’t sound safe.”

Berry Pinch rolled her eyes. “Duh, that’s why it’s ultra.”

“I dunno, I’d rather have a water slide,” said Featherweight.

Twist leaned back to see the thin colt on the tree branch. “But it’ll be winter thoon. You won’t get to play on it.”

“Nope, ‘cause in winter it becomes an ice slide!” Featherweight bounced on his tree branch, scattering orange leaves across the table. You’re lucky you’re cute. Silver picked an oak leaf out of her teacup. “So, what’s the bad news, Tiara?”

Diamond tugged out a sketch of the playground’s layout: an old map from a defunct plan to cream the Cutie Mark Crusaders with water balloons. Silver Spoon had axed it for being too brutal and easy to trace. It still worked fine as a map, and all the prime playground spots had already been marked off.

“The bad news is… we’ve got twenty grand for playground equipment. Nothing else.” Diamond Tiara steepled her hooves, eyeing the council. “It can’t cover installing the new stuff, or even moving out the broken stuff.”

“Which meant all we’re gonna get ith a bunch of thuff in boxeth.” Waving her hooves over the side of the bench, Twist leaned back to take in the foals gathered around them. Not a meeting of student council, but a meeting of the tribes: all ages, all cliques, every rung on the social ladder. “We’ll need thomepony to put it together. Thomepony like…”

“…all of us,” finished Silver Spoon.

It sank in.

The schoolyard’s excited murmurs fizzled. Foals gathered closer to the table to see the plans for themselves. An awkward, motionless silence overtook the budding enthusiasm. Slides, swing sets, and volleyball nets suddenly looked less like a gift list and more like a chore wheel.

This proposal skirted dangerous waters. Ignoring the safety hazards of handling equipment—and to
think, Mrs. Rich had worried about insurance liability from just playing on it—a project of this stature took weeks to complete. Diamond essentially asked everypony here to give up not just one recess, but ten. Ten at the very least. No wonder she’d brought imported chocolate.

If Diamond Tiara felt the schoolyard’s apprehension, she didn’t show it. “Exactly!” A familiar spark lit her eyes as she swept her hooves over blueprints and bullet points.

It almost felt like the start of the talent show or sneaking out for Nightmare Night. Diamond grasped a project too big for her bridle, a new scattershot scheme star-high and miles wide, coupled with the pure ambition and stubbornness to pull it off.

“I bet we can have the whole thing done by harvest time.”

Diamond Tiara smiled. Not the paltry, simpering thing she’d tugged along all day, but the real thing. The kind that convinced you this crazy idea could not only work, but work perfectly and in record time. Warmth beamed upwards and outwards from that smile, lighting up wonderful things about ponies they’d never known they had. At a glance, a pony knew Diamond believed in the work, and she believed in them. Anything and everything she said couldn’t be anything other than true.

Silver Spoon smiled back. For a silly little moment, she couldn’t remember why she’d ever been angry at all. Who could stay angry with somepony who smiled that way?

Silver gently touched the base of her braid.

I didn’t ask you to speak.

The moment passed.

The stack of encyclopedias wobbled as Pipsqueak edged forward. “D’you really think we can finish before the Summer Harvest Parade?”

“No, Pip. I know we can.” Diamond turned to the ponies gathered behind her. “But we’re gonna need everypony—and I mean everypony all in on this. It’s like I told you yesterday—”

Silver blinked. Diamond met with Pip? When did that happen? Certainly nopony had told her about it.

—this is a huge project that’ll need lots of time and lots of hard work.” Diamond shifted to address the ponies crowded at the other side of the table. “And I won’t lie; that work’s not gonna be fun sometimes.”

Snips frowned. “Work? You don’t mean like… school work? Or work-work?” He didn’t favor the thought of either one.


More hooves rose in the air, though nopony waited to be called on.

“Is this gonna take more than three recesses?”

“Yeah, how long is this supposed to be?”

“Doesn’t this violate foal labor laws?”

“We’re just kids! We slide on slides, not build ‘em!”
“What’s Project X?”

“Can I get another candy bouquet?”

“Whoa, whoa! One at a time, guys!” President Pip stood, wobbling a little on the encyclopedias. “I know it all sounds like a lot, and yeah, we’ll ‘ave to give it a few recesses…” He rubbed the back of his neck. “…and some after-school time—”

Cries of outrage blasted the council. Diamond tucked her tail close.

Pip waited for the noise to settle. “Thing is, we’re in a bit of a pickle ‘ere, an—”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Button Mash snorted. “You’re the one who promised us a playground. AND an arcade.”

Pip flinched.

“Yeah,” added Rumble. “Nopony said anything about putting the playground together until the last second.”

Boysenberry shook her head. “This is why my moms always say never trust politicians. Oooh, and know what else I heard?” She leaned over to Carrot Crunch, who straightened his ears. “I heard he never even had a plan to get a playground, and Diamond had to bail him out last minute.” She glanced at Silver. “I heard it from a good source.”

Note to self: double-check open windows before complaining to Ferdinand. Silver Spoon arched a cool eyebrow. “So the treasurer helped the president with a money problem, what’s your point? It’s a student council, not a magic wand. Truffle, pass the sugar, please.”

Two lumps plopped into a fresh cup of tea. She should have Deerjeeling more often. “Of course…” Silver stirred idly, examining the white swirls in her cup. “Nopony needs to build a playground if they don’t want to.” Her eyes flicked up to her fellow councilponies. Follow my lead. “The school board might have a point; maybe we’re not ready for a job this big.”

Diamond reached for her little black budget book. “Sure, it’s not too late to cancel the order. We’ll wait until we raise enough money to hire a construction crew. No big deal.”

“Yep, it’ll be fine.” Twist winked. “Truff, how long did you thay it’d take to get the money with fundraitherth?”

Sipping her tea, Silver scanned the crowd. Foals whispered to each other, examining their dilapidated slide and smashed fence and warped merry-go-round. The council had them on the ropes. She slid the meeting minutes to the vice president.

Truffle tapped the budget notes. “We’d need to have somewhere between twenty-five and fifty fundraisers, assuming we sell out every time, every month. So, it’d be twenty months, at least.”

“Why, that’s only two years!” A prim little smile graced Silver’s muzzle. “No time at all.”

More unhappy murmurings.

“It’s a shame, though,” sighed Diamond Tiara. The budget book came out again. “Pip, Twist, and I ran some numbers with Miss Cheerilee and Tall Order yesterday. We figured if the whole class pulled together with a little help from ponies around town, we could finish in…?” She gestured toward the president.
“Three weeks!” Pipsqueak preened with the fresh wave of class approval. “Maybe even two and a half!”

“More like definitely in two and a half. We could do it. I know we could, because I know you guys.” Diamond seized the birch between her teeth and jabbed it at the pigtailed filly next to Boysenberry. “I’ve only known Longsocks for like, three months, but I can already tell she’s the strongest filly in Ponyville—maybe the strongest pony period, after Big Macintosh.”

Lily Longsocks blushed and tried to hide her face in her own pigtails.

Diamond’s flattery train didn’t stop there. “Scootaloo can pull a wagon across town in a blink; just think what she could do carrying supplies. And you know the Crusaders’ clubhouse? Babs Seed told me Apple Bloom restored the whole thing all by herself in an afternoon!”

“Aww, well…” Bloom waved her off with a do-go-on chuckle. “Only a couple of new boards, fresh coat of paint.”

“I bet you’d work great with Berry Pinch.”

The pink unicorn perked up. “Wait, what about me?”

“She’s a great artist, and I bet she could draw way better blueprints for Project X.” Diamond rolled out a wrinkled water-stained sketch of her elaborate jungle gym idea. A cross of tape pasted the four parts together where they’d torn. Faded hoofprints marred the edges. “Also, we could actually read it.”

Snips nosed his way through the saucers to get a better view. “Wait, isn’t this just the jungle gym thingy from last week? That’s all Project X is?”

“Um. Yeah, sort of.” Diamond’s ears drooped, then jerked up again. “It’s so much more than a regular old jungle gym, though, so I thought it should have its own name. Project X is a placeholder name.”

“We should call it The House of Skulls and Daggers!” The Dink spread out the name with her hooves. “Or Midnight Castle!”

“I don’t really think it looks like a castle, Dinkster.” Berry Pinch rubbed her chin. “What about Blüd Häüs? You spell it with umlauts. Umlauts are cool.”

Prickle Berry gasped. “Ew, no, that’s way too scary!”

“Yeah, and Miss Cheerilee will never let us get away with it,” said Cotton Cloudy. “Let’s call it Tim!”

Rumble stretched a wing. “Tch, that’s stupid.”

Cotton’s wingspan arched higher. “YOU’RE stupid!”

Pipsqueak raised his hooves for order. “We can think about names later.”

“We have two years to decide,” said Silver Spoon, “since nopony wants to build it themselves.” Personal grievances or not, she still knew how to play ball. “Theoretically, if we did handle it ourselves, what would the rest of student council be doing, Treasurer Tiara?”

Diamond considered it. “Twist could help with all the math stuff—along with yours truly—and
Truffle could be our safety inspector. The last thing we need is somepony in the hospital. You’d do what you do best, Silver: use your connections. We’ll need somepony to round up some adults who can help us out, like that Hard Hat guy. Wait, do construction workers like tea?”

“You’re good friends with Pinkie Pie, and she knows everypony. Oh, and Fluttershy! She could, like, get her bird friends to airdrop—”

“The pegasus foals could do that, you know.”

—or that! See, that’s why we need you, Silver. You’ve got the best advice.” Flatterer. “You’re super organized too, so you’d be perfect to tell Princess Twilight about the project. Also, grown-ups like you.” Diamond paused. “Most of them, anyway.”

“Right,” said Truffle Shuffle. “It’s basically the same job you’re doing as secretary anyway.”

Pipsqueak coughed into the frog of his hoof. “Or it would be if anypony actually wanted to build it, but they don’t, soooooo…” He let the sentence trail off into the land of missed opportunities.

Miss Cheerilee’s class felt the dream of epic jungle gyms and sparkly new swings fade into the mist, and they scrambled to catch it before it was lost forever.

“WAIT!” Rumble zoomed out of the tree and over the table. “No wait, we could do it!”

“It’s not that much work,” cried Snips and Snails in unison.

“Well, okay.” Diamond flashed one of her newly patented squeaky-clean-fresh-start smiles. “If you really want to.”

A thousand points of Apple Bloom’s gaping mouth twinkled, reflected in circles upon crystal circles. The filly rocked back on her haunches, her neck stretched so far back her bow tapped the base of her tail. If Silver Spoon had known a sixth-century chandelier was all it took to shut her up, she would have brought Bloom to her house years ago.

“Gosh, it’s so big. I didn’t think it’d be so… so fancy in here.” Bloom watched the multimillion-bit antiques and imported rugs with a guarded eye, as if she expected a baroque vase to launch itself off the podium any moment. Glancing at her mud-caked hooves on the spotless marble floor, she drew her legs close.

Yawning, Berry Pinch hopped on the banquette and stretched like an alley cat. The pink split ends of her tail wicked across the damask upholstery. “Well, yeah, it is a rich pony’s house.”

“You can’t be that surprised.” Silver Spoon glanced up from the table where a brand new designer three-ring binder spread out for them, still empty. “I mean, you’ve been to Diamond’s house before at least twice and it’s way more expensive than this one.”

Apple Bloom shook her head. “Diamond Tiara’s house is bigger, but it’s not so… fancy-like. Feels like I’m fixin’ to go and break a vase in here, and then I’ll be in debt for eight million bits, and then I’ll have to become a maid and wax all the floors for hundreds of moons ‘til I can pay it off.” The oddly specific scenario sent shivers through her coat. “I heard y’all downsized when you moved to Ponyville. Guess I expected somethin’ less expensive an’ breakable.”

When had she found out about that? Silver flicked her ears. Had Diamond been leaking secrets, or
had the Silvers’ money problems fed into Ponyville’s well of common knowledge? Apple Bloom acted as if she’d expected regular old upper middle class furniture or something.

“We did downsize, can’t you tell?” Silver raised her hoof to the banister overlooking the foyer. “I love our house—it’s nice and cozy, don’t get me wrong—but it’s only got, like eleven rooms.” Thirteen, counting Brass Tacks’ workout room and the off-limits basement. “I don’t know how much it cost, but a cute little place in the country like this can’t be more than a few hundred-thousand bits or so.”

Berry Pinch stared as if Silver Spoon had dropped one of her wrestling figures in the toilet.

Silver blinked. “What?”

“Do you actually hear yourself when you talk?”

Silver Spoon tilted her head. “Yes?” Diamond’s house mostly had locally-made furniture, but with the pool, the panic room, and a three-acre lawn, the house itself had to break two million at least.

“I—never mind.” Pinch rubbed the bridge of her muzzle. “These rich ponies, I swear.”

“Listen, I just didn’t expect a chandelier that fancy, is all. I didn’t mean to make a fuss, I’m sorry.” Apple Bloom flicked her tail over her hooves. “Applejack says it’s rude to go ‘round pointin’ out how much money somepony has.”

A Cutie Mark Crusader recognizing her rudeness and actually apologizing for it. Would wonders never cease? “She’s right, it is,” said Silver, “but it’s okay, Apple Bloom. I don’t blame you.” She smiled to show no hard feelings, nodding to the tiered chandelier above them. “Honestly, it is pretty expensive for the house.” At auction, it could have helped buy a Canterlot mansion twice this size. “Mother didn’t want to sell it because it’s an heirloom.”

“Ooh, an heirloom!” The tension washed from Bloom’s withers. “I know all about those; the Apples have lots of ‘em.”

Apple Bloom circled the foyer to the table where Silver Spoon had spread seven neat piles of notes, including the freshly inked sketches of Project X that Berry Pinch had drawn last Thursday.

Berry Pinch gave the room an easy, satisfied smile. “It’s not as complicated as it looks. I gave it lots of details to be sure everypony knows wha—” She yawned again. “What we’re doing.”

Indeed, she’d drawn them simple enough to be understood by the average school foal, but with enough detail to guide an adult. Miss Cheerilee and Big Macintosh helped her label all the little parts with technical names. Silver Spoon organized the sketches in order of importance (or her best guess thereof) and the likelihood of getting it. Needless to say, she tucked the zip lines and arcade near the back.

Other playground drawings sat to the side. Nopony really needed pictures to know what a tetherball court or swing set looked like, but the new map could help figure out where to put them.

The two-page map spread out inside the binder so that it’d be the first thing a pony saw when they opened it. Silver studied it, frowning. Pinch might have drawn the symbols and lines, but the placements, the dotted lines running end to end, the entire feel of it echoed the candy map from last Nightmare Night. Diamond Tiara’s hoofprints were all over it.

Silver Spoon shook her head with a scoff. Of course they are, you silly filly. Project X is her idea. She obviously planned for the rest of the playground to go around it.
For the first time, Diamond had a project idea that could benefit not only herself, but her classmates and all the other foals for years—maybe decades—to come. Her father would be proud of her. Golden Glitter would be proud of her. The entire town would be proud of her. A win.

Silver supposed she ought to feel happy for Diamond. Everypony else seemed to.

Bloom nudged a second stack of drawings toward Silver to be filed: the underground plans. Nothing too fancy, just some open space and pillows with a feel somewhere between a secret base and a basement rec room. Pipsqueak wanted to do right by his campaign promise to Button Mash and add arcade machines, but Miss Cheerilee had vetoed. Diamond offered to donate one of her pinball machines, but that got vetoed as well. Diamond then tried proposing some sort of educational game, which received a “maybe”.

“Scootaloo told me that Miss Cheerilee and the school board got clearance from the mayor to build it already.” Bloom scooted closer to the table, happy to sit on the marble tile. “Lucky that Diamond already knew Tall Order so well, huh?”

Silver Spoon accounted none of that to luck, but if one had the connections she may as well use them. “Yes, it saved us a few days.” Perhaps even a few weeks, depending on when the mayoral staff finally got around to approval or whatever they did at town hall. “At this rate, if we get all the adults we need, we’ll be done before harvest vacation.”

“I know we’re still not leavin’ for another hour, but if we finish early, we could get somethin’ nice from Sugarcube Corner.” Apple Bloom glanced at the remaining stacks of pages. “Do you want help putting this together? I can do it backwards from the other side and meet ya in the middle.”

“You don’t need to do that.” Technically, since they’d already run the sketches by Cheerilee, Bloom didn’t need to stick around at all, but as the closest pony to Project X besides Diamond herself, and a pony with construction experience, it helped to have her around. “But that would be nice, thanks. Berry Pinch?”

The unicorn snapped awake from a catnap.

“You want to help, too? You drew it, so you know best about the order it should go in.”

Pinch gave another yawning nod. “It’ll keep me awake with something to do.” She shook herself off and took a seat next to Apple Bloom. “Ugh. Nopony needs to be up at eight in the morning on a Saturday.”

“Really? I’m always up way earlier than that.” Apple Bloom tapped her chin, “At least I think I am. It’s whenever the rooster crows; I don’t really keep track of the exact time.”

“Sheesh, you’re almost as bad as Diamond Tiara.” A sleepy green eye opened wider to examine Silver Spoon. “Lemme guess, you too? Is this some kind of earth pony thing, or a being-friends-with-Diamond-Tiara thing?”

“I prefer to think of it as a not-being-a-lazy-lump-of-a-unicorn thing.” Silver placed a thin stack of papers in the binder, grinning at Pinch’s wrinkled nose. “Would you rather a ponies-who-can-manage-their-time thing instead? You stayed up all night last night, didn’t you?”

An eraser wobbled in a lime green glow, slowly orbiting Berry Pinch’s fetlock while she warmed up her horn. “Hey, I had important stuff to do. It’s not my fault Tiara decided to pull all this stuff at the last minute, and I’m not jumping through hoops for her sake. I already lost recess for a month; I’m not letting her take Friday night wrestling, too.”
“You’re the one who agreed to it,” Silver Spoon pointed out. “What were you going to do at recess with a broken playground, hunt for the spirit of the haunted teeter-totter?”

“We were gonna play battle tag—not that you’d know anything about any kind of tag, Silver Snob.” Six blueprint pages lifted with Pinch’s magic, wobbling through the air before they settled in the binder prongs. “I dunno why you even care this much about Diamond Tiara’s pet project. Last I checked, you weren’t talking to her.”

“I’m not.” Silver splayed her ears. “And I don’t. We happen to be on the same student council, that’s all. Besides, I don’t think any of that’s really your business.”

“Uh-huh. Like how calling her out in front of the whole class last Monday wasn’t my business either, right?” Pinch held up a mollifying hoof before Silver could bite back. “Chill, I’m just pulling your tail. Fair’s fair, Diamond dragged you first.”

“That’s not what—I mean, I didn’t mean anything by it.” The shuffling papers stopped. Silver’s eyes flashed up and back down to her work. Both fillies were staring at her now. Her ears splayed flatter, flushing a rosy shade of pink inside. “I didn’t! It sort of just… happened.”

She hadn’t done it on purpose. How could she have? A public attack would only give Diamond more pity party supplies. It had been a simple—and over-emotional—mistake, that’s all.

“Anyway, what’s over is over. It doesn’t matter now.”

Echoes of Brass Tacks’ hoofsteps clicked above them as he went about his duties on the second floor. Every now and again they caught a glimpse of him carrying a wastebasket from Father’s study or dusting the banister. The conversation withered into shuffling papers and side glances.

More hoofsteps. The clock chimed eight. Mother’s laughter drifted from some far private corner of the house.

Apple Bloom’s tail brushed over the marble tile. “Well, I think it matters.”

“Good for you.” Silver Spoon frowned, but kept her eyes on her work. “When your opinion matters, maybe I’ll care.”

“Oh please, not this mess again.” Bloom flipped her fluffy tail with a sigh. “Swear it’s like talkin’ to the same exact pony with you two sometimes.”

Something told Silver Spoon the other half of that “you two” didn’t refer to Berry Pinch. She shifted through the blueprints faster. “Whatever. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Says you.” The antique wood groaned as Apple Bloom leaned forward. She crossed her forehooves, letting them dangle across the binder’s edge. Close enough to pop Silver’s personal bubble. “Whenever anything gets too tough or too hard—when somepony goes and says somethin’ y’all don’t want to hear—y’all fluff out your fur, back into the prickle bush, and snap your teeth at anypony who pokes atcha. None of this’ll go away just ‘cause you decide to be mean to me—”

Silver jolted upright. Her muzzle wrinkled inches from Apple Bloom’s. “I am not mean!”

“And I’m Princess Blueblood,” mumbled Pinch.

“Nopony asked you.”

Apple Bloom rolled on as if nopony had said anything. “—so hunkerin’ down on being angry and
acting ugly to folks ain’t gonna help nopony, Silver. It ain’t!” The ratty little busybody jutted her chin, lips twisted in a self-righteous pucker. Her little snort steamed Silver’s lenses. “I think you’re right—you’re not a mean pony, not really, but that don’t stop you from acting like one, and I don’t know why! This is stupid, Silver Spoon!”

Silver flattened her ears and shifted to the far side of her cushion. “Hey, I don’t have to care about your opinion if I didn’t ask for it. You’re the one storming into other ponies houses, making a big deal over nothing and accusing them of being mean.”

“Don’t go playin’ dumb, you know I’m not talking about that. Diamond Tiara already apologized to you twice now. Three, countin’ the tea set.” Apple Bloom closed the distance between them in two scootches. “I don’t know what’s so hard about burying the hatchet.”

Silver Spoon angled her head back toward her work, but her glare smoldered over the rim of her glasses. “Newsflash, farmpony: high-class hooves don’t touch hatchets.”

“For goodness—” Bloom threw her hooves up. “Fine, bury the butter knife or whatever fancy ponies use instead of hatchets, then! Diamond’s honestly sorry, Silver; she feels downright terrible about it. Last weekend, whatever time she didn’t spend on the playground she spent frettin’ about you and how bad she treated you.” Her head ducked down to meet Silver’s eye. “It’s not like she’s fakin’ it if that’s what you’re worried about. She’s really and truly sorry, and means it.”

“Good. She should be sorry. That’s got nothing to do with me, though.” The third stack of material locked in the binder. Blueprints for Project X’s watchtower bled through the paper. Silver could make out faint designs for a tea table in the center. She laid down a divider to make way for the next stack. “I bet she doesn’t even know what she needs to be sorry for.”

“She knows she hurt you,” said Apple Bloom. “That’s gotta count for somethin’. Right?” One look at Silver’s expression gave Bloom all the answer she needed. “Well…” Frustrated, she sucked her teeth. “Did ya tell her why you’re so hurt?”

“It’s stupid to accept an apology when somepony doesn’t even know why she’s doing it. She’s not stupid. If Miss Tiara can’t even figure out what she did, then we have nothing to discuss.”

“Diamond ain’t a mind reader, neither,” Bloom sighed. “See, if y’all would just talk—”

“Maybe Silver doesn’t want to talk, Apple Bloom.” Berry Pinch drew herself up, narrowing her sharp green eyes. “She doesn’t gotta if she doesn’t wanna. If Tiara decided to be a giant butt trumpet all over the place, it’s not up to Silver Spoon to shrug it off like nothing happened, ‘cause it did happen, and it sucks.” She lashed her short slip of a tail and glared daggers into the table. “Diamond Tiara doesn’t get off scot-free just ‘cause she feels bad.”

“Or because she tossed a few thousand bits at everypony.” Silver Spoon hadn’t expected Berry Pinch of all ponies to tap in, but she certainly wasn’t about to complain.

“That’s not what I said!” Outnumbered, Apple Bloom backed away from the table, trying to focus on both fillies at once. “It’s—” She took a breath and a moment to regroup. “Diamond Tiara wants to do better, be a better pony than she’s been. Wantin’ to change oughta count for something, I think.”

Slowly, Berry Pinch rose to her hooves. “I don’t.”

Apple Bloom flinched closer to the table.

“I don’t.” The tip of Pinch’s left ear twitched like a telegraph knob as she measured Bloom’s hurt expression. Sympathy flickered across her face. She clenched her jaw, doubled down on her
conviction, and walled it out.

“I don’t care if she wants to be better. I want a lotta stuff too, but that doesn’t mean I’ll get it, even if I deserve it. Unlike some ponies.” Everything Berry Pinch said last week about letting things go, all the stuff about not wasting energy on being mad, all the shrugs and the she’s-not-worth-its evaporated in the heat of her glare. “‘Sorry’ doesn’t fix anything she did to me, Apple Bloom.” The stare turned on Silver Spoon. “C’mon, Silver, back me up on this.”

Silver Spoon went back to the binder and curled her tail close. “I think it’d be better not to waste time arguing about Diamond Tiara and get back to work.”

Pinch flumped back on her haunches. “Figures.”

Silver hunched her shoulders. “I don’t want to get in a fight, Pinch.” Especially not about Diamond.

“No, you just don’t want to fight out in the open. You wouldn’t have a single problem complaining about her under the table, I bet.” Berry Pinch’s magic rustled through a stack of blueprints. “I dunno what you’re scared of; it’s not like anypony here’s gonna use it against you.”

“I’m not scared, but I—” Silver adjusted her glasses with a little cough. “I don’t know, I feel weird about it.”

Apple Bloom sighed. “Now, that part I can understand. This whole thing still feels kinda funny. I’m not used to Diamond Tiara being all… not terrible to me all the time.” Her amber eyes grazed Silver Spoon and ran away again. “If I hadn’t seen her with my own two eyes when I found out about her ma and stuff, I might not believe it either.” She rubbed the back of her neck, frowning at the wide expanse of the Silvers’ foyer. “Really, the only reason I know I can believe it is ‘cause Diamond didn’t know we were there. Besides, I don’t think even she could fake that face. She looked so sad.”

So the Cutie Mark Crusaders had started it. Silver should have known that Diamond Dazzle Tiara would sooner sink to the bottom of Luna Bay than ask for help or accept pity. Those three always did pop up at a pony’s worst time. Like bad credit, but worse. Of course this whole thing happened because they poked their noses where they didn’t belong. Of course it did.

Silver Spoon’s mouth drew into a grim, wire-thin line. “Those gift baskets weren’t Diamond’s idea at all. They were yours.”

Apple Bloom adopted an intense interest in the architecture of the ceiling. “Uh… maybe?” She squirmed under Silver’s corrosive stare. “We jus’ wanted to help, is all!”

“Right, and get your friendship therapist cutie marks while you’re at it, I’ll bet.” Silver sneered at Bloom’s flank, as yellow and barren as the Badlands. And it didn’t even work, blank flank. Silver Spoon didn’t say it. She didn’t have to.

A coral pink flush colored Apple Bloom’s cheeks. She glared. “That’s not what we were doin’, Silver Spoon. We saw somepony—no, we saw our friend having a hard time and wanted to help her. Didn’t know that was a crime.” She reached across the table and pointed an uppity little hoof at Silver’s chest. “But if you want an apology, then fine: I’m sorry you got a fancy expensive tea set for free from your old friend who wants to make nice with you. That what you wanna hear?”

As a filly who’d been raised better than to entertain rhetorical questions, Silver snapped her tail in Apple Bloom’s face.

“Golly, Silver Spoon.” Berry Pinch clicked her tongue. “I thought you didn’t want to fight.”
Silver cleared her throat. “We are not fighting. The two of us are having a discussion.”

“Which is exactly what adults say when they want you to think they’re not fighting.”

“Huh. Now that I think about it…” Apple Bloom glanced out the window and down the road that led to Sweet Apple Acres. “I remember Diamond’s daddy used to say that, back when she’d come over for one of those long weekends.” Slowly, her brain dusted off and connected old dots. “…oh. I forgot Spoiled Rich isn’t her first… Oh, wow.” She sighed, shaking her head. “No wonder Diamond was such a pain in the rear all them years.”

“That is the single biggest load of horse apples I’ve heard all week!” Pinch banged the desk so hard the papers jumped. “So Diamond’s moms are jerks, who cares?” Her short mane flared with a toss of her head. A pale scar curved close to the cranberry hairline. “My dad’s meaner than Goldie and Spoiled put together and I never went around being terrible to ponies.”

A conversation from The Dink’s séance last October whispered in the back of Silver’s head: Your friend’s lucky Pinchers didn’t knock her teeth out. I would’ve if she’d said that to me. Silver glanced at the notch in Berry Pinch’s left ear. She told her that one day she’d end up in jail, just like her dad —she said that already knowing what Pinch’s dad is like.

Silver’s gaze trailed from the unicorn’s ear to her face. Pinch stared back expectantly.

“Yeah, and besides,” said Silver, “Mrs. Rich never made Diamond throw out my speech.” She mumbled it in a whisper. Any louder and her chest might get waterlogged again. “And nopony forced Diamond to tell me I’m not allowed to speak, either.”

Apple Bloom had the sense to tread carefully. Thank goodness. “Maybe not, but if not for that I don’t think Diamond woulda turned out how she did. She said she’s been under a lot of pressure lately.”

“And?” Silver humphed. “So am I.”

“I know.” Bloom shrugged at Silver’s surprise. “Sweetie Belle told me. Listen, it’s not just Diamond I wanna let bygones be bygones with, Silver. You’re an ornery lil’ fusspot, and kind of a know-it-all, but I think you’re pretty okay.” She risked a smile. “And you brew a mean cup of apple tea.”

“I know.” After a pause, Silver added, “But thank you, I try. For what it’s worth, you’re kind of okay yourself. For a loud obnoxious busybody with bad hair.”

“Thanks.” Apple Bloom leaned forward with a fretful little frown. “But I still dunno why you can’t just accept her apology, Silver.”

And back to that old line again. Of course. Silver should have known better when Bloom started complimenting her tea. She didn’t care a bit about tea. Without a word, Silver went back to filling the binder.

“The only pony you’re hurtin’ by getting all bitter an’ stubborn is your own silly self, you know.”

Silver Spoon didn’t budge from her notes. Luna’s sake, if I knew she’d start quoting posters from a guidance counselor office, I would have done the blueprint binder myself.

“In the end, it’s only gonna—” A note of silence. The table creaked. “You got some nerve, Sterling Silver Spoon, you know that?”

Silver’s head popped up. Did this two-bit hayseed with no cutie mark just pull full name rank on her?
“Yeah, you heard me. Where do you get off actin’ all high and mighty about this? I get you got your feelings hurt, but you’re not the only pony in the world with hurt feelings.”

“You don’t get to tell me how to feel, Apple Bloom!” The sentence wobbled and stumbled through the air, dragging a blood trail behind it. Silver bit the inside of her lip until the quaver went away. It didn’t matter what kind of sob-story measuring stick this uppity little farmer pulled on her. Apple Bloom of all ponies was not going to shake her. Silver blinked the wetness from her eyes and glanced at the unicorn trying (and failing) not to eavesdrop. The last thing she needed right now was Pinch telling everypony how she’d cried like a yearling.

“I’m not! I’m sayin’ you got no business acting so huffy about not acceptin’ her apology like it’ll change somethin’ when it won’t. If anypony oughta know that, it’s me.” Bloom banged both hooves against her chest. “You two were terrible to me and my friends day in and day out for years. Diamond herself’s been giving me a hard time three times longer than she’s even known you, Silver Spoon. Way meanner an’ way nastier than she ever, EVER was to you, and it got even worse once you showed up. If anypony in town oughta hold a grudge, it oughta be me—you showed up in my nightmares for Celestia’s sake!”

Apple Bloom sniffed hard. “Even after all that, I’m still willing to let bygones be bygones, but you won’t even hear her out. It’s stupid!”

“You’re stupid!” Silver spat back on instinct. “Just because you rolled over and forgave her doesn’t mean I have to, and just because she’s been meaner to you longer, it doesn’t mean you can tell me what to do.”

Bloom snorted at her.

Whatever, let the hayseed be mad. Silver snatched up her pen and clamped it hard between her teeth. She ought to get back to work and not give Bloom the least bit of satisfaction.

What section had they left off on, anyway? Only three piles remained for sorting, but did they go in front or in back, or…? Pressure built in Silver’s chest. The pen wobbled in her mouth. Silver spat it out. “I don’t care how mean Diamond was when you two were five and she broke your apple cores or whatever. It’s not the same, Apple Bloom.”

“It’s really not.” Berry Pinch’s voice drifted in from the other side of the table, shy, soft, and flat. She may as well have spoken from the other side of the world. “Diamond Tiara wasn’t your friend when she did it to you. Especially ‘cause…” The rest of the sentence caught in her throat and died there. “…it’s just different, okay?”

Apple Bloom rested her chin on the tabletop, ears pinned. “Well, it doesn’t feel that different to me. Still hurt.” A hot, resentful stare rubbed against Silver’s coat. “A lot.”

Neither filly could argue that. One couldn’t compare a snakebite to a manticore sting, but both got a pony into the hospital. “Okay, fine. I’ll give you that.” Silver dabbed her eyes with her fetlock. “It’s not a contest, though, Apple Bloom. You don’t win because Di’s been mean to you longer.”

The lash of Apple Bloom’s tail slowed to a tap. “That’s not what I meant.” She studied Berry Pinch and Silver Spoon’s faces. Gradually, the anger faded from her own. “I guess maybe it wasn’t nice of me to jump on ya like that. Sorry.”

“That’s… okay, I guess. I’m sorry, too. For the stuff today and, um… the stuff before today, too.”
Silver wiped her lenses and slipped her glasses back on. She recalled the farmer’s shy reluctance when she’d entered the house. Maybe it hadn’t been the antiques that intimidated her. “Was I really in your nightmares?”

“Oh.” That had been more information than Apple Bloom meant to share, it seemed. With an awkward waggle of her shoulders, she returned to filing blueprint pages. “Couple times, yeah. Still are, sometimes.”

Silver had never been in somepony’s nightmares before. Not to her knowledge, anyhow. “Huh. What am I like? Do I have long spidery legs and glowing eyes? Wolf fangs? A chainsaw?” Chainsaws weren’t her style at all, but dreams didn’t run on common sense.

“No.” Apple Bloom never sounded so quiet. “You’re just you.”

“Oh.”

“Silver, listen. I’m not saying you need to kiss and move in together with Diamond Tiara, alright?” Bloom pointed her tail towards the other end of the table. “Accepting an apology can’t be that hard. Berry Pinch is as mad as you are, and she still did it.”

Silver whirled around. “Wait, what? You did?”

Smoothing the last few sketches into the binder, Berry Pinch shrugged and nodded.

“Then what was all that stuff from before?!”

“Hey, I accepted her apology. I never said I forgave her.” A white envelope stuck out of Pinch’s saddlebag, still wax-sealed with Diamond’s cutie mark. “We stopped being best friends a long time ago, anyway. I traded up for The Dink.” She shrugged again. “So. Yeah.”

Apple Bloom nodded. “Right, see? At the very least, it’d get Diamond Tiara to quit worryin’ herself into a wreck over you and let her get to what she’s s’posed to be doing.”

“If Diamond still can’t control her emotions, that’s not my problem, Apple Bloom.” Besides, from what Silver had seen earlier this week, reports of this “wreck” had been highly exaggerated. “Diamond Tiara seems fine to m—”

“Hi, guys! Good morning!” Diamond’s voice sailed through the window crack, too chipper for eight in the morning.

Speak of the devil. Silver looked up expecting to see a pink nose pressed against the glass. She only found the neighbor’s cat curled up in the Silvers’ bed of wilting snowdrops. White petals tumbled across its black pelt in the morning breeze.

The voice had to have come from somewhere, and Silver knew she hadn’t imagined it. She opened the window and stuck her head out the window, scanning the road.

Diamond stood in the dirt road separating the Silver property and Miss Junebug’s house. Fully loaded saddlebags bulged at her sides while her neck craned backwards towards the sky. Tornado Bolt and Featherweight hovered a few feet above her nose.

“Hi there, Diamond Tiara. You’re up early, huh?” Featherweight’s darling dinner plate ears tilted forward. “Hey, you didn’t bring any of those fancy éclairs along, did you?”

“I think it might be too early for éclairs,” said Tornado Bolt. “We already had breakfast, and I think
they’re not supposed to be a brunch food.” The grey pegasus dipped a bit lower. “But um, while we’re on the subject, do you have any of those Power Pony Sigil Pops left over? Those were sooooo cool!”

Apparently, this had not been the way Diamond expected the conversation to go. She blinked at her saddlebags, then back up to the pegasi. “Not really, sorry. I already gave you all of what I ordered.”

Featherweight sagged in the air. “Awww. That’s okay, I guess.”

“But!” Diamond reached a hoof out to them. “When I get my allowance next week, I could always order more, though! We could have some when we take breaks from building the playground.”

“Thanks, Diamond Tiara! That’s real cool of you.” Tornado Bolt shot The Power Ponies’ signature signoff salute. “We’ll see you around.”

“Oh! Uh, actually, guys?” Diamond reared on her hind legs to stay in their sight before they could drift off. “Guys?” The chipper lilt in her voice flaked. Featherweight and Tornado Bolt drifted out of Silver’s view, but their silhouettes still shaded Diamond’s face. “Hey, I actually was wondering when you’d come down to the schoolhouse today.”

Silence. Featherweight’s shadow fidgeted.

“The new equipment comes in tomorrow morning. We could use as many hooves as possible to clear out the old broken stuff before it gets here.”

“Oh, uh… today?” Bolt’s voice trailed off as her shadow shrank. “You mean like… today, today?”

Diamond’s laidback chuckle strained through her teeth. “Well, I don’t mean next month.”

“I can’t. I’ve actually got tickets to Power Con today, see?” Tornado Bolt held them out. “Sorry.”

“Oh.” The chuckle died entirely. Diamond flicked her tail, clicked her tongue, and tried again. “Well, that’s okay! We can do it tomorrow.”

Tornado Bolt cleared her throat. “Um. It’s all-weekend tickets, actually.”

That wouldn’t have been a problem if everypony hadn’t spent the past four recesses playing skyball (Rumble borrowed his brother’s ball from home) and tag. As the week wore on with little progress to show for it, most foals came to an unofficial agreement that there wasn’t enough time at recess to work on the playground.

Bubblegum Brush argued that nopony wanted to come back to class dirty and sweaty, and the rest of the class decided this had been a perfectly serviceable excuse. They also ignored the student council’s counterargument that ponies got just as dirty playing skyball and tag.

“I guess it’s only me and you, Featherweight.” Diamond upgraded to her patented pageant smile. The sun rose barely four hours ago, and she’d already resorted to the big guns. How many other foals had better things to do today? “You’ve been working out with your big brother, right? Now you can do some real heavy lifting!” No immediate answer came. Diamond’s smile widened. Silver Spoon could practically hear the hinges creak. “No pain, no gain, right?”

“I’m kinda busy this morning too, Diamond,” Featherweight finally admitted. “Me and Rumble and Shady Daze are gonna meet Button for pinball.”

“What about after that?”
“Yeah, we’ll pop in after we’re done, maybe.”

Featherweight’s confirmation had all the watery confidence of a parent’s “we’ll see.” It directly translated to “If we happen to remember” at best, and a polite “Absolutely not” at worst. Diamond Tiara knew that. She HAD to know that. And yet…

“Okay, awesome! So, I’ll see you then, alright?”

“Sure. See ya, Diamond Tiara. Thanks again for the éclairs!”

“You’re welcome, see you this afternoon.” No way Diamond bought that tripe. Featherweight might have had the bone structure of a supermodel and eyes like the deepest pools of Horseshoe Bay, but the colt couldn’t lie his way out of a wet paper bag. What game could she be playing at?

“Featherweight—you are going to be there, right?”

Featherweight made a subtle motion that may or may not have been a nod. The two shadows shrank into pinpricks.

Silver Spoon raised an eyebrow. She glanced at Apple Bloom, who’d joined her in the windowsill, and at Berry Pinch, still at work with the binder. “So, like I said. Diamond’s totally fine.”

Apple Bloom adopted one of her big sister’s deadpan stares.

“What?”

Bloom sighed. “Nothin’.” She raised a hoof and waved at Diamond, who’d likely known they’d been there the whole time. Two ponies sticking out of a window would be kind of hard to miss.

“Mornin’, Diamond Tiara!”

“Good morning, Apple Bloom. Hello, Silver.” Diamond Tiara crossed the lawn, stopping a few paces short of the snowdrops under the window. The neighbor’s cat opened an eye at the pink hooves near its napping spot and edged farther in the flowerbed.

Silver Spoon offered a polite nod. “Good morning.”

Pinch raised a lazy hoof in greeting.

Diamond stretched her neck to peer over Apple Bloom’s shoulder. “Hey, Pinch. Didn’t see you there.” Surveying her audience, she stretched a hoof toward the windowsill. At the last second, she noticed Silver’s forelegs crossed upon the sill, reconsidered, and put her hoof down again. “I’m on my way to Town Hall right now. If you want, you could…” She pricked her ears and pointed at the table. “Wait, are those the plans for Project X?”

“No, it’s the blueprint for my new doghouse.” Berry Pinch paused mid-yawn. “…Actually, a new place for Mr. Dog isn’t a bad idea.” She jotted a note on her fetlock.

“Can I see?”

A loose-leaf diagram of the center slide levitated up from the binder rings. Pinch held it up a few seconds before filing it away.

Carefully, Diamond stepped around the snowdrops to get a closer view. “It looks amazing—way better than my old version! So does that mean you’re almost done with the blueprints?”

Berry Pinch twitched her ears, pleased. “Almost nothing; I finished it on Friday.”
“Yep!” Apple Bloom bobbed her head towards the tiny single stack of papers on the table. “Right now we’re actually organizin’ all the blueprints and notes and stuff in this here notebook—"

“It’s a binder,” clarified Silver Spoon. Folders lacked effort and class. A portfolio would be overkill and aroused suspicions of adult interference. A stylish binder found a reasonable middle ground between the two. “I decided it would be easier to read everything and find what we need fast. We’re going to Hard Hat’s place to show him as soon as we’re done.” Behind her, the last stack of papers whittled down to about five pages. “Which should be in a few minutes.”

“You finished all that?” Diamond’s eyes grew wide, her voice soft and impressed. “Already?” She beamed. “Wow, thanks! That’s awesome work, you guys, seriously.”

Silver blinked. “Uh, it’s literally what you told us to do?” Technically, the binder had been Silver’s idea, but she’d assumed the task came with a prerequisite for decent presentation. “Reformed” or not, they were still dealing with Diamond I-Made-Pie-Charts-To-Negotiate-Bedtime Tiara. “You gave us a whole week to do it.”

“I know, but…” Diamond pawed the garden topsoil. “Things have been going a little slower than I’d planned, lately.” A lot slower, more like. “I guess I’m just glad to see something roll like it’s supposed to.”

If anypony else had something to do this weekend that they’d conveniently forgotten to mention, the playground wouldn’t finish until next Nightmare Night. This sounded like a job for Class Secretary Silver’s attendance sheet. “Pinch, do me a favor and give me my planner?”

“What, you can’t walk a whole two feet across the room? I’m not your maid, Silver Snob.” The planner hovered over and dropped at Silver’s hooves anyway.

“Do you know who else is coming to clear the schoolyard this weekend?” Silver nosed through the pages until she found a clean sheet. “Mister Hard Hat’s probably going to need clear space to figure out where to put Project X.” Best case scenario, he might even be able to start digging before Monday.

“I saw Prickle Berry and Bubblegum Brush on my walk here, and they said they’re coming after lunch. I haven’t seen many ponies from our class yet,” said Diamond. “Most of them are probably still in bed or eating breakfast. Yesterday they all said they’d be coming, though. Pretty sure they’ll be there.” She smiled to prove it. Prove it to who, Silver couldn’t know.

“‘Pretty sure’? You mean you don’t actually know?” When Diamond didn’t answer right away, Silver lashed her tail.

Celestia’s sake. Maybe the class treasurer didn’t mind waffling for fifty semesters, but while Diamond dragged her hooves she dragged the rest of the student council with her. This playground bolstered the bulk of Pip’s administration plans; he’d be hurt the most by its failure. The council itself had barely shaken off its connotations of dorkitude. It couldn’t take a hit like this. What is with this filly and screwing up other ponies’ reputations?

Silver closed her eyes. She breathed. “Okay. Have you considered not asking ponies, but telling them where they should be?”

“Yeah, this whole thing’s your idea, ain’t it?” Apple Bloom lifted Diamond’s original rough draft of Project X’s east bridge, the one connecting the watchtower and the ziplines they weren’t getting. “You’re the filly who knows where everything oughta go, so that means you know best where everypony oughta be.” She smiled encouragingly. “Right?”
“It’s not that. A lot of ponies happen to be a little busy this weekend.” Diamond Tiara shrugged and laughed it off. “I mean, it’s still only the first weekend, and we’ve still got all of Sunday if today doesn’t work out.”

Silver Spoon narrowed her eyes. “They’ve already had a whole week and barely done a thing.”

“I don’t want to push anypony too hard, that’s all. We’ll still work it out. Okay?” Diamond smiled again, all apologies and sunshine. It wouldn’t fool baby Pumpkin Cake.

Silver Spoon’s coat rumpled. This sugary slop was the stuff of scholarship students—green scholarship students too stupid or naïve or gutless to realize how the gears of society moved. Diamond had been engineering the Ponyville Schoolhouse social scene years before Silver stepped through the door.

Silver stepped back from the window, suppressing a scowl. The sight of that milquetoast cubic zirconia smile turned her stomach. “We need to get back to work, alright?”

“Okay, Silvie. See you.”

Don’t you dare call me that in that cutesy-cute voice. “See you.”

The last of the blueprint sketches settled in the binder. Apple Bloom clicked it shut. “Alright, now I know you saw that, Silver Spoon.” She kept the class secretary in her line of sight as Silver bent beneath the table to fetch a fallen pencil. “Sumthin’ funny’s going on with her and you know it.”

“So what? Diamond’s business is not my business, Apple Bloom.” A familiar black ooze bubbled in the pit of Silver’s stomach, slithering up the sides and into her throat. She shoved it down. “As a matter of fact, why do you even care?”

“’Cause I’ve actually got a heart still beatin’ in my chest, unlike some ponies.” Bloom flicked her tail across her hooves. “Ponies are supposed to care about each other, especially their friends. Remember?”

“I remember you didn’t notice or care about Diamond’s problems until about a week ago. Besides, it’s not like she’s the only filly in town having a hard time, and I don’t see you giving any of them a hoof.” Silver drew herself up in a huff. “If you’re really such a sweet little sweetheart who ‘only wants to help’ why don’t you help Truffle Shuffle or Prickle Berry? Scootaloo’s probably got some sob story she’s been sitting on, and she’s your actual best friend. Why you don’t help her and leave mine alone?”

A pause. Slowly, Apple Bloom’s ears stood straight up. An almost-smirk struggled on her lips. “So. Diamond’s your best friend, huh?”

“…You’re lucky I was raised right, Apple Bloom. Quit avoiding the question: why are you so obsessed with Diamond Tiara all of a sudden?”

“Actually, yeah. What IS up with that?” Berry Pinch tilted her head. “You got a crush on her or something?” She scratched the space between her withers with a pen. “It’d explain a heck of a lot.”

“She—what?! Eww, no!” Bloom stomped unladylike figure eights around the foyer. “Sheesh, why do I gotta have a crush to care about somepony? I told you, it’s ‘cause she’s my friend. But you’re right, it ain’t just that. I got a…” She tossed her head in a restless search for the right words. “I dunno, it’s a feeling. A real weird feeling about all of this. Something’s not right with Diamond Tiara, y’all.”
“Naw, really?” Pinch waggled the pencil at Apple Bloom’s nose. “I could’ve told you that, Shadow Spade.”

The foyer echoed with Apple Bloom’s stomping hooves. “No, I don’t mean just that! It’s something…something else. When she came to our clubhouse last week and saw all our crusadin’ stuff, she said—” With a snort, she shook her head. “No, didn’t say it, not out loud, but there’s something goin’ on with Diamond’s cutie mark.”

The stomping slowed to a stop. Apple Bloom tilted her head back, staring into the labyrinth of gears inside the grandfather clock. Her eyes followed the pendulum back and forth. “I don’t think Diamond Tiara understands it. Not entirely or…” Confidence in her argument melted under Silver Spoon’s incredulous stare. “This all sounds kinda crazy, don’t it?”

“No, it sounds idiotic.” Even as she said it, however, Silver’s heart skipped. “Of course Diamond knows what her cutie mark means! She practically spelled it out for everypony after she stood up to her stepmother for you, remember?”

But Diamond had also said it with the same cubic zirconia smile she’d had at the window. Said it at ninety-percent confidence. Said in a way to convince herself along with everypony else—why else say it out loud? Nobunny there cared but her. Silver certainly didn’t.

Miss Silver Spoon stepped forward, raising her head to regard a nosy little hayseed from the proper height. “Berry Pinch and I have been friends with Diamond Tiara longer than you, Miss Apple. I think we know a little more than you do.”

Apple Bloom’s face twitched, but otherwise didn’t budge. “Exactly.”

Silver Spoon frowned.

“Nopony knows Diamond the way you do. If there’s anypony who can help sort out what’s goin’ on —”

“Then they are more than welcome to try, Miss Apple Bloom.” After a quick double check that the materials were in order, Silver Spoon packed up the binder and swung on her saddlebag. “Contrary to popular belief, I am not Diamond Tiara’s butler.” She couldn’t help a sour smile at Bloom’s guilty flinch. “I don’t clean up her messes.”
“Is it two spoons or three?” Silver dipped the little spoon in the jar of rye, one eye keeping close watch on the boiling kettle beside her. It ought to whistle in about three… two… now. Silver’s tail wrapped around the kettle’s handle and lifted before the first gasp rang out.

A renegade biscuit rolled off Tealove’s tray. She ducked and caught it inches from the floor. The porcelain tea set that balanced upon her withers didn’t rattle a bit. “Two.” Tealove puffed a strand of mane out of her face and smiled. “It’s only three spoons on the first of the month.”

Right, right. Silver Spoon should have known that. Thanks to two months of haywire scheduling, she’d gotten rusty with her apprenticeship. Amazing that Miss Tealove still remembered Silver’s name, considering how little they’d seen each other. Even so, only one mare in town wanted rye in her tea at all, much less rye mixed with mistletoe.

“Miss Shoeshine takes that with two lumps and a dash of cream, right?”

Tealove winked on her way out of the back room. “You got it!”

The teaspoon twirled in the cup until the clouds of cream settled into a calm murky brownish green. At a glance, one couldn’t tell the difference between the tea and a cup of Froggy Bottom Bog water, and in Silver’s opinion, rye didn’t mix well with mistletoe in the first place. She’d offered to add other herbs and flowers to brighten the blend before, but Shoeshine declined every time.

*Hey, so long as she’s happy with it.* Silver Spoon arranged the small tea set and napkins on the tray and stepped into the teahouse.

The Sunday crowd packed the tables end to end in a cornucopia of scents and tea blends; simple black with lemon melded with the peppermint, yerbas, raspberry, and green teas, all wafting through soft scents of honey, flowers, and fresh biscuits. Even so, the strong scent of monkshood could draw Silver Spoon to table nine with her eyes closed.

The mare sat alone at a small table in the corner of the room, bolstered by the walls and shadowed under a cabinet of purchasable glaze ware. Her coat matched the soft blues and whites of the teahouse, and unless one thought to look for her, they wouldn’t notice her at all.

“Good morning, Miss Shoeshine.” Silver smiled and nodded over the teapot as she poured. “I apologize for the wait.” She left the teapot on the table. Shoeshine rarely had more than one cup, but one never knew.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Silver Spoon. It’s busy in here today.” She shrugged with a little smile. “I should’ve gotten here when you opened, but that’s what I get for sleeping in, I guess.” Steam curled beneath the dark rings shadowing Shoeshine’s burgundy eyes. The tip of her nose twitched at the scent. She’d never been a pony to rush her tea. “Besides, it’s more than worth the wait. Nopony makes it the way you do.”

“They don’t?” How strange. The blend might have been unusual, but it had a straightforward process no harder than a normal lavender-chamomile. Silver saw no reason why Tealove or Jasmine Leaf, the tea seller, couldn’t make it. Shoeshine herself could probably manage it in her own kitchen. “Is there something that I do differently?”

The plump white curls of Shoeshine’s tail flicked between the table legs while she thought. “I know
it’s kind of a strange tea. Mistletoe and rye don’t normally go together, do they?”

“No, ma’am.” In fact, Shoeshine was the only reason they kept rye in their usual stock at all.

“Well, you see…” Shoeshine checked to see if Tealove hovered nearby. She didn’t, but Shoeshine erred on politeness and lowered her voice anyway. “Other ponies can get the ingredients in the same cup, and they can measure it out the right way, but that doesn’t mean the ingredients will want to talk to each other.”

Silver blinked. “Talk to each other?”

Miss Shoeshine sipped her tea and nodded. “Or sometimes, a pony can get them to talk, but the conversation won’t work. The rye is too loud, or the mistletoe is too bold, and the cream can’t do anything except sit on the sidelines and watch. It technically works, but it doesn’t feel right. But when you put them in the same cup, Silver, the rye and mistletoe don’t just talk. They laugh and smile and want to dance, while the cream plays a waltz and the sugar—” She shook her head and laughed to herself. “I’m sorry. This sounds silly, doesn’t it?”

“No, Miss Shoeshine.” A familiar warmth blossomed behind Silver Spoon’s smile. Goodness, how had she stayed away from this teahouse for so long? “I don’t think it’s silly at all.” Silver Spoon glanced at the rest of the teahouse. The Sunday morning rush had wound down, and Tealove seemed to have the rest of the place handled. She could spare a few extra seconds. “Excuse me, but is it okay if I ask you a question? About your tea?”

The mare blinked several times. Her eyes flicked between the table and her swamp-green tea. “Oh, sure.” She turned a slightly paler shade of blue. “What is it?”

“Why—” Silver Spoon paused.

For the past year, Shoeshine never failed to come in for her Sunday mistletoe and rye—a blend that she never seemed especially fond of, either from monotony or taste. Judging from the plentiful cream and sugar, Silver guessed the latter. But as she now examined Shoeshine’s paling face, she considered two things.

First, and most important: mistletoe came from the Top Shelf.

Last winter, Tealove had dedicated an entire month to introducing Silver Spoon to the Top Shelf. Drinking the wrong amount of tea from that shelf, she’d said, could put a pony in the hospital. Or worse. Measurements had to be exact. Save for the mistletoe—which needed an additional month of training before Silver could brew it on her own—most of the teas didn’t go into circulation except in the spring. Top Shelf tea served a purpose: red clover when somepony wanted a new foal, parsley when they didn’t want a new foal, and pennyroyal for when they really didn’t want a new foal.

Silver didn’t know what mistletoe did—Shoeshine didn’t seem like the baby type, and she drank it year-round, not just in spring—but nopony drank from the Top Shelf unless they had a very good reason.

The second thing Silver realized was that this reason was none of Silver Spoon’s concern. She didn’t like Apple Bloom poking into her business all the time. Miss Shoeshine wouldn’t like it either.

“Why don’t I mix you a blend to take home? I can measure it out, so all you’ll have to do is brew it.” Silver held up a hoof to clarify, “In sachets, not tea bags.” Seriously, whoever thought of grinding tea into tasteless dust ought to be thrown in a dungeon.

“Oh!” Miss Shoeshine brightened. “Oh, thank you, Silver Spoon, that would be wonderful. I mean,
if it’s not too much trouble or anything?”

Silver Spoon puffed her chest. “You’re welcome, ma’am, and don’t worry, it’s fine. I do this kind of thing all the time, like this one time during pageant season, I brewed this special hibiscus and ginger blend for…” The words rotted under her tongue. “Uh, anyway, I can have it ready by this evening, Miss Shoeshine. Should I bring it to the farrier or your house?”

“The house,” Shoeshine said. “Please.”

“Then I’ll do that. I need to get back to work now, though. Bye!” Silver took the tray back and headed back to the kitchen.

The tablecloths rustled in an open window’s cross breeze. A voice carried in the wind. “Psst. Spoons.”

Silver’s ears pivoted. She scanned the tables, but couldn’t find the source.

“Down here.” A purple hoof poked out from under table thirteen’s tablecloth and waved her over.

“Act natural.”

This probably crossed talking to a table off the list. Luckily, that angle had been covered. The Dink’s mom waved from table thirteen, happily enjoying her croissant and steamed milk. “Hi there, Silver Spoon!” She smiled down at the rustling table cloth. “Dinkums is on a stakeout.”

“Ma!” hissed the tablecloth. “It’s not a stakeout if you tell everypony in the place. Sheesh, we’ve been over this.”

The Dink’s mom broke off a piece of her croissant and slipped it under the table.

A short pause. The tablecloth rustled with muffled chewing sounds. “So, spill. What’s the skinny on her, Spoons?”

Silver sighed. “I didn’t get anything.”

“Rats, she’s sneakier than I thought. I’ll bet she knew you were coming.” Dinky gasped. “Which probably means she already knows I sent you, which means—“

“Relax, Dink, Shoeshine doesn’t know anything.” Not that Silver had seen, anyway. “I didn’t ask.” She frowned at the grouchy face surely brimming beneath table thirteen. “I’m not digging into a customer’s personal business; it’s rude.”

The tablecloth tsked. “Some things are more important than being polite, Spoons.”

“Sorry, Dink. I’m out.”

“Whatever.” A yellow tail tip lashed against the lace. “Just don’t come crying to me at the next full moon.”

Silver shuffled her hooves in the teahouse carpet. Usually, the right thing to do would be to give back her fee, but in this case… “Listen, Dinky, I know this was supposed to be a favor for a favor, but we really need more hooves on the playground project today. Foals haven’t been showing up.”

“Well, I don’t really blame ‘em. I wouldn’t want to help somepony who wanted me to get eaten up by a marewolf either,” grumbled the tablecloth. “But I kinda already told my mom I’d do it, so I guess I’m stuck. But you still owe me, Spoons.” The Dink’s face poked out from under the taffeta
and lace. “Oh, and ears up.” She pointed over Silver’s shoulder. “Somepony’s got their eye on you.”

Silver followed Dinky’s hoof to table six. Her eyes widened at the sight of purple wings and a regal face smiling in her direction.

Princess Twilight Sparkle rose slightly from her chair to wave her over. “Morning, Silver Spoon. Do you have a minute?”

“Of course!” Silver rushed over as quickly as politeness would allow. Remembering that the princess didn’t like it when ponies bowed in full, Silver dipped her head. “Do you need anything, Princess Twilight? More milk or sugar?” She glanced at the levitating cup of jasmine tea. “I could go get Tealove if there’s a problem with—”

“Oh, no, everything’s wonderful, thanks.” Twilight folded her droopy wings in close and clasped her hooves upon the table. The princess’s violet eyes stretched wide and friendly, but the smile on her face didn’t reach them. “I wanted to talk, that’s all.”

If it were anypony but literal royalty, Silver would have excused herself to go back to work. “Um…okay. What about?” She tried to stay optimistic. Maybe the Princess of Friendship just wanted to talk about Father’s antiques, or she also wanted to custom order a new tea. One never knew.

“I’m sorry, Silver Spoon!” It popped from Twilight like a button on a sweater three sizes too small. Silver hopped back in surprise. “You—I-I’m sorry, but what are you sorry for?”

“You had a friendship problem—no, a friendship emergency—and there I was, off fighting bugbears. I should have done a follow-up visit, or tried harder to reschedule. I had a whole thirty minutes of free time the Thursday before the class election. If I’d only visited then…” She shook her head. “I’m so sorry, Silver Spoon.”

Silver stared back, speechless. The princess almost looked upset enough to cry. That didn’t make any sense; princesses didn’t cry, did they? Only foals—and maybe some very emotional adults—ever did that. Pinkie Pie once told Silver that ponies usually didn’t cry because they felt sad, but because they felt frustrated. They cried when they didn’t know what to do, but the princesses were like Equestria’s moms; they always knew what to do. They didn’t cry.

Princess Twilight hung her head. “You had a friendship problem—no, a friendship emergency—and there I was, off fighting bugbears. I should have done a follow-up visit, or tried harder to reschedule. I had a whole thirty minutes of free time the Thursday before the class election. If I’d only visited then…” She shook her head. “I’m so sorry, Silver Spoon.”

“That’s alright, Princess Twilight. I’m not mad.” It didn’t seem to bring the princess much comfort. Silver stepped closer to the table, staring into the depths of Twilight’s teacup. “The Crusaders told you Diamond Tiara and I broke up, didn’t they?”

Twilight shuffled her wings. “Applejack did.”

Meaning that Apple Bloom’s big sister found out sometime during the weekend Diamond stayed at Sweet Apple Acres. Applejack never struck Silver as the gossipy type; hopefully Twilight had been the only pony she’d told. However, considering the tight-knit group she ran with…

Silver’s ears wilted. “Princess, does… does Pinkie Pie know?” She hadn’t even considered it until now. Poor Pinkie would be so sad. No, worse: disappointed. “She told me a party pony is supposed
to spread smiles. They’re supposed to keep harmony in their heart and try to understand their fellow pony.”

Half the time, Silver barely had to try. She could break ground and break bread with somepony like Button Mash or Scootaloo, even if she didn’t particularly like them. These days, she’d gladly take a ten-week burping marathon with Snips and Snails before another council meeting with Diamond on staff. Just standing near her put the fuzz in Silver’s tail.

Silver Spoon glanced at Miss Shoeshine quietly sipping her mistletoe and rye in the corner. “Young ladies aren’t supposed to stay bitter, either.” The Wisteria Codex never mentioned anything about it, but it did imply that a lady should move on from drama with grace. “But I am bitter, Twilight, and I’m… I’m so mad at her, still. Apple Bloom keeps telling me I should accept Diamond’s apology, and then it makes me even madder.”

Princess Twilight Sparkle folded her hooves and tilted her ears. She didn’t say anything, but she didn’t seem overtly disgusted by Silver’s behavior. That had to be a good sign, right?

“And the worst part is…” Silver dipped into a whisper. They were still speaking in public, and rumors spread like ponypox in this town. Who knew how many already knew Silver’s business thanks to Apple Bloom’s big mouth? “The worst part is I can’t stop being mad.” She stamped the carpet. “I don’t want to stop being mad.” Silver Spoon chewed her bottom lip. “Does that mean I’m a bad pony?”

Purple feathers curled around Silver’s back. The wing didn’t have the same shape that White Lightning or Fluttershy’s did. Twilight’s wings arced just so to create a dip in the center, a perfect shape to wrap somepony’s withers like an egg wrapped its yolk. “No, Silver Spoon,” said Princess Twilight Sparkle. “I don’t think it means you’re a bad pony at all. And you know, it’s natural to feel angry with other ponies.”

An invisible “but” clung to the end of that sentence. Silver fought to keep her ears straight and not flatten them like a petulant foal. “But you think I should forgive her, too. Don’t you?”

Twilight blinked at her sadly. “I think that from what I’ve seen, you two have been very good friends, Silver. A friendship like that is worth fighting for. Always.”

Silver’s tail gave a rebellious swipe. Two years of friendship. Twenty percent of her whole life. And within that twenty percent, ten months—ten months at least—of battling Diamond’s seasonal hurricanes. Ten months fighting to keep their tiny little ship stable as it thrashed through crashing black waves and thundering skies. The flotsam of Hurricane Diamond lingered in Silver Spoon’s coat, her tail, her hooves. Saltwater stung her eyes, clung to her tongue and ruined her meals.

Sure, the sun shone now, but for how long? This could still be the eye of the storm, and everypony knew the eyewall was the worst part. Even if the hurricanes were over, storms came in seasons. Sooner or later, another one could come to try and capsize their little ship again. And Silver Spoon was so sick of being seasick.

“What if you’ve already fought for your friendship and lost?”

The princess sipped her jasmine tea, flicking her straight tail in thought. “Well, that depends.” She tilted her head a perfect twenty degrees to the left. “Did you lose the battle or the war?”

Thoughts of noble Silver Sword sliced through Silver Spoon’s mind. A steadfast, quiet mare with rapier tight in tooth as she battled the Unicorn Kingdom’s tyranny, the unyielding frost of windigos, the despair of dungeons, and the ferocity of timberwolf packs. Her sons and daughters grew up to
face battalions of gentry within the Celestial Court and beyond, armed with quill, skill, and wit. The Silvers never rushed headlong into a skirmish; they fought cautiously and wisely, but fought all the same. Never in a pointless fight, however. A nobly unwinnable fight, perhaps, but never a pointless one.

So she’s still your best friend, huh? Even miles away, Apple Bloom still managed to get under Silver’s skin.

Silver Spoon shook off the memory with a toss of her braid and reconsidered the question: Did you lose the battle or the war? “Honestly, Twilight, I don’t know.” What’s more, Silver couldn’t tell if Diamond wanted to fight for it either. Diamond didn’t want to fight for anything, lately.

“Hmm. ‘I don’t know’.” Princess Twilight repeated the phrase slowly, savoring the taste of it in her mouth. A languid grin poured across her face. “Star Swirl the Bearded used to say that’s the best sentence in the entire Ponish language.”

Star Swirl. A pony namedropped by Great Uncle Silver Chalice more than once when he spoke of magic and spellcraft, and second only to Mage Meadowbrook herself. Silver Spoon didn’t know much about him, but if Princess Twilight and Uncle Chalice respected him, he must have deserved it.

“Why would he say that?” Silver wondered aloud. “If you don’t know something, isn’t that like admitting defeat, or saying you’re stupid?”

“Because that’s the exciting part—then you get to find out the answer for yourself. You get to learn something you never ever knew before!” Twilight Sparkle fluffed her feathers and arced her wings. “Personally, I can’t think of anything more exciting, but…” She settled in her chair again and shrugged. “Then again, some ponies are happier never finding out. I mean, who doesn’t like a good mystery, right?”

Silver Spoon looked up.

Twilight’s wide eyes smiled down at her, the violet of an evening sky twinkling with the promise of new knowledge. “So I guess that’s another question for us. Are you a pony who likes unsolved mysteries, or a pony who discovers something for herself?”

In the past week, one thing had become clear to Silver Spoon. Whether she wanted to break things off with Diamond or patch things up, it had to be done cleanly. The cut at the election had been less a surgeon’s scalpel and more a flailing cleaver. It left loose threads and tatters that tangled in Silver’s tail and dragged behind her in the street. One way or another, those loose threads had to go.

Silver nodded in resolution. “Mysteries are dumb. I want to find out for myself.”

“Paisley!” Peachy Pie sat up so fast she almost fell off the broken merry-go-round. She clapped her yellow hooves, beaming ear to ear. “Let’s paint it paisley!”

Sunny Daze gasped with huge awestruck eyes, and took her best friend’s hooves into hers. “Oooohh, that’s a great idea, Peachy-P! Oh golly-gosh, it’ll be the prettiest slide ever!”

Peachy bowed her head with a giggling blush. “Aww, thanks, Sun-Sun, but you’re really the one with all the bright ideas!”

“Oh no, Peaches, you’re—”

If Silver didn’t cut in now, she’d lose her teacakes. She liberated the white birch. “Okay, first,
paisley’s not a color, it’s a pattern.” *An ugly pattern.* She gestured toward the blueprint draped over the massive crate behind her. “And second, whoever heard of a paisley jungle gym?”

“Exactly! It’ll be extra-special that way!” To hear Peachy talk, a pony would think three-tier five-section jungle gyms with an underground lounge sat on every street corner. She wrinkled her nose at Silver’s unenthused expression. “Well, pooh to you. I think it’s a great idea, and Sunny agrees.”

“Yeah!” Sunny Daze tried to copy Peachy’s nose wrinkle but it just ended up looking like she had to sneeze.

“You’re not in charge of Project X anyway.” Peachy Pie stretched her neck up to the crate. “What do you think, Diamond Tiara?”

Diamond swung one leg over the side of the crate as she adjusted her position on top of it. She examined the blueprints, imagining Project X in bright paisley patterns. “Well, it’s a really… unique idea, Peachy Pie.” She looked like she’d swallowed a bucket of slugs.

Silver waited for the second part of that second sentence. This should have been the part where Diamond let the filly down gently, or suggested a less idiotic-beyond-all-reason option. It never came.

“Excuse me, can I have the birch?” Truffle Shuffle took it from Silver and tapped it against the crate. “Guys, we already have a list of fourteen colors to choose from.” He indicated a maxed-out notepad page of color suggestions.

Peachy put her hoof on her hip. “So what? That doesn’t make any of those colors better than mine.”

“Paisley isn’t a color,” Silver said again.

Peachy Pie ignored her. “I’ve got the same right to be on the list, ’cause everypony gets a say. That’s what the president and Diamond said, and they’re the boss of Project X, Truffle Shuffle, not you.”

The vice-president turned to Secretary Silver, who rolled her eyes. He looked to the president, but he only shrugged.

Berry Pinch raised her hoof. “Yeah, well, I’m the art director and I still say we paint it black and green.” She glanced at The Dink. “Or black and red, that’s cool, too. Besides, paisley’s ugly and stupid.”

“Not as ugly and stupid as painting it black and puke green,” shot back Peachy.

“Not as ugly and stupid as your face!”

Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie gasped in unified shock.

Before Sunny turned on the waterworks and did something everypony would regret, Pipsqueak broke in. “Order, order! C’mon now, nopony’s got a stupid face. We are getting a little stuck on the colors, though. Truffle’s right, we can’t use all of them.” He glanced at Diamond for some support. They needed a firm and final word.

Diamond Tiara glanced between the council’s watchful stares, Peachy’s petulant sulk, and a dozen other hopeful ponies certain their color would grace Project X. “Technically, paisley’s a bunch of colors already. Maybe we could use all the colors we’ve gotten so far and use them in the pattern?” She smiled weakly.
Silver huffed and pointed at the color list. “Including neon plaid?” She shot Sweetie Belle a meaningful glare.

Sweetie Belle and her abominable taste stuck her nose in the air. “It’s pretty and you know it.”

Yeah, pretty ugly. Out loud, Silver sighed and steered the conversation somewhere more productive. “Look, the jungle gym’s not even built yet and it can’t be painted before then. Why don’t we shelve this for now and—”

“You’re just saying that ‘cause you want it to stay boring old gray!” Scootaloo called from the crowd.

Better than fire-cart red. Ick. “—and so we should move on to what we actually need to do today.”

Silver took another quick head count of gathered foals. Between the student council and the Crusaders, the eight of them had managed to round up a little more than half the class by lunchtime. Not bad for a Sunday afternoon. Not great, but not bad.

Thankfully, Prickle Berry had been among the first to arrive, and she’d come on her own. That meant initiative, which meant she’d actually bother to get something done today. Silver nodded to the pigtailed filly, who sat quietly with Carrot Crunch by the broken merry-go-round. They needed all the earth pony strength they could get.

Frowning, Silver leaned in Truffle’s direction. “Any sign of Snips or Snails yet?”

The vice president shook his head.

“Rats.” Snails might have been as sharp as a wad of chewed gum, but the colt had one of the strongest levitation fields in the class. Paired with The Dink’s finesse and the extra help of Sweetie Belle and Berry Pinch, they might have set up half the playground today. Oh well. “That probably means we’re skipping setting up the swings and tetherball.” They might get one done, but not both.

Finally taking some darn initiative for once, Diamond raised her voice. “May I please have the birch, Silver Spoon?” The stick passed from Silver’s mouth to Sweetie’s horn to the crate. Diamond Tiara tucked the birch behind her ear, nodding at the playground. “Today we need to focus on clearing out the rest of the broken old stuff. We got some of it yesterday, but all of it should be gone so the builders can have a clean slate to work with. How’s that sound?”

Nods all around. Nopony could argue with that, and most of the work had been done already. Miss Cheerilee, Big Macintosh, and Applejack had cleared out the bent tetherball pole and twisted swing set, so the new ones could be put in today. If they got nothing else done, they’d at least get a clean field.

Diamond hopped down from the crate, landing in the grass with a slight stumble. She trotted a circuit around the crate of the would-be Project X. “Kay, so we’re gonna do it like we did yesterday afternoon. Everypony here will work in teams—especially the clean-up crews—except for Truffle, who’s gonna be on safety watch. And Miss Cheerilee too, of course.” She waved to their teacher on the far side of the schoolyard, setting up supplies by the fence boards. “Everypony remember the teams they chose?”

Again, nods all around. Most ponies already sat with their teammates, the same teammates everypony always chose for school projects: Dink and Pinch, Sunny and Peachy, the Cutie Mark Crusaders, Shady Daze and Pipsqueak, Prickle Berry and Carrot Crunch. In retrospect, maybe it had been a good thing Cotton Cloudy’s usual partner had gone to a nerd convention this weekend. Not
that it did Silver much good today.

Diamond blinked at Silver, who sat alone in the grass as Truffle broke rank to review their plans with Miss Cheerilee. She skimmed the list of teams with a slight frown. Her ears flicked out of synch. “Oh right, Cotton Cloudy had to go with her mom to help with the snow clouds today.”

Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo pricked their ears and exchanged eager glances. Frenzied whispers wired between them in some scattershot new conspiracy. As one, all three swung around to stare pointedly at Diamond Tiara with huge shiny eyes.

Diamond, to her credit, ignored them. “Is anypony willing to be Silver’s partner with the fence today? Like, maybe one of the groups of three can spare a pony?” She didn’t look at the Crusaders or name names, but the playground project had only one group of three.

“Yeah, ’cause we all know sweet widdle Silver Spoon can’t build a fence all by herself.” Berry Pinch snickered. “She’s so delicate, ya know.”

The Dink chuckled with her, but offered a sympathetic smile in Silver’s direction that said, Parents, am I right?

Silver Spoon withheld a groan. The incident had long passed, and couldn’t be helped. A proper young lady could only hold her head high and weather the social fallout with dignity. Still, she wished she’d asked Brass Tacks to walk her to school instead. Father had meant well. He really had. But for sun’s sake, why, WHY did he have to talk to Miss Cheerilee about “delicate constitutions” and “the dangers of heavy lifting” and splinter infection statistics in public?

Silver cleared her throat. “I’m okay working on it on by myself, actually.” Manual labor didn’t suit a proper young lady, but it was the lightest job on the list, aside from safety duty. Besides, she wasn’t made of glass and plywood; she’d be fine. “It’s only a fence.”

“Oh, well, that’s okay too,” Diamond said. “I mean, if you’re sure…”

“I am. Everypony’s already set up in their teams. I don’t want to mess anything up.” With a wary glance at the Crusaders’ whispering conspiracy, Silver raised her hoof again. “Is it alright if I get started on it now? Like, right now?”

“Yeah. Yeah, go on ahead, Silver Spoon.” The tip of Diamond’s tail waved in the air while she watched Silver pack up her things in her saddlebag. Her eyes slowly angled to the whispering filly behind her. Out of the side of her mouth, Diamond whispered, “No. She doesn’t want to, Apple Bloom.”

Scootaloo whispered something back. Sweetie Belle added to it.

“Because I just know, okay?” Diamond Tiara returned to normal volume. “So Sunny Daze and Peachy Pie are handling the tetherballs, right? Right. And Prickle Berry, you’ll be moving the merry-go-round with…”

The meeting faded into the background as Silver crossed the grass, watching for bits of stray metal and wood. Miss Cheerilee waved at her. Silver Spoon waved back and surveyed the work she and Cotton had done yesterday. Five wooden poles jutted from the ground, each spaced perfectly with Cotton Cloudy’s advantage of flight and Twist’s math measurements. They’d even managed to paint all of them before everypony had to go home for the night.

“That means all I have to do is put up the fence planks.” Silver smiled at the little piles of wooden planks, sliding a box of nails closer with her tail. She took the hammer in her jaws and tapped it
against the wood a couple of times to get the feel of it. “Easy. I’ll be done by evening!”

“I’m sure you could be, Silver Spoon, but remember to take your time. I don’t want anypony getting hurt because they tried to rush through it.” Miss Cheerilee frowned, looking about. “Where’s your partner? I thought you were all working in groups.”

Silver pulled the first plank in her lap, mentally measuring out where it would go. It’d be sensible to do the bottom plank first; then she could use it for balance when she did the top one. “I can do the fence by myself, Miss Cheerilee.” When Miss Cheerilee didn’t appear enthused by this news, Silver shot her best adult-soothing smile. “It’s the easiest job on the list, I’ll be fine.”

After all, Apple Bloom did this sort of stuff on the farm all the time. If she could do it, how tough could it possibly be?

Technically, Silver Spoon had been right. Hammering in nails wasn’t hard at all after the wood got measured out. The plank slid from her hoof and bopped Silver’s nose. “Ow!”

Silver rubbed her muzzle and stepped back to recalculate. She glared at the treacherous plank that swung from her perfectly hammered nail, mocking her. Nailing a board, indeed, wasn’t hard. Holding it up while keeping it level and hammering the nail all at the same time, however, proved slightly more difficult than she’d accounted for.

The other side of the wooden plank lifted and stabilized. Diamond Tiara held the other end with two forehooves and a wary smile. “Hey, uh… need a hoof?”

Silver worked her teeth around the hammer handle. Polite fillies didn’t speak with their mouths full. “Miss Cheerilee didn’t like the idea of you working alone, and everypony else is busy, so…” Diamond rocked back on her heels. “Yeah.”

With a noncommittal shrug, Silver let her gaze wander back to her work. She steadied the hammer against the nail and blinked in acknowledgment. Not in approval or disapproval, but acceptance. This was a matter of circumstance. That was all.

_Tap-tappa-tap-tap-tappity-tap-tap. Tap._ Second nail done. _Tap-tappa-tap-tap-tap._ Third nail. It got easier the more she did it. Faster, too. _Tappity-tip-tap-tap-tappa-tap-tap._ The vibrations of the hammer rattled Silver’s molars. How did other earth ponies do this all day?

There. First plank done. Silver stepped back to inspect and gave the board a test shake. It held. She glanced down the line of waiting posts. “Two down, eight more to go.” Her tongue ran along the edge of her smooth white teeth. “Ugh, I’m going to end up with teeth like Apple Bloom’s by the end of this.”

“Oh please, it’s eight planks in a fence, not a whole barn. You’re not gonna get carpenter’s jaw from one day of work.” Diamond Tiara’s laughter died halfway out of her mouth. She bent her head to a humbler angle and brought out that cloying zirconia smile of hers. “It’s good work, though!”

Silver Spoon rolled her eyes and turned away.

Diamond followed her to the wood pile. “No really, it is! You’re off to a great start so far. I know physical labor’s not your style, and I just wanted you to know that I appreciate all the hard work you’ve done lately.” The smile faded at Silver’s blank face. “I wasn’t trying to make fun of you earlier. I can help with the rest of the fence, but if you want, I could always ask Twist to switch jobs with me. We need two ponies to a task, but Cheerilee doesn’t mind who’s on them.”
Silver’s ears twitched. That could work, actually. In more ways than one.

If she really wanted to, Silver could deal with her Diamond problem once and for all. Hypothetically, she could sow a quiet little rumor into the student council that Diamond had stolen the playground idea from Silver and taken it for herself. Meanwhile, Twist didn’t have a sly bone in her body. With the right word choice and a slight rearrangement of events, she’d believe it. Truffle Shuffle might not buy it from Silver’s mouth, but he’d never doubt Twist.

This sort of scandal would cripple any goodwill Diamond had garnished so far, and it wouldn’t be hard. A long record of jerkitude worked against her. They’d still get a playground, and Silver Spoon’s trouble would be over. It would be easy.

*Friendship is worth fighting for. Always.* Twilight’s voice echoed in Silver’s ears. *Did you lose the battle or the war?*

Twist’s faraway reflection skimmed across Silver’s glasses. It would be *so* easy. But, no. Only lazy cowards chose the easy way out. Besides, Silver Spoon didn’t need that kind of blot on her conscience. And Diamond didn’t deserve it.

“When you want, Diamond. I mean, if you don’t mind risking a chipped tooth.” Come to think of it, Diamond Tiara had avoided most jobs that needed a strong jaw. “Pageant season starts soon, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but I’m covered. Mom got my smile insured a few years ago.” Diamond Tiara pulled out another plank, one eye on the crate containing Project X’s parts. “The season’s not until after Hearth’s Warming, anyway.” She frowned. “Mom still says she’s coming down for the holidays. We’ll be done by then for sure.” Her hoof kicked over the plank. “Here, you hold it this time and I’ll hammer.”

Fine by Silver. She moved the nails to Diamond’s side and held the wood in place. “We’ll probably be done by then. Maybe.” She shrugged. “It depends.”

The hammer beat out a steady rhythm. Diamond’s gaze flicked up to Silver, then back to the nail in an unsaid question: *Depends on what?*

A dozen diplomatic responses flipped through Silver’s registers. Subtler, kinder methods of getting the point across without a fuss. She could suggest bringing in professional builders, or gently suggest a schedule rearrangement.

But that smile.

That *insipid* little smile curled around the hammer handle the way it curled around the student body for a sweet *Get Out Of Dungeon Free* card. Do not pass Go, do not collect two-hundred bits. Maybe Diamond won Oligarchy nine times out of ten, but Silver still knew how to play the game.

Still, Silver had always been more of a Battleclouds type of filly. “Depends on when you decide to drop the act.”

Hit to cloud-five. The hammer slowed to a stop. “What are you talking about, Silver Spoon?”

A question that stupid didn’t even deserve a sarcastic answer. Not when they both already knew the real one. Silver leveled an even stare. For good measure, she added a cocked eyebrow.

The silence gnawed through Diamond’s zirconia smile like a parasprite. “I’m not playing at anything, Silver, this isn’t an act.”
“Oh? Then what is it?” Silver sniffs. “Because I already know it’s not a lie; you’re a much better liar than this.” A twinge rippled beneath her coat. You’re better than this all over. Silver’s eyes narrowed into slits, and her tail curled upwards in a smooth silver crescent. “No, seriously—I’m curious, Di. What is all this? Enlighten me.” A tiny smirk coiled at the base of her muzzle.

“I—it’s not anything.” Diamond shied against the fence. Her hammer tapped out rapid little hits on the first nail, then the second. As she reached the last nail, her gaze trailed back to Silver’s. “This is just me.” The last nail hammered in sloppily. “A better version of me.”

Silver’s smirk twitched. “Sure, Di.”

A ridge of hair bristled at the base of Diamond’s neck. With a slow breath, it went flat again. “You don’t have to forgive me if you don’t want to. You don’t even need to accept my apology, but that doesn’t mean you can be nasty about it.”

“I don’t need to buy this hacky little act, either. And who’s being nasty? You’re the one getting your tail in a knot.” Silver’s own tail snapped with flourish.

Diamond spat the hammer into the grass. “I told you already, it’s not an act! I’ve changed; I’m trying to be better. Why can’t you accept that?”

“Right, I forgot.” Silver Spoon tossed her head with a sharp and breathless snap of a laugh. “The Cutie Mark Crusaders waltzed in with the magic of friendship and a pep talk, and five seconds later ta-da! You’re the sad, sweet little filly you’ve been deep down all along. Equestria’s precious sweetheart who giggles and smiles and gives out candy to everypony, who’s never mean to anypony and never ever gets mad.” Silver rolled her eyes and snorted. “Celestia’s sake, we already have a Fluttershy in this town.”

Whatever remained of the zirconia smile shattered in the lightning flash of Diamond’s blink. “For somepony who thinks they’re so much smarter than everypony, you still don’t know how to answer a simple question.”

“Oh. Okay. So now you want to know what I think?” Silver put her hoof to her chest, fluttering her lashes in mock astonishment. “Does that mean I finally have Her Highness’ permission to speak freely?” The smirk vanished. “Fine—you want to know why I can’t accept it? Because I don’t take checks that bounce.”

Diamond stepped back with a slighted little huff. “My checks do not bounce.”

“Uh-huh. Sorry to break it to you, Di, but ponies can’t step in and out of a clubhouse and switch personalities like a new pageant outfit. You can’t. It’s not my fault you’re dumb enough to believe your own hype.” Silver Spoon’s laugh wheezed sour and low. “You didn’t change one bit, Diamond Dazzle Tiara. You’re just telling everypony what they want to hear.”

“Hey, what can I say?” The ridge of Diamond’s muzzle crinkled in an ugly little sneer. “I learned from the best, Silvie. Fine, maybe I didn’t instantly get better. Unlike some rich fillies who’d rather wallow in their own snobbery, at least I’m trying to be a better pony.”

“Can’t fault you for that. After all…” Silver bared her teeth in a dark smile. “Everypony tries. Winners succeed.”

Both ears went rigid. The left one twitched once, then twice. Thunder rolled across Diamond Tiara’s features. “Watch it, Silver Spoon.”

“You’re not the boss of me, Diamond. I’ll watch what I want, so there.” Silver Spoon braced her
shoulders and held her neck high, sneering down at the snarling filly by the fence. She still had dirt on her hooves. Gross. You’d think a pageant filly would know better. “I don’t know why I should listen to some pathetic new-money tryhard with mommy issues.” Silver turned her nose up. “You’re beneath me.”

The field went quiet.

Silver twitched her ears. She glanced back.

Diamond’s head slammed into Silver’s jaw.

Silver Spoon stumbled back with the vague taste of iron on her tongue. She blinked, stunned. “Did —”

Diamond tossed her mane and charged.

Silver reared and jumped back, but her back hoof caught the stack of wooden planks. The ground slammed the breath out of her.

Ears ringing, Silver Spoon scrambled and rolled before pink hooves crashed down on her face. “This is SO typical of you!” She heard the rush of grass and lashed out with her legs, but Diamond ducked them. “Every time something goes a little wrong you need to throw some big stupid tantrum—whoa!” She ducked a flying hoof. Move now. Quip later.

Silver wiped blood from her muzzle. She dared a glance over her shoulder. Cheerilee and Truffle Shuffle strolled by the schoolhouse. Could they hear her call out from all the way out here or would she have to run for—

“What, can’t take somepony face to face?” Diamond Tiara pawed the grass. “You gonna run off with your tail between your legs to tattle on the new-money bully being mean to delicate widdle you?” She snorted. “And you say I’m predictable.”

Silver Spoon spun on her heel and rushed her. Diamond braced and grinned.

Their heads collided in a solid thwack. Poll against poll, Diamond planted all four hooves in the ground and shoved. Silver’s designer horseshoes slipped back a few inches, but she held firm. Grey bangs tangled with white and lavender.

Diamond’s ragged breathing fogged Silver’s lenses. “You’re not better than me, Silver Spoon!” The salt of her sweat mingled with the full earthy scent of dirt and grass and wood and steel. “I don’t care about your stupid old vases or your stupid old-money school with your stuck-up old-money friends!” She stomped both front legs. “You. Are. Not. Better than me. You’re not!” Diamond shoved. Hard.

Silver’s legs crumpled under her and she stumbled back. Her skull hit one of the fence poles. The wood dug into her spine and her head felt dizzy.

Everything looked fuzzy. She couldn’t stay here. She had to stand up. Her legs tangled together and she couldn’t see. Where did her glasses go? Diamond’s hoofbeats thundered in her ears. She had to move. She couldn’t move. Silver squeezed her eyes shut and curled into a ball and braced for—for…

Nothing.

No hooves slamming down on her face. No kick in the ribs. Nothing.

Dirt crunched next to Silver’s ears. She opened one eye.
Diamond Tiara stood over her, a faceless pink and purple blur. Her breath hissed between her teeth. “My dad says it doesn’t matter where you’ve been, it matters where you are.” Grit and grass crunched under Diamond’s hoof. “Know where you are, Silver Spoon? In the dirt.” The hoof pressed against Silver’s chest. Diamond’s face zoomed in close enough to see her red-rimmed eyes. “You’re in the disgusting Ponyville dirt in dirty old Ponyville with the farmers and the lawn-biters and th-the new-money tryhard who could buy you if she wanted.”

With a wet sniff, Diamond lifted her hoof and stepped away. Her voice trembled, but it didn’t break. Barely. “And don’t you gimme any of that lame Wisteria ladies-don’t-fight garbage.” Diamond Tiara gulped a breath. “Ladies don’t stab their friends in the back, either. Ladies are honest. Ladies are grateful and kind and true and loyal.”

Slowly, Silver’s ragged breath returned to normal. She blinked tears out of her eyes and stared at the pink blur on the grass. That sounded a lot like the introduction to Madam Wisteria’s codex.

“Yeah, I read your dumb handbook. I know what a lady’s supposed to be, and that’s not you. All you are is polite—any lowlife on the street can be polite. You’re no lady, Sterling Silver Spoon.” A warm droplet slid from Diamond’s chin and plopped on Silver’s nose. “You’re a snake. You’re a snake, just like she sai—”

Something crunched. Glass tinkled. All of Diamond’s venom vanished in a gasp. “Oh… um. I… found your glasses.”

“You broke my glasses?!” Silver rolled on her hooves, rubbing her hurt withers. Something sharp dug into her stomach. She glared at the steel tiara in the grass and kicked it away. A splitting headache throbbed between her ears. “It’s not good enough to throw me into a fence, you have to blind me, too?”

“I didn’t mean to! I didn’t even see them there and it… I… Aw, horseapples, I’m sorry.” Diamond Tiara sniffled. “It doesn’t look that bad? Here, look.”

Her glasses settled on the bridge of Silver’s muzzle. Diamond’s red puffy face came into focus, tearstained and obscured by a massive crack in the left lens. Whatever, at least she could see now.

Silver Spoon checked her vitals; nothing felt broken, but the pain in her back and chin and ribs said there’d be bruises later. Father would have an absolute fit. Brass Tacks would be even worse. Slowly, she rose to her hooves and shook the grass off her coat.

“I’m sorry,” Diamond whispered again. She covered her mouth with her hooves, staring with wide blue eyes. They grew wider and wider as the last few minutes settled upon her. “Silver, are you okay? I just—you—oh no, I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

“Yeah…” Silver tested her legs, tail, neck, and ears. She had the broken lens and some dirt stains and bruises, but nothing life-threatening. “Yeah, I’m okay.” She flinched and grabbed her throbbing head. “Sort of.”

“Okay, good. I-I-I mean—I don’t mean it’s good, but—” Diamond dragged her hooves over her face. “Auuugh, why did I DO that?!” She stomped the box of nails and kicked it against the messy wood pile. “Ugh, that was stupid! That was so stupid, why’d I do that?!” She drew her trembling hooves away from her face. “I’m gonna go get Miss Cheerilee, and she can—”

“No.” Silver didn’t need a million questions right now. Especially not when Truffle Shuffle would be tagging along with Cheerilee and then he’d have questions and then everypony else…
Silver groaned and rubbed her temples. “No, don’t. It’s fine, Diamond.”

Diamond Tiara stifled a sob. “No it’s not!”

Silver Spoon looked at her for a moment. “No,” she said, “it’s not.” This morning’s cinnamon toast and mulberry tea tried to bubble up from her stomach, but she forced it back down. “It’s really not.”

“I know. I’m sorry anyway.”

“Okay.”

Silver Spoon stretched out on the grass, letting her braid snake out into a spray of dandelions. They’d barely gotten progress on the fence—what little they’d built stood pretty well, considering a foal got smacked into it—but getting headbutted in the jaw seemed like a good excuse for a rest.

She closed her eyes. Her head still hurt, but it didn’t feel like her brain was going to pour out of her ears anymore. Silver didn’t even want to think about what her mane must have gone through.

The grass rustled as Diamond settled into it. She didn’t say anything, but every few seconds her throat made wet little hiccups. Either she was crying or trying very hard not to.

Voices of their classmates piped farther off in the distance. Too far to still be on the playground. Everypony must have gone inside for a snack break. Or maybe they’d snuck off seeking funner ways to spend a Sunday. Silver didn’t know and didn’t care.

A cricket hopped on Silver’s haunch, chirping a slow November dirge for the approaching winter. Dandelions bent in the wind, tickling the insides of her ears. Silver Spoon opened her eyes, staring blankly into the flat blueness of the sky.

“Diamond? I’m sorry, too. You’re not beneath me; I shouldn’t have said that.” Strands of silver waved in the corner of her eye. Her braid must have been coming undone. She didn’t feel like going through the trouble of fixing it. “I don’t think I’m better than you.”

“Liar.” Diamond’s upside-down face hovered over Silver’s, glaring with bloodshot eyes. Her bottom lip twisted up tight. “You—you know what? I’m sorry I pushed you into the fence, and I’m sorry about your glasses, and I’m sorry I headbutted you, but I’m not sorry about calling you a snake, ‘cause you’re still lying to me.” Di’s ears went so flat Silver couldn’t see them anymore. “You do too think you’re better than me.”

Silver rolled on her belly and curled into a ball. She wrapped her tail tight, the tip flicking beneath her nose. “Don’t you presume to tell me what I think and don’t think, Miss Diamond Dazzle Tiara. I’m not lying, but fine. Be that way.”

Trying to talk sense into a natural disaster was a stupid idea. On the other hoof, she didn’t have any reason to walk on eggshells anymore. It couldn’t possibly get worse than it already had. “You never listened to me anyway, why start now?” Silver’s gaze rolled up to Diamond, who sat with her back to her, staring at the crate full of Project X parts. “I said all I can say. If you want to believe Spoiled Rich over me, that’s your business.”

Diamond bent her neck low to glance behind her. Grass stains capped the sharp pink points of her withers. Her bangs covered the beginnings of a bruise on her forehead. “Mother did not tell me you think you’re better than me, Silver Spoon. I’ve got eyes. I’ve got ears.”

“Yeah, now if only you’d use what’s between them.” Silver shook out the remains of her braid, smoothing her hooves through the tangles to get her mane somewhere close to respectable. She
kicked over the tiara lying in the grass. “And take this back before I hurt myself on it again.”

The tiara flipped over in Diamond’s hooves, tilting this way and that while she examined it for damage. The little comb holders bent at odd angles, and the steel needed polish. A lesser metal would have snapped on impact, if not snapped years ago. “I can use it just fine, Silver. I figured it out before Mother even came back from her business trip. It’s not like I needed extra help to know you didn’t think I’m good enough for your fancy exclusive cuteceañera.”

Silver blinked at the spoon on her flank. Her cuteceañera? From forever ago? “Of all the dumb—that wasn’t an exclusive thing, Diamond, that was a family thing. I told you it was a family thing. I told you twice.”

“Really? Because last time I checked, Fancy Pants isn’t a Silver.” Diamond Tiara smirked at Silver Spoon’s befuddled expression. “Yeah, I’m not as dumb as you think I am.”

“It’s not like I’m the one who wrote the guest list. Mr. Pants is my auntie’s friend, and she probably only invited him because she needed help opening her new art gallery. That’s business stuff; Canterlot parties are always business stuff.” Silver edged closer through the grass. “Di, come on. You seriously think a grown stallion doesn’t have better things to do than go to a little filly’s party? Like, all my cousins are almost old enough to be my dad. I would have loved somepony my age to talk to.”

Which is why she probably could have pushed harder to bring Diamond Tiara along. At the time, Silver hadn’t wanted to rock the newly stabilized boat. She’d assumed Mother declined the idea because Di had been new money, or because she’d been a new friend in general and not yet privy to such a private event.

But maybe not.

Granddad Silver Tongue certainly held no love for Diamond’s step-relatives. “A stench of desperation clings to that house; the Canterlot Rottens are not misnamed.”

How far back had her family connected the dots between Silver Spoon, Diamond Tiara, the Rotten-Milks, and whatever nasty baggage came with them? It didn’t sound to her as if their families had had a serious incident—Granddad or Father would have spoken up for anything too serious—but one never knew. Or maybe it really had just been because Diamond was new. The real reason, Silver supposed, didn’t matter in the end.

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, Diamond Tiara.”

“Sure, like you didn’t mean to hurt my feelings when you didn’t stand up for me to your Manehattan friends?”

“Okay, did I hit my head harder than I thought, or have you, like, gone totally mental?” Silver rubbed the sore spot on the back of her head. Hurt a little less, but still hurt. She glanced back to Diamond, who still glared at her. “Seriously, if you think that Toplofty of the Manehattan Loftys ever looked like my friend, you’re the one who needs new glasses.”

“That’s not better, Silver Spoon! It’s like, ten times worse!” Diamond hooked her leg around the fence post, jabbing her head at the horizon. “If any of my pageant rivals came after you, I’d stop them. I’d say something. I’d protect you.” She kicked over a stack of wooden planks. “Or I’d try, anyway.”

And try she had. Silver’s ears drooped, remembering Diamond’s protests against her stepmother in
the Crystal Empire hotel. And that happened when Di had still been mad for losing the flag competition. Even so, not the same thing. “Your pageant rivals aren’t going to come after your blood in five years, though. It’s not like I wanted to get jumped at my own party, Di. I did the best I could do.”

Silver Spoon might have done better with more preparation, or if she’d realized Toplofty and Palanquin had been sharpening their knives for her. Might have, but she doubted it. One couldn’t adapt to Ponyville and not go a little soft.

Now that Silver thought about it, that whole trip to Manehattan began on the wrong hoof. Diamond left for Canterlot bouncing out of her horseshoes and returned dragging her tail. “Hey, what did Mrs. Rich say to you when you guys went on that shopping trip for the winter gala? Did she tell you I invited you as a joke? Because I didn’t.”

Diamond rubbed her withers. “Didn’t say it, but…” She flicked her tail around her hooves. “I heard her talking to Dad before we left. Something about ‘pulling a Zirconia’ or something, I dunno. I dunno about a lot of stuff.” The tiara flipped upside-down in her hooves. She brushed back the lavender corkscrews of her mane and sighed. “I really didn’t know Mother came after you like that at the school board meeting, Silver Spoon. I’m sorry.”

“Good!” Silver shouted so loud the crickets ducked for cover. “You should be sorry! In fact, I hope you’re sorrier than, like, a whole bunch of sorry ponies at an I’m Sorry Convention, because it’s your fault I was ever at that meeting in the first stupid place!”

Two weeks of waterlogged ugliness burbled in Silver Spoon’s chest. So much that she couldn’t keep it in and it bubbled up through her tightening throat and into her eyes. Her head hurt. Everything hurt.

“Spoiled Rich embarrassed me in front of the school board and the student council and Miss Cheerilee and I couldn’t even do anything about it even though I was trying my best and the only reason I got back ON student council was ‘cause you wanted to run for president!” Silver Spoon rubbed her eyes with a choked little sob. “M-may-maybe I’m not the best pony all the time but for for the past three months all I did—all I ever, ever, EVER did—was try and help you, Diamond Tiara! I’m not the pony who wanted to do talent shows or pageants or run for student pony president, and I still cancelled my appointments and woke up at five in the morning for you. Not ‘cause I owed you a favor. Not because I’m your employee, but because I’m your friend! All I wanted to do was help my friend an-and-and the-then I’m… I’m… you say I’m not even allowed to spea—”

It fell apart. It all fell apart and Silver didn’t know if it could get put together again. She hid her face in her forelegs and wept.

For a long time, Diamond Tiara sat there and didn’t say anything. She moved a few inches closer, but no more than that. When Silver finally stopped crying, Diamond cleared her throat a couple of times. “Are… you feeling better?”

Silver gulped down air. “No.”

Yeah, me neither.” Diamond’s tail flicked through the air, close enough to tickle the hairs in Silver’s coat. “Sorry about the election, Silver. I know I already said sorry before, but…”

“Oh, sure.” Silver brought her head up and shot a weak glare over her hooves. Far across the playground, the Crusaders looped rope through one of the new swings. “You remembered to say sorry after you went to bat for a bunch of fillies you hated five seconds ago. I-I don’t even know why you even wanted to come talk to me in the first place. You’ve already got three new best
friends.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her fetlock and keened softly in the back of her throat. “You don’t need me anymore.”

“Silver Spoon, don’t be dumb! Of course I need you.” Slowly, Diamond inched closer, her hoof hovering over Silver’s shoulder. When it didn’t get pushed away, she let it rest there. “I mean, look at the playground so far. Maybe we don’t have Project X built yet, but we wouldn’t even be close to where we are now if not for you. And if… if we weren’t fighting, we’d probably be done by now.”

Silver Spoon narrowed her eyes.

“Not that I’m blaming it on you, I mean! I just mean we work good together, Silver. We always did, and I’m not only talking about projects and stuff. Apple Bloom’s cool and all, but it’s not like I can talk to her the same way I always talked with you. We’re friends, but it’s… different. They’re all on a different wavelength; the Cutie Mark Crusaders are each other’s best friends, not mine. You’re my best friend.” Diamond curled her lush tail around a crushed box of nails, picking it up and putting it down again. She took her hoof back and picked at the grass with it. “Or, you were. I think.”

“You think?” Silver Spoon rose to her hooves, shaking out the dirt and grass in her coat. “What the hay do you mean ‘you think’? What were the past two years to you, hoofpainting and stalling for time?”

Diamond screwed up her face in something bordering close to anger. “Look, I told you, I don’t know about a lot of things right now. It’s… weird, with everything that’s happened.” In a low voice, she added, “And everything you did…”

“What, do you honestly think the thing with the Foal Free Press or me not inviting you to my cuteceañera means we weren’t ever best friends? Seriously? Seriously, Di?” Silver bent her neck to fix Diamond Tiara with a firm stare. The remains of her braid came undone in the breeze, and thin ribbons of pale silver fluttered over her shoulders. “What about all the times I covered for you? Yeah, one time out of twenty I didn’t have your back, but those other nineteen times suddenly don’t count anymore, I guess.”

“Of course they do!” Diamond snapped back. “They’d probably count for more if I knew why you did ‘em, though.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m just saying that I’m not the only filly who writes bad checks, that’s all. What about all those other times? How am I supposed to trust anything you say to me when you’re scheming off the top every five seconds? You can’t keep your eyes on the prize when you’re too busy watching your own butt all the time. I can’t—” Diamond snorted and stamped around the tiny scrap of fence they’d built in a tight circle. “I hate it! I hate second-guessing everything that comes out of your mouth ‘cause it went through like thirty rough drafts first! I have to read between the lines so much my eyes hurt. You never give me a straight answer, Silver Spoon.”

“Uh, duh?” Silver’s hoof swung upwards to indicate her glasses. The fracture in her lens glinted in the autumn sunshine. “Look what happens when I do! I don’t know what stupid little thing’s gonna set you off—of course I have to think before I say anything.” She took a tiny step away from the fence, tail lashing between her legs. “If you bothered doing that every once in a while, maybe you wouldn’t have lost the election in the first place.”

“Hey, but you—I—” Diamond’s guilty expression flinched and fluctuated until it swung around into indignation. “What you said to me today was not being honest, Silver Spoon, that was just being plain mean! I’m not an idiot, I know when somepony’s trying to get under somepony’s skin, and
that’s all you were doing.” She jabbed her hoof between the fence boards. “You pushed me into getting mad on purpose!”

Silver Spoon clicked her tongue, twitched her tail, and eyed the box of nails. “…Maybe. A little.”

“Why?!” Diamond’s voice cracked. “Why’d you do that to me, Silver Spoon? Are you trying to wreck me or something?”

Silver pursed her lips. “No.” Not deliberately, anyway.

“I’ve been doing good, Silver. I’ve been doing so good this week, and you wrecked it. I didn’t yell or get mad at ponies anymore, not even when they did something kind of dumb—”

“Like a paisley slide?”

“—and it worked. Sorta. I-I mean, I thought it worked. Ponies didn’t hate me anymore. I still didn’t feel so good sometimes, and I ran out of all my allowance money, but at least nopony hated me.” She huddled against the fence post, tail clutched tight in her hooves. “But it… it didn’t go away. I’m still angry, Silver Spoon.”

“Princess Twilight says it’s natural to feel angry with other ponies sometimes.” Silver Spoon didn’t think that advice really helped anything, but it felt like the best thing to say at the moment. There had to be something useful in it if a princess said it.

“Yeah, but I’m mad all the time.”

“I’ve noticed.”

Enlightening as this therapy session had been, it didn’t get any fences built. Silver ran her tongue along her gumline, pleased not to find any coppery tastes or loose teeth. She didn’t know how rough she looked, but if they didn’t at least have some work done to show for it, they’d lose a decent alibi. Silver Spoon didn’t know if Ponyville Schoolhouse expelled fillies for fighting, but she didn’t want to risk it. If it didn’t get them kicked out of school, it could still kick them them out of student council.

Diamond kicked the nails under the fence. A couple of fresh ones rolled in the frog of her hoof, ready to use. “I think it’s your turn to hammer. I did the last one.” She picked a wooden plank without any hoofprints on it and lined it up with the second fence post.

Clenching the hammer hurt Silver’s teeth. Her jaw wouldn’t thank her in the morning for this. “It’s kind of hard for me not to notice how mad you get, Di.” She lined up the nail and took aim. Tap-tap. “Cleaning up your messes and fixing your reputation’s not exactly easy, you know.” Tappity-tip-tap-tap.

“I never asked you to.” Diamond glanced at the progress, shifting her weight so the hammer could get the second nail in. Holding the board tighter made it easier on Silver’s jaw. “I didn’t get foaled yesterday; I don’t need somepony holding my hoof all the time.”

The second nail banged in with one last solid hit. Silver Spoon set the hammer in the grass, rubbing her jaw while she examined her work. First side looked good enough. She went to the other side of the plank, eyes on the bottom to assure it stayed level. “Well, which is it, Diamond? Do you need me or don’t you?”

“What I need is a friend to help me, not micromanage. I don’t need a yes-mare, and I don’t need a third mom, either. Two are more than enough.” Diamond shifted her hooves out of hammering range as the third nail went in. She let her ears sink into her mane and mumbled, “Sometimes, I swear
you’re almost as bad as Spoiled is.”

Silver Spoon’s head jerked up with wide eyes. The hammer wobbled in her jaws.

“Hey, quit looking at me that way. I said *almost*. And only sometimes.” Diamond’s hooves ran under the length of the board. “You both do that we-gotta-look-totally-perfect-in-public thing all the time. Maybe that’s just a thing fancy ponies do.”

Silver Spoon couldn’t nod and hammer at the same time, so she managed a muffled “uh-huh.”

“Figures,” Diamond sighed. Three nails in, the board didn’t need her support anymore. She sat back down in the grass, watching Silver work. “Don’t worry, you’re not near as bad as she is. I mean, you never tried to win anything *for* me.” She hooked her hooves over the fence post and pressed her cheek against the wood. “I still can’t believe she did that. Didn’t ask me about it, or mention the school board meeting, or anything. She says she wanted to help, but it… it’s like she doesn’t have any faith in me at all.”

If that were true, Mrs. Rich probably didn’t have much faith in Diamond’s judgment in other ponies either. Silver finished the last nail, relieved to give her jaw a break. “Is that why your stepmom hates me so much?”

Diamond’s ears flew up. She laughed. A real laugh. It sounded foreign and bizarre after days and days of fake giggles. When had been the last time she’d laughed that way? “What? Silvie, Mother —” She shook her head and laughed again. “Mother does *not* hate you, believe me. I mean, she *really* doesn’t like you, but I don’t think she likes anypony besides me, my dad, and Princess Cadance.”

“Princess Cadance?”

Diamond Tiara shrugged. “Something to do with her job, or an arranged marriage or something… I dunno, doesn’t matter.” She brought her head up. The tip of her tail played with the hammer’s head, picking it up and letting it flop in the grass again. “Silver, if I ask you something, can you answer me? Like, with a regular yes or no answer?”

“Um. Sure?” Quickly, Silver Spoon double-checked that answer. If Diamond wanted honesty, it’d be better to cover her bases now rather than later. “I mean, if there *is* a normal answer.” She twitched her ears in frustration. True or not, it still sounded like weaseling. “I’ll do my best. What’s the question?”

“Silvie, look at me.” Diamond dropped to all-fours. She met Silver Spoon nose-to-nose through the slats of the fence, eyes bright blue against red rims. The same steadfast gaze that pinned Mrs. Rich to the ground and negotiated detention sentences. “I’ve got to know for real: Is Spoiled Rich right about you?”

Silver Spoon’s heart skipped fast. That old familiar black ooze of guilt returned, this time with a splash of confusion and a dash of shame. It bubbled beneath her coat, broiling into a sticky cocktail that pasted her stomach to her lungs. “I don’t know. What does she think about me?” She had a good guess, but a legitimate answer needed all the details first. Even details she didn’t want to hear.

“Well, it’s like I said, she doesn’t hate you—I’ve seen how she gets with ponies she hates—it’s that she doesn’t trust you. Mother says your family treats ponies like chess pieces and puppets. She told me the Silvers don’t have any friends, just allies, and only if you’re useful to them. That you’re all like… like vipers.”
Silver Spoon couldn’t help an offended flick of her tail. “You know, Miss Fluttershy raises snakes, and you know what she says? She says that snakes aren’t ever out to bite anypony. They only bite if you step on them first. I’m not out to get you, Diamond. I’m not out to get anypony, but I don’t want to get stepped on, either. Not even by accident.”

Silver’s hooves played with the loose ends of her mane, sectioning them into panels to rebraid her hair. “Things can go wrong when you’re not careful with the ponies around you, Diamond. They can go really, really wrong.” Her cheeks and ears flushed warm. “I’ve seen it happen.”

“So you think I’m going to step on you?” Diamond Tiara kept her voice level, but her ears went flat. “That’s why you ruined my job at the Press, right? That’s what you said, you got scared. You got scared and covered your own butt because you don’t trust me. I knew you didn’t trust me, you jerk!”

“Hey, I didn’t—okay, fine. I didn’t know what you were going to do with the Press, and I hadn’t talked to you in a long time. But I knew you needed more juicy stories, and I knew that your stepmom knew why the Silvers came to Ponyville, and I… I saw danger coming. I panicked, and I did something stupid.” Silver Spoon adjusted her cracked glasses. “Kind of like how you do stupid stuff when you’re angry. I was wrong. You were wrong. And that’s it.”

Diamond sucked her teeth and adjusted her tiara. She didn’t seem too satisfied with that answer. Silver couldn’t blame her.

“So,” said Silver Spoon, “now what do we do?”

Diamond Tiara lashed her tail impatiently. “For starters, you could answer my question like I asked you to.”

“You asked me a complicated question; did you want a fake short answer or an honest long one? I can’t do both.” However, she’d already finished giving the long part of the answer. At the root, it had been a yes-or-no question. Silver Spoon played with the strands hair in her hoof. “No. I try to be smart and safe with other ponies, but… no, Di. You’re not a chess piece to me.” She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t even like chess. It’s so boring!”

“Ugh, I know, right? Mother’s all like ‘you’ll like it, it’s got strategy and math’ but it’s not, because it doesn’t have any solid numbers and it goes on for-ever!”

The two of them shared a short laugh. It felt good. Really good. The best Silver Spoon had felt in a long, long time. But eventually, the laugh faded back into the silence, and there they were again, alone in the field with Silver’s question: What do we do now?

“Silver, listen, I don’t—” Diamond Tiara squeezed her eyes shut and gulped down a lump in her throat. Bracing herself, she tried again. “I don’t want you and me to end up like my mom and dad.”

Meaning the first mother, then. “Do you mean the way your mom and dad were before they got divorced, or after?”

“Both. Either way, they fight all the time.” Diamond shook her head with a long tired sigh. “Silver Spoon, if you really don’t want to be my friend anymore, then you don’t have to be. We’ll go our separate ways and I’ll… deal with it. But this frenemy stuff, all of this…” She wheeled both forelegs to indicate everything around them: the fence, the smushed nail box, the raggedy manes and cracked glasses, the burning throats and eyes and stressed out stomachs. “This thing we’ve been doing, it’s not working. It’s not okay, and I don’t wanna do it anymore.”

“Me neither.” Silver Spoon rubbed her sore jawline. “I don’t want to do this ever again.”
“Is it okay if I ask you another question?”

Silver nodded.

“Silver Spoon, I want to be friends again.” Diamond Tiara chewed her bottom lip and looked at the ground, twisting her tail in her hooves. “I mean, if you want to be. Do you want to be?”

Another yes-or-no question. No asterisks with this one. No strings, no invisible consequences lingering over Silver’s head. No measured scales or connections laced with other connections. Again, Miss Sterling Silver Spoon found herself faced with a question not of duty or logic or cunning or safety, but of want. One of the precious few times when what Silver Spoon wanted actually mattered. *It’s nopony else’s friendship but mine.*

The question sat in her lap like an unmarked gift basket. One she actually wanted. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, I do.” Silver stepped through the fence to stand shoulder to shoulder with the filly on the other side. “On one condition.”

“Okay. What is it?”

Silver squinted. Indeed, this foal still looked like the same filly she’d known for the past two years who hated cheaters and alfalfa, and who took so much sugar and cream in her tea she barely left room for the hibiscus and cinnamon. She looked like Diamond, yes, but many rocks looked like diamonds to the naked eye.

“I want to be friends with *Diamond Tiara*, not…” Silver made a wishy-washy gesture with her hooves. “Whoever’s been trying to build a playground all week. And not trying very hard, either.” Before a word of protest dropped from Diamond’s mouth, Silver Spoon pointed at the giant crate of Project X parts. “The Diamond I know doesn’t let ponies walk all over her like an imitation Yakyakistani rug, or run her allowance dry giving out bribes while she does it. The Diamond Tiara I know would have been half done with Project X by now because it’s her project and she loves it.”

Silver narrowed her eyes, peering over the rim of her glasses. “Maybe I’m not a multi-millionaire anymore, but I’m still rich enough to know the difference between a diamond and cut glass. The Diamond I know believes in her project the way she believes in the ponies working on it.”

The wood creaked under Diamond’s hooves as she rocked back and forth on the fence. “But nopony liked that Diamond Tiara.”

“I did.” Silver moved in closer. She laid her hoof on Diamond’s withers and smiled. “I always did—even when she was being a giant butt. Usually.”

The steel tiara brushed back into the thick of Diamond’s curls. It stayed there and sparkled. Diamond leaned against Silver. “Yeah…” A bashful laugh trickled out of her. “I’ve been kind of a butt trumpet lately, huh?”

Silver Spoon nuzzled her ear. “You’ve been an entire butt *orchestra.*”

“You know, it’s kind of a shame we made up. Now I can’t use any of the awesome mean names I came up for you.” Diamond grinned and winked. “I couldn’t decide between Silver Snake and Slither Spoon.”

“Slither Spoon’s better.”

Diamond gave a solemn nod. “That’s what I figured. Oh, and a butt orchestra? Seriously, you’ve been hanging around Berry Pinch too long.”
“I don’t even know what a butt orchestra would sound like.”

“Forget what it sounds like.” Diamond laughed—a little sputter that exploded into a full guffaw. “What would it smell like?”

Silver Spoon giggled. She knew proper young ladies really shouldn’t giggle at fart jokes, but hey, who would even know? “I don’t think we want to find out.”

A shadow fell over the fillies. “Whoa, what happened to you guys?”

Rumble zipped down through the clouds, followed closely by Tornado Bolt. Power Pony lanyards dangled from their necks; they must have come fresh from the con. Rumble landed on a fresh fence rail with his strong wings flared for balance. Frowning, he tilted his head to the side and pointed at Silver’s glasses. “You okay, Silver Spoon?”

“Oh! Oh no, we’re okay.” Silver tried and failed to smooth her mane into place. She didn’t have a mirror, but knew she must have looked a sight: half a raggedy braid, coat rumpled and dirty, muddy hooves, cracked glasses lens, and her eyes were probably all red and puffy. “We were building the fence and we had an accident.” She glanced at Di for backup. “I fell building it.”

“The fence, that is.” Diamond nodded. “She fell and so I tried to help and then I fell. We both fell.”

“We both fell building the fence together.” Diamond Tiara shrugged with a chuckle. “Clumsy us.”

Tornado Bolt hovered over one of the free-standing fence posts. “Whoa, you guys should be more careful!” She smiled at Rumble, who still had his eyebrows all furrowed. “They look almost as bad as you did last year, remember? When Snips said Trixie could beat Thunderlane in a race and then you guys scuffled in the ditch?”

“Yeah,” said Rumble, “did you guys get in a kick-fight or something?” He laughed at his own little joke.

Silver mustered all the dignity she had left into a serene tail flick. “Ladies don’t get into kick-fights.” And nopony had kicked with their hind legs. Everyone knew it only counted as a real fight if you used your hind legs.

“Ladies usually don’t build fences either, but Silver made an exception this one time, because it’s important for everypony to help get the new playground built. Her dad didn’t really want her building stuff, but Silver insisted.” Diamond glanced at the wood stacked behind them in two rows of three. They’d only put up four planks so far. “Cotton Cloudy’s supposed to be helping her, but she couldn’t come today. I saw Silvie trying to build the fence all by herself, so I came to give her a hoof.”

Tornado Bolt rubbed her forehooves together with a guilty glance towards the paltry assembly of foals hard at work in the schoolyard. “Oh.”

“Not many foals showed up to help this weekend.” Silver Spoon dipped her ears low, smiling her saddest I-tried-my-best smile. “Building a fence by ourselves is a little harder than we thought, though.”

“Yeah, we’ve been at it all afternoon,” added Diamond. “It’d be great if we could get some extra help, but I guess everypony’s too busy. Oh well.” Diamond wiped her sweaty brow with her fetlock and sat up smiling. “By the way, how’d Power Con go?”
“It went good. We had lots of fun.” Tornado Bolt landed quietly beside Rumble. She eyed the stack of wood and nails, and ruffled her wings awkwardly. “Sorry we weren’t here.”

Diamond shrugged. “It happens. I mean, you probably got those tickets, like, months ago and I kinda sprang it on you last minute. Glad you had fun anyway.”

Rumble brightened a little. “Yeah, Power Con was pretty cool. Look, Jack Derby signed my lanyard.” He leaned his neck down, letting his ID card dangle in the grass to show them. Rumble blinked up at Silver Spoon, who peered at him inches from his nose. In a clumsy clap of feathers, he scrambled into the air. “Hey, uh, since we just got back, we’re not busy right now. We can still help you guys out if you want.”

“That’d be great!” Diamond’s ears twitched as she surveyed their progress with the fence. “We’re almost half done with this and still need to finish, but it’s not a top priority.”

Across the yard, Sunny Daze had tangled herself in a tetherball cord. Peachy Pie struggled in vain to lift the pole and untangle her friend at the same time. Silver heard their pathetic squeaking without even straining her ears.

Diamond nodded toward the playground. “Do you think you can help Peachy put in the new tetherball pole? If somepony can keep the ball out of their way, it’d be easier for them.” She lifted a hoof before Rumble could go higher in the air. “Not you, Rumble. You’re the fastest flier in class; I need somepony to zip by Featherweight’s and see if he can help, too. It’s fine if he can’t, but I want to check anyway. Can you do that?”

Rumble fluffed his feathers proudly. “You can count on me. I can be there and back in ten minutes.”

“Awesome! See you then.”

Silver Spoon waited until the pegasi went out of hearing range before she let out the sigh she’d been holding. It seemed like they’d be done with fence work for today. Now would be a good time to pack it in and head home, but if she left it would signal other ponies to go home, too. “I’m going to go to the bathroom and clean up a little bit.” Silver shook out the bits of grass and twigs from her mane and headed for the small washroom in the back of the schoolhouse. “How terrible do I look?”

Diamond followed at the hip. “Honest answer or nice answer?”

“Honestly nice answer.”

“Like you fell off the fence and landed on your face. Twice.” Diamond brushed a lock of tousled mane away from Silver’s cheek. “I still think you should see Cheerilee about that. Or Truffle, he’s the safety guy.”

He’d end up blaming himself for not keeping close watch, too. Silver Spoon grimaced. “Truff’ll freak out worse than Cheerilee. They’ll find out on their own eventually; I’ll take care of it then. Nothing’s broken and I’m not bleeding. I’ll live.” She traced Tornado Bolt’s flight path to Sunny and Peachy. Her eyes lifted north, in the direction of where Bulk Biceps had built his cloudhouse. “You really think Rumble’s going to be back when he says?”

Featherweight could be flaky sometimes, but if Diamond’s claims of his crush on Rumble held any water—and it sadly did, judging from the gooey eyes at Rumble’s aerial dives—the chances of him showing up tripled. Rumble still had to make it there in the first place, however. Even ignoring Diamond’s recent weak command of her fellow students, Rumble had never held Diamond in high regard.
“Oh, he’ll be here on time. In fact, I bet an oatmeal cookie he’ll be here before the ten minutes is up.” Diamond grinned. “After seeing your broken glasses and hearing how much you needed help, he’s flying like his feathers are on fire. Nice teamwork on that, by the way.”

“Thanks, but why does that matter? It’s not like Rumble likes me or…” Silver Spoon slowed to a stop outside the washroom. Thinking back on it, he’d come around to her apology really fast, even though the colt couldn’t look her in the eye half the time. “Does he?”

Diamond waggled her shoulders with an irritatingly innocent smirk. “Maybe, maybe not. Who knows? The world’s a mysterious place.”

“You’re such a butt.”

“Takes one to know one.” Diamond opened the bathroom door for her and checked it out. “Coast is clear, go get fixed up. I’m gonna try and get everypony together again.” She flinched at the sound of a crashing see-saw. “I think we need another pep talk.”

Nopony had to tell Silver twice. She double-checked under the bathroom stall for hooves, grabbed her saddlebag, and approached the mirror. Not a pretty sight. The crack in her glasses ran top to bottom in an ugly lightning bolt, and the rest of the lens had been scratched. No bruises she could see, but the knot on her jaw told her one was on its way. She couldn’t do anything about that part, but at least Silver could fix her coat and mane.

The methodic metal bristles of the currycomb through her coat relaxed her muscles. It couldn’t get the grass stains out, but it smoothed out the ruffles and buffed her grey coat to a dull shine. Now the real work began. She fished out the comb for her mane and went to work.

Midway through Silver’s third mane combing, the bathroom door moved.

Silver pricked her ears and watched the mirror.

The door stayed cracked. Two familiar voices whispered on the other side.

“I dunno, Sweetie Belle, it feels like cheating.” Scootaloo’s lack of indoor voice made for terrible whispering.

Silver went back to combing.

“It’s not cheating,” Sweetie whispered back, “it’s strategy.”

“What if she’s pooping? It’s not fair to pounce on somepony who’s pooping.”

“Don’t be silly. Rich ponies don’t poop in public.”

Silver Spoon teased out a knot at the base of her neck. “I can hear you guys, you know.”

A quiet pause. The bathroom door creaked open for Scootaloo’s muzzle to poke in. “You’re right, she’s doing her hair. Three… two…”

Sweetie Belle kicked the door open like the protagonist of a tacky detective paperback and marched up to the sink. “Silver Spoon, we need to talk.” If she didn’t know better, Silver might have expected another fight. Might have, but even in serious-business-mode, Sweetie Belle had all the bluster of a fluffy sparrow.

Silver shook out her mane—nice and lush after exactly seventy-five brushstrokes—and began
brazing. “Yes?” With effort, she squashed a brimming smirk. “Well, don’t we look serious today?”

“It’s ‘cause we are.” Scootaloo flanked her from behind, blocking off an easy escape route. “This has gone on for long enough, Silver Spoon.” When Silver only stared back dumbly, the pegasus flared her wings and doubled down. “I get that you’re really mad. If it were me, I’d be mad too, but you can’t keep giving Diamond the cold withers forever. You and her have been best friends ever since you came to Ponyville.” Scootaloo buzzed into the air, hovering over Silver’s shoulders so that she had no choice but to look at her reflection. “We know you’re probably sick of hearing this, since you already heard it from Apple Bloom—”

“—but suck it up, you’re gonna get it from us again, anyway.” Sweetie Belle narrowed her eyes, watching Silver finish her braid. “It’s gotta be said, whether you like it or—what happened to your glasses?”

“An accident.” Somewhere in the fray, Silver had lost the coordinating hair tie for the braid. She went with one of her emergency barrettes and turned to face her would-be interrogators. “The problem’s taken care of. Thanks for your concern, but I’m fine.” Silver stepped away from the sink and headed out the door with two thirds of the Crusaders flanking her like guards.

Squinting in the sunlight, Silver shaded her eyes and searched the playground. A crowd of classmates had gathered around the crate of Project X parts. Something shiny twinkled in the center of them; Di must have started her pep talk already.

Sweetie Belle stalked Silver’s left, swinging her tail low. “Says you.” She puffed herself up, clearing her throat. “I tried to be nice about this, but it seems you give me no choice: Miss Silver, I’m calling in my favor.”

“What? Since when do I owe you a fav—” Silver sighed and shook her head. “Sweetie, I’m sorry, but I really don’t have time for this; I’ve got work to do.” She trotted through the playground, bobbing her head in the direction of the swings. “So do you.”

Scootaloo shadowed Silver’s right shoulder, buzzing like one of those new magical razors. “We’re taking a break to keep you company.”

“Suit yourself.” Silver skimmed along the edge of the crowd, straining her ears. Above her, Featherweight, Rumble, and Cotton Cloudy listened from the schoolhouse roof. Rumble waved at Silver Spoon’s approach, but Silver barely saw him. She steadied her gaze upon the pink hoof gesturing over Snails’ head. “I want to hear this, hold on a second.”

“…remember what this roof looked like a few weeks ago? I do. It had a hole over the chalkboard so big it could fit a whole buffalo through it, with all these grody scorch marks on the sides. It came from one of the magical blasts.” Diamond’s hoof waved along the edge of the roof, measuring out where the hole had been. “I could tell where it came from, because there used to be smaller one just like it in the roof of my house.”

Silver Spoon’s ears pricked high, swiveling and twitching to catch every word. Something about this speech sounded familiar.

“A-hem?” Sweetie Belle punctuated it with a fake cough. “It’s been a second.”

Silver waved her off. “Ten more secs. You made me miss part of it.”

“I never actually saw the flames. I never even saw Tirek, but we know he dropped by, because we saw him and felt him in my house for days. Like, talk about a rude houseguest, right?” The class
smiled at Diamond’s little joke. A few even laughed, including Apple Bloom who stood a few feet behind her. “I saw the charred bits of wood that fell in our game room, and the whole wing smelled like smoke forever. I thought I’d never play pinball again.”

Button Mash gasped and put a sympathetic hoof to his cheek.

Sweetie barged into Silver’s line of sight. “No, you used up your sec, and this can’t wait. I’m calling in my favor, and you can’t ignore me. Remember when I helped you get to Twilight’s castle when the bugbear blocked the road? You said you owed me.”

Darn it. She did owe the marshmallow a favor. “I’m listening.” Silver could listen to a lecture and a speech at the same time, sure.

“…but here’s the thing: in the end, it was only a bunch of smoke and burnt hay. That’s all. At first, it seemed totally impossible to fix, like my house could never ever be the same. And know what? It couldn’t. You can’t un-burn a roof, and you can’t un-break a playground. But you know what else? That’s okay. We could still get fresh hay and more wood. It’s not the same roof; it’s an even better roof. It cost a lot of money, too.”

Silver’s mouth fell open. I do know this speech. Somewhere in the background, Sweetie Belle had gone into full lecture mode. Silver didn’t hear a word of it.

“Like, having lots of money helps a filly out in life, sure, but money didn’t stop Tirek from burning the roof in the first place. Money alone can’t get this playground built, either. It needs horsepower for that. It needs us. ALL of us.” Diamond Tiara’s smile cut through the crowd, bright and dazzling and warmer than the sun in summertime. A smile meant for Silver alone, even if nopony but them knew it.

I don’t believe it. I wrote this speech! The very one Silver had written for election day. The one Diamond tore up and threw to the wind. She’d memorized it after all. Memorized it and reworked it so that it worked even better than before. Silver Spoon beamed.

Sweetie Belle took a deep breath and moved into her thesis statement. “It’s down to this: We’re not saying you have to forgive Diamond Tiara right away, but be willing to hear her out, that’s all I’m say—” Sweetie paused. She frowned. “…wait.”

Scootaloo blinked at Silver Spoon’s bright smile. She glanced at Diamond grinning from the throng of encouraged foals. “You guys made up already, didn’t you?”

“We heard each other out,” said Silver Spoon. She adjusted her glasses and turned her ears back to her speech.

“The school board doesn’t think we can build a new playground. Maybe some of you here don’t think so, either.” Diamond’s hoof clacked hard on Project X’s wooden crate. “Well, I’m here to tell you you’re both wrong. You can—no, we can build this. I know a quality investment when I see it, even if you don’t.” She’d even remembered the footnotes.

The speech didn’t have the three-digit price tag of imported teas and a jade teapot from Neighpon. Any smart shopper knew that the most valuable stuff didn’t have price tags at all. “But I think I might be able to do the forgiveness part, too.” Silver glanced back. “Oh, and good job wasting your favor, by the way.”

“What? But that doesn’t count! You—” Sweetie Belle groaned loud enough for a couple foals in the crowd to glare at them. “I spent a whole hour getting that speech ready, you jerk!”
“I told you I had it taken care of,” Silver Spoon said. “It’s not my fault you didn’t want to believe me. I still did what you wanted, I just did it ahead of time.”

Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo looked at each other. Scootaloo shrugged. After a moment, Sweetie did the same and shook her head with a laugh. “Whatever, I’ll take it. Guess we’re even.”

“Good.” Silver nodded with a smile as she threaded into the thick of the crowd. “Now if you don’t mind, I really want to hear the end of this speech.”
Like Death & Homework

Student Council Treasurer and reformed butt trumpet Diamond Tiara dabbed at the sweat trickling down her forehead. Staring at the open double doors of the Castle of Friendship’s throne room, she squirmed and fidgeted to get a decent view. A good effort, but from this angle, she could barely see two doors down the hall, much less five.

“Okay, like, so…” Diamond swallowed whatever she’d planned to say and sank back into the high-backed crystal chair.

Silver Spoon leaned away from the crystal table, fanning herself. The natural warmth of magic felt less like a hearth and more like a hotbox.

Surrounded by icons of friendship in a castle where friendship was supposed to triumph over adversity, she should have felt encouraged. Confident. Faithful that their reforged friendship could conquer any challenge from any threat.

Silver peered at the trio of balloons etched at the top of her chair, floating too high for her hoof to reach. I bet it’s easier for grown-ups to solve a friendship problem.

Pinkie Pie had fought bugbears, brought Luna back from the grip of Nightmare Moon, and stopped diplomatic crises with yaks in their tracks. She brought smiles to dozens of faces every day. All those tasks put together sounded better than facing down two sets of angry high-society parents. Silver didn’t envy Princess Twilight’s job right now.

Silver Spoon shut the Project X binder—nobody had so much as glanced at it for the past hour—and hopped out of her chair. “Hey Diamond, you want to stretch our legs a little bit? Maybe we could get a snack or something.”

And on the way, if they just happened to pass by the library and accidentally overheard something, well that could hardly be their fault, could it? All foals needed their exercise, even well-bred ones.

Diamond slid out of Rainbow Dash’s chair—wait until they told Scootaloo!—and crept to the door. The coast felt clear, but she lowered her voice anyway. “They said to wait in here. Are you deliberately disobeying your elders, Silver Spoon? Guess my bad influence is rubbing off on you after all.” She slumped against the doorway with a dramatic hoof against her forehead. “Oh, sweet innocent Silvie, forever corrupted. Tarnished! Forever!”

“You said ‘forever’ twice.”

“It’s two forevers. That’s how corrupting I am.” Diamond stepped in the hall, listened for danger, then waved Silver out.

“Technically, we’re not disobeying anypony. They told us to wait in here, but nopony said for how long. Two hours should be enough, and besides, we’ll be right back.” After one last spot check, Silver slid out the door, hugging the wall.

Apparently, Princess Twilight Sparkle still liked the minimalist look, because the hall hadn’t changed from the empty corridors Silver saw last time. No pillars to hide behind or plants to shelter under meant a dangerous place for sneaking. Pink and purple reflections in the crystal matched Diamond’s colors, and Silver’s coat naturally blended in with daytime shadows, but neither would be enough out in the open like this. They had to be fast.
They stopped at a tall door with clouded green quartz windows. From the outside, it appeared no different than any other room, but the small stack of books outside and obvious hoof traffic in the carpet screamed “library”. If Silver squinted, she could see silhouettes moving on the other side, two standing and three sitting.

Diamond put her ear to the crack under the door and shook her head. Nothing. No voices, no hoofsteps, no chairs dragging across the floor. It sounded as if nothing existed inside at all. “Bet there’s a silence spell on it,” she whispered.

Silver Spoon nodded. No way Mrs. Rich sat through this entire conversation and never raised her voice at least once, and Mother’s voice had been trained to travel in large buildings. Forget listening under the door, they should have heard something all the way from the thrones room.

“How’s it going in there?”

Both fillies froze.

Brass Tacks stared down at them, expressionless. He must have been walking the grounds this whole time, lying in wait for fillies to get up to mischief. Maybe he had a sixth sense of when Silver wasn’t where she ought to be. Maybe he’d placed a sensor on the door.

Silver glanced at the cards in his jacket pocket, then at Spike peering at them from the end of the hall. The dragon held a full hand of cards in his claws.

Or maybe he’d been playing Crazy Eights in the other room and kept the door open.

“Is there something the two of you need?” Tacks bobbed his head at Spike, who waved at him. “We could assist you if you like.”

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon looked at each other, then back to the butler. “No thanks,” they said together.

Wait. No, that didn’t work. Silver backpedaled. “I mean, we don’t need any help. We got bored and wanted to stretch our legs.”

Diamond’s head poked over Silver’s shoulder. “And I said I was hungry, so Silvie wanted to try and find the kitchen.”

“That’s right, I wanted to brew some tea for everypony. I thought it’d be nice.”

“We wanted to ask permission before we started touching Princess Twilight’s stuff, but also didn’t want to interrupt.” Diamond fluttered her lashes. “Could you ask for us, please?”

Good save. Diamond gave them a solid excuse to be at the library specifically, and one that still got that door open. It only gave them a couple of seconds to hear, but enough to gauge the mood and build a strategy besides worrying themselves into a rut.

“Oh, no need. You’ll find it past Master Spike’s quarters, down the hall and to the left. You can’t miss it.” Brass Tacks put himself between the fillies and the door with a smile. “I’ll escort you.”

Oh well, they tried. Silver followed his brisk pace down the hall. “That’s nice of you, Tacks.”

“No trouble at all, Miss Silver. I would hate for somepony to get lost on my watch.” Brass Tacks lit his horn, opening the kitchen door. A tea set and some leaf tins had already been set out for them. Let nopony say Twilight didn’t know how to host.
“Fortunate I arrived when I did.” He raised his white eyebrows. “Any longer, and you might have accidentally eavesdropped on private conversations. But I’m certain you know better than that.”

Diamond beamed with her sweetest little pageant smile. The kind that made the eight-by-ten glossies. “Oh, of course!”

Pity that any weakness for cutesy charms had gotten drilled out of Tacks in basic training. He gave her a slow, deliberate blink. “I am also certain that wise young ladies know better than to push their luck.” The kitchen door shut behind him.

“Well, that could have gone better.” Diamond played with her mane, frowning the frown of somepony who didn’t know how to feel. “I think your butler’s mad at me.” Until now, she probably never knew ponies of Tacks’s station were even allowed to get mad.

“Probably. He’s a bodyguard first and a butler second.” Silver squinted at her reflection in a saucepan, examining the pale shades of green coloring the base of her chin. The bruise stopped hurting days ago, but it still looked pretty gross. “Be glad you weren’t around when he found out what happened last Thursday.”

Silver inspected the tea set. Nothing fancy, nothing plain—an elegant purple set accented with pink in all the right places. The tea had been a cover story but a good idea, now that she thought about it. Everything improved with tea. At least a little bit.

It would be too awkward to fetch her saddlebag from the thrones room, so she’d need to work with Twilight’s stock. Silver sniffed the tea tins, swishing her tail in thought. Good stock, not much variety. Jasmine, peppermint, and traditional blacks were all perfectly fine teas, but Silver needed better than “fine” for this situation. She also couldn’t custom brew five different teas to suit each pony, even if she had the time and resources (which she didn’t).

Prioritize, Silver. Who’s our biggest obstacle? Like she even had to ask.

“Di, can you find the spice rack? I need fennel. Spoiled Rich still likes fennel, right?” Silver never got a nasty quip about it and she thought she caught Mrs. Rich smiling over a cup once. She didn’t know if that was enough to count as liking it, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. “And some anise too, while you’re at it. I want to make a blend.”

Mother loved anise, and the herbs blended beautifully in tea, especially with something sweet to even it out. Meanwhile, Mr. Rich preferred coffee anyway, and Princess Twilight always seemed excited to broaden her horizons. Father favored Trottingham breakfast tea (pitch black, no sugar, no cream) but he’d enjoy whatever Silver Spoon brewed. Anise and fennel it would be.

Diamond took down two jars and sniffed them. “Uh, are they supposed to be exactly the same?”

“What are you talking about? They smell totally different!” Silver pointed at the left label with her tail. “The fennel picture’s got longer stalks and the anise smells licoricey.”

“If you say so.” Diamond helped pour water for the tea, but her job only took a few minutes. She watched Silver measure portions while the kitchen lapsed into silence.

Diamond Tiara pressed her cheek against the counter, tracing the natural geometric patterns in the stone. “Hey, so… are you mad at me, too?”

Silver Spoon looked up.

“For telling, I mean.” Di kept her eyes on the counter.
“Oh.”

Silver nudged her new glasses higher on her muzzle. The eye doctor had called the broken glasses a blessing in disguise since Silver’s prescription needed an update anyhow. Mother and Father’s view of the matter was less optimistic.

“I guess I’m a little mad.” Silver winked. “I mean, I’m supposed to be the one who cracks under pressure and rats ponies out. You’re stepping all over my territory. Rude.”

Diamond smiled at Silver’s joke, but her ears still drooped.

Silver moved to Diamond’s side of the counter. “It’s okay, Di. Really. I’m not happy they found out, but I think my parents and Tacks figured it out on their own. It’s not your fault.” She rubbed the bruise under her chin. “Well, knocking me into a fence is your fault, but you know what I mean. If anything, your confession kept me out of trouble.”

The longer a lie stretched, the worse the snapback. Silver shuddered to think of the reaction if the truth came out weeks or months after the fact.

“I guess. No matter what happens today, at least we’re good at school and nopony kicked us out of student council.” Diamond lifted her head to glance out the window. “Speaking of which, we’ve got company.”

President Pipsqueak sat on the castle lawn playing jacks with Scootaloo. It didn’t look like Pip was winning.

Diamond tapped the glass while Silver waved at them.

Neither party could hear the other through the glass, but Pip’s frantic pointing at his invisible watch got the message across. They should have been at the schoolyard an hour ago.

“Dunno why he’s pulling that face. How were we supposed to know they’d take this long?” Diamond reached over the sink, opening the window a crack. “Hi, guys.”

Scootaloo buzzed above eye level, hovering over the sill as she surveyed Twilight’s kitchen. Streaks of yellow and red splattered her mane and hooves like she got in a fight with a condiments bar. “They don’t look like they’re in trouble to me, Pip.” She frowned at Silver while Pipsqueak struggled to pull himself up to the windowsill. “What gives? You said you couldn’t come on time ‘cause you had an emergency, but it looks more like you’re having a tea party while we spend all day getting sweaty and covered in paint.”

Lashing her tail, Silver Spoon lowered her head over her tea ball. New alliances, friendships, and efforts to be more open-minded demanded that she ought to give Scootaloo the benefit of the doubt. Friends of friends should be friends, but why did Scootaloo need to make it so darn hard all the time?

“It is an emergency. We’re doing damage control. We need—I need…” Silver scrunched her muzzle. “Ugh, what do you know about tea anyway, Scootaloo? I don’t have to justify myself to you. You wouldn’t even get it.”

Scootaloo pulled from the window. “Yeesh, sorry I asked.”

Had that come out too mean? Whatever, Silver didn’t care.

…Yes, she did.
“Listen, we’ve got a lot going on right now, okay?” Silver watched the kettle, though she’d only put it on the stove a few seconds ago. “We’re doing all we can.”

“Which isn’t much,” added Diamond.

Silver shook her head. “You got us a last-second appointment with a princess; I’d say you’ve done a lot.”

Whatever verbal bloodshed lay beyond the library door couldn’t compare to the carnage of meeting at Diamond or Silver’s house. They needed neutral territory to broker peace, and public places risked third parties overhearing. Diamond had gotten them the best possible option.

“I don’t know why you’ve got your tail in a knot, anyway.” Silver opened the window wider so she could point at Scootaloo properly. “Project X is practically finished and you got to paint it the color you wanted.” Granted, Diamond had talked her down from garish fire cart red to a smoother carnelian, but still. Scootaloo wanted red and got red.

“We’re lucky I didn’t draw Peachy Pie’s ticket. I really didn’t want to paint it paisley.” Diamond Tiara frowned in thought. She squinted at Pip, then Silver Spoon, who blinked innocently at her. “That was luck, wasn’t it?”

Pip’s eyes bugged out and darted away. “Uh. Of-course! Heh, why wouldn’t it be? Heh.” If this was his idea of a white lie, the colt didn’t have a bright future in politics. “Right, Silver Spoon?”

“Absolutely! Total luck of the draw.” What could she say? Tickets got stuck to the bottom of bowls all the time; the world was an imperfect place. “Besides, Sunny Daze got runner-up and picked yellow for the accent color, so evverypony went home happy. Good idea by the way, Di.”

“Don’t change the subject, you sneak.” Diamond smiled. “But thanks. We did pretty good on the playground, didn’t we? And we even got to see the end of it, even after Cheerilee found out about the fight.”

Pipsqueak’s hooves finally got a good grip on the sill. He pulled himself halfway in the window, knocking a bunch of sponges in the sink on the way. “Dunno what you were on about, anyway. It’s kinda hard to kick out the treasurer when she donated money for the whole thing.”

“Besides, Cheerilee’s nice, she knows you guys made a mistake,” said Scootaloo. “I bet your folks’ll understand, too.”

“Right. That’s why it’s only taken them two hours to talk it out.” Diamond went back to sulking on the counter, though she still smiled at Silver. “Seriously, I’m glad we get to wrap up one last project.” She leaned against Silver Spoon, nuzzling her ear. “I really missed you, Silvie. I’m glad we got to be friends again, at least for a little while.”

Silver took Diamond’s tail in hers and swung it. “Diamond, come on. It’s not like they’re going to execute us, you drama queen.”

“Speak for yourself. You didn’t hit anypony in the face, first of all, and second of all, have you met Mother? If I wasn’t the best at telling ponies to do stuff, I’d probably be under a funeral tree by now.” She fluffed her mane proudly. “But I am, of course.”

Pipsqueak shuddered. “No kidding. I think that mare eats rusty nails for breakfast.”

“With a side of salted dragon tails. Spike better watch his back.” Scootaloo wormed her way further into the window, sniffing at the air. “Hey, what smells like licorice? Are you making licorice tea?”
The tea ball rolled away with a poke of her hoof. “Can I have some when you’re done?”

Without looking away from the stove, Silver shook her head. “You smell anise, not licorice, and no, we’ll need all of it.” She lifted the kettle and signaled Diamond to turn off the stove.

Scootaloo’s wings sagged at that, but she likely wouldn’t enjoy anise anyway. Juniper, maybe. Or raspberry. Cousin Silver Lining said nettles were good for feathers; she might try that one day.

“If there’s any left over you can have some, but don’t count on it.” Silver Spoon checked the clock. “It’s teatime soon, and you can’t let teatime happen without tea. It’s illegal.”

The short Trottinghammer nodded. “She’s right, you know.” He flicked his little brown tail thoughtfully. “At least, ponies back home sure act like it.”

Slowly, the tea ball dipped into the boiling water. Another full ball sat on the sidelines in case something happened to this tea and she had to make more.

“This isn’t a full tea party.” Silver mumbled it more to herself than to anypony in particular. “No cucumber sandwiches or cakes… barely a decent spread for seven ponies, but it’ll do. Most important part’s here. Imagine skipping teatime in a royal castle in front of a princess—”

“I’m not sure Mother even believes Twilight’s really a princess,” pointed out a rather unhelpful Diamond Tiara. “She says Twilight’s too new to have real credentials. Whatever that’s supposed to mean.”

“So? The rest of Equestria calls her a princess no matter what Spoiled thinks. She doesn’t have to believe Twilight’s a princess, but she’ll sure believe in nopony inviting her to the Gala because she decided to be rude in Twilight’s own castle. And during teatime.”

Scootaloo blinked. ‘Kay.” She clicked her tongue at Silver’s perfectly circular arrangement of tea cups. “I guess you know what you’re doing, but I still dunno what a bunch of hot leaf juice is supposed to do.” When she saw Silver’s face, she held up both hooves and almost fell off the sill. “Hey, no offense.”

“It’s not the tea by itself.” Silver struggled to unclench her jaw. Hot leaf juice, indeed! “Some iced tea by the tire swing’s one thing, but teatime means something, Scootaloo. It means when you sit down with somepony, you treat them with respect, even if you don’t like the pony on the other end of the table.”

Not to disparage the tea itself, of course. The right cup with the right pony could defuse a disaster into a minor inconvenience. Tea reined the panic of Nightmare Moon, got Pinkie Pie to use her inside voice, and healed two years of bad history with Sweetie Belle.

Silver Spoon breathed in rising steam from the anise-fennel and let her shoulders go slack. “Anyway, that’s why I’m doing this instead of painting the jungle gym.”

“Oh, huh. So that’s what the spoon’s for. Neat!” Scootaloo buzzed to the other side of the window to see Silver’s flank better. “I always figured it was just about prissy tea parties. Didn’t know it helped you negotiate stuff, too.”

“My talent is tea parties. It’s what I do.”

“Yeah, I know, but like…” Scootaloo squirmed to find the right words. “It’s like, tea parties help you do other stuff, like get ponies to get along and stuff.”
“Or how you have everypony on the same page at student council meetings,” said Diamond Tiara.

True. A party pony brought smiles and harmony. A tea party pony brought civility. Silver Spoon had never forgotten that fact, but it helped to be reminded now and then. She also hadn’t forgotten what happened the last time she brewed tea for fighting adults. “That doesn’t mean it’ll work with our parents, though,” she said.

Pipsqueak shook his head. “I dunno what your mums are on about in the first place. I get into scrapes with the lads all the time, and they’re way worse than yours. ’Ere Silver, lemme see your chin.”

Silver Spoon practically had to shove her face through the window for him to see. The tip of Pip’s nose tickled the bottom of her chin. “It was a lot worse last week.”

“Yeah, and it wasn’t that bad back then, either.” He drew an invisible circle around his left eye, the one with white fur. “Featherweight gave me a shiner tons nastier than that. Lasted a whole two weeks, almost!” Pip brushed his mane back coolly. “Mind, I gave ‘im as good as I got. Bopped ‘im back in the front teeth, I did.”

Silver Spoon put both hooves to her own mouth and gasped. “You kicked Featherweight in the FACE?” So that’s where that gap in his perfect little smile came from!

Diamond Tiara gave Silver a flat look and rolled her eyes.

“That’s not what Featherweight says.” Scootaloo grinned. “I heard Featherweight sneezed and tripped into your hoof. And Button Mash says you both had your eyes closed the whole time.”

Pip lifted his chin. “That’s the censored version we told you delicate fillies. Didn’t want to frighten anypony or anything.” He bobbed his head at Silver, who still reeled from the shock of somepony wrecking Featherweight’s sweet little face.

Diamond rolled her eyes even harder. “Silver, it’s not even that big a deal. Colts get hit in the face from falling out of bed, and anyway, it wasn’t even a real fight. The Dink told me they slapped around like a fish at the bottom of a boat, and Dink actually was there.” She turned to the wall, clearly fighting back a laugh. “And then Pip’s sister had to come get him ’cause he started crying.”

Pip blinked. “Well. You get hit in the eye, your eye naturally starts tearing up. It’s plain science.” He coughed into his hoof and eased himself back onto the ground. “Anyhow, I’ve got presidential matters to get to. You guys are still coming to the christening tomorrow, right? It’s not like your mums can stop you from coming to school.”

Monday marked the beginning of harvest vacation, and thus not a school day. Father could lock her in the highest room of the highest tower all week if he wanted. Pip and Scootaloo had been doing their best to cheer her up, however, so Silver kept that note to herself. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Diamond Tiara watched the kitchen door and didn’t say anything at all beyond a vague murmur of worry.

The curtains twisted and rumpled under Scootaloo’s stomach as she fought her way further through the window. She bumped Diamond’s shoulder and chuckled—a bubblier sound than Silver would have expected from such a raspy voice. “Come on, you stood up to your mom once, you can do it again. You two are the biggest pains in the butt in all of Ponyville. In a good way, I mean. Sort of. I think?”

Somehow, Silver Spoon suspected Scootaloo wouldn’t earn her cutie mark in pep talks anytime soon.
“Oh, you guys know what I mean. Rainbow Dash says it's not over ‘til it’s over, and it’s still not over.” Scootaloo poked at the apple patterned curtains twisted around her barrel. “Also, why are Apple Bloom’s curtains in Twilight’s kitchen?”

Diamond’s gaze settled on her cutie mark and stayed there. “One last round to charm the judges.” Teeth shone in her smile. “You’ve got a point there, Scootaloser.”

The pegasus closed her wings tight between her withers. “Uh, we’re not exactly that close of friends yet, Diamond Tiara.”

“Well, thanks, Scootaloo.”

“Sorry.” Feathers splattered in the sink as she wriggled her way backwards through the window. “I better catch up to Pip and finish painting the bridges. Break a leg, you guys!” Scootaloo pushed off the windowsill in a fast drop to the ground.

Silver Spoon waved until Scootaloo crossed into Ponyville’s main streets and vanished. Once again, the two of them were alone with the kitchen and whatever the future held in store. Silver smoothed out the curtains. Indeed, the pattern matched the Apple family’s décor. A housewarming gift from Applejack, maybe?

Now that Silver thought about it, the cozy feel of this whole kitchen kind of reminded her of Miss Applejack. She must have gone through a lot of trouble putting the room together, even though interior design couldn’t be in Applejack’s wheelhouse.

*It must be nice to have five best friends. You’ve got extra in case you lose one.*

“Hey, Diamond?” Silver Spoon’s voice fell small and unimpressive in the room. No echo at all. “What do we do if this doesn’t work? If… they say we can’t be friends any—”

“They won’t,” Diamond said.

“But—”

Diamond Tiara narrowed her eyes. “They won’t. I didn’t get this tiara on my head or this tiara on my flank for rolling over like somepony’s pathetic little prize poodle.”

The tea smelled ready. Silver poured herself a small sample without any additives. It turned out good. Better than good. Now it had to keep until showtime. “I don’t know, Di. I heard my parents talking before. They used words like ‘toxic’ and ‘enabling’. What’s ‘enabling’ mean?” Diamond clicked her tongue. “It doesn’t sound that bad. Like, it means to help somepony do stuff, right? Helping’s a good thing.”

“Not if the only reason you help is because you want something in return.”

“Okay then. ‘Enabling’ doesn’t sound so bad either. It means to make something possible, so… yeah, helping somepony do stuff. I don’t think it sounds bad either, but they sure said it like a bad thing.” Silver sat on the tile floor with her tail wrapped close. “I don’t want to stop being friends, Di. We just started again, and besides, everypony else has a best friend. All the bestie spots are taken. Not that I even want a new one.”

Silver stood back up, glowering at the pots and pans that hung from the kitchen ceiling. They shook when she kicked the table beneath them. “It’s not fair! We shouldn’t get in trouble for making up with each other. It’s stupid!”

“Am I speaking Horsuguese over here?” Diamond Tiara gripped Silver Spoon’s shoulders hard and
spun her around so that they stared nose to nose. “It’s. Not. Gonna happen. I don’t care what Mother says, or my Dad says, or your parents and grandparents put together. I don’t even care what my first mom says about it! You’re my best friend, Silver Spoon. That’s it. The end.”

When Silver smiled, Diamond did too. “That’s the spirit. We’ll sneak out the window and meet at the night if we have to.” Di clapped her hooves. “Ooh, we can do it in secret during the new moon, just like Star Catcher and Skywishes!”

“You know, Skywishes and Star Catcher died at the end of that opera.” And also in real life.

“Nopony likes a neigh-sayer, Silvie.”

Silver stuck out her tongue. “That’s what they always call somepony who’s right. Besides, if they catch us sneaking out, they’ll put bars on the window.”

“That’s why you don’t get caught, duh.” Diamond plucked a petal from a vase of daisies and ate it. “And if that happens, I’ll borrow a blowtorch from Pinkie Pie.”

“What if Mother and Father decide to move again?” Silver thought of Wondermint back in the old penthouse, and hoped she’d been doing alright. I lose more best friends that way.

“Easy, I’ll follow you. No—no, no, even better!” Diamond Tiara got that dangerous shine in her eye. “We’ll escape before they get the chance!” The apple curtains brushed away with dramatic flair as Diamond threw the window open all the way. “I’ll hire a cab driver, pay him to keep his mouth shut, and blowtorch the windows, bust you out like Nightmare Night Part Two, and then we’re off!”

“Off to where?”

“Wherever we want!” She wrapped a foreleg around Silver, pulling her close. “Think of it: Manehattan! Fillydelphia! The Haymare Islands! Detrot!”

“I like it,” said Silver, “but we’ll be fugitives. Guards will be after us. I guess we could change our names and get some disguises.” Fake mustaches would be a must. “Might be better to go someplace farther away, like Trottingham or Mexicolt—oh! Prance!” Silver bounced on her haunches. “I always wanted to go to Prance.”

“But I don’t know how to speak Prench.” Diamond shrugged. “You can teach me on the way. We don’t even need to worry about money, ‘cause I’ve got tons of bits from all the pageants I’ve won.”

“How much?” A decent flat had to go for more than sixty bits. On the lam or not, a filly of Silver’s stature couldn’t live in some shabby hole in the wall.

“I dunno, like… fifty thousand or something?” Diamond laughed at Silver’s stunned expression. “I’ve been winning longer than I can remember, and Mom always said those bits belong to me. Dad says it’s for college, but who needs college when you’re already perfect?”

“I don’t think Smart Cookie U lets in fugitives, anyway.”

“Exactly. We’ll live in Prance, and eat cookies for breakfast, ice cream for dinner, and have tea in-between.” Diamond pulled another daisy from the vase and plucked two petals. She ate the first, then put the second on Silver’s nose. “We’ll live like the princesses we are and be best friends forever and it’ll be great.” She leaned on the counter with a smile of satisfaction. “Yep.”

“It would still cost a lot and we’d run out of bits eventually. Good tea leaves and petals and stuff could get hard to afford.” Silver Spoon thought her collection of magnificent tea sets. Fugitives had
to travel light, so she’d have to take only one. Maybe the jade set Diamond gave her. “That’s okay, though. If I have to, I’ll even…” She drew a breath for courage. “I’ll even use teabags!”

Diamond Tiara gasped.

“That’s right! Not even the gourmet ones, regular old dust in a wrapper with that ugly string attached. I’d do it—I would!”

They hugged. The idea was crazy. Impossible. Dangerous. But even if it didn’t work, it would still be worth a shot.

“We already do everything else they tell us.” Diamond stared out the window as if already mapping out their escape route. “We eat our alfalfa and go to bed on time—usually. They should at least let us pick our friends for ourselves; it’s not like we can pick and choose family.” She swiped her tail. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Right. We’re best friends and if they don’t like it, they can get postcards from Prance.” Silver Spoon wasn’t educated in the ways of rituals like Great Uncle Silver Chalice, or even The Dink, but she still knew a pact this important needed to be sealed.

Silver pulled out of the hug and held out both hooves. “Bump.”

“Bump!” Diamond gave her double-hooves up high.

“Bump!” Down low.

“Sugar lump rump!” Elbow-elbow, flank to flank.

A pact of friendship in the Castle of Friendship about to meet with the Princess of Friendship. They couldn’t ask for a better seal than that. For safety, they linked tails and shook on it.

Diamond nodded firm. “Best friends until the stars fall down.”

The clock struck the hour. Teatime. Silver arranged the tea set on a wheeled cart, performing quality checks on the saucers, sugar, honey, and the napkins folded into birds. “All set. Let’s move.”

Outside, the hall showed no sign of Brass Tacks, but he or Spike had to lurk around here somewhere. Silver Spoon quietly decided to keep any escape plans under wraps for now.

“I don’t know about all that ‘til the stars fall down’ stuff, Di.” She gestured to the walls of the crystal tree palace not even a year old yet. “The way things go in this town, that could happen, like, next Tuesday.”

“True.” Diamond Tiara grabbed the handle, kicked the carpet, and rode the cart down the hall.

“Friends like death and taxes? Nah, we don’t pay taxes yet.”

Silver thought about it. “Death and homework?” Moving towns, financial disaster, social embarrassment, illness, and four national emergencies couldn’t stop homework. If Silver died on the spot, Cheerilee would still find some way to assign a history report.

“That works.”

The cart slowed to a stop outside the library door. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon exchanged nods and knocked.

Air under the door popped and sucked like a fresh jar of preserves opening for the first time. The
silence spell broke. Nopony on the other side of the door sounded happy, but no yelling or shouting, so… good sign?

The door opened. Diamond stared dead ahead, pressing herself close to Silver Spoon.

Silver smiled her best game face. “Death and homework,” she whispered.

Princess Twilight Sparkle, avatar of friendship and second chances, their trump card and main defense, smiled at them—tired but genuine. She seemed as happy to see them as they were. Finding some smiling faces must have been a relief. “Hello, girls. We didn’t expect you this early.”

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon bowed. “Good afternoon, princess,” they chirped in unison.

Bent low to the ground, Silver opened one eye to size up the room. Their parents sat on opposite sides of a coffee table, each pair to their own couch. Mr. Rich appeared tired, sad, and frustrated. Mrs. Rich sported the same glacial disdain she had every day. Mother wore her mask of social warfare; a neutral face that meant anything from extra desserts to certain doom.

Father caught Silver Spoon’s sneaky gaze and smiled at her. It sent chills down her coat. He smiled the smile of dentist visits and booster shots. The sort that said I know what’s best for you. Even if it hurts. She couldn’t help but recall that Great Uncle Chalice had wanted the best for Silver Shill, too.

Normally, Princess Twilight would insist nopony needed to bow to her. From the look of her droopy feathers, she felt too tired to bother. Her magic took over the tea cart and wheeled it to the table. “This smells amazing. Silver Spoon, did you make this?”

Silver poured the first cup and offered it. “Yes, princess. Diamond Tiara helped me in the kitchen.” She nodded to Diamond, who blinked and sat up. “I tried something new with anise and fennel since we didn’t have time to brew something special for everypony by themselves. I hope that’s alright?”

The alicorn’s eyes lit up. “Ooh, I’ve never had fennel before.” Her droopy feathers perked, smoothing out as she breathed in the steam rising from the cup.

Spoiled Rich angled her head down, pinning both fillies with an acidic stare. “Hm. Didn’t we ask the two of you to wait in the throne room?” Unspoken criticism saturated the question. “Why don’t you do as you’re told? You don’t behave when you’re together.” Her lips pressed together. “Most ponies would leap at the chance to be in a castle, much less sit on a throne. Twilight’s been very hospitable, opening the room to you.”

Diamond shuffled her hooves in the carpet tassels, debating whether to respond or not. “I know, Mother—” She dared a quick glance to Silver. “Uh, we know. That’s why we wanted to show our appreciation.”

“That’s right. It’s rude to stay in somepony’s house and not to give something back to the hostess.” Tea poured into the second cup. Silver dropped in one sugar cube, swirling it in without ever dropping her gaze or her present smile. “And teatime is at two, ma’am. It’s still one lump, right?”

Mrs. Rich’s tail flicked irritably against the cushions, but she eyed the teacup with interest. “It is, yes.”

Silver Spoon’s smile widened. “Wonderful!” She measured out the honey for her own mother’s cup and remembered to leave the condiments in Father’s reach; he preferred to stir his own tea.

Diamond took the initiative of offering the third cup to her own father. “We wanted to use our time efficiently,” she said, “but everything for the playground is almost done, and Miss Cheerilee didn’t
give us homework over the weekend. There’s no point sitting around doing nothing, right? Time is money.”

“Don’t look now, Twilight, but we’re being buttered up.” Not unkindly, Mr. Rich smirked at his daughter. “You’re still grounded with an allowance cut, you know.”

“Dad, if you think Silver Spoon made tea just to get on your good side, you don’t know Silvie at all. I mean, if we were on a flaming airship and it crashed in the mountains at teatime, she’d still be searching for a kettle.”

Mother laughed at that. “I bet she’d use the fires to boil the water.” The anise blend had been an excellent call. She drank deep and smiled down at Silver Spoon. “The tea’s wonderful, dearest heart.”

So far, so good. Mr. Rich laughed along with Mother, Father smiled, and Mrs. Rich didn’t glare daggers anymore. The mood of the room wouldn’t stay this light, but easing the tension let everything stabilize.

Satisfied, Silver poured her and Diamond’s own cups, and settled on a cushion at the end of the coffee table. Everypony settled into small talk and light jokes, though every few minutes Silver felt Mrs. Rich side-eye her for a second or two before returning to the conversation.

Eventually, they ran out of weather to complain about and recent events to criticize, and the conversation steered toward the real reason they’d gathered here.

Twilight Sparkle’s wings perked at her sides, watching the gathered ponies with renewed confidence. She gave Silver a wry glance. “You know, Silver Spoon, when I told you friendship is worth fighting for, I didn’t think you’d take it so literally.” She pointed at Diamond and Silver’s tails, twined together behind them. “But from the look of it, it did seem to work. Eventually.”

The princess settled in a cozy reading chair, spaced perfectly between a reading lamp and an end table. It oddly suited her better for a throne than the actual crystal throne down the hall. She patted the small stacks of papers in the center of the end table: their friendship reports.

According to Apple Bloom, Princess Twilight—still a wingless librarian back then—used to write letters to Princess Celestia about what she learned about friendship that week. Diamond Tiara thought it might be a good idea to do the same, but writing to the Princess of Friendship this time. Even better, both letters had been sent before anypony approached her with the idea of their folks meeting to work things out. Before Diamond guilted herself into confessing, even. If Twilight hadn’t been on their side from the start, the letters sealed it.

Diamond Tiara blinked at the stack of typed papers that dwarfed the stapled five pages next to it. “Sheesh Silvie, did you write a book?”

“I wanted to be thorough!” Silver whispered. “Twilight likes reading, so I figured…”

“What’d you even say?” Diamond paled, lowering her voice. “You didn’t tell her everything we did, did you?”

Silver rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I blabbed every awful thing we ever did to anypony and made us look like monsters. Di, come on. It’s me.” She adjusted her glasses and sniffed. “I told her what we learned and a little what we did to get there, but I didn’t sell ourselves out.” Granddad had a fancy legal word for that. Self… inclination? Self-immolation?

Louder, Diamond asked, “Did you get to read our letters? We worked real hard on them.”
The atmosphere shifted. All four parents exchanged glances, none of them warm or encouraging.

“We did,” said Father.


Silver’s ears sank slowly into her mane. She glanced away from Mrs. Rich’s hawkish stare and thought of her ecosystem project from last year. *Hawks eat snakes, don’t they?*

She should have anticipated this. Celestia on the mount, no wonder they stayed in here for two hours. Silver dug her hooves in the carpet, trying not to grimace. She wrote those letters for Twilight specifically, with more honesty and candor for somepony without the power to ground them.

Worse, nopony had actually asked for Twilight to keep them private. Without that, if their parents asked to see them, she’d have to oblige. Or maybe because Diamond proposed both the letters and the meetings, Twilight thought they’d written them *for* the meeting.

*I should have cross-referenced the letters. This is what I get for being honest and not safe. I should have asked for them to stay confidential. I should have been safer than this.*

Diamond tapped in. “Oh, good! Then you know that we’ve learned a lot about friendship the past couple years. Especially ours.” She jostled Silver’s withers for a silent morale boost. “It took work to break it down, but even more to build it back up. We’re better ponies for it, and we’re going to keep it that way.” Good to know one of them had something prepared for this.

“I’m glad to hear that, Diamond Tiara.” Indeed, Twilight seemed quite pleased. Good.

Silver watched her parents from the corner of her eye. *They can’t say our friendship’s bad if Twilight believes in it, right? It’s like arguing with Luna about when to have a full moon.* Her eyes sagged to the coffee table. *Then again, the moon doesn’t live in its mom’s house or headbutt other moons in the face.*

Father hadn’t smiled at Diamond Tiara once, not even in politeness. Silver Spoon couldn’t say it surprised her. Father called in at least three doctors when she got the sniffles; he’d jumped out of his horseshoes seeing that bruise.

“Mr. Laurel? Mrs. Perfect?” Diamond Tiara approached Mother and Father with her head at a respectful height. “I’ve got something to say.”

“Yes?” He watched Diamond the way one watched a stray dog sniffing in the yard.

The Riches, in turn, watched Father with thin frowns and twitching tails. Mr. Rich, in particular, braced to literally leap in if he needed to.

Diamond Tiara ignored all of it. “I understand if you’re angry at me. If somepony hit a member of my family, I’d be angry, too. And I also know it doesn’t fix anything I did, but I still want to apologize again for what happened last week. Especially headbutting Silver Spoon and knocking her into the fence.”

“Wait—you also knocked her into the fence?” Father whipped around at Silver Spoon. “She knocked you into a fence?”

“Father, please.” Silver cringed against the table, trying to fight the blush creeping into her cheeks. Why did he have to do this every time? “I’m fine now. It didn’t even hurt that much when it happened.”
“Brightness, that hardly matters! It shouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

Mrs. Rich tsked and whispered something into Mr. Rich’s ear. Mr. Rich laid a hoof on his wife’s fetlock and shook his head.

“You’re right, Mr. Silver Laurel, it shouldn’t have. It was wrong of me, and won’t happen again. Ever.” She nodded at Silver Spoon. “I promise.” She offered a hoof for peace.

Mother looked at Father, the outstretched little hoof, then back at Father. She rose from the couch, with a slight frown aimed behind her.

Father cleared his throat and adjusted his monocle.

“Good to know, Miss Diamond Tiara. We’ll hold you to that promise.” She shot a quick glance at Silver Spoon. “Both of you.” Mother smiled and shook Diamond’s hoof. “We accept your apology, honey.” Her smile stiffened a little. “Don’t we, Laurel?”

Father nodded. He shook Diamond’s hoof as well, albeit with less enthusiasm.

“Thanks!” Diamond beamed. “Uh—I mean, thank you, sir.”

Twilight clapped her hooves with a sigh. “There, you see? Like I said, clear communication is the first step to conflict resolution, and the fifth step on the road to healing. I think we’ve done pretty well so far.” At least seven feathers wilted onto the carpet and she had dark rings under her eyes. Silver couldn’t tell if the princess was trying to convince the parents or herself.

Mr. Filthy Rich rubbed the bridge of his muzzle with a long groan. “I still can’t believe it even happened. Diamond, honey, you know better than this. We taught you better than this.”

If Mr. Rich noticed, he didn’t show it. “You don’t lay hoof on another pony. Now, I don’t care how upset you get, and I don’t care what they said or didn’t say first.”

It may have been Silver Spoon’s imagination, but it seemed his gaze wandered to his wife at that second part.

“And I don’t care who started it, neither. Diamond, you do not lay hoof on another pony—or any other creature—unless you’ve got no other choice.” He straightened against the couch. “From the sound of it, you had plenty of choices still left.”

Mrs. Rich—who’d held her tongue with both hooves so far—finally cut in. “Yet, you chose to scuffle about in the dirt like a pair of West Fillydelphia degenerates in a back alley. As if you had no home training whatsoever! I don’t know where you picked that up, but I know it’s not from us.”

“Yes, Mother,” Diamond sighed.

“You’d think we lived in a Griffonstone tavern, the way you acted.” Spoiled turned up her pointed muzzle. “I’ll bet you get it from that bartender’s ruffian child.”

Diamond’s hackles rose at that barb against Berry Pinch, but she had the sense to pick her battles. One friend at a time. “It was unladylike conduct, Mother. I’ll do better next time.”

Somberly, she placed both hooves on Silver’s withers. “I’m sorry, Silvie. Our strength is not for hurting.” An old adage every earth pony knew from the cradle onward.
“I forgive you, Di. I’m sorry, too.” They’d done this song and dance already, but this audience needed an encore performance. “I should’ve tried to talk it out before it got that bad. Besides, it’s not like I didn’t hit you back.”

Diamond pulled her in a sidehug. “Ha! More like you tried to.”

Father rose from his seat, clearing his throat. “Speaking of which…” He nodded to Mother.

Mother reached behind the sofa and pulled out a wooden box. “We’ve gotten you something, Silver Spoon.”

The box clicked open to reveal a white outfit and odd little mask. The jawless thing looked something like a knight’s champron, but wicker mesh instead of metal. Both had Silver Spoon’s cutie mark monogrammed on them.

Diamond Tiara pricked her ears.

Mrs. Rich rolled her eyes with more exaggeration than necessary.

Silver herself withheld a groan. She should have seen it coming.

“Because it seems you cannot settle affairs with dialogue alone,” Father said, “the time has come for you to learn how to fence. It ought to do something about that excess energy, too.”

“Oooh.” Diamond leaned over the box, taking in the shiny silver piping in the fencing suit and unique open-muzzle design in the mask. She sat up and turned to her father.

Spoiled Rich frowned. “No, Diamond.”

Diamond lashed her tail, grumbling. “Didn’t even say anything yet.”

“Strange choice of sports, Silver Laurel,” Spoiled continued, “after all that talk about how delicate and fragile and innocent little Silver Spoon is. I thought we came here to reprimand fighting, not encourage it.”

Twilight Sparkle dove in before anypony had the chance to get offended. “Actually Mrs. Rich, the sport of fencing isn’t the same as fighting at all. With the mask and suit, you can’t get hurt with the little foils, and it’s really more about hoofwork and strategy.” She grinned at the equipment, armed with an entire lecture about the historical value of the sport. “My brother called it real-life-pointy-chess.”

Father nodded. “It’s also highly regulated. Somepony’s always around to monitor safety—accidents do happen—and a skilled instructor assures everything done is done correctly.”

Silver swished her tail thoughtfully. Maybe she could renegotiate her terms. “Is this a condition or an order?”

Father poured himself more tea. “All things have rules, Brightness, including the rules of engagement. We must be disciplined in those rules. Am I right?” Which didn’t answer the question at all.

“Yes, sir.”

It would have happened eventually; the fight only gave a solid excuse. Silver Spoon settled her twitching tail in an effort to appear grateful. If she’d been presented with fencing equipment in front
of everypony it had to mean Mother and Father were willing to let her friendship continue. She could be glad of that at least.

**Besides, it’s an honor to learn the family tradition. Be happy.** Thus, the youngest Silver smiled.

“Thank you for the chance to learn, Father. I’m sure it’ll be good exercise.”

**Tennis would be better exercise. Nopony pokes me in the face in tennis.**

Mother smiled. “We’re pleased you see it that way. Remember, an ideal duel is one you never have to fight, but if the time comes…” She didn’t acknowledge the judgmental stare from the other couch, but the tip of her orange tail began to flicker. **“Well. Self-defense is always useful.”**

“Like if changelings attacked Canterlot again, you could fight your way out!” Diamond still hadn’t stopped staring enviously at Silver’s mask. “Or if the Everfree goes crazy and lets out all the timberwolves and stuff. Dad, if I’m careful could—”

“No,” both Riches said again.

Despite all the hoof-shakes and apologies, tensions still ran too high for Silver Spoon’s taste. Nopony here had told them whether they could stay friends, and from the looks of things, nopony planned to.

Perhaps, after the work done today, they’d already accomplished what they set out to do. Silver saw more smiles now than she did when they first entered, and the mood had settled from a boil to a mild burble.

But perhaps not.

Silver dialed her voice to a whisper and took a long drag of tea to hide her muzzle movements. “What do you think, Di? Are we in the clear?”

“No.” Diamond didn’t even need to think about it.

Silver nodded. The hardest rule of the schoolyard applied well beyond its fence; never talk bad about family. **That goes double for a foal’s parents, so it must go quadruple for somepony’s foal.** Even if everypony shook hooves and left smiling today, those barbs stayed under the skin. A “yes” today could flip into a “no” next week.

Family roots drove too deep for royal decrees to budge. Worst case scenario, if either the Riches or Silvers put their hoof down, even a princess couldn’t do anything about it.

Meanwhile, Diamond Tiara watched their trump card file through what appeared to be a friendship problem portfolio. The gears turned in her head; she’d likely come to the same conclusion Silver had: the princess had done all she could do.

“Right now we’ve got a three or four out of five. That’s a pass, not a win; I don’t go home with silver trophies.” She glanced at Silver Spoon with an awkward smile. “Uh, so to speak.”

“We need a power move.”

Diamond nodded.

Silver Spoon watched Mrs. Rich watching them. “But I don’t think we should push our luck either,” she whispered behind her cup. “Maybe it could still be okay?”

“Sure. Send me a letter from wherever you move next and tell me how that worked out.”
Silver Spoon averted her eyes to the sugar bowl, but could still feel Mrs. Rich glaring at her. Somehow, the mare did it with without even narrowing her eyes. *Pony’s sake, I never even did anything to you.*

Silver sat up. “I assume you’ve got a plan?”

Diamond Tiara grinned. “Of course.”

“…it’s not jumping out the window and running, is it?”

“Not anymore!”

Silver Spoon stamped her hoof.

“Relax, it’s Plan D anyway.” Diamond swept her tongue along the edge of her teeth, scouting her line of attack. She rose to face the adults.

Silver rose slower. “Wait. What exactly are we doing?”

“What we do best. Shut up and give me a hug.” Diamond wrapped both forelegs around Silver’s neck, whispering in her ear. “Follow my lead, go with your gut, and play for keeps.”

That didn’t explain much of anything. Silver frowned, uncertain.

“Go with your gut,” Di said again. “I trust you.”

Silver swallowed her protest and nodded. “Okay. I trust you too, Diam—are you crying?”

“Setting the mood. Cover me, I’m going in” Diamond adjusted her tiara, drooped her ears, and stepped forward.

Close behind her, Silver Spoon let her own ears drop and widened her eyes. Puppy-dog faces and sad ears wouldn’t and couldn’t change minds, but the classics still got hooves in doors.

Twilight Sparkle noticed movement beside her chair. When she saw the expressions on fillies’ faces, her own ears drooped a few centimeters. “Oh, hello girls. Do you need something? Are you okay?”

Di shyly dragged her hoof across the carpet. “M’kay, so we were wondering… You got to read our friendship letters? And liked them?” The puppy eyes dialed up to eleven, complete with the sheen of real tears. “So you know we learned our lesson. Right?”

Mother and Father suddenly felt the need to avert their eyes. Mr. Rich’s face fell, and Mrs. Rich visibly braced.

Princess Twilight never stood a chance.

“Oh, I…” Twilight’s guilty glance ricocheted between Diamond’s parents and the friendship reports. Her wingspan heaved like bellows, and when she met Diamond’s eyes again, she met them steadfast. “Yes, Diamond Tiara. I believe that you—both of you—have gained an invaluable lesson from all this. You’ve done bad things, but you’re not bad ponies, and I know you’re doing the best you can to correct the mistakes you’ve made. That’s all anypony can ask of you.”

Silver Spoon’s head jerked up. She’d guessed what the answer might be, but… not like this.

Twilight said it the same way she’d list the height of a mountain or the average speed of a falcon. Not a guess or a feeling, but a fact among other facts: The Canterhorn is fourteen-thousand feet high.
A falcon dives at two-hundred miles per hour. Silver Spoon is not a bad pony.

Silver blinked. “How do you know?”

“The same way I learn everything.” Twilight’s magic flipped through the letters. “I did the research.”

“Oh.” Maybe being honest had been worth something after all.

Diamond cleared her throat. “So, does that mean we can keep being friends? Please?”

Twilight’s pause went too long for comfort. “Diamond, if it was completely up to me—”

“But it’s not. Which means you can’t really help us…” One angry tear slid through Diamond’s coat, strategically placed, but not fake. Not fake at all. She turned to glare at both sets of parents. “Because your answer’s still no, isn’t it?”

Rationale and vindication rippled from couch to couch, tripping and skipping over each other.

“Come now, Diamond Tiara.” Mother’s voice cut to the front of the pack. She also was the only pony there to stare both fillies in the eye. “Be reasonable; nopony here’s said anything of the sort.”

Diamond stepped in front of Silver Spoon protectively. “Not yet, but you’re building to it. Letting us down nice and easy.”

Nopony met Diamond Tiara’s eye now.

If that hadn’t been the plan, it had at least been an option. It wouldn’t have been a clean snap, but a slow dissolve over days, then weeks, then months. Something painless and subtle.

Diamond stamped the carpet. “And even after you guys talked for two hours and read our friendship letters and everything. Why? Why even bother doing that if you were just gonna turn around and say no anyways?!”

Now, that sounded familiar. Silver recalled the student council sweating before the looming shadow of the school board.

“Why did you let us try when you knew we couldn’t do it?”

Mrs. Rich’s mouth drew tight in a harsh whisper. “Diamond Tiara. Do not make a scene.” Her narrowed eyes darted to Princess Twilight and back.

Silver Spoon blinked slowly. Her tail curled into a thoughtful arc.

This should not have taken two hours. Even in a stubborn mood, Father couldn’t stand to get locked in negotiations for more than twenty minutes. Mother and Mr. Filthy Rich had concerns, but seemed willing to let the friendship continue from the start. Somepony had stretched it out.

That meant this meeting couldn’t stretch anymore. A power move had indeed been the right call.

“W-well why shouldn’t I, Mother?” Diamond wiped her eyes with her fetlock. The waterworks came in full now. “The answer’s not gonna change no matter what we do or say. It’s not fair—I won’t let it happen!”

Silver Spoon wrapped both forelegs around her friend. “Oh, Di. C’mere.”

Diamond’s strategically placed crying became genuine crying.
“Don’t worry. It’ll all be okay, you’ll see.” Silver offered a cup of tea and another hug. “But Mrs. Rich is right.”

“Listen, I understand this is a really hard time for you both—” Twilight Sparkle blinked. “Wait.” She stared at them and blinked again. “Wait, what?!”

*Go with your gut.*

“Mrs. Spoiled Rich is absolutely right,” Silver Spoon said again. “We’re proper young ladies, and ladies do not start tantrums or cause a fuss. Like Twilight says, we’ve done our best to correct our mistakes, but mistakes still have consequences.” Silver closed her eyes with a deep sigh. “Ladies accept their consequences with dignity.”

Diamond sniffled into her teacup and nodded.

“Princess Twilight, we’re really sorry we put you through all this drama and trouble. It’s been a hard time for us, but thank you for understanding. I know you tried your best, too.” Silver Spoon shook the alicorn’s hoof.

Twilight considered Silver Spoon’s expression. “It’s no trouble at all, Silver Spoon.” After a moment, she nodded.

Silver gave Diamond one last hug for courage and approached the couch. The new lenses of her glasses gleamed on the tip of her nose. As manners dictated, she bowed her head to her opponent. She’d become a fencer ten minutes ago, but Silver had been a duelist for years.

“We will accept whatever decision you think is best. Even if we don’t like it, and even if we don’t understand.” Silver Spoon smiled sadly at her parents. “I don’t understand why Shill can’t come to Hearth’s Warming anymore, but I know it’s because Uncle Chalice did what was best. Like how I know you’ll do what’s best for me.”

The corners of Father’s mouth dipped into frown. He wiped his monocle, staring down at his cufflinks.

A cheap move? Perhaps. An unnecessary move? Possible; Mother was already sold and Father seemed more than willing to let bygones be bygones. But they needed a spotless sweep, and if it worked, it worked.

Silver blinked at the Riches with the same smile. “And the same way Diamond’s mother and father are only looking out for her.” She took Diamond’s hoof. “Our parents wouldn’t hurt us unless they had no other choice.”

Diamond Tiara buried her face in Silver’s withers. A light smile twitched through the soft gray fur. “I guess not.”

Father knelt to foal height. “No. We absolutely wouldn’t.” He smiled at the both of them. “We’ve already accepted your apology, Diamond Tiara, and we’ll gladly accept your friendship as well.”

Diamond’s head popped up from Diamond’s shoulder, beaming and still sniffly. “Really?!”

Mother laughed and offered Diamond a handkerchief. “Really. So long as your parents are alright with it, of course.”

“Oh, it’s completely fine with me.” Mr. Rich leaned back in the couch and turned to his wife. “What do you think?”
“Why did you let us try when you knew we couldn’t do it?” Plausible deniability. The appearance of fairness. Spoiled Rich was a first class jerk, but she was no idiot. No society pony in Equestria would dare attack the littlest Silver in broad daylight. Maybe Spoiled could slide by with a back-hooved compliment in the school board, but now she sat among ponies wise to sly digs and shankings under the table. She couldn’t touch her with a feather. Not without looking like a monster.

The rational excuses had been addressed and put aside. Diamond herself nipped a quiet friendship dissolution in the bud. The mood of the room clearly favored friendship four-to-one, and both fillies had been nothing but reasonable.

There could be no way to leave this room and save face other than a “yes”.

That still didn’t mean Silver couldn’t help it along. She straightened Diamond’s tiara for her, curling the white bangs out of the way. “No matter what happens, Di, we’ll be fine. We can always get new best friends—like, I’ve still got Truffle Shuffle and Twist in the student council.” Silver Spoon blinked innocently at Mrs. Rich. “Meanwhile, you’ve got the Cutie Mark Crusaders.” And all that entails.

Nopony could argue a filly should have no friends at all, but only a fool could disparage Apple Bloom with Applejack’s best friend in the room and the Apples’ old business partner sitting beside her.

Spoiled Rich tossed up her hooves. “Oh, for goodness—nopony here ever said you couldn’t be friends. We wanted to be certain the two of you understood the seriousness of the situation, but you don’t need to be so dramatic about it.”

“Us?” Diamond Tiara dabbed the corner of her eye with the handkerchief. “Dramatic?”

Mother erupted into coughs that sounded suspiciously like choked laughter.

Mrs. Rich dismissed them with a flick of her tail. “Well, of course you can be friends. Never said you couldn’t. Hmph. Children.” She looked like she wanted to drop-kick Silver off a balcony, but in the end, it didn’t matter what she wanted. Spoiled was still a high-society pony, after all, and society had rules. A lady had appearances to keep.

Spoiled Rich clicked her tongue and leaned down to extend a hoof.

Silver Spoon, after a moment to assure it wouldn’t strike her, smiled and took it.

“I accept your friendship, Miss Silver Spoon.” The hoofshake had a death grip. She smiled back and added in a whisper, “But hurt my daughter again and I’ll ruin you.”

Fair enough. “Thank you, Mrs. Rich. I’m sorry for the dramatics; I guess we’ve still got a lot to learn about manners.”

Silver Spoon settled at the table to pour herself a fresh cup of tea, with a mental note to let Mrs. Rich have the extra tea ball of the bonus blend she’d left in the kitchen. She patted the cushion next to her.

Diamond flicked her tail out of the way and sat to toast. “To us?”

Silver Spoon grinned. “To us.”

Under the table, they bumped hooves.
Tag Never Changes

Teeth yanked Silver’s tail. “Run!”

She barely heard it through the screams. In the center of the schoolyard, Miss Sterling Silver Spoon, student council secretary and deputy manager of the Project X campaign, stood frozen in the grass. Her mouth parted slightly, trying to form a question, but she could find no words for the madness crashing down upon them.

The grass trembled under trampling hooves. Dozens of buzzing little wings kicked up dust tornados, grit whipping through the winds.

Shrieks and screams and squeals ripped through the air. The voices of her classmates built and built into a great cacophonous cry of rage and sorrow and terror. Stampedes of rushing colors pulsed on every side.

Silver Spoon stepped back in bewildered horror. Another sharp tug snapped her out of her stupor. “Ow!”

Scootaloo spat out Silver’s tail. “What part of ‘run’ don’t you get?!” She smashed her head into Silver’s flank. “Come ON, move!”

“I—ow, quit it!” Silver stumbled into a clumsy trot before she got hit again. “Wait, but what’s going —eep!”

Something white—Cotton?—whizzed inches from her nose.

Okay, fine. Questions later. Run now. She spat out a white feather and jumped into a skittering gallop, fast on Scootaloo’s hooves.

Cotton Cloudy landed hard behind them. Sod and dirt ground under her hooves as she pivoted in a U-turn. “Oh, no you don’t!”

Cackling, the pegasus reared and flew after them. Strings of blue mane ribboned behind her, tangled in leaves and twigs and cloudstuff. Grass stains marred her white coat. Her gaze pierced straight through the schoolyard, flint-hard and fire-bright, dancing with all the drooling and sinister wilderness of a manticore. When she caught the alarm in Silver Spoon’s eyes, the filly grinned with all her teeth.

An orange blur swung through Silver’s line of sight, kicked a mud clod in Cotton’s face, and banked hard left. Scootaloo cut her speed to fall in at Silver’s shoulder. “Don’t look back, just go!” Her tail whipped at the grey flank beside her. “Go, go, go!”

“But—” Silver leapt aside to avoid Shady Daze careening through her path. He glanced over his shoulder to meet her gaze; he had the same crazed look to his eyes. “But where are we going?”

She couldn’t resist one more look back. Shady Daze narrowly missed Tornado Bolt’s dive-bomb, only to be tackled to the ground under Pipsqueak’s hooves. Both colts tumbled through the dirt in a knot of flailing legs and curse words.

Tornado Bolt kicked back into the air. She swooped up and over to meet Cotton Cloudy. The fillies traded grins and fanned out.

Scootaloo tossed another mud clod over her shoulder. “Great, now it’s both of them. C’mon, follow
me.” She paused, sniffed the air, and flicked her wings out. Catching a cross breeze, Scootaloo skidded over the grass. “Hey, watch your left!”

In the corner of Silver’s eye, Berry Pinch and The Dink raced past. Pinch stopped and twitched her ears with interest, no doubt weighing the risk of catching a slow earth pony with an agile pegasus bodyguard. She whispered something in Dinky’s ear.

Nodding, The Dink balled up a chunk of mud and wet sod with her magic.

Silver gulped a breath. She pushed faster. “Scootaloo!”

“I see ‘em.” Without breaking speed, she shifted from air to land, wings still buzzing. Clouds of dust threaded in her wake.

The mud clod exploded at their hooves, showering Silver’s tail in mud and slime. She shrieked.

“Don’t sweat it,” called Scootaloo. “It’s a distraction, it doesn’t count, just keep going!”

They broke to the right, towards the swings. Silver flattened her ears and ducked low to weave between the seats and ropes.

Metal clanged above them. Tornado Bolt cantered along the top bar of the swing set. Right on top of them, she shadowed her quarry, matching them hoofstep for hoofstep. Her muscles braced to pounce the second either one crossed into open playground.

Silver took shelter beneath a swing, pressed back-to-back with Scootaloo. “She’s got us trapped.”

“Sure do!” Cotton Cloudy slammed onto the swing above them, grabbing at Scootaloo’s tail.

On instinct, Silver Spoon bucked, lashing out with her back legs. Both hooves hit the swing dead center.

Cotton went sprawling in a commotion of feathers.

Silver stumbled backwards into the grass. A streak of grey and purple swept straight up and dive-bombed.

Scootaloo shoved Silver backwards. “Go for Base!” She tucked and rolled as Tornado’s hooves hit the dirt. Her wings buzzed frantically at her back as she righted herself, struggling to find the air. “I’m right behind you!”

A white hoof stomped Scootaloo’s tail. “But who’s behind you?”

Scootaloo turned. “Aw, horseapples.”

Cotton Cloudy bopped her right between the withers. “TAG!”

“And no tag backs!” Tornado Bolt climbed skyward with Cotton right behind her. Cupping both hooves to her mouth, the cry rang from schoolhouse to sandbox. “Scoots is It!”

The chaos froze. Ears and heads turned towards the swing set. Crowds fanned out. Slowly, then frantically, then hysterically.

“Everypony run! I repeat: Scootaloo is It!”

Abandoned swings drifted in the wind without a rider, squeaking a high and lonely song.
Silver Spoon frowned. “Scootaloo?” The question echoed. “Um, now what?”

The muddy pegasus shook out some loose orange feathers. She straightened her back, cracked her neck, and stared dead-on with round violet eyes. Scootaloo smiled. “It’s like I said, Silver Spoon…”

Silver took a cautious step back.

Scootaloo matched it.

Silver took three more.

She matched those, too. “Go for Base.” The smile pooled across her face. Slow. Dangerous. Predatory. “I’m right behind you.”

Uh-oh.

Silver bolted. “Okay, Base.” Her eyes ricocheted foal to foal, landmark to landmark. “Base, Base, Base… what the hay even IS Base?!”

A lifetime of teaspoons and small talk flashed before her eyes. How had it come to this? It had all started so fast.

Her delicate network of connections within connections, of clubs, cliques, and concords. The interlocked rivalries, alliances, and apathetic neutralities. The pillars of student government.

Gone. All gone.

Law and order withered and died underhoof. With a single war cry, every treasured structure in Silver Spoon’s meticulous balance of schoolfoals and social circles buckled and collapsed like a house of cards.

Friend hunted friend. Councilpony clobbered councilpony with sod grenades. The air sang with sweat and betrayal.

On Silver’s right, Twist pelted after The Dink, hot on her yellow tail. No sign of Berry Pinch anywhere; they must have split up in the chaos.

Dinky swerved around the teeter totter. Too slow.

The goofy nerd with lopsided glasses clenched her teeth in a vicious grin and pounced. She caught the unicorn with two hooves in the back of the head. “GOT-cha!”

Knocked off balance, Dinky yelped and went tumbling. Twist streaked away before she even peeled her face off the grass.

“Twist!” Silver tottered after her. If she tagged The Dink, that meant she wasn’t It anymore. That meant safety…ish. “Hey, Twist!”

Councilpony Twist narrowed her eyes behind muddy lenses, but didn’t turn her head.

Silver Spoon risked a glance at the sandbox, where Scootaloo stood deadlocked with Boysenberry, Carrot Crush, and Bubblegum Brush in a standoff. It wouldn’t stay that way. Either they’d escape and Scootaloo would be after Silver again, or there’d be a new It.

She pushed into a gallop. Trustworthy or not, Silver needed allies. “Twist!”
Eyeing Silver at her flank, Twist strafed to the right—close enough to talk, but well out of tagging range. “Make it quick, Thilver.” She kicked a dirt clod in Button Mash’s face before he got within three yards. “I’m buthy.”

“I need to know where Base is.” Silver Spoon ducked Button’s counterattack. “And who else is It, besides Scootaloo?”

“Apple Bloom, Rumble, ‘n’ The Dink.”

Twist jumped through the fence, picking up speed as she approached her target: a picnic table by the bushes, shaded by a flowering dogwood. In the chaos of the playground, the tree stood in eerie serenity. Its drooping branches drifted sweetly in the breeze.

Not a bad place to hide; Twist’s mane and tail blended in perfectly with the leaves. Yet she didn’t move like a pony running to safety.

Silver angled her head higher.

The red curtain of dogwood leaves twitched and flowed like a matador’s cape. Too much movement for the breeze alone. Silver traced the leaves up the branch, where Rumble crouched in the shadows, lying in wait.

Beneath the picnic table, a stubby brown tail gave a twitch. Truffle Shuffle. Rumble had him trapped. Hearing approaching hoofbeats, the pegasus pricked his ears and turned.

Twist screeched to a stop and hopped into a nearby bush, Silver on her tail. She pushed against the leaves, trying not to rustle them while she made room for her new roommate. Not that she had a choice; letting Silver stick out would give away their position. “What? I already told you who’th It.”

“You never told me where Base is.” She kept one eye on Rumble, who’d shifted his attention to the bush. It didn’t look like he knew who hid in here yet, and was weighing his options. Silver’s tail wound in thought. If Diamond had been telling the truth about him before...

The makings of a plan knit together. Silver Spoon felt her breathing settle, and for at least a moment, the chaos around them untangled. “Okay. You help me, I help you, how’s that sound?”

Twist flicked her tail suspiciously.

“You’d risk gettin’ tagged just for some obvious information?”

“If it were obvious, I wouldn’t be asking,” Silver countered. “Besides, Truff’s my friend too. I don’t want to see him get picked off.” Especially not with such a lowdown tactic for an easy tag. “I know what I’m doing. Trust me.”

Twist flicked mud off her bargain bin glasses and turned to her. “You were Thcootaloo’th partner a couple minutes ago. How do I know you’re not tricking me tho she can tag me again?”

“Come on, Twist.” Silver pointed both hooves at herself. “Do I look like the kind of filly who plays Battletag? Or any kind of tag? I don’t know how this game works and I don’t care. All I want is to make it home with a clean coat.”

Actually, where had Scootaloo gone? Silver couldn’t see her on the playground. Maybe she’d moved out of range.
“How about I tell you after we get him out?” Twist held out her hoof. “Deal?”

They hoofbumped. “Deal. I’ll go first. You get him soon as I’m out.”

Rumble whirled at the rustle of bushes, ready to spring.

Silver Spoon stepped up to the picnic table, blinking up at him with interest.

Rumble froze, the tips of his wings fluttering in the wind. He stared at her approach like an oncoming train. “Hi, Silver.”

A whirl of red and cream shot beneath the table. Rumble turned to see it, but Silver’s head popped up to block his view.

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“You too, thanks!” He visibly winced. “I mean—yes, thanks. Um.” All of Rumble’s feathers fluffed and fluffed while his eyes got bigger and bigger. He looked more dust bunny than pony. “U-um.” His wings twitched once, twice.

Silver Spoon smiled at him. “Yes?”

“Okay good talk see you in class bye!” Rumble zoomed so fast, he stripped half the leaves off the dogwood.

Vice President Truffle Shuffle crawled out from under the table, flanked by Twist scouting the perimeter. “Thanks, Madam Secretary.”

“You’re welcome, Mister Vice President.” Silver tensed at the edge of the table, ears up. “Quick, Twist. The next one won’t let me go that easy.”

“It’s Project X.” Twist bobbed her head toward the towering structure across the field. “In the watchtower.”

“Of course!” Silver jumped down and broke away into the field. “Thanks—good luck, guys!”

They called something in return, but Silver Spoon had already gone too far to hear it. She hopped through the fence, taking the long way around the thick of the Battletag.

Yards away, a golden flag flapped against the blue. Her heart swelled at the sight.

Raised in the tradition of honorable young ladies who understood the polite speeds for running and proper volumes for shouting, Silver Spoon held no real love for jungle gyms. They supplied high perches to monitor classmates and hold private discussions, but no more than that. Too much exertion on the playground led to stains, sweating, and low grades in etiquette class.

Still, the daughter of an art appraiser knew a masterpiece when she saw one. Project X arced over the horizon, its labyrinth of slides and tunnels glinting in the sun to welcome the young warriors of Ponyville Schoolhouse.

Silver sprang onto a rope net and climbed. She traced the net to the bridges, rope ladders and climbing walls that mapped the path to salvation. A haven of peace. A harbor of reason, free of dirt and muck. A place… abandoned.

Nopony competed for her spot on the rope net. Nopony fought for the climb to the top. The shouts
and wails of struggle, victory, and mud bombings rang above her, behind her, below her, and on the opposite side of the jungle gym.

But nothing here. Silver gulped.

“Peachy Pie’s It!” Scootaloo’s shout rang high from the watchtower. “Repeat: Peachy Pie is It!”

Project X thundered. Hoofbeats pounded from all sides. Foals rained down stairs and slides as if the jungle gym caught fire and cooties at the same time. The ones too impatient to fight the crowds jumped headlong into the sand pits below.

Silver Spoon flattened her ears and clung to the rope net for dear life as it banged and jostled against her belly. A shadow breezed overhead. She looked up.

Two levels up, a yellow and orange shape clung fast to a rope swing, screaming in outrage as the rope violently whipped back and forth. Her back hooves waggled to get leverage on a monkey bar, but the movement only swung her harder.

Only a pegasus or a madmare would risk a jump from that high up, and Peachy Pie was neither. There was still time. Slowly, Silver reached for the vibrating rope above her.

A blue eye blinked through a crack in an overhead bridge. The very bridge at the end of the rope net. “Hiya, Silver Spoon!”

Silver mouthed a word unfit for polite society.

Sunny Daze giggled with a razor blade's edge. “Peachy, lookit who I found!”

The shadow slid down the rope swing and jumped. Hooves hit the sand. Peachy Pie wobbled side to side, shaking off the dizziness and rope burn. “Wow, great job, Sun-Sun!”

The rope net still shook too hard for fast climbing. She could barely keep her balance at a crawl. Silver shook wet bangs out of her eyes and pulled herself up. Slow would have to do.

Peachy Pie’s hoof burst through a gap in the net. “I gotch—HEY!” She screwed up her face as Silver swept her tail out of reach. The hoof waved and stretched, but stuck on the ground, Peachy had to jump to even get close. “Hey, hold still, you butt!” She shot a nasty glare at Silver Spoon and darted for the bottom of the net.

The vibrating ropes finally settled. Silver Spoon climbed for her life.

Behind her, ropes twitched with Peachy’s approach. The gap closed between them with alarming speed, but Silver had a head start and better leverage up in the high section.

She’d beat her to the bridge easily. And they knew it.

“She’s coming your way, Sun-Sun! Hold onto her ‘til I get there, ’kay?”

“Kay!”

Silver gritted her teeth. Two against wasn’t fair at all, especially when Sunny technically wasn’t even It. She could always risk jumping to the bottom, but even if she landed on her hooves—which she wouldn’t—Peachy would only grab her faster.

Okay. Worst case scenario, if I end up It, my chances are... Glancing about, Silver judged her current position, the position of everypony else, her average speed versus everypony else’s. …about
that left one option: up. She glanced up at Sunny, who stared after her with twitching hooves and an
eager grin.

Pulling herself up onto the wooden bridge, Silver shook herself off and kicked the net bridge hard. Peachy Pie squeaked as it jostled and bumped.

Sunny Daze rushed her.

Silver Spoon turned and faced her with a calm cold eye. She didn’t run.

The yellow filly paused a moment. She shook it off and pounced, locking Silver Spoon in a tight hold. “I got her, Peachy!”

Silver relaxed in the crook of Sunny’s foreleg. The grip loosed a little. “So, I guess we’ve got a little while before she gets here.”

“Yes.” Sunny smiled against Silver’s ear. “And we’re gonna sit and wait.”

Silver fake-smiled back. “Wonderful, and I know a great way to pass the time. It’s weird, I’ve known you for—what, like, two and a half years? We really don’t spend enough time together.” She tilted her head up and whispered, “Sunny, you want to know a secret?”

The rope net bucked and shook. Silver Spoon trained her gaze on the filly above her, not below.

“What secret?” Sunny Daze’s eyes bounced from her bestie to her captive. She squinted hard, wrinkling her face. “…You don’t have a secret. You’re just trying to mess with me.”

Good. Keep her talking.

A month’s worth of blueprints, sketches, notes, and footnotes from the Project X binder flipped through Silver’s mind. Her eyes drifted over the network of tunnels, slides, and bridges beyond Sunny’s squinty face.

Maybe Silver ran like a snail in a tar pit, and maybe she didn’t know how Battletag worked, but she’d been practically living in this jungle gym before construction crew broke ground. She knew this structure better than almost anypony here.

The corners of Silver Spoon’s mouth quirked in a half smile. She shrugged. “Okay.”

Project X had only one rope net. It stretched from level two to the ground level, and sat right below them. That meant they stood on the southeast bridge, near the twisty slide. Silver traced the slide up a pole and to the left.

“I just thought you might want to know that Peachy Pie…” Silver shrugged again. “But you’re not interested, so it’s whatever. Doesn’t matter.”

So, the tunnel leading to the watchtower’s got a secret entrance right about… Her eyes landed on a rope handle embedded in the wall, about half a foot away from Sunny Daze. There.

Silver waited.

One second.

The rope net creaked under Peachy’s weight.
“…What’s your secret?” When Silver Spoon didn’t answer right away, Sunny’s whisper got high and squeaky, like a rubber duck crushed underwater. “C’mon, tell me!”

Silver’s tail waved gently over the bridge. “But I thought you didn’t want to know.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Well, alright, but…” Silver glanced at the bouncing rope at the edge of the bridge. “I can’t say it too loud, or it won’t be a secret anymore. Maybe I can whisper it in your ear?”

Sunny smirked—she really didn’t have the face for smirking, but it was a good try—and tightened her grip. “Nice try. I’m not letting you go that easy, Sneaky Spoon.”

*Slither Spoon’s still better.* “You don’t have to.” Her heart beat fast. The rope net had settled, and she could see brief orange flashes of Peachy’s mane through slits in the bridge. “I can reach from here if you lean down a little bit.”

Sunny’s neck leaned down.

“Little more.”

When the yellow ear came within whispering distance, Silver stretched to meet it halfway. Her muzzle brushed the tips of Sunny’s white mane. “Peachy Pie’s going to betray you. As soon as she gets on this bridge, she’ll tag you instead of me.”

The grip loosened. “You’re a liar. She’d never—”

“It’s Battletag, Sunny. You think that matters out here?” Silver placed a gentle understanding hoof on Sunny’s fetlock. “Think about it: who easier to tag than your best friend? You’d never even—”

Peachy Pie burst over the edge, blazing towards them.

“—see it coming!” In one smooth motion, Silver Spoon slipped out of Sunny’s grip.

Too quick to catch.

Too late to turn.

Peachy’s hoof bopped Sunny’s nose.

Before either of them turned around, the tip of Silver’s tail had slipped into the tunnel.

**“SILVER SPOOOOOOOOOOON!”** Outrage rocked Project X to its foundation.

Silver galloped up.

Little rubber grips lining the tunnel flew underhoof in a glow-in-the-dark blur. As much as she’d love to, there was no time to gloat. The second Sunny calmed down, she’d be out for blood.

She galloped up.

Blood roared in her ears.

She galloped up.
Her heaving breathing echoed in the tunnel.

A second set of hooves rumbled, and she felt it in the depths of her stomach.

She galloped up.

And up.

And up.

Silver’s head bumped the ceiling, face to face with a dead end. She’d found the end of the tunnel, but where was the door? Her hooves waved along the smooth walls, searching for a crack, a handle, a point of light in the dark.

Nothing.

“That’s a dirty, dirty trick, Silver!” The tunnel walls transformed Sunny’s wimpy little squeak into a deafening echo. “You’re gonna pay for that!”

Where was the door?!

“You’re gonna pay BIG!”

That stupid door had to be here somewhere!

The bright yellow of Sunny’s coat came fast through the darkness.

Silver yelped, huddled against the cold unfeeling tunnel walls.

So this is how it ends. Tagged in the dark, trapped like a snake in a pit. She closed her eyes and leaned against the dead-end. I guess I had a good run. Made class secretary, got some good teapots, scored good connections… Not that those connections meant anything at the business end of Battletag.

Hoofbeats thundered closer. Sunny’s eyes flashed blue in the dim light.

“So,” Silver sighed to herself, “that’s that.” Nothing left to do now but hold her head high and accept oblivion with the proper dignity of—

“Whoa!” Silver tumbled through the wall, head over hoof. She landed hard in a wide circular platform. Silver shook her tail out of her face, blinking against the brightness. A conal roof and the puffy clouds solidified through her blurred vision. The watchtower.

Sunny Daze exploded through the trap door.

Scrambling backwards, Silver yanked her tail from the opening. All four hooves hit the wood floor with a solid clack. “Base!”

“Sheesh, took ya long enough.” Scootaloo nodded and waved from her perch on the tower wall.

Diamond Tiara lounged below her, cleaning clumps of muddy grass out of her tiara. “Yeah, but still the third one to Base. Told you she’d make the first five.” She reached up with a grabby motion. A bag of jawbreakers dropped into her hoof. With every hoof too muddy to handle food, Diamond drew her lips back and grabbed a piece with her teeth.

Silver Spoon coughed. She wiped strings of sweaty tangled mane over her shoulders and shook the
sand off her flanks. Every step trembled.

Diamond rolled the jawbreaker in her mouth, watching her approach.

Silver Spoon collapsed. A clutch of rainbow orbs sparkled under her nose.

“Hi, Silvie.” Diamond’s hoof pushed the sparkling orbs pushed closer. “Jawbreaker?”

Silver spat out mud. “I. Hate. This. Game.”

After a moment, she took a candy. To Silver’s utmost annoyance, it was absolutely delicious.

Sunny Daze stomped out of the tunnel, eyes blazing and chest heaving with the great and terrible fury of the slighted tagger. “You won’t get away with this, Silver Spoon!” She crossed the watchtower, waving her little hoof at the sky. “You just wait—next time, me and Peachy are gonna tag you so hard you’ll wish you didn’t get tagged so hard! You’re gonna get so many dirt clods you’ll… um…”

“How to open a mud pie bakery?” offered Scootaloo. “Spit out worms for a month?”

“Yeah! Yeah, that! You better—” Sunny peered down the long slide spilling out of the watchtower, then back at Silver. “Hey, a little help?”

Silver Spoon rolled her eyes. “Fine.” Without getting up, she kicked Sunny down the slide.

“You better watch your back next time Silver Spoon! I’ll get you next tiiime! Wheeeeeeee!”

“…okay, then.” Silver gathered herself and turned to glare at Diamond Tiara. “I want an explanation.” She jabbed a hoof at the chaos outside. “You call this a ribbon-cutting ceremony?”

Diamond blinked at the herd of muddy foals thrown clear across the sand below. “I think they call that a roundhouse kick, actually. Good leg, Apple Bloom! And technically, this isn’t the ribbon ceremony.”

Scootaloo buzzed across the tower to sit by Silver. “Yeah, that was last week, remember? Twilight came to see it, and Cotton’s mom put the flag on top of the tower. I dunno how anypony could forget; that’s the same day Diamond thanked me and Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom for helping out with her cutie mark problem, and we felt so great about it we…” A rapturous grin split her face ear to ear.

Diamond and Silver exchanged knowing glances. This made the ninth time this week.

Before Silver could duck away, Scootaloo swung her rump in her face to show off the tri-colored shield that literally everypony and their dog’s fifth cousin had already seen by now. Her short tail flapped against Silver’s poll as she bounced. “And then we-we FINALLY GOT OUR—”

Silver shoved her off. “I know. I was there, thanks.”

If certain young ladies didn’t have decorum and felt exhausted from a schoolyard-wide sprint, certain young ladies would have firmly pointed out the rudeness of smushing butts into faces.

_Celestia’s Summer, I didn’t get this obnoxious when I got my cutie mark, did I?_ If so, Silver owed a lot of ponies an apology.

Diamond leaned over the edge of the tower wall, grinning at the chaos she’d wrought. “Think of it as Ribbon Cutting Part Two. Or a Project X warming party.”
She gestured across the battle-torn playground where Twist currently held off a small army of jocks on the merry-go-round. Truffle sheltered beneath her, supplying artillery from an honor student’s ransom of mud balls, dirt clods, and sod grenades.

Somepony who may or may not have been Sweetie Belle sailed past the window, trailing arcs of dust behind her. She waved at them.

Diamond waved back. “I mean, what better way to warm up a new playground than to, like, play on it?”

“And we haven’t had schoolwide Battletag since I don’t even know when!” Scootaloo spat out a (baby?) tooth with a satisfied sigh.

Diamond thought about it. “Uh… two years, maybe two and a half? That’s the game that got Cheerilee to ban it after Truffle got stitches and tattled on everypony.”

“Right, ‘cause back then nopony had their…” Scootaloo’s eyes got soft and gooey again. Her face melted into another besotted sigh. “…cutie marks…”

Meaning that the last game happened before Silver’s time, though she’d heard plenty of stories. Mostly horror stories from Truffle Shuffle himself.

“Wait, did you say ‘banned’?” Silver Spoon clutched her pearls. “We’re playing an illegal game?!”

Diamond waved her off. “When the president does it, it’s not illegal.”

Treasurer Tiara motioned to the east slide, where President Pipsqueak rode headlong into victory, tagging Featherweight on his way down and laughing like a supervillain.

“Besides, the student council voted on it, and Twist says that means it’s an official student government sanctioned activity.” A rainbow of jawbreakers dripped in Diamond’s grin. “Totally legal.”

“What vote? When?” Though exhausted, Silver found the strength to draw herself up in a huff. “I never voted on this.”

“Yeah, but you would have voted no, right? Right. And Truffle also would have voted no and told Miss Cheerilee, so we motioned to vote without you, and it passed three to two.” All the gunk had been cleaned out of the tiara tiers, though the steel badly needed a shine. Diamond frowned at it, shrugged, and placed it back on her head. “Even if one of you voted in favor, it’s a majority vote no matter what.”

Silver Spoon clutched her pearls. “You made me an accessory to hooliganism!”

Scootaloo lifted an eyebrow. “Is she always like this?”

“Pretty much,” Diamond said.

There could be nothing done about it now. And Silver had to admit her classmates did seem to approve of the council’s decision. “You could have at least warned me it was coming.”

“We did!” Scootaloo crossed her forelegs. “What’d you think ‘one-two-three-not-It’ meant?”

“I don’t know! I never even heard of regular tag before I came to this school! I still don’t know how it works; I just ran when you told me to and tried not to get hit.”
Diamond Tiara and Scootaloo blinked in synch. They looked at each other, then at Silver.

“Uh, yeah? That’s pretty much it.” Scootaloo laughed. “It’s tag, it’s not that complicated. There’s no real rules to it or anything.”

Silver rubbed a raw spot on her chest. She must have scraped it in the bush or in the chase up to the watchtower. “Yeah. That’s what’s so complicated about it.”

How could Battletag even count as a game without any rules? That didn’t make any sense at all.

She flicked an ear in thought. *Run for Base. No tag backs.*

And it also wasn’t true.

Battletag did have rules, but from a list that everypony memorized years ago and never wrote down. A game you learned on the fly, and if you weren’t a quick study, have fun with the sod grenades and good luck being It. (Silver Spoon still had no idea how many foals could be It at once; it apparently range between one and… everyone.)

No nets, safety or otherwise. No balls, no rackets, no referees, no scoring system, no teams. Alliances perhaps, but they could break in a blink and had to be judged by the millisecond. The few rules Battletag had stood vaguely at best and liable to change with the wind.

The game had no real structure whatsoever, and in the end, nopony really won or lost, so what was even the point?

“How do you know when Battletag’s over, anyway?”

“When nopony’s playing anymore, I guess.” Scootaloo buzzed up to the roof with both hooves cupped over her mouth. “Go get her, Apple Bloom! Smash her like a berry in your potion grinding thingy!”

Shots of lime green magic ricocheted off the base of Project X. Two-thirds of the Cutie Mark Crusaders had fanned out to chase down Berry Pinch, with Bloom quick on the unicorn’s flank and Sweetie Belle veering starboard to cut her off at the rock wall.

Pinch rolled under Bloom’s tackle, kicked her into the sand, and ran up the slide, hooves scrambling on the slick metal. Her pursuers tried to follow, but every time they touched the slide, Pinch shot sparks of magic at their hooves.

Silver Spoon curled on the floorboards, watching Diamond whistle her support—for whom, Silver didn’t know—and stared at the mud on her friend’s hooves. Dirt caked on grass speckled in mud dusted in sand to form thick socks of earth that stretched from hoof to stifle. Spare streaks of pink shot through the browns, blacks and greens in her coat and mane and tail. Diamond’s eyes and the shining tiara on her head were the only things untouched.

With seven solid months of dressage training every year, no wonder Diamond got to Base first. The eight-time national pageant champion—a record for an earth pony, Diamond once said—was more earth than pony at this point. Every first prize had its price, and this was Battletag’s.

Silver wondered what else Diamond had done to get here first. Had it been a blind charge straight for Project X, or a rapid-fire montage of betrayals, violence, and psyche-outs? If so, would anypony remember what she’d done by next Monday? Would they care?

In fact, would any of this battlefield drama follow them into the classroom? Did everypony just brush
it off with the dirt after the game, or would Silver Spoon have to rewrite all her alignment charts?

For the first time since that first week in town, Silver had no clue what Ponyville Schoolhouse had in store for her. She curled her tail around her hooves to hide her ruined designer horseshoes. “I seriously hate this game.”

Diamond glanced down at her, filthy mane flying free in the breeze. “Why?”

Silver volleyed a flat stare. 

“No, seriously, why?” Gently, Diamond pulled Silver to her hooves and turned her toward the schoolyard.

“I mean, I know it’s loud and dirty, but you see stuff in Battletag you’re never gonna see anywhere else. It’s the great equalizer: everypony gets to play, so nopony gets left out.” She pointed to the sandbox. “Look: Twist and Truffle have half the class on the ropes, and Rumble’s flying for his life. Rumble. Running from Twist!”

Scootaloo’s head swung upside-down from the roof. “Right? When else are you going to see something that cool?”

“It’s an awesome way to de-stress. Think of it like a super intense mud bath.” Diamond tried not to laugh at Silver’s disgusted expression. “Okay, bad example. It’s… a chance to try being somepony else for a little while. Like Nightmare Night without the costumes.”

Scootaloo nodded. “Yeah, and besides, you’re pretty good at it for a filly who never played before. You didn’t get tagged once!”

“Forget getting tagged, she didn’t even get mud pied or dirt bombed.” Diamond pulled Silver into a side hug and winked. “Like Silvie’s gonna let a little thing like grenades mess up her coat. You still look like a trillion bits.”

Silver looked. “Feels more like half a million to me.”

“Hey, half a million bits still buys a four-star airship. Oh, and Scootaloo, did you see how she slipped out of Sunny and Peachy’s trap on the bridge? She didn’t even break a sweat!”

“No, but I sure heard it.” Scootaloo snickered. “Peachy Pie screamed so long I thought she was gonna pass out. I bet they heard her all the way in Canterlot.”

“Or Manehattan.” Diamond mimed drinking a teacup. “I bet Silvie’s old friends are all like, ‘I say, it sounds as if our dearest Silver Spoon’s caused somepony the utmost of misfortunes’.”

Silver smiled at that, though not for long.

Diamond Tiara sighed. “Okay, I’m sorry the student council shut you out of the vote. I didn’t think it’d bug you this much.”

“It doesn’t.” Backdoor deals came with the political package. She may as well complain about grass in her garden salad.

“I just wish I knew it was coming so I could like…” Silver’s back pressed against the wall, her tail twitching at her hooves. “Prepare or something.”

In one smooth sweep, Scootaloo flipped off the roof and into the watchtower. “That’s dumb. I told
you, Silver Spoon, you don’t prepare for tag, it just happens.”

Silver lashed her tail with a snort. As if that explains a single bit of it.

Scootaloo’s wings flapped at her sides. “What is your problem?” She looked Silver up and down as if she could find and snap the stick up her butt. “Nothing even happened to you. You didn’t get hurt, barely got dirty, and got to Base without getting tagged in your first game ever. So what if you’re not ten steps ahead of everypony for once? That’s how the game works.”

“Maybe,” said Silver, “but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“But it’s fun! Don’t you like fun?”

“It’s not fun for me, Scootaloo!” Silver stomped and turned away. “It’s loud and dirty and too noisy and everything’s happening on top of everything else, and I never know what’s happening, and…”

Silver Spoon pulled her tail close and sniffed. In the corner of her eye, the schoolyard teemed with dozens of foals: filthy, screaming, bruised, bleeding, scarred, and having the time of their lives.

“And I’m the only one it bothers.” After months perched on the pulse of Ponyville Schoolhouse, Silver couldn’t even find the vein. “Everything’s weird and different now.”

Diamond glanced at the slide, where Berry Pinch still fought her way upwards. “Yeah, but it’ll be back to normal tomorrow.” She twitched her ears in thought, then turned back to Silver. “…You’re not talking about Battletag anymore, are you?”

“You said it’ll be back to normal tomorrow, but, like…” She shook her head, trying and failing for the right words. “I mean… what even IS normal anymore?”

Diamond Tiara looked around the watchtower. She shrugged.

Silver bent her head, embarrassed with herself. This was ridiculous. Things had changed, but almost entirely for the better. No drama with the Crusaders looming on the horizon, no hurricane watches, no damage control to plan. No political battles. No struggles for trophies, honor, or justice. Now what?

Project X opened to enormous success. The next project on the Council docket was the bake sale in spring, but that wouldn’t be for three months, and Silver and Truffle could do that in their sleep.

“When does this year’s pageant season start?”

Diamond’s ears pricked high. She stared a moment, her expression unreadable. “Officially? The first week of March… the third, I think? The Running of the Leaves is in a couple days, so I should start training in three or four weeks. I think. I still need to get my schedule together and stuff.”

“That makes sense,” Silver thought aloud. Normally, the pageant cycle would have been locked in well before now, but all the election stuff probably threw it off.

Diamond nodded with a small smile. “Mom’s gonna help me plan a yearlong routine set when she comes down for Hearth’s Warming—oh, and did I tell you? Apple Bloom says I can use their rodeo paddock to practice my jumps. I really need to work on those; I’m entering the older divisions this year, and they’ve got a lot more jumping courses. Applejack’s going to help me train since there’s not that much work to do in winter.”

Scootaloo, who’d barely been listening, flipped around. “Applejack knows beauty pageant
jumping?”

“No, but she’s got blue ribbons for rodeo jumping. It’s not the same thing as dressage, but the fences are the same height. Coach says a jump’s a jump; it’s just the journey to it that’s different.”

Suddenly restless, Diamond hopped to her hooves and paced the watchtower, still watching Berry Pinch’s epic journey up the slide. “Plus, Dad will relax if I’ve got an extra trainer living nearby.” She pawed the floor with her cracked hoof. “He gets kinda weird about my jumps, sometimes.”

“Oh, I see,” Silver said. “That’s good—uh, the extra training I mean. Not the part about your Dad being weird.”

“It’s okay, I know what you meant.”

“Okay.” Silver rubbed the back of her neck. “So, um. Guess you’ve got all the help you need to get ready, then.”

“Yeah. Unless… unless you want to help, too.” Diamond stopped pacing. “Do you want to?” She glanced over her shoulder, not quite looking Silver Spoon in the eye. “I didn’t know if you would after… you know.”

A panting Berry Pinch flopped into the watchtower. “After you decided to be the biggest butt trumpet in the universe every time you competed for anything, ever?”

Diamond sat down again, studying her hooves. “Yeah, that.”

The unicorn barreled past her and smacked the center pole with both hooves. “BASE! Eat it, suckers! Third one here and not even a scrat—”

“Excuse me?” Silver Spoon waved. “Fourth one here.”

Berry Pinch boggled. “What?” She blinked a few more times. When Silver didn’t magically evaporate, Pinch crowed in disbelief. “What?! Ha-ha, how’d YOU get here so fast, Silver Snob? Did you get an escort or pay a taxi?”

Silver swept her tail with a flourish. “Natural talent.”

Diamond Tiara stepped up, patting Silver between the withers. “That’s right! She got here all on her own. Not bad for a first timer, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Pinch kept eye contact with Diamond all of two seconds. She tossed a nod to Silver Spoon. “Guess you finally got your Ponyville stripes, huh?”

Silver nodded back. “Guess so.”

“Cool, cool.” Berry Pinch clicked her tongue, pointedly looking in any direction besides Diamond’s. “Me and The Dink said we’d explore the underground section, and I wanna find the epicenter before she does. See you, Scoots. Later, Silver.”

Scootaloo and Silver Spoon both waved.

Diamond waved, too. “Bye, Pinch.”

Berry Pinch flicked an ear. “Yeah, bye.” She held her nose and fell backwards down the slide.

Diamond watched until the unicorn hit the sand pit at the bottom. “I think I know what you mean
about the new normal, Silver.” Her ears drooped.

Scootaloo sat beside her and offered a wing pat. “Yeah, but every day’s kind of like a new normal—
that’s what my aunts say. It’s like an adventure.”

The east wall of the watchtower shook on impact. A hoard of wiggling hooves erupted from the
tunnel, grasping for purchase on the slick wood floor. No telling how many foals had crammed in
there—no less than four—but Silver thought she recognized Apple Bloom’s bow and
Featherweight’s dinnerplate ears within the writhing knot of mud.

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon exchanged glances, then turned back towards Scootaloo.

After a moment, the gloom faded from Diamond’s face. “Yeah. That’s a good way to put it.” She
smiled.

Silver didn’t. “Yeah...”

Somepony broke from the traffic jam to hit the wall and officially declare Base. Filth coated the foal
head to hoof, their voice so raw from screaming it’d become unrecognizable. Silver watched the
pony, searching for a familiar mane style or body type, maybe a telltale accessory. She found
nothing.

“Yeah,” Silver said again. Her gaze lifted from the mystery foal over the watchtower wall, to the
wide expanse of the playground and Ponyville beyond. “I guess so.”
The sword whipped through the air, inches from Silver Spoon’s haunch. She danced several steps back and to the side, eyes trained on the stallion looming over her. Her own sword—actually, did foils still count as swords?—wobbled in her teeth, springy and practically useless in the mouth of an amateur. At least she hadn’t dropped it this time.

Slowly, the stallion circled her. Clouds of breath puffed through the mesh of his mask as he stared her down: unreadable, expressionless, and unrelenting. He stood a head taller than her, dressed in jet black from head to hoof. Sunshine through the open window threw his shadow across the tile floor, rolling over Silver’s shoulders when she ducked him a second time.

The bright green dot of the rubber foil tip thrusted for her. Silver Spoon pulled back and tried not to look at it. Instead, she focused on his hooves. *Don’t see where he is.* The stallion came for her once more, smooth and effortless on the tile as a duck upon the water. *See where he’s going to be.*

In a pale pathetic imitation of his hoofwork, Silver stumbled and clacked over the tile. Her teeth dug into the soft handle of her foil. She couldn’t keep this up forever. Even if he didn’t catch her—and he only hadn’t caught her by sheer luck—he’d outlast her without a sweat.

There had to be an opening someplace.

The stallion in black shifted his weight, neck arced low to strike. Back hooves planted. Left leg curling upward and rising. There.

She let him come and swung her neck up hard. Steel struck steel.

The stallion in black paused and stepped back. His grey ears pricked high, twitching with interest. After a moment, he bowed his head and sheathed his sword. “Excellent parry, Brightness.”

Silver Spoon shook her braid free, removing her mask. “Thank you, Father. Are we taking a break, or are we finished already?” She searched the gym for a clock before remembering it didn’t have one. After the fifth time of being scolded for checking the time instead of her hoofwork, Father had moved it to the outdoor patio.

“Hm. Done for today, I think.” Father nodded to Tacks, who magicked both their foils away for storage. “We can resume tomorrow. I’ve other matters to attend to this morning. Brass Tacks, is my travel desk ready?”

“Prepared and waiting, sir.” Brass Tacks bent to Silver Spoon. “Young Miss Silver, you are awaited downstairs.”

Silver’s fencing uniform came away in a satisfying snap of buttons. She rolled her withers, savoring the chilled air on her coat. “Downstairs? But I thought I wasn’t allowed in the base—” She blinked at the gym’s porthole window overlooking the stairs and banister. “Oh, right.”

Two weeks into fencing practice, she’d gotten used to blades in her face and masks strapped behind her ears, but somehow hadn’t come around to the concept of a second level to the Silvers’ house.

Opening the door, Silver Spoon peered down the hallway. A rug rolled past the doors and down the
stairs in a shock of indigo and gold. Sconces flickered along the walls, illuminating the tasteful wood paneling. Nothing more.

She’d once overheard Mother describe the upstairs decor to Rarity as “minimalist” and “concise”, which sounded much nicer than “barren” and “lonely”. Traveling from the lavishly furnished main hall downstairs to the thin hall upstairs might as well have been a trip from the jungle to the desert.

From a functional standpoint, the décor made sense. The scant rooms up here consisted of the gym, Father’s office, a small library, and Mother’s specialized acoustic-friendly practice room. A space for work, study, and training. Before now, Silver Spoon had no reason to come up here at all; all of her work could be done in her own room.

Exploring a brand new section of the house she thought she’d known for years ought to have felt exciting. It should have felt like an immense rite of passage that came with the package of a noble family fencing tradition. And it did… to an extent.

Silver Spoon examined her reflection in the gym’s porthole window; her withers rose well above the windowsill. However, she hadn’t expected the upstairs to feel so small.

A remarkable side effect of the natural transition from a Young Miss to a Young Lady to simply a Lady, in Silver’s opinion, was the constant resizing of things. Over the years, she’d become accustomed to sizing up from dresses, shoes, and saddlebags as she grew taller, and the fattening of books, schedules, and workloads as she grew older. Accustomed, yes, but it never ceased to fascinate her.

It felt as if bookshelves and wardrobes expanded or shrank with the seasons, but of course, the truth was quite the opposite. A dress today would be the same dress tomorrow, next week, or five years from now. But last year’s Silver Spoon didn’t have the same withers, legs, or barrel as this year’s Silver Spoon. The different—yet not all that different at all—filly required different dresses.

And all this without even getting into the matter of shifting tastes. Last year’s Silver Spoon would have fainted at the thought of plaid, yet the purple tartan scarf Sweetie Belle gave her after the Crusaders’ cuteceañera was the highlight of Silver’s new winter wardrobe.

She’d become used to resizing clothes, but as long as she would live, Silver Spoon didn’t think she’d ever get used to the resizing of entire buildings. The upstairs hall shrank before she’d even gotten the chance to meet it: a lonely place, cramped and immense, vast and unexplored with no leg room to spare.

It was all very strange, and Silver wished she knew what to make of it.

“Hey, Silvie!” Diamond Tiara’s voice bounced up from the foyer, amplified by the tall ceiling. “Are you gonna stare at your reflection all day? Your hair’s fine, come on down!”

Blinking, Silver snapped out of her trance and made for the stairs. “Hello, Di. Hold on, I’ll be right there.”

She considered pointing out that young ladies shouldn’t shout indoors. Then again, young ladies shouldn’t spend five minutes idling in front of a window when they had guests waiting, either.

They met at the bottom of the stairs and hoofbumped. “If I knew you’d be coming, I would have put the kettle on.” Silver motioned towards the kitchen. “I can still get your blend started if you want.”

A peaceful brunch tea would be a fantastic way to cap off the morning and start what would be a promising afternoon, judging by Diamond Tiara’s dropping by unannounced. Perhaps she’d grasped
onto a new project, or discovered a social catastrophe she needed Silver’s expert advice on. Or maybe Diamond didn’t have anything better to do today and just wanted to hang out. All good by Silver’s count.

Instead, Diamond shook her head. “No, thanks.” She shrugged apologetically at Silver’s disappointment. “Sorry, I’m just dropping in real quick. Hi, Brass Tacks.”

Tacks nodded to her on his way back upstairs, his mouth full with Father’s attaché case and his horn levitating a stack of office supplies.

The two fillies slipped into their usual synchronized canter on the way to Silver’s room. On the way, Silver tilted her head up to see Father’s open office upstairs, where papers shuffled and hooves trotted about excitedly. It sounded like a deal had gone through.

Diamond entered first, dropping her saddlebag before she sat. “Truffle Shuffle wanted me to drop off the ideas for the spring fundraiser. I meant to do it last week, but then the Crusaders had that giant all-day cuteceañera, and then Battletag… well, it’s Battletag.”

A notebook coated in a rainbow of pastel sticky notes plopped open upon the tea table. Suggestions from the student body included but were not limited to: a student-led skill-sharing program to help blank flanks discover cutie marks, “Fancy Bake Sale Part Two: Eclectic Rendezvous,” a demolition derby, a historical reenactment of the first Grand Equestria Summit, and a ten-part seminar/lecture/stunt-flying demo/scooter relay quantifying the many accomplishments of “Rainbow ‘Danger’ Dash: Awesomest Wonderbolt Reserve Ever Ever.”

To Silver Spoon’s alarm, that last one already had four votes tallied.

Diamond Tiara stood and watched while Silver spread notebook pages across the table in a broad-strokes arrangement of likely candidates. “You know that the thing—whatever it is—isn’t happening for like, four more months, right?”

“Yeah, but we’re still voting on it in three weeks. We’ll need extra time depending on what wins.”

Silver frowned at the extensive notes for the music festival. The festival wasn’t even a student function; this was just an effort to bring a celebrity to a Ponyville event already in the making. Did that even count as fundraising? Either way, it already had twelve tallies—the winner so far—from the straw poll. Her frown deepened. She’d only passing knowledge of Countess Coloratura from Diamond’s pageant playlist, but Silver knew for sure that an A-lister would be tough to book.

“I guess so.” Diamond pawed the soft rug, examining Silver’s doll collection, the bookshelf, the new velvet bedspread, and the armoire saturated with tea sets. “You’ve got a really nice room. I don’t think I ever told you that.” She grinned, breathing in the scent of roses and tea leaves. “It’s like… calm and stuff.”

“Thanks.” Silver admired the blue filigree wallpaper that bordered the room. Two years on, the splash of color still tied the room together. It is pretty nice, isn’t it?

“And I’ll bet nopony cleans it up for you—even though it doesn’t need to be cleaned because you’ve got a system—and moves all your stuff where you can’t find it, either.” Diamond wrinkled her mouth like she’d bitten into a hunk of rotten cheese.

Silver Spoon leaned forward. She smelled storm clouds forming. “You feeling alright, Diamond Tiara?”

She nodded without enthusiasm. Diamond’s ears worked in a shiftless twitch, quietly working out
something to herself while her eyes traced the blue filigree down to the fish tank to watch Ferdinand.

Behind the betta’s fins, little flashes of red, blue, violet, and silver zipped and bounced within the walls of the underwater castle and weaved through the jungle of plants. It looked as if Ferdinand was swimming through one of Miss Vinyl’s loud glowstick parties.

One of the neon flashes stopped to nibble a stray food flake, long enough for Diamond to get a good look. “Oh, hey!” she called in an eager change of subject. “You got new fish!”

Now that she knew what to look for, Diamond Tiara grinned and searched the tank more flashing scales in the water. Her brows lifted as she followed the tetras schooling through the castle to the suckerfish eating algae in a quiet corner of the tank. Above it all, a tiny frog dozed on a lily pad.

“You got lots of new fish! There’s…” She did a quick headcount. “Twenty… six? Wait, there’s a snail in the rocks. Twenty-seven.” The grin faded. “Wow, you got almost thirty new fish. It really has been a while since I’ve been in your room. Or I was too full of myself to notice…”

Silver stopped her with a hoof. “What’s passed has passed. Don’t beat yourself up over it. You had a lot going on; we both did.”

“Maybe, but that’s no exc—”

“Yes,” said Silver Spoon, “it is. I got most of these fish the weekend after election day; we weren’t even speaking then. The rest got here a couple days ago. Also, I think you counted some reflections, because it’s twenty, not counting Ferdinand. Hi, Ferdinand!”

Ferdinand paused his swim through the reeds to peer back at them. He fluttered his tail fin to match Diamond’s wave hello.

“Miss Fluttershy said he seemed lonely, so I got him some friends.”

After swimming solo in a forty gallon tank for so long, Silver had worried the influx of new fish might upset Ferdinand. The week they arrived, she’d rushed home every day after school to check on them. What if Fluttershy made a mistake and he’d started a fight with the tetras, or the frog bit his fin?

“I think the new company startled him at first. He’s never seen so many fish before, but—oh, here come the minnows!” Silver waved to Figaro, Pagliacci, Carmen, and Don Jose as they threaded the sunken ship. “He got used to it, though, and I think he actually likes it better this way. It’s no fun being alone all the time.”

Diamond Tiara bunched her shoulders, staring out the bedroom window. On the other side of the fence, Randolph stood watching the house. Noticing Diamond, he pulled a pocket watch from his waistcoat with a meaningful nod. She turned back to the table. “No, it’s not.”

Silver tilted her ears forward with a frown. “Diamond, are you sure you’re feeling—”

“I said yes, didn’t I? Why does everypony need to be so nosy about how I’m feeling all the time?” Diamond shoved hard off the table and lumbered out of the room, saddlebag half-detached and dragging behind her.

She didn’t look back when Silver Spoon followed, though she did grind her teeth. “I thought I told you I don’t need a handler and I don’t need you holding my hoof. I’m fine. Everything’s good now:
“we’re friends again, the school doesn’t hate me, it’s fine.”

Silver Spoon adjusted her glasses and, with effort, held her tongue.

“Why does everypony have to keep picking at stuff?” One blue eye glowered over Diamond’s shoulders, daring somepony to say another word. Her hooves left shallow imprints in the hallway rug. “All I want to do is get ready for pageant season, write a Hearth’s Warming list, and hang out with my friends. I don’t think that’s asking a lot!”

Alright, that tore it. Silver stepped in Diamond’s path. “Hey, all I did was ask a question. If you were really fine as you say you are, you wouldn’t bite my head off for asking, either.”

Diamond flattened her ears, shifting to the side.

Silver followed without breaking the stare. “Something’s going on with you, and crazy me, I thought that maybe you could trust me enough to tell me what’s going on.” She drew her head up, jaw tight. “You want a friend, not a yes-mare? Newsflash, Di: being concerned is what friends do. Bare minimum, you could respect me enough not to totally brush me off.”

“It’s not that!” Diamond Tiara flinched at the echo of her own voice.

The anger ebbed, and in the grand hall of Silver portraits, Diamond dwindled to a small size. The same size the filly had always been; the same size they’d both always been. Silver Spoon wished the scale of this house would make up its mind already.

“Can you keep a secret?” Diamond’s eyes trailed upward to the balcony, where Brass Tacks and Father spoke quietly outside his office. Neither indicated they’d heard Diamond’s outburst, but both fillies knew better.

The wall pressed against Diamond’s side. “I mean, it’s really secret,” she whispered. “Nopony can know. No. Pony.” She shot another glance at the balcony. “At all.”

“Oh.” Silver Spoon blinked. “O-of course.”

“I want your word.”

“Then you’ve got my word, Diamond Tiara.” The weight of the pact sat heavy. She’d never outright sworn to keep something from the family before. What did I just get myself into?

“Well, the secret was safe; Silver couldn’t leak it if she tried. Note to self: find ‘paradigm’ in the dictionary tonight. “Oh. Uh.” She blinked. “Is... that... good?”

“Maybe?” Diamond scratched the back of her neck. “We’re... seeing somepony. Like a doctor, but for your head. To help you work out emotions ‘n’ stuff or whatever.”

Silver Spoon brightened. “Ohh! You mean a thera—”

Diamond clamped both hooves over Silver’s mouth. “What part of secret don’t you get?”

“Sorry. Why is it such a big secret, though? It’s just talking about your problems with somepony, right? Isn’t that what Princess Twilight does when ponies have a friendship problem? Or what the
Crusaders do when they’re not busy breaking stuff?” Joining Diamond by the wall, Silver leaned back to peer up at the portrait of Silver Lining. “After Tirek happened, my cousin had to see a doctor to help his nightmares go away. That’s what doctors are supposed to do, right? They help you.”

Rising to her hooves, Diamond walked to the front door. “I guess, but my parents still said nopony but us is supposed to know. It’s nopony’s business but family’s.” She gestured toward the silhouette still waiting outside by the fence. “But if we can tell Randolph, I think you’re fine to tell too.” Idly feeling at the doorknob, Di averted her eyes. “‘Cause you’re like… you know.”

Silver smirked. “A butler?”

Diamond’s tail smacked Silver’s shoulder. “Like family, you snot.”

“Snot?” Silver gasped and clutched her chest in mock hurt. “This is how you treat family?”

“Sure. Why do you think we need a therapist?” Diamond glanced back before opening the door. “Seriously, though: you spill the beans, and I’m telling the whole school you still sleep with dolls.”

“Lady Mimic is not a doll! She’s an educational historical reenactment tool. That also happens to be good for hugs.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, Silvie.”

Diamond got a few steps down the brick walkway before she stopped and signaled Randolph to wait another second. From the butler’s expression, he’d been waiting several seconds too many already. “Before I forget again, Cheerilee says we’ve got a newbie coming during winter vacation. She wants to know if you can show her the ropes before school starts again.”

Grabbing her yellow tartan scarf, Silver followed Diamond outside. “Sure, but isn’t that the president’s job?”

Twist had spearheaded the proposal for new student orientations after that bumper crop of ponies moved in at the start of the school year. It had been her last big act as Student Pony President, and in Silver’s opinion, her best one.

However, it was also a job tailored for the president, being the official representative of all the students. Whoever won the presidency already had charm and charisma—no other way to win popularity contests—so they’d be the logical choice to charm a newbie.

Silver Spoon knew how to maintain a solid popularity base, but she was and always had been an A-minus-lister: well known, well liked, rarely well loved. Not the worst choice for a first impression by any means, but Pip, or Diamond. or even Truffle would be a far better choice to represent the schoolhouse. So why her?

Silver lifted an eyebrow, fishing for the catch.

“She’s one of yours. A former Wisterian.”

The other eyebrow went up. “I see.” A thousand speculations fired off at once, but Silver filed them away for when she’d need them. “I’ll do my best to represent us, then.”

Diamond Tiara met Randolph at the fence like a mare condemned. “I know you will. See you, Silvie.”

“I could walk with you to the house if you want?”
Diamond turned to Randolph, who didn’t show signs of disagreement. “That’d be nice.”

Ponyville skimmed the razor’s edge of winter, and the wind whistled sharp and sheer to prove it. Leaves carpeted the ground in a solid block of reds, golds, and browns. They only found the road thanks to the trail of powdered foliage trampled by countless hooves.

As they crested a hill, Silver traced the crushed leaves’ path down into the lower valley, where a great herd of ponies thundered through the woodland. The tree branches trembled in their wake, freshly naked and spindly against the blue sky. Echoes of a microphone narrated the Running of the Leaves, but the balloon floated too far away for Silver to make out the words.

Diamond watched the race with interest, stretching her neck around to find the front of the race. “My mom won that, you know.” Her smile rang bittersweet. “Five years in a row. The medals are still in the War Room.”

“That’s impressive,” Silver told her, because she couldn’t think of anything better to say. She stopped to consider the ponies who lived here: farmers, tillers, and cloud shepherds. Ponies with real muscle under their coats. “That’s really impressive, actually.”

“Naturally. It is my mom, after all. No losers in my family.” Diamond grinned, but it faded as the roof of the Rich mansion breached the horizon.

Diamond grew still and solemn. She stayed quiet for a moment. Then, “Did I ever tell you how I got my cutie mark, Silver Spoon?”

“Sure, you—”

Actually...

Silver frowned. “Well, you told me you got it onstage at the nationals in Applewood. It helped you win that, right?” She nosed the tiara higher on her friend’s head.

“Yeah.” Smiling, Di brushed her hoof over the little steel spires. “I figured that since it helped me win, my special talent must have been winning. It all added up: winning makes me happy. Winning’s what I’m good at. It’s always been what I’m good at. Now I had solid proof, not just in the War Room, but on my flank so everypony who saw me would know. So I’d never forget how good I was, even when I got all dumb and weird and scared and started doubting myself.”

The Running of the Leaves crossed the bridge over the river. Dozens of silhouettes massed together in a long stretch of writhing shadow, barely visible against the shining ribbon of water. Diamond watched them with her tail pulled close. “And then, I came home and did nothing but lose. I lost to ponies who weren’t even committed to winning—ponies that barely even tried. I didn’t get it.”

Tresses of white and lavender curtained Diamond Tiara’s face as she bent her head. “I still don’t get it.” She chewed her bottom lip, and wouldn’t look at Silver Spoon when she brushed her mane back. Diamond swallowed hard and tried to laugh. “My talent’s not winning, though. I know that much.”

Silver Spoon wanted to reassure her, to find the right thing to say. But she hadn’t known the right words before, and she didn’t know them now. At best, she could only offer a watered-down “you’re still great” or “winning’s not everything.” Empty platitudes and quick fixes that fixed nothing.

Silver knew better than to insult Diamond Tiara with pity or participation trophies. Instead, she opened her hooves and pulled her friend into a hug.

Di let her. Her withers went slack, leaning against Silver Spoon’s weight. She stayed there.
“So…” Silver’s quiet voice ruffled Diamond’s mane. “If winning’s not your special talent, what is?”

“It’s like you said, Silvie: I got it in the last round, not when I won. I forgot about that part. The last round’s the Q-and-A section, and I’m usually awesome at that category, but Royal Ribbon was on the judge’s panel that day, and she’s never liked me much. Then I remembered a hint Coach Razzle told me that morning: Ribbon likes sincerity.”

Diamond brushed her mane back and drew from Silver’s hug, though she kept Silver’s hoof around her withers. “I stood up there under the spotlight staring out into the dark. I saw Royal Ribbon and the rest of the judges. I saw the hundreds of ponies who’d come from all across Equestria to watch the finals, and I wondered how many of them came out here to watch somepony they loved. How disappointed they’d be when their filly lost… I mean, one winner, twenty-nine losers, right? I’d never thought about that before.”

Echoes of the announcer’s loudspeaker bounced over the hills, ghostly and indecipherable. The Running of the Leaves competitors vanished into the thick of the woods. A steady stream of dead leaves winding through the trees marked their course.

“But then I looked at the rows up front, and there I saw them: Golden Glitter and Filthy Rich, sitting together. They weren’t looking at each other and they didn’t talk, but there they were, together and not fighting. And I knew I might never see them like that again.” Diamond’s ears twitched when the breeze brushed against them, but aside from that, she stayed perfectly still. Almost as if she felt frightened of what might happen when she moved. “So when Royal Ribbon asked me what I’d do to help Equestria if I were princess for real—not just a pageant winner—I thought about it. And then I told the truth.”

“And?” asked Silver Spoon. “What did you say?”

“I, uh…” Diamond rubbed her foreleg. “I actually don’t remember a lot of the details; it went on a little long. I talked about all the ponies I saw in the crowd, and how they all wanted the same things I wanted: to be happy and proud of each other. If I had the power to help them get what they wanted, I’d do it. So we could all, like, not be miserable and fight each other anymore.”

Diamond flicked her tail with a shrug. “It sounded a lot better at the time. Maybe because I cried a little bit? That usually helps.” She shrugged again. “Anyway, what I said doesn’t matter—like, I meant it, and all—but it doesn’t really matter, since the speech did what it was supposed to do ‘cause when I looked into the audience again… You know how ponies can sit next to each other, but it’s like they’re sitting on the other side of the world?”

Silver nodded.

A faded smile crept along Diamond’s muzzle. It grew. “My parents weren’t sitting that way anymore. They still didn’t love or even like each other, but for a little while, they agreed on something: I did good, and they were proud of me. That’s all I wanted.” She nodded to the blue crown on her flank. “Like I said, Silver Spoon, I get ponies to do what I want. Even if they don’t do it for very long.”

“Sounds like you really earned it.” Silver smiled at Diamond’s mark, then at the tiara upon her head. The early winter light skimmed through diamonds and battered steel, tossing light refractions over Silver’s hooves. “It suits you,” she told her. “You make this thing look good.”

Diamond gave a confident flick of her mane. “I know. Thanks anyway, though.” She gestured toward the house, where Mr. and Mrs. Rich waited by the window. “Anyway, I’d better get going before I’m later than I already am.”
“Okay. See you around after it’s over? You’d be right on time for late-afternoon tea.” Silver smiled at Diamond’s nod. “Father’s taking me to get some new tea from Zecora today; you can try my new blend. Or would the usual be better?”

Diamond Tiara smiled back. Not quite a grin or a salesmare’s flash of teeth, but something small and honest. It suited her more than the tiara did. “Surprise me. You know what I like.”

“Without further ado, it is my privilege and honor to present to you the future Ponyville Museum of Royal Art and Antiquity!” With a grand flourish of his hat, Father stepped back to reveal… a crumbling stack of mold and mossy stones in the forest.

When Silver Spoon peered closely, she could see where it used to be a building before parts of the roof caved in and the forest overtook the walls. And the floor. And… everything, really. At a glance, she couldn’t tell where the outside ended and the inside began. They’d come through a set of double doors, so she presumed they were inside. Silver stepped through a patch of grass, shivering from the draft and squinting in the sunlight pouring down from the dilapidated roof.

“Well?” Father rubbed his forehooves together eagerly. “Don’t hold me in suspense, what do you think?”

Tatters of a moth-bitten banner dropped off the wall. Brittle bits of moldy fringe dusted over Silver’s hooves. “I think I know why they call these things ruins.”

Brass Tacks broke composure with a snort of amusement. “You did ask, Mr. Silver Laurel.”

“Fair enough.” Father chuckled to himself and put his bowler hat back on. “It has been quite some time since the old place had a touch-up. Your mother tells me that Miss Rarity attempted a sort of restoration project last spring, but I don’t think much became of it.”

No kidding. Silver’s tail swatted at some fuzzy sticky thing brushing against her flank. She pulled away from the wall to discover shiny strands of spider webbing matted in her tail—spider still attached.

Summoning every scrap of her decorum, Silver Spoon repressed an unladylike scream. She breathed slowly in a manner befitting dignified fillies who absolutely did not panic at the sight of awful little spider legs wiggling around and touching her coat. “Tacks? Please?”

A flash of blue magic scooped up the spider and shooed it into the forest. Brass Tacks combed out the bits of dust and webbing in Silver Spoon’s tail, then pinned it up to avoid any more stowaways.

“Thank you.” Silver flattened her ears with a shudder. “I’m glad you’re working closer to home, Father, but couldn’t you have chosen a location that’s less… um…” What’s a politer term for dilapidated garbage? “…broken? It’s not too late; we can still ask Mayor Mare to build a brand new museum.” One where trees grow outside the building.

This had not at all been how Silver Spoon imagined her afternoon. Her peaceful outing into the Everfree to sample kei apple skins and rooibos from Miss Zecora had been an insidious plot all along to drag her into the grossest, dirtiest, drippiest place in Ponyville city limits.

Father’s attaché case opened with a click. He brought out his folder of documents, a notepad, and a fountain pen, which he tucked behind his ear. With a flick of his hoof, the case flipped over to convert into a travel desk. Father slipped the strap over his neck, making sure the desk sat snugly on his barrel before arranging his things upon it.
“I suppose we could request a new building, yes, but then we’d have lost an optimal learning opportunity.” Father’s indecipherable mouthwriting scritched and scribbled across the notepad, devouring page after page in riots of ink. He smiled around his fountain pen. “It isn’t a matter of what this place is now, but what it used to be. Can you guess what that is?”

Not at all in the mood for riddles, Silver clicked her tongue. “It would be faster to just tell me.”

“Mm, yes. It would.” Meaning he’d locked her into another history lesson.

In the weeks ensuing the Silvers’ negotiations with the Riches, Father had returned to the Castle of Friendship many, many times to thoroughly research and prepare for the new museum. It seemed that Princess Twilight shared his affinity for antiquated art and the histories thereof; he’d barely gone through half of his proposal before the princess gave her seal of approval.

Instead of his weekly Canterlot commute, Father now left at sunrise and returned after dark, carrying along a song in his heart, a spring in his step, and double the workload he’d left with. Unfortunately, Twilight’s knack for scholarly lectures had come back with him, too.

With no hope of coaxing out a hint, Silver Spoon sighed and gave the ruins a deeper look. She peered at the carved arches sloping overhead as she trailed in Father’s hoofsteps. “Well, it’s old. It’s also made of stone, and stone takes forever to break down, so these ruins have to be ancient—like, five hundred years old.”

“Double that, and you’re close.” Father’s voice echoed from the other room. A real room this time, with four walls and a roof with a broken skylight. “It’s been abandoned for roughly a thousand and... two years, if my math is correct.”

He indicated a jagged slab of wall, where the epicenter of a massive spider web crack split the stone. “Brass Tacks, mark the fractures for this room, if you please.”

Sticky notes rose from the travel desk and fanned across the room like a flock of paper birds. They coated the room with so much yellow it looked like a crime scene.

Maybe it was.

Silver prodded a slab of marble that had once been a statue. “This one didn’t get worn away. It’s broken.” Running her hooves along the sides, she found the curved bend of a pony’s spine, a broken haunch, and an elegant neck without a head. Violent punctures marked where wings should have been. “It’s broken on purpose.”

Brass Tacks nodded while he filed away Father’s freshly highlighted notes. He pointed to the precise cuts in the marble. “Quite right, Young Miss Silver. Clean breaks like these are created by magic—”

Tacks’ lean frame braced, ears suddenly pricked. “—magic blasts.”

The unicorn peered behind them, where a grove of young trees rustled in the entry hall they’d just come from. “Hm.” Light flashed from his horn a few times before he moved on.

Now that they’d been pointed out, Silver Spoon noticed similar magical fractures in the walls and balconies. The great hole in the roof where they’d entered might have had them too, but with all the moss, she couldn’t quite tell. She touched the statue’s headless neck again. “A battle happened here.”

With his mouth full writing notes, Father only nodded. What had he called this place, again? A “Museum of Royal Art and Antiquities”?

Again, Silver Spoon felt at the ruined wings, tracing the ridge of the statue’s spine down to the
haunches—broken off before the cutie mark, she noted—and the remains of a tail, full of curves and waves to communicate lushness. Silver twitched her ears. Or perhaps… perhaps to show the ethereal flow of an alicorn’s tail. “This statue used to have a horn, didn’t it?”

“Look well, my Brightness. We stand in the Castle of the Two Sisters.” Father stepped through the center of the room, where sunlight poured across his back. Shadows of the broken skylight wobbled through the light like a fracture through the sun. When Father lifted his head, the shadow snaked down his face and across his spine as if a massive crack had split him in half. “Our Princesses, Celestia and Luna, spent their early years in this very castle. They might have lived here all their lives, if not for… well, I suspect you can guess the rest.”

Father’s muzzle twitched in a melancholic smile. “Many, many winters before this one, the battle between Princess Celestia and Nightmare Moon shattered this section of the castle.” His tail swept through the dust and dead leaves. “Time did the rest. I’ve seen paintings of this castle in its prime: regal, shining, glorious… even Canterlot Castle can’t compare. Celestia could have restored it anytime she wanted, you know, but she didn’t.”

“Why didn’t she?” Silver Spoon followed her father through a hall of armor and barding. Helmets glowered at her from their pedestals, hollow-eyed with a grim luster that time hadn’t eroded. Sharp cruel points of the barding winked in the sallow light.

“I can’t say,” Father said, “but from what I’ve heard, she’s not overly fond of the place these days.”

Silver couldn’t blame her; the creep factor of the abandoned castle was starting to get under her coat. When she blinked, Silver thought she saw a pink shape—kind of like another pony—shift in the reflection of a flanchard, though when she turned, she found nothing there. If Silver Spoon were the silly sort of pony, she might have thought she’d seen a ghost, but of course, ghosts weren’t real.

Brass Tacks twitched his ears again, leaning into Father’s ear. He kept his voice low. “My utmost pardon, Mr. Silver, but you must excuse me for a moment.” He lit his horn and stepped away towards one of the empty rooms. “I believe there may be something that warrants my attention.” With Father’s nod, Tacks quietly took his leave.

Their hooves fell soft upon the thinning carpet. Rooms flanked them on both sides of the hall, stretching down and down until the doors became tiny dots in the distance. Peeking through the open doors—or what little remained of doors—Silver saw chairs, cushions, and shelves nestled in the darkness of their rooms. Many of the tables sat at awkward angles, as if somepony had pushed away from them in a hurry.

Passing through one of the doorways with no door, the Silvers came upon what appeared to be a study for an important statesmare. Everything, from the candlesticks, to inkwells, to the dressing gown draped over the bench had been left exactly as they’d been a thousand years ago.

Silver Spoon paused to examine a withered scroll half-unfurled across the desk. In Classical Era Ponish, the letter excitedly detailed the birth of a new foal from somepony named Gardenia Glow and pleaded for Northwind to visit right away. Apparently, the foal’s wings were a very big deal, though Silver didn’t know why. Another more official-looking letter reported suspicious characters and unusual activity around the town of Hollow Shades.

“Now that I consider it—” Father’s voice made Silver Spoon jump out of her skin. He gathered up the scrolls and placed them in a preservation box for safekeeping. “—I’m not sure Celestia knows about this project at all. The museum plan’s been in Princess Twilight’s domain from day one; I think she’s more excited about it than I am.”
Silver Spoon agreed. “It’s the first major government project she’s done so far too, right?” Unless regularly beating up threats to the kingdom and solving friendship problems counted as a government projects. “Now she gets to do that and also educate other ponies.”

“I only wish I hadn’t waited so long to launch a proposal. We could’ve started months ago, if not for my reticence.” He gave a gentle little tsk, shaking his head. “Silly, really.” Relics untouched in centuries skimmed across the reflection of his monocle. Father smiled with his ears and eyes low. “After Manehattan, I didn’t think the historical art community would let me get within three miles of a pre-classical tablespoon, much less allow the curation of a museum.”

Silver reached up to give her father a nuzzle. He looked like he could use one. “I’ll bet you’re happy about not working at the modern art museum anymore.”

A job, she now realized, that he’d likely only gotten because Aunt Silver Frames owned and curated that museum. Through it all, Father had maintained his composure with the proper amounts of grace and gratitude, and not once complained, save for the long commute between Ponyville and Canterlot. Still, Silver couldn’t help hearing the bitter detachment in his voice whenever he’d discussed work (which he rarely had).

Father laughed and rocked back on his hocks, delighting in the company of ancient tapestries and oil paintings. “If I never see another abstract statement deconstructing the sociopolitical power structures of Equestrian gender roles by way of carrots in fishbowls, it will be entirely too soon.”

He seemed so happy, and Silver Spoon didn’t want to bring him back down again, but the word was already on its way out before she could reconsider. “Father?”

“Yes, my Brightness?”

“Um, I’ve been wondering…”

Silver Spoon stared at her hooves. Two years after the fact, broaching the subject still felt entirely inappropriate. A young lady shouldn’t pry into the private affairs of her elders, especially not with questions she didn’t want to know the answer to. However, an answer unwanted was not an answer undeserved.

If she’d earned the right to wield a sword, then she ought to have earned the right to know the truth. Silver brought her eyes back up.

“Why did we leave Manehattan?”

The little question didn’t echo, though it filled the entire room.

Father turned and regarded Silver Spoon quietly.

Nopony said anything. The silence put ants under her coat, and Silver rushed to fill the dead air with more words. “I-I mean besides the money and Mother’s opera career. I—” She licked her dry lips. “Everypony keeps saying you did something, but I still don’t know what that thing is. If it’s a family secret, I promise I won’t tell, but I’m your family too. What happened?”

Father cast his ears down, still saying nothing for a time. Then, “Alright. Come along, Silver Spoon. I wish to show you something.”

He led her back through the hall of armor, past the library roped off for research purposes, and under the massive web of creepy star spiders, until they arrived at the foyer where they’d first come in.
Knowing what she knew now about what this place used to be, Silver supposed she ought to feel some sort of reverence. If not reverence, then some sort of humbleness or sorrow… maybe even fear? Yet even now, with her small grey hoof upon the grey (once white) throne, all she felt was dust and grime.

Father pulled a cleaning cloth from his travel desk. Gently, he wiped and dabbed at the headboard to reveal Princess Celestia’s cutie mark carved underneath. It gleamed brilliant white against the dirt. “I have an affinity for this place, Brightness. It reminds me of us.”

“Us?” Silver Spoon flicked her ears, unsure of whether to feel insulted or flattered.

A thin film of dust coated Father’s monocle, fading the bright amber of his eyes. “You and I, and the eight generations before us, we are earth ponies of privilege. It’s a rare thing for our tribe, even rarer to have it for so long. We are used to certain comforts, but over time, those comforts build up.” He breathed lightly on the monocle and wiped it clean. “Given enough time, comfort begets complacency. And complacency,” he told her, “can be a dangerous thing.”

The sun carved into the throne hung a few measly inches above her nose. Little Silver Spoon stood closer than anypony of its native era would have dared; she could touch it if she wanted. Up close, shadowed by dust and ivy, the symbol felt so surreal. It belonged on official statements and castle gates, on flags and coins, on a living, breathing flank. Not here.

“Are you saying Princess Celestia became complacent?” The sentence felt treasonous—blasphemous, even—upon Silver Spoon’s tongue, and she lowered her ears in apology.

Foals could get complacent, maybe grown-up ponies too, but Celestia—the grown-ups’ grown-up and the princesses’ Princess—didn’t get to be a princess for a thousand years by messing up. She wasn’t allowed to be wrong.

Biting winter chills rolled through the magic-blasted holes in the roof. Silver shivered. But if princesses are never wrong, then… Out loud, she continued, “Is that why Nightmare Moon happened?”

“Personally? I believe that was part of it, yes.” Father brushed a layer of dust off a carved crescent moon and jotted a few more notes on his pad. “However, these things are composed of many parts, Brightness, and historians don’t have them all. I’m not sure if even Celestia and Luna have them all. When a break cuts that deep—a break forming for so long—it’s hard to find all the fault lines.”

Silver Spoon touched the spot in her jaw where Diamond Tiara had head-butted her. “I guess that makes sense.” She stretched over the portable desk to blink at her father. “What does all this have to do with you, though? Did getting complacent hurt you, too? Did it hurt your reputation so badly you couldn’t fix it?”

Father coughed into the frog of his hoof, rolling his neck against the desk strap digging into his coat. “Well, I, uh…” He struggled to introduce the topic gently, stopping and starting a series of metaphors that never got off the ground.

“Father, please—a straight answer, that’s all I want.” She met his eyes directly. “I can handle it.”

“Forgeries, Silver Spoon.” Gently, Father nudged her off the desk, though he didn’t break the gaze. “Dealings in art forgeries. By the time it became public, the scandal had been in operation almost eight years, and I never noticed. I didn’t see the errors in the portraits, and I never bothered to look closer at my assistant.”
“You mean Miss Penny Drop?” Silver remembered that name being kicked around a lot during those hushed few months in the penthouse. At the time, she’d assumed Father’s assistant had been promoted or moved to another museum. The only reason she knew otherwise was that she’d overheard Brass Tacks mention Penny Drop’s parole hearing last year. “She always seemed so nice, though.”

“Indeed, she did,” Father agreed, “and at a glance, the Pinto Picasso I saw every morning appeared authentic.” He clicked his tongue. “Bad Penny runs a tight crime syndicate, I’ll give her that.”

Silver Spoon furrowed her brow. It still didn’t add up. “But how? Your Special Talent is all about art appraisal. You’re the best classical art expert in Manehattan—one of the top three in all of Equestria. *The Stall Street Journal* said so. Five times!”

“Was a top art expert.” Father held up his hoof before Silver could argue. “Things don’t always stay as they are, Brightness. There is no shame in ‘was’; the past has passed.”

That still didn’t explain how it could have happened in the first place. An expert, first in his field, being fooled was a hard pill to swallow; Silver Spoon began to see why he’d needed Granddad’s army of lawyers. “My friend Berry Pinch says that ponies who don’t think they can get conned are always the ones who are.”

Father laughed at that. “Your friend’s not wrong.” He shook his head with a sigh. “Sometimes, you can be so accustomed to having your Talent that you forget to actually use it.” Silver Laurel, former appraiser and curator for The Manehattan Museum of Art and Antiquities, future curator of The Ponyville Museum of Royal Antiquity, breathed in the fresh forest air and millennium-old dust. “It’s not something you forget twice.”

Something clattered upon the ceiling. It sounded like a shower of hailstones or a stampede on the roof. Aquamarine light flashed outside the windows, in the shadows of the trees overhanging the castle, and the air sizzled with the distinct scent of magic.

Father brushed Silver Spoon under his forelegs. “What in—?”

Bolts of cornflower blue magic shot across the broken skylight, and chunks of the roof tumbled down in cascades of pebbles.

A dome the same color of the magic blasts spread over both Silvers before the debris hit. Broken glass and stone bounced harmlessly off the top. Brass Tacks skidded to a stop at the edge of a hole in the roof. The light of his horn flashed blue and bright under the shadows. “My deepest apologies, Mr. Silver. I pray I haven’t hindered your research.”

Father’s ears swiveled to follow the clattering on the other end of the ceiling. No doubt of it now; those were hoofbeats. “The damage is nothing this castle hasn’t already seen, but for peat’s sake, what’s happening out there?”

The unicorn bowed deep, the tip of his horn scraping the roof. “No need to worry, sir, I’ve got it handled.” More aquamarine magic bounced off the invisible shield around Tacks’ shoulders. “I have located a loiterer skulking about the property without the proper clearance.”

Silver Spoon craned her neck to follow the silhouette dashing along the stained glass skylight.

Another shot of magic bounced off Tacks’ shield. Without looking up, he shot one of his own. A branch cracked, a mare yelped, and the silhouette vanished from the skylight. “I am currently in the process of asking her a few questions.”
“What? I didn’t think this area had been marked off quite yet.” Father checked his paperwork to be certain. “No pony needs security clearance for this castle.”

Tacks’ expression hardened. “Yes, so it stands to question why she bothered forging a false identification badge.” Something landed hard in the trees outside. Brass Tacks bowed again. “I shall leave the barrier, but for now, you must kindly excuse me again.”

In one swift motion, he leapt off the roof.

Silver Spoon tugged her father’s jacket. “Should we go home?”

Father shook his head. “If we had to leave, he would have said so. If Brass Tacks says he’s got it covered—” Outside the window, blooms of blue and green flashed and poured like fireworks. “—then he’s got it covered. Come along.”

The dome of protective magic followed their path, shrinking and expanding to cover both Silvers when they came closer or moved farther apart. If the two of them had decided to stand at opposite sides of the castle, it might have covered the whole building.

Silver Spoon understood the necessity of precaution—especially with that nothing-to-worry-about unicorn outside—but the blue tint over everything meant they had to get close to see anything normally.

Carrying on with museum preparation, Father narrated their way into the castle’s upper levels. He pointed out which rooms did what and housed who, along with what purpose they’d serve after the castle’s conversion. “We’ll preserve the throne room and royal bedrooms as they are with a standard archive-strength Velvet Rope enchantment, but I still don’t know what to do with the letters. A glass showcase in the library, perhaps… can’t imagine Princess Twilight leaving the scrolls and books where they are after the museum opens.”

With Brass Tacks momentarily occupied, the responsibility fell to Silver Spoon to manage the inks, papers, notes, and stamps. She examined the building’s floor plan while Father labeled rooms in different colors and scribbled in the margins.

Silver wrinkled her nose at the ruined walls that needed rebuilding, the rugs that needed re-threading (if not a total replacement), and the furniture needing reupholstering. She didn’t have Diamond’s skills in money management, but she suspected the invoice for this project had to double the cost of a new facility plus the labor of artifact relocation.

“I still think getting a new building’s a better idea than restoring this one.” Silver nudged over a fresh pad of purple ink before Father ran out. “It would be cheaper and easier. Faster, too.” By the time they finished, she’d probably be in college.

“Absolutely correct on all points.” Father tipped his hat backward to wipe his brow. “That’s why we’re not restoring it.”

Silver Spoon tilted her head. “We’re not?”

“Oh, we’re still cleaning it up as best we can, and we’ll rearrange some furniture to accommodate a new layout, but for the most part, the castle stays as is. Nothing’s wrong with the stone, and I think the moss adds a bit of character, don’t you?”

Miss Silver chose to keep her opinions to herself. “What about the roof? It’ll rain on everypony, and all the twigs and leaves and things will fall inside.”
A new sketch unrolled on top of the floor plan. It looked sort of like another blueprint, but a blueprint of what, Silver Spoon couldn’t say. It had the same layout and design of the castle, but this one had big splodges of grey and white all over it. It almost resembled tile, but tile had geometrical patterns, and these patches splashed out at random with bold yellow borders separating them. If anything, it reminded Silver of a piece from the abstract wing of Aunt Frames’ gallery.

“That’s the idea. See, we’ll fill the cracks and seal the patches with a special melted gold—weather-proofed and magically reinforced, of course—so that the whole roof’s shot through with it. We’re doing the same with the walls, the doors, everything! ‘Mend what was once broken, and let it be all the more beautiful for its breaking.’ Mistmane said that; legend has it she invented the technique.”

Father stared through the hole in the roof with stars in his eyes. “Kintsugi, she called it.”

With the last room on the list finished and labeled, Silver began rolling up the materials and giving them back to Father to store in his case. “So this way, you can see where Nightmare Moon and Celestia broke things? But then, why bother doing anything?” She gestured to the blue shield above their heads. “If you put a magic bubble around it like this one, you could leave the ruins alone and not do a thing.”

“I agree, but permanent spells of that capacity exceed the budget. We still need a roof, yet we shouldn’t ignore the battle scars. They’re part of Equestria’s history—of our history.” Father gave the room one last glance before he locked it behind him. “Our history is who we are, bad parts included. We shouldn’t forget it.”

As they passed through the entry hall for the last time, Silver Spoon’s hoof idly traced an ugly gash in the stone. Not a battle scar, but the natural result from centuries of neglect. “Back at Wisteria, Mister Martingale said that, too. It’s how we learn to do better next time.”

Before the door shut behind them, she stole one last glance at the Castle of the Two Sisters. Hours had passed during their time here, and the sun positioned itself just so behind a broken turret so that the rays fell in gentle pools of light.

A web shimmered in the crook of a battered statue. Its threads thrummed like a guitar string while a spider repaired the hole Silver had torn through it earlier. Hoofprints in the dust crisscrossed the marble floors.

Old and decrepit though it was, the place did have its charm. Still smelled like mold, though.

“Your teacher’s right, and frankly, I can think of no better place for this museum than Ponyville.” Father stretched his hoof to the rope bridge connecting the castle and the Everfree Forest.

At this height, the lines of trees dipped just below Ponyville’s rooftops. A patchwork of homes and roads and businesses rolled over the hills: the stone cap of town hall, the shiny metal of the Apple family’s silo, the broad terrace of the Rich mansion, the neighborhood of cloud homes drifting over open fields, and way off in the distance, the shining crystalline turrets of a brand new castle. A flyover nowhere-ville with an alicorn princess. A sleepy hamlet where nothing ever happened, except for when the world turned upside down. It was still tiny compared to Manehattan, but grew by the day, faster than a dandelion in the sidewalk.
The town made no sense two years ago, and it made even less sense now. Still, not a bad place to live, once one got used to it.

Father’s tall shadow fell over Silver Spoon’s withers. “We could have gone to Canterlot you know. The manor’s always open to us, but I thought we might be due for a change of scenery.”

An odd choice of words, Silver Spoon thought. The scenery changed whether one moved to a new town or not. Ponies, too.

She wrapped her tail around herself, staring into the evergreen of the Everfree. In the hills above, Ponyville’s barren trees swayed in the wind. “I don’t think I like things to change. What’s so wrong with things staying the way they are?”

“Fair point. Allow me to answer your question with another question.” Father turned to the castle ruins jutting high behind them. “Nopony’s touched this castle for a thousand years. In all that time unchanged, do you think it's done it any good?”

“No,” Silver said. “I guess not.” Despite some uncomfortable bumps in the process, she had to admit, in the end, the stark change of scenery had benefit. Young ladies knew how to use their circumstances to their benefit, and if circumstances constantly shifted, then so too did the benefits. “When we first moved here, Mother said that the country air would do us good. I think she was right.”

Father nodded solemnly. “That, and it’s cheaper.”

The forest air turned sharp and crackling, the scent of smoke and ozone mingling with leaves and soil. In a pop of aquamarine light, a unicorn appeared. Scorch marks licked the back of her hocks and tail, and she glanced about the forest, flicking her ears and pawing the earth. A scroll floated in the glow of her horn.

“Hey! You guys know which way to the castle?” The strange mare tossed her sweaty purple mane over her shoulder, nodding to the ruins behind them. “Not that one, the new one.”

Silver Spoon frowned and sheltered close to Father’s legs. “You’re the pony Brass Tacks was chas —”

The mare’s horn flashed once, twice.

The whole world went aquamarine.

When the greenish light faded from her sight, Silver Spoon found herself blinking dumbly at the trees. The forest spread before her in deep greens and browns, yet that didn’t seem right. Hadn’t there been a blue tint to everything a moment ago for… some reason?

Silver rubbed the back of her neck, wondering where Brass Tacks had gone off to. They hadn’t seen him since the hall of armor, and it wasn’t like him to vanish for no reason. Why bother coming all the way out here only to leave? He was supposed to help Father with his research materials.

She wanted to ask Father about it, but it would be rude to interrupt. He stood beside her, talking to the pink unicorn with pretty blue eyes.

“Please, I’ve been lost in this forest for hours, and I need to find Princess Twilight's castle right away! It’s an emergency.” The unicorn certainly looked the part. From her disheveled mane, sweaty coat, and all the little scrapes and scratches, she must have been wandering the Everfree all day.
Hoofbeats sounded in the distance. A tall unicorn’s silhouette plowed straight for them, head lowered and horn pointed in their direction.

The mare blanched. “I need to know, like, now.” Her eye twitched. “Right now.”

“Oh, we’re headed for the castle ourselves, as a matter of fact,” Father told her. “We’d be more than happy to accompany you as soon as we find our butler.” He followed the mare’s line of sight and brightened. “Ah, here he comes now!”

The strange unicorn’s eyes bulged. “*That’s* your butler?”

Silver Spoon nodded. “The best money can buy!” She reached up to touch the mare’s leg; she felt cold and clammy. Maybe she’d fallen ill from her forest adventure. “Are you feeling okay, ma’am? When Brass Tacks gets here, maybe he can help—”

The foreleg yanked out of Silver’s grasp. “No!” The pink mare cleared her throat. “Uh, no thanks, I mean. I don’t want to trouble you, I just need to go home and clean up first. Meeting a princess, after all!” She laughed too casually for it to be casual, with a hysterical edge to the sound. “Just directions.” She dropped the laughter like a hot iron. “Now.”

Silver frowned. Something about this didn’t feel right.

“Over the rope bridge, there, then due north to Ponyville.” Father raised an eyebrow at Silver Spoon bracing against his haunch. “Take two rights until you find the shop with the candy cane fence, then look for the crystal spires. It’s a straight shot from Sugarcube Corner; you can’t miss it. But really, miss, you ought to let somepony examine your inju—”

She’d already run off.

“What a rude pony.” Silver Spoon adjusted her glasses, glaring at the pink shape darting into the trees on the other side of the bridge. She didn’t think she liked this unicorn at all; she’d been very short with them when all they’d tried to do was help. “She didn’t even say ‘thank you’! I mean, it’s the least she could do.”

“Miss Silver!” Brass Tacks thundered through the branches, nearly worse for wear than the strange pink mare. The light of his horn blazed bright, cloaking both Silvers in his magical aura. “Oh, Miss Silver, are you alright?”

“Yes, why wouldn’t we be? Tacks, what’s happening? Where did you go?” Silver Spoon furrowed her brow while her guard’s magic scanned her head to hoof. “You left us all by ourselves, and…”

Poor Brass Tacks’ sides heaved with exhaustion. He had the haggard, whetted air of a pony who’s fought through Tartarus and back. Twice.

Silver’s face fell. “We’re not mad at you, but I don’t understand. Why are you so upset?”

In a thick copse of trees far across the bridge, the strange unicorn vanished in a flash of light.

Brass Tacks stepped back and let his horn go dark. His eyes flicked to where the mare had teleported away, gritting his teeth hard. Under his breath, he growled, “Memory spell.” When both Silvers peered at him in complete bafflement, he shook his head with a sigh. “I’ll explain on the way home.”

“I’ll brew you some emergency tea when we get there.” In Silver’s opinion, he needed a long nap and a bath to go with it, but Tacks had never been one to relax properly. They’d be lucky to get him to skip his workout tonight.
“That’s very kind of you to offer, Young Miss Silver, but it’s really not—”

“It is. I insist.” Silver Spoon touched the torn sleeve of his suit jacket. The brown coat under it was scorched and bruised. “You need one, I can tell. You still take yours with flax instead of lavender, right? Heavy on the cinnamon, light on the honey?”

Brass Tacks’ sigh took half the air out of him. Dark rings circled his bright eyes, and every muscle braced tighter than bowstrings. He must have been so tired and stressed, whatever he’d been doing. Her bodyguard slouched, tired, disappointed, and frightfully angry—more at himself than anypony else. Not unlike Diamond Tiara through most of last year.

Silver Spoon offered a smile. “It’s alright, Tacks. I know you did the best you could do.”

“That’s… kind of you to say, miss.” He sighed again, softer this time. “Emergency tea sounds wonderful, Miss Silver.”

“It always does.”

Chapter End Notes

That’s all she wrote, folks. Stay tuned for the epilogue!
Soft combers of steam rose from the teacup, curling under Silver’s chin and wafting through the empty schoolhouse. Passionflower tea normally circulated during the summertime, but Silver Spoon felt that a reminder of warmer months could bring some cheer in the ice and snow.

She glanced at the stubs of icicles dripping on the edge of the roof. Or at least, there had been ice and snow. They’d strung the icicles up yesterday morning, and it had snowed early last night, yet by noon today, it had all mysteriously vanished. Not melted—too cold for that—but vanished. All the icicle stubs had jagged ends; they’d been snapped off. The weather team must have decided to take them back, but why? And why the rush?

She’d tried asking Rainbow Dash about it, but she and her tortoise (less so the tortoise) had been in a rush this morning and couldn’t stay to talk.

Luckily, passionflower worked in all weather. Its mildly sweet taste came without sugar, the scent could charm a manticore, and the flower’s properties naturally calmed anxiety. Perfect for a Welcome To Ponyville afternoon tea.

So when the new filly stared at the teacup as if it might scratch her eyes out, Silver Spoon couldn’t help but feel a little slighted.

“If you don’t like it, I could always get you something else. Do you like cocoa?” Silver hadn’t brought any, but Sugarcube Corner wasn’t far. Mr. Cake’s hot fudge cocoa couldn’t be beat, and the place sat in the heart of town, perfect for newbie introductions. Plus, some ambassador advice from Pinkie Pie might be in order.

The new kid sat frozen in her chair, peering out from behind her mane with wide blue eyes. She didn’t tremble, however, and when she spoke she spoke clearly, without a stutter. “No, the tea is okay.”

Like you’d know. You barely touched it. Okay, that wasn’t fair. Not everypony wanted a relaxing tea to unwind. Different yokes for different folks. Don’t take it personally.

“Um, it’s just that…” The filly brushed her mane away from her face. At the last second, she noticed what her hoof was doing, winced, and shoved both hooves in her lap. She squeezed her eyes shut, took a breath, and looked up again. “I apologize, but nopony informed me that our meeting would be a tea party. I am not dressed for it, I beg—oh!” She snatched the puffball hat from her head. “I beg your pardon.”

“This isn’t a formal tea. It’s not even a tea party, think of it as a relaxing tea between two new friends.” Silver Spoon sipped her tea, smiled at her own fine work, then motioned the new kid to try some for herself. “Relax, nopony’s going to dock you for points here; it’s not that kind of school.”

“Oh. I didn’t think it would be but…” The filly watched from the other side of the table with both ears up and shoulders stiff. Not terrified. Wary.

“Here, let’s start over.” Silver offered her hoof. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss…” They shook. “TooLa Roola. I am pleased to be here and to make your acquaintance.” She didn’t
mean it and wasn’t good at faking it. That said, the newbie had a firm trustworthy hoofshake. That would get a pony farther than badly rehearsed introductions ever would, especially in this town.

“Lovely to meet you, Toola Roola. On behalf of the Ponyville Student Council, it is my utmost pleasure to welcome you to Ponyville Schoolhouse. I’m Sterling Silver Spoon.” She paused a moment before adding, “Of the Ponyville Silvers.”

“Yeah, I know; everypony knows who you are. You’ve got that one ballroom in the gardens, and used to be with Wondermint and Brights Brightly’s group.” Toola Roola rubbed her chin in thought. “Aaaand I think your friend made Toplofty cry in the bathroom last year?”

Silver Spoon coughed into the frog of her hoof. “I wouldn’t know; we left a little early that night.” Now would be a fantastic time to change subjects. “By the way, how are Brights and Wondermint?”

Toola Roola shrugged her thin shoulders. “I wouldn’t really know.”

Silver peered over the rim of her teacup while her tail curled thoughtfully behind her.

The new filly seemed roughly the same age as Silver, maybe a grade down. The winter hat looked new, but it had no designer labels. No mention of her family name after giving her own, no bragging what her parents did for a living, and no namedropping the city they hailed from. She exchanged pleasantries mechanically and froze whenever Silver Spoon made direct eye contact. She knew of Toplofty’s dethroning, but not the details.

Miss Toola Roola, formerly of Manehattan, had been a scholarship student. No wonder Silver Spoon hadn’t recognized her.

“No,” said Silver, “I suppose you wouldn’t.” A thought occurred. “We weren’t in the same class, were we?”

She thought she remembered most of Mr. Martingale’s small class, but the scholarship students all sort of melted into one badly groomed unit. Most days, she couldn’t be bothered to know one from the other, much less their names.

“Nah, I had Miss Sugarcoat for homeroom.”

Silver flattened her ears. “Yikes.”

Toola Roola laughed. “Tell me about it! We did meet before, though: third year, in the spring. It started raining hard that afternoon, and when it was time to go home, I couldn’t find my raincoat anywhere. I asked you if you’d seen it.”

The mood of the room went lopsided. Toola Roola had stopped laughing, and she now spoke with a strange dreamy flatness to her voice. “You didn’t say anything, so I asked again. You kinda sniffed at me for half a second, and said ‘Who gave you permission to speak to me,’ so I figured that was the end of that.” She leaned back in her chair and shrugged. “Anyway, nopony else was around to ask, so I ended up walking home in the rain.”

“That does sound like me…” Silver played with the loose tip of her braid. “Um. I’m sorry you had to walk home in the rain.”

“Eh, s’fine. Rain’s just water, same stuff you shower in; I’ve had worse.”

“You really remember all of that?” Silver just remembered staying late one rainy day to finish her homework, because Tacks had gone to visit his mother in the Hooflyn. Even that much of the
memory was fuzzy at best. It might not have even been the same day.

Toola Roola sipped her tea (finally) and flicked her ears at the taste. It seemed to agree with her. “Yeah, sure. I’m pretty good at remembering things. That’s how I can paint ’em so good later.”

Silver glanced at Toola’s blue tail—four different shades, ranging from cyan to deep indigo—and then to the mop of yellow, pink and red atop her head. Some of those colors had to be dyed, and only one clique could get away with such a bold color mismatch. “You’re an Art Kid!”

The filly preened and turned to show off the paintbrush on her pink flank. “Well, I didn’t get a scholarship through the lottery.”

“Mother used to be one of those; she says the competition’s brutal.”

“Sometimes, but it’s fair, too. Nopony cares who your family is or how many bits you’ve got. In The Studio, the only thing that matters is what you can do. I liked it there.” Toola Roola picked at the complimentary fruit basket Silver had brought her. She picked up a cantaloupe, turning it over in her hooves with a sad little smile. “That’s where I met Pot Luck, back in first year.” The cantaloupe dropped back into the basket. “Back before she got on Bridleway.”

That name sounded familiar. Silver thought back to the chubby red kid at the gala. “She’s in Hinny of the Hills, right?”

“Yeah,” Toola Roola whispered.

“I see.” Silver Spoon bent her head sympathetically.

It all came together, clearer than a crystal castle.

Wisteria Academy’s social climate marinated in bloody power struggles, character assassinations, meticulous alliances, and trading card economics, but all of these were domestic affairs. The three social circles were an orrery, not a Venn diagram. If the old money snobs underwent a total revolution, the scholarship foals wouldn’t find out for months—if at all—and when they did, nopony would care. Likewise, neither the old or new money cared about the inner-squabbles of the charity cases, save for who stood on top.

But once in a great, great while, a charity case had the extraordinary guile, luck, talent, and sheer ferocity to do the impossible: they ascended. The new money crowd respected that sort of tenacity, and rewarded skill with first class seats in the upper echelons of their rank. (Friends close, enemies closer, and all that.)

Golden tickets, however, had admission for only one. Anypony else at Wisteria would have naturally understood this and accepted it, but not an Art Kid; they crossed social class in auditoriums and studios every day. It might take them a little while to understand.

Bursts of upward mobility tended to give ponies amnesia—“We’re in this together” became “Do I know you?” in a microsecond—but they never forgot where they come from. They never wanted to go back. Ever. If some trace of their humble scholarship past tried to follow them…

Silver Spoon nodded to herself. “You got a black card, didn’t you?”

A tear dripped into Toola Roola’s teacup. “Yeah.”

Gently, Silver reached across the table and laid her hoof upon Toola’s. She bent her neck to look her fellow former Wisterian in the eye. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that.”
Toola Roola froze. No pony, it seemed, had ever told her that before. She stared with massive blue eyes that shined and glistened like a doll’s. Wrinkles creased her face, and she began to cry in earnest.

“I didn’t mean to hit her, Silver Spoon! I really, really didn’t, but she’d been so mean to me all year, and then in finals, she stepped on my painting and she did it on purpose for no reason and it made me so ang—” She gulped and wiped her eyes with kerchief Silver handed her. “I-I didn’t mean it! I didn’t mean it! Pot Luck’s my best friend, I don’t wanna hurt her. I told Headmistress Avalonia—I t-told everypony I di-didn’t… I didn’t mean to… I said I was sorry.”

It didn’t matter. Physical violence from any student meant automatic expulsion. Period. That was why black card dealers wound their targets so tight in the first place.

Silver poured a fresh cup of passionflower tea while she gave the filly some time. Good call on that newbie meet n’ greet, Di. Better to get all this out now instead of letting it congeal into something nasty three months from now.

When the sobs finally settled, Silver added a dollop of honey to the cup and began to stir. “It’s probably for the best. I don’t think you belonged there in the first place.”

She didn’t need to look up from stirring tea to know Toola Roola was glaring at her.

Before the newbie could say anything, Silver continued, “Not in the way you’re thinking. Listen, Wisteria Academy’s not like other schools. It doesn’t fit for certain types of fillies.”

“Yeah, like the poor types, right? The scruffy have-nots or charity cases, or whatever else you guys call the scholarship students?” Toola hunched low in her chair and puffed a lock of yellow mane out of her face. Under her breath, she groused, “…not even poor. We’re upper-middle class.”

“No, actually.” Silver shook excess honey off the spoon and pushed the cup forward. “It’s because you cared. You cared so much that you let it eat you up until you hit Pot Luck instead of getting revenge some other way.”

Toola Roola laughed at that. “A charity case getting revenge on new money?”

“Mother says there’s nothing more dangerous than an angry scholarship student. I mean, you don’t need money or class to get vengeance—that takes cunning and patience. Revenge needs dedication, and that kind of dedication needs hatred. But you?” Silver Spoon’s hoof traced over the string of pearls Diamond Tiara had given her for her cuteceañera. “It doesn’t sound like you hated Pot Luck, and I don’t think you wanted revenge, either. I think you felt hurt and wanted your friend back.”

Silver spread her hooves in a little shrug. “And that’s why you’re not Wisteria material. It doesn’t mean you’re any better or worse, it’s just a fact. Some ponies aren’t meant for some places.”

“Tch, easy for you to say. You didn’t get kicked out.” Toola Roola knocked back her tea in one long gulp.

Silver began to argue that leaving in disgrace was hardly better, but something about Toola’s tone gave her pause. How much did she really know? She steepled her hooves, tilting her ears forward curiously.

Toola Roola rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t get cute, Silver Spoon. Everypony knows you left and got the early drop on one of the fastest growing towns in Equestria—one with a top-line fashion designer and a princess! Brights Brightly says your family got insider information, and that’s why you moved here so fast.”
“I knew that unicorn couldn’t keep a secret.” The smile spreading across Silver’s face bordered on unseemly, but she couldn’t help it.

Maybe her old school had fostered more alliances than friendships, but the few she’d made there still held fast. *Bless you to the stars, Brights.*

It also gave a perfect segue back to the reason for this tea in the first place. Silver gestured to the pretty little schoolyard beyond the window. It’d look prettier with a fresh coat of snow, but whatever. “In that case, you must already know how lucky you are to be in Ponyville.”

“I don’t feel so lucky. My mom and dad aren’t too happy about my getting expelled and all my friends are back home. Or hate me.” Toola Roola followed Silver Spoon’s gaze to the window. She drew in the feast of new playground equipment with Project X standing centerpiece of the whole thing. “Gotta admit, you guys do have a pretty good playground… be better if I had somepony to play on it with, though.”

Outside, Sweetie Belle passed by the fence. She’d been bundled up tighter than a mummy, with only her eyes and reddened nose poked out from under her hat. When she noticed Silver Spoon and Toola Roola in the window, she smiled and waved.

Silver waved back. “That’s the nice thing about friends: you never stop making them. Lucky for you, Ponyville’s the friendliest place in Equestria. I’m pretty sure it’s literally impossible to come here and not get at least two new friends by the end of the week.”

Granted, it had taken Silver Spoon almost two weeks, but she considered herself the exception, not the rule.

“How about this? I know a unicorn who likes to draw almost as much as you like to paint. We’ll stop by her place and I’ll introduce you during the newbie tour.”

Said tour would begin in a few minutes, too, judging by the near-empty teapot. Silver pulled the new and improved route map from her saddlebag. The revamp now covered all major landmarks and also hit all the focal points for the fourteen-and-under crowd, including the lake, the new playground, and homes of other new students.

Had Coconut Cream connected with anypony yet? Silver didn’t think so. She circled Coconut’s house in purple. “I’m guessing you’ve already met Pinkie Pie?”

Sprinklings of green confetti tinkled out Toola Roola’s tail when she flicked it. “Yeah, about that. She um… shot a cannon at my face? We sang a song I didn’t know the words to, and I ate some cake, and I’m not really sure what happened?”

“What happened is Pinkie’s your new friend whether you like it or not.”

“Oh.” Toola scrunched her face. “Is that… normal?”

“For Ponyville?” Silver laughed. “Yeah, pretty much. Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it.”

The breeze rustled through the curtains and the temperature plummeted. Miles above the schoolhouse, something rumbled ominously.

Silver wrapped her scarf around her neck and stuck her head out the window, with Toola Roola standing on her back hooves to see over her head. One by one, all the other ponies outside stopped to look, too.
The visiting city of Cloudsdale thundered above the rooftops. Lightning licked the blue skies. Dark thick clouds blossomed out of season, and electricity spat and sparked in the center of it.

In the street, somepony cried, “The weather factory’s gone haywire!”

A massive shadow fell over Ponyville. Something big and white and wide and BIG was falling for them. Fast.

Toola Roola gulped. “I think we should close that wind—”

PLOFF!

Everything went white and quiet.

After a few moments, Silver Spoon’s head popped out of the snowbank that used to be her chair. Beside her, Toola Roola spat out a mouthful of snow.

Silver sighed and dumped the remains of her tea out the window. A steady stream of slush poured into a bush. “You’ll get used to that, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Dedicated my fifth grade nemeses, Cody and Alex.

I hope you've both grown into better people than the bullies I knew you as.

(However, if you happened to step on a Lego, I would not be particularly upset)

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