**THE PARENT MAP**

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Prologue

(*Opening shot: fade in to a stretch of clear early-morning sky punctuated by the rise of the Crystal Castle’s spire in the background. Pan/tilt down to the Crystal Empire street intersection in which the statue honoring Spike’s rescue of the Crystal Heart stands. A uniformed mail carrier stallion trots to the front door of a particular house; he knocks in a closer shot, retrieves a letter from his saddlebags, and passes it over to the mare who answers. She grins and gives him a carrot in return; taking it in his mouth, he tips his cap to her and continues on his route as she shuts the door.*)

(*Cut to a long shot of Sunburst’s house, resembling a beat-up wizard’s hat as seen in “The Crystalling.” The mail carrier approaches, chewing the last of the carrot, and all his good cheer evaporates the moment he catches sight of the unorthodox dwelling. A glance back at the bags informs him of a wax-sealed letter on top of the piled contents; he rolls his eyes with an irritated sigh, slaps on a big fake grin, and proceeds along the front walk and up the stoop. His polite knock at the door yields no response for some seconds, so he repeats the summons with considerably more force. This time, he is rewarded with a series of muffled crashes and thumps from within and the door begins to swing open. Cut to just inside, the knob wreathed in the occupant’s magic; the door opens to expose the carrier, but an open book held in Sunburst’s aura drifts into view to hide him. This is Sunburst’s perspective; a loud-throat clearing, and the now-annoyed carrier pushes the literature down and out of the way.*)

**Carrier:** ’Morning, Sunburst. (*Longer shot, framing both.*)

**Sunburst:** What?…Oh! (*closing book, chuckling sheepishly*) Hi! You know, no matter how many times I read it— (*The carrier; he floats it closer; continuing o.s.*) —*Houyhnhmn’s Guide to Magical Arcana* never gets boring. (*It is pushed back.*)

**Carrier:** If you say so.

(*The second word of the book title is pronounced “Whin-num.” The carrier picks the letter from his bags with his teeth and holds it out in a hoof.*)

**Carrier:** I’ve got another letter for you— (*Sunburst is back to his reading.*) —from Sire’s Hollow.

**Sunburst:** (*floating it away, retreating into house*) Mmm-hmm. Sure thing.

(*The carrier holds out a hoof with an ingratiating grin, but gets nothing for his trouble except the door slammed in his face. Sighing wearily, he departs to continue his rounds. Inside, the letter is tossed onto a very tall pile of others identically marked as Sunburst ambles past, completely absorbed in this bit of research. So much so, in fact, that only a head-on collision with a book stand jolts him back to reality; he shifts the book onto it and carries on, only to stop short at a pulsing flash that begins to emanate from somewhere below its bottom edge.*)

**Sunburst:** What’s this?

(*He glances around the room; cut to a longer shot. The light is coming from a spot near the haunch of his starry cloak, and he has sat on a stool to use the stand.*)

**Sunburst:** (*excitedly, standing on it, flipping pages*) Could I be experiencing the cerebration transmogrification effect described in Chapter Seventee—

(*Gravity claims the scholar, dumping him off the stool and onto his face so that his cloak settles forward over his head. The real cause of the pulse is now seen in full: his cutie mark, sounding off to indicate that his services are needed for a mission. He lifts the fabric away from his face and eyes his haunch with mild curiosity.*)

**Sunburst:** Oh. My cutie mark is glowing. (*It sinks in after a moment; he shoots upright.*) My cutie mark is glowing! (*trotting eagerly in place*) I know what this means! (*voice raised*) Why am I yelling?!?

(*Fade to black.*)

OPENING THEME

Act One

(*Opening shot: fade in to a long shot of the Castle and School of Friendship and zoom in slowly. The hour has advanced a bit.*)

**Sunburst:** (*voice over*) Princess Twilight—

(*Cut to him, Twilight Sparkle, and Spike walking inside; his cloak is back in place.*)

**Sunburst:** —what an honor this is! (*Pause.*) I-I mean, it is, right? (*Chuckle.*)

(*The other two smile as they lead him along an upper-story walkway.*)

**Sunburst:** I’m called for a friendship mission?

(*He stops for a look around the area, then hurries to catch up; cut to the three.*)

**Twilight:** You sure are, and it must be a special one. Nopony outside of Ponyville has ever been called before.

**Spike:** (*nudging him in the chest*) If you need some pointers, let me know. (*smugly, cracking knuckles*) I’ve been on my fair share of missions. (*Sunburst floats up a quill and pad to take notes.*)

**Twilight:** (*dryly*) You’ve been on one, Spike.

**Spike:** And that’s my fair share.

(*The boss just rolls her eyes at this touch of unnecessary braggadocio. Cut to a set of closed doors, which swing open under Twilight’s control so they can enter from the far side. Sunburst has put away his implements; zoom out to put them at the entrance to the throne room, a worried Starlight Glimmer in the foreground and staring at the map on the central table. Her cutie mark is pulsing merrily away just like his, and changes in camera angle during the following show both icons circling above a certain spot in the foothills of a mountain range.*)

**Sunburst:** (*overjoyed*) Starlight! You mean we’ve both been called? This is great! (*He steps in; she turns toward him.*)

**Starlight:** (*listlessly*) Yeah, great.

**Sunburst:** Aren’t you excited? You and me! (*zipping closer*) On a mission! Together!

(*His old friend just lets off a long, unenthused groan in replay.*)

**Sunburst:** (*stammering a bit*) I’m sorry, are—are you not excited to go on a mission with me?

**Starlight:** No. (*He reacts with shock; she hastily shifts gears.*) Uh, no! I mean, yes. (*Laugh.*) Totally excited about us going together! Just… (*pointing to the marks*) …not so excited about where.

(*He follows her gesture, adjusting his glasses for a better look; cut to a close-up of the orbiting pair.*)

**Sunburst:** (*from o.s., floored*) Sire’s Hollow? (*Zoom out to frame him and Starlight.*)

**Starlight:** Yep. Home.

**Sunburst:** Oh. Great.

(*At the doorway, Twilight shoots a concerned glance to Spike, who smiles confidently and pats her wing before walking in.*)

**Spike:** You know, I can go if you two don’t want to. (*pulling out quill/notepad*) I am kind of an expert.

(*Long overhead shot of the room, zooming out slowly as the other three voice a unison groan of mild disgust. Dissolve to a stretch of railroad track, along which a train chugs into view, then cut to the interior of one car. Starlight and Sunburst sit facing each other, the latter reading a telekinetically held book while several others lie stacked within easy reach. The former, for her part, stares gloomily out the window for a moment before sighing and turning away. Both their cutie marks have gone quiet now.*)

**Starlight:** It’s not that I don’t *want* to go home, it’s just that whenever I do, my dad treats me like a filly. (*Sunburst sets his book aside.*) Like nothing has changed since I was a foal.

**Sunburst:** Oh.

**Starlight:** I know. I’m a horrible daughter. (*She huddles on her seat, face down.*)

**Sunburst:** No, no! My mom actually does kinda the same thing. (*Starlight sits up, surprised.*)

**Starlight:** Really?

**Sunburst:** I don’t even have to *go* home. She sends me letters constantly, asking about my plans for the future. (*mockingly, using a hoof as a puppet*) “You’re a grown-up pony, Sunburst. You need a plan.”

(*He reverts to his own voice with a defeated sigh.*)

**Sunburst:** I haven’t been home in a while, either.

**Starlight:** (*determinedly, hopping off seat*) Hmph. We’ll just have to explain to our parents that we’re on an important friendship mission, so they can’t bother us.

**Sunburst:** (*smiling, adjusting glasses*) Do you think that will work?

**Starlight:** Nope!

(*A great juddering and screeching of brakes; cut to a stretch of track, the train lurching to only the briefest of stops before accelerating away. Behind it is a station that consists of nothing more than a waiting platform and ticket booth; Starlight and Sunburst have debarked here, the latter without his books. As they descend to a path leading a nearby village, Sunburst utters a contented sigh; profile close-up, panning to follow.*)

**Sunburst:** The great thing about home is, it always stays just how you l—

(*The happy reminiscence turns into a yell of pain as he runs flat into a pair of tall wrought-iron gates set into a wall. Zoom out slightly as Starlight catches up to run an uncomprehending eye over the twin barriers, which have a heart prominently worked into their design, then cut to just inside.*)

**Starlight:** Where did *that* come from?

(*A push from Sunburst swings one gate wide open with the squeal of a rusty hinge and triggers a mare’s amplified voice.*)

**Mare voice 1:** Welcome to Sire’s Hollow!

(*They enter warily, only for Sunburst to stop in his tracks when a perfume atomizer is thrust into view toward him on a light blue hoof clothed in a white-edged magenta sleeve.*)

**Mare voice 2:** Essence?

(*He peers intently at it with a tweak to his glasses; cut to a longer shot. The holder is an earth pony mare with a slicked-back blue mane/tail and deep blue eyes, wearing a white skirt and a magenta/white shirt patterned to appear as a cardigan over a dress shirt and tie. The clothing hides her cutie mark.*)

**Sunburst:** Essence of what?

**Perfumer:** You tell me.

(*A squeeze of teeth on the atomizer’s bulb sends a burst of mist into his face, setting off a violent coughing spasm and prompting Starlight to shield her eyes and nose.*)

**Starlight:** What *is* it?

**Sunburst:** (*floating glasses off, cleaning them on cloak*) Uh…chocolate, maybe?

**Perfumer:** (*siding up to them, mashing her cheek against Starlight’s*) Not chocolate maybe, chocolate definitely! (*Starlight gets his specs back on.*) And all of the benefits with none of the drawbacks.

(*She trots away, secure in her belief that she has just made the sales pitch of her life. Sunburst watches her approach a table loaded with atomizers that stands out in front of a brightly colored perfume shop, which in turn is situated next to a smoothie joint.*)

**Sunburst:** Didn’t this used to be a fruit stand?

**Perfumer:** I don’t know what it used to be. The Sire’s Hollow Development Committee determines what it is. (*She sets her atomizer on the table as Starlight and Sunburst move closer.*)

**Sunburst:** The Sire’s Hollow Development…what? Wh-Where do ponies buy fruit?

**Perfumer:** (*pointing*) You can get a fruit smoothie two doors down.

(*Sure enough, a couple of mares in outfits and mane styles not unlike hers are leaving the smoothie shop and sipping placidly away at their drinks.*)

**Sunburst:** All of the shops are different! Everything’s changed!

**Starlight:** Not everything. (*glumly, pointing o.s.*) *That’s* the same as it ever was.

(*“That,” which brings a smile to Sunburst’s face, proves to be a district of stone-built dwellings and shops when the camera cuts to it and pans through the area. The ponies here are much more rustically garbed, and a small fountain stands at the center of a town square or common area. In fact, the older and modern buildings stand on opposite sides of the fountain. Starlight and Sunburst approach a bookshop in the old quarter; cut to just inside its front window as the perplexed mare presses her face and a hoof to the glass, staring in at the displayed tomes. The camera then cuts back to the pair, Sunburst raising a hoof to turn the doorknob—but before he can even touch it, the door opens inward to reveal the two hard-faced proprietor mares. One is a pale pink unicorn with light blue eyes behind blue-framed glasses, wavy two-tone mane/tail in bright pink, dangling blue-violet earrings, and a darker pink scarf tied around her neck. The other is a brown earth pony with birdcatcher spots under blue-green eyes, curly mane/tail in three shades of gray-green, and a pale yellow sweater long enough to cover her haunch. Neither mare’s cutie mark can immediately be seen.*)

**Unicorn bookseller:** Sorry. Our bookstore’s been declared a site of historical significance by the Sire’s Hollow Preservation Society. (*She and the earth pony trade a low-down high five.*)

**Earth pony bookseller:** You’ll have to experience the books from here.

(*A pair of brass poles joined by a velvet rope are levitated out of the shop and set in place to bar any interlopers from entering. Now the unicorn’s cutie mark becomes visible: a cardboard coffee cup.*)

**Earth pony bookseller:** That’s why windows are see-through.

(*And with that blindingly brilliant statement of the patently obvious, the mares back up inside and slam the door.*)

**Sunburst:** *What?!?*

**Starlight:** Preservation Society? What is happening around here?

**Stallion voice:** (*slightly reedy*) I’ll explain it to you, sugarplum.

(*On the end of this line, pan slightly to show the speaker standing a short distance behind her—Firelight, her father. Older unicorn; violet coat; short, well-coiffed mane/tail in two shades of light green; deep brown eyes; yellow-buttoned red vest over a pale yellow, sleeveless dress shirt with upturned collar and light yellow-green tie; cutie mark of a fire with licks of flame reaching upward. The sight of him, and the sound of his words and the chuckle he appends to their end, cause Starlight to recoil in mild horror and worry her lower lip. She has no time to take evasive action before Firelight squishes her cheeks and turns her to face him.*)

**Firelight:** You are just as cutesy-wutesy as ever!

**Starlight:** (*muffled, half-whining*) Da-a-ad! (*She pushes him back; normal tone.*) Quit it! What is going on?

**Firelight:** Oh! (*walking past shops*) Just a father wanting to preserve our town’s rich history for his little pumpky-wumpkin. (*Chuckle.*)

**Starlight:** (*warningly*) Dad, you promised—no “pumpky-wumpkins” in public! (*Sunburst stifles a laugh; Firelight pops up behind her.*)

**Firelight:** (*whispering*) Sorry, Chipmunk Cheeks.

(*He proceeds to poke at one of said cheeks, provoking his daughter to slap his hoof away.*)

**Starlight:** Uh, don’t. You’re preserving the whole town? That’s crazy!

**Mare voice 3:** That’s exactly what I told him.

(*Chipper and ambitious at the same time, this voice. Both glance in its direction, Starlight with puzzlement, Firelight with irritation. The speaker proves to be Stellar Flare, Sunburst’s mother: older, golden brown unicorn with off-white “sock” markings on all four hooves; three-tone, medium-length red-brown mane/tail, the former secured with a light blue band; brown-shadowed, light green eyes over a smug mouth; pearl necklace; short blue scarf with lighter accents and pinned by a light blue, triangular gem brooch; cutie mark of a sun marked by a spiral at its core. She stands across the square from the pair, in front of one modern store.*)

**Flare:** I said, “Firelight, you’re crazy.” (*Pat the mane.*)

**Sunburst:** (*uneasily*) Mom…? (*Flare steps up to him.*)

**Flare:** Our village needs the same thing you do, Sunburst— (*She floats up a pair of scissors.*) —a clear plan for the future.

(*One magically manipulated snip at his beard fails only due to her son telekinetically yanking the unkempt tuft of hair away from the blades. Putting them away, she turns to Starlight and Firelight.*)

**Flare:** That’s why I started the Sire’s Hollow Development Committee. (*Float up a scroll.*) And I’ve got plans for this little town—big plans.

(*When unfurled, the document turns out to be nearly twice as long as Starlight, to her dismay and Firelight’s vexation. She walks off, dragging the thing behind her; cut to ground level as one of his hooves lances into view to pin the free end to the ground.*)

**Firelight:** (*from o.s.*) Listen here, Stellar Flare. (*Cut to frame both.*) I’m not gonna let you turn our historical heritage into Las Pegasus! (*Flare’s field rolls up the scroll and jabs him in the nose with it.*)

**Flare:** And *I’m* not going to let *you* turn it into a museum!

(*The two parents go nose-to-nose, softly snarling their rancor at point-blank range.*)

**Starlight:** Wait. Are you two fighting over this?

**Sunburst:** Like having a friendship problem?

**Flare:** (*acidly*) Oh, there’s no problem. (*She leaves.*)

**Firelight:** Because there *is* no friendship! (*He does the same; zoom in on Starlight and Sunburst.*)

**Sunburst:** (*smiling, to Starlight*) Well, the good news is, we know why we’re here.

(*She just blows her forelock aside with a barely contained scowl. Fade to black.*)

Act Two

(*Opening shot: fade in to a long shot of the town square, zooming in slowly as Firelight and Flare stride back toward their respective sections of Sire’s Hollow.*)

**Sunburst:** (*sighing*) Maybe we should’ve sent Spike after all.

(*Starlight copies the sigh, kick-starts her horn, and reels the feuding pair in with her field.*)

**Starlight:** Sunburst and I were called here to do a job, and it looks like you two are it.

**Flare:** You mean, *your* success depends on *us?*

**Sunburst:** (*scratching back of neck*) Uhhh…

**Firelight:** (*eagerly; Flare smiles as well*) And you have to hang out with us the whole time you’re here?

**Starlight:** (*grinning stupidly*) Ummm…

(*The bonhomie between the older ponies dissipates in record time and they pointedly turn their faces away from each other. Cut to Sunburst and Flare.*)

**Flare:** Well, I’ll hear what you have to say, but every plan I’ve made for this town is perfectly reasonable. (*Pan to Starlight and Firelight.*)

**Firelight:** Good luck convincing me my preservation efforts don’t make sense.

(*Back to their children, who sigh wearily and slump against each other down to the ground. From here, dissolve to the closed wrought-iron gates, one of which swings open in Flare’s magical grip to let her enter.*)

**Mare voice 1:** Welcome to Sire’s Hollow!

(*She grins broadly and points at the rig—enchanted to play that sound bite whenever opened. Sunburst and Starlight trade an unsettled grimace between themselves, but shift it to a humoring grin which they aim at her. A shower of old books tumbles past the screen, the view wiping behind it to the bookshop. The front door is open, the two mares in charge standing behind their velvet rope to regard the visitors through narrowed eyes. Firelight, standing off to one side, gesticulates grandly at the display.*)

**Starlight:** (*skeptically*) So we can’t *hold* the books?

**Unicorn bookseller:** (*laughing, then sourly*) No.

**Sunburst:** Can *you* hold the books?

**Earth pony bookseller:** No.

**Starlight:** So nopony can *read* the books?

(*Cut to the pair of hard faces and zoom out to the sound of Firelight’s laughter.*)

**Firelight:** (*to them*) Isn’t she adorable?

(*Another chuckle leaves Sunburst and Starlight at a loss. Wipe to the once-again-closed gates, the pair approaching from outside, and zoom out. Flare stands within, accompanied by two smoothie-drinking locals from her side of town. Starlight boots the gate open with a hoof so she and Sunburst can enter.*)

**Mare voice 1:** Welcome to Sire’s Hollow!

(*An ear-to-ear grin from the progress advocate wilts all too quickly before her son’s mildly irked glare. A tumble of perfume atomizers wipes the view to a close-up of Starlight and Sunburst approaching that particular table.*)

**Perfumer:** (*from o.s.*) You *can* call them… (*A soft grunt of disdain.*) …“smells”… (*Cut to frame them and her on opposite sides; they back off.*) …but I call them “essence”!

(*Grabbing one up, she pumps its bulb with her teeth to propel a spritz into Sunburst’s face and backs out of view. He is immediately wracked by a coughing spasm as he hastily floats his glasses off; Starlight, on the other hand, takes a step closer and sniffs the air.*)

**Starlight:** Fruity. (*Glasses on.*)

**Sunburst:** (*pointedly*) Huh. Too bad there’s nowhere to get *actual* fruit.

**Flare:** (*from o.s.*) In the future—

(*Both turn around; a longer shot frames her approaching with two cups in her field.*)

**Flare:** —all ponies will drink their fruit.

(*The beverages are rammed into the pair’s faces to that they are forced to take a long pull—and, judging from their disgusted retching, the taste does not agree with them one bit. Smoothie cups tumble down past the camera, the view changing behind them to an extreme close-up of a countertop. A loaf of bread lands hard on this, inflicting severe cracks to the wood across nearly its entire width, and a longer shot puts Starlight and Sunburst in a bakery on the historic side of town. Firelight is with them, and a hefty gray earth pony stallion is behind the counter. Slicked-down, dark gray mane/tail; dark green eyes; off-white shirt with sleeves rolled up; red apron; heavy beard stubble; cutie mark partly hidden by the counter.*)

**Baker:** One hundred percent ancient pony grains— (*gesturing to a picture on the wall*) —just like the town founders ate.

(*Zoom in quickly to a close-up: every single pony in the depiction has a mouthful of gapped and hopelessly misaligned teeth. When the camera returns to the counter, a pitcher, mixing bowl, and two eggs can be seen on the baker’s haunch.*)

**Baker:** Hope you like crust!

(*As he backs off, Sunburst pokes hesitantly at the rock-hard loaf—only for the countertop to crumble away and drop it out of sight. A camera-shaking impact drifts up from below, accompanied by a puff of dust, and Firelight grins/sweats nervously and tugs at his tie under a double glare from the pair. Masses of bread plunge past the camera; behind these, wipe to them at the open gates, accompanied by Flare and quite a few onlookers. The irritated Sunburst flicks one of them closed and open repeatedly, setting off the “Welcome to Sire’s Hollow” recording every time and slowly getting on the crowd’s nerves until Flare uses a brief spell to cut off the demonstration in mid-prattle.*)

**Flare:** Okay, it’s annoying. I get it.

(*Dissolve to Firelight, his head drooping in silent resignation, then cut to Starlight, Sunburst, and Flare gathering in with him at the fountain. The baker is laboriously pushing a cart piled high with his bread.*)

**Firelight:** Maybe my preservation efforts were a little over the top.

(*The vehicle chooses this moment to go to pieces; one wheel bounces away across the town square as he lets off a loud groan.*)

**Baker:** Oh, no.

(*Behind Flare, the perfumer works one of her atomizers while chasing after the two booksellers.*)

**Flare:** And I might have been trying to turn the town into a shopping mall. (*Both smile.*)

**Firelight:** (*offering a hoof*) Well, whatever direction the town takes from now on, how about we work together on it?

**Flare:** (*shaking it*) Deal!

(*Both grin toward their children, and Flare pivots toward Sunburst. On the next line, she floats up a comb and starts to run it through his unkempt forelock.*)

**Flare:** Sunburst, you should move closer to Ponyville. After this success, I’m sure the Princess of Friendship will want to send you on more missions.

(*One last, particularly hard pull snaps the red-orange strands into a more orderly arrangement, but he gets right back to patting it into its usual disarray.*)

**Sunburst:** That’s not really how it works. (*Glance at a hoof.*) Oh, look at the time!

(*Never mind that he is not wearing a wristwatch—or anything else, for that matter—on the limb.*)

**Sunburst:** (*bulldozing Starlight toward the gates*) We should get going, now that we’ve solved the friendship problem—right, Starlight?

**Starlight:** (*stopping him*) Yeah, the thing is… (*glancing at her haunch*) …I don’t think we did solve it.

(*Close-up of her cutie mark; its dormant nature would seem to suggest that this assessment is correct.*)

**Starlight:** When we solve a friendship problem, our cutie marks are supposed to glow. (*Zoom out to frame Firelight facing her and pinching her cheek on the next line.*)

**Firelight:** Aw, don’t be disappointed, puddin’. Your papa will work this out for you. (*Wink.*)

**Starlight:** (*chuckling, pointedly singsong*) My papa wasn’t called by the map in Twilight’s castle. (*own voice, dryly*) *I* was.

(*Pan away from the face-off to frame Sunburst, sneaking toward the now-closed gates—at least until a sudden tug on the hem of his cloak stops him in his tracks. Flare’s hoof has pinned the fabric to the ground; the sudden momentum shift dumps him to his haunches as she leans into his face.*)

**Flare:** How are you going to explain this to the Princess? What’s your plan if she fires you from friendship quests? (*Sunburst shoves her back.*)

**Sunburst:** (*sputtering*) Mom, she doesn’t—it—it’s not—

**Flare:** (*calmly*) Use your words, Sunburst.

(*Frustration boils over into a mingled neigh and teeth-locked snarl that causes his mother’s eyes to pop very wide.*)

**Starlight:** I guess you two weren’t the problem we were sent to solve after all.

**Flare:** So now you don’t even know why you’re here? (*scoffing, to Sunburst*) We have to figure this out before we run out of time!

**Sunburst:** (*sighing*) Mom, there isn’t a time limit.

**Firelight:** So you’re here for an extra-long visit? (*Laugh; he pinches Starlight’s grimacing cheeks.*) You can stay in your old room, punky-wunk! It’s just like you left it!

(*Accompanied by a hug that leaves her even more badly shaken. After he finishes, the camera pans quickly to a dim bedroom whose window is covered by a set of tattered curtains. The bed is unmade, and the floor and walls are littered with items that speak to the occupant’s bleak outlook on life: skull-themed décor and electric guitar, scattered articles of clothing with copious buckles and studs, a heart impaled by an arrow, and so on. After the camera pans quickly back to Starlight and Firelight, it takes a moment for the younger unicorn to recover her senses and bug out. Cut to her and Sunburst huddling in near the gates.*)

**Starlight:** (*hushed*) We need to find this friendship problem *now!* (*He nods vigorously.*)

**Firelight:** (*tapping Starlight; he and Flare ease up*) Now, I know you have your little job to do, but Stellar and I know the town a lot better than you two.

**Flare:** That’s right! Neither of you have been home in ages. You’re gonna need our help to succeed.

(*She gives Sunburst a nudge and wink that does nothing to settle the pair’s discomfort.*)

**Starlight:** (*unwillingly*) I guess that makes sense. (*Firelight and Flare chuckle; Flare floats out a sizable scroll.*)

**Flare:** I already have some ideas. (*Firelight does likewise.*)

**Firelight:** Me too!

(*Both gallop off together, grinning like fools.*)

**Sunburst:** (*to Starlight*) I think I liked it better when they were fighting.

(*Dissolve to the exterior of a house on Firelight’s side of town. Zoom in slowly to the sound of chalk being plied against a blackboard, then cut to these two items inside. Nearly every square inch of the board is covered with notes and drawings, and the chalk adds a few more details while held in a telekinetic grasp.*)

**Firelight:** (*from o.s.*) Okay!

(*Zoom out; he has been doing the work, and the board is mounted in a wheeled frame. His giant scroll has been stowed away.*)

**Firelight:** (*setting chalk down*) Now that I’ve explained how Sire’s Hollow was founded, we can start to explore all the possible friendship problems that might have developed over time.

(*He underscores the end of this line by fetching the board a kick that spins it wildly on its axis and sends the chalk flying; it comes to rest showing its flip side, marked with columns of notes. Cut to Starlight, seated at the far side of the room and taking notes; she lets the quill and pad drop from her aura and claps a hoof to her forehead while drawing in a deep, irritated breath.*)

**Starlight:** I appreciate the history lesson, Dad, but I need to find the problem now—in the present.

**Firelight:** Aw, now, hun-bun— (*patting her shoulder*) —how are you gonna do that without all the backstory, huh?

(*Not mollified in the slightest, she climbs off her stool.*)

**Firelight:** Oh, of course, I know how hard it is for you to sit still and focus, soooo…

(*His magic brings over a ratty gray blanket, to her considerable disbelief and mild disgust.*)

**Firelight:** (*baby talk*) …would it help you pay attention to hold on to your bwankie?

(*Which is unceremoniously wrapped onto her head and tied under her chin like a bonnet—they are in the family home, then. He follows up this offering with a glass of milk and some cookies Instead of calming Starlight down, though, the lot sets her to snarling through her teeth and looking as if she might want to burn the house to the ground. Dissolve to a profile close-up of an equally disgruntled Sunburst walking outside; on the start of the next line, zoom out to show Flare with him. Like Firelight, she no longer has her whopper of a scroll.*)

**Flare:** Now you’ve had a little setback, but don’t worry. I know exactly what you need to do.

**Sunburst:** (*sarcastically*) Make a plan?

**Flare:** (*floating up a smaller scroll*) Already got one! (*It is unfurled; she starts to read.*) “Step one—interview the suspects. Step two—use your talents to solve the issue. Step three—get the Princess of Friendship to send you on more missions.”

(*She keeps moving, oblivious to the fact that Sunburst has stopped and put yet another hoof to his face.*)

**Sunburst:** Mom! *It does not work like that!* (*She doubles back.*)

**Flare:** Uh-huh.

(*Off she goes again, missing the fed-up scrunching of his face. A bit farther down the block, the perfumer and the two booksellers catch her grin and head twitch toward Sunburst, but do nothing until she clears her throat loudly and points at him ;he has caught up to her by this point. The following six lines are delivered in a manner so stilted that Princess Celestia’s reading of her lines in “Horse Play” would sound vibrant by comparison.*)

**Perfumer:** Oh! Thank goodness you are here. (*indicating booksellers*) These two ponies refuse to use my essences. (*Flare nods; cut to the three.*)

**Unicorn bookseller:** Maybe because we don’t like to cover our natural scent.

(*She punctuates her words by raising a foreleg; the motion releases a wisp of greenish vapor that instantly has the perfumer struggling not to vomit on the spot. A loud throat-clearing from the o.s. Flare jolts them all back on track; cut to her, inclining her head sharply toward her son, who scowls and rolls his eyes at the stupid artificiality unfolding in the street.*)

**Perfumer:** Ugh!

**Unicorn bookseller:** Ugh!

**Earth pony bookseller:** Ugh! (*pointing at perfumer*) And *she* refuses to buy our books.

**Booksellers, perfumer:** Surely this is a friendship problem.

(*They stick on big expectant grins, waiting on Sunburst to deliver the capper—but he just sighs disgustedly and puts a hoof to his temple.*)

**Sunburst:** (*to Flare*) It needs to be a real friendship problem! You can’t just make one up!

(*Voicing his anger and frustration and annoyance in a long groan, he stomps away.*)

**Flare:** (*to the others*) This is what happens when we don’t rehearse!

(*She lets go with a groan and exits. Dissolve to the exterior of the bookshop, door closed and velvet-rope barricade gone. The baker has procured a new cart for his bread, and two locals are doing a little reading as Firelight walks up.*)

**Firelight:** (*voice raised*) Starlight! Sweetie? (*Close-up; he floats up a book.*) I found a really old town by-law that nopony agrees on, uh… (*Flip pages; point out a passage.*) …apparently we’re not supposed to prance or canter after dinnertime. Could that be the problem? (*walking off*) Silly filly?

(*Zoom out slightly to put Starlight in the fore, hunkering down behind the edge of the fountain opposite him and no longer wearing her “bwankie.” She peeks up to see him depart, but he does not notice her.*)

**Starlight:** (*wiping forehead*) Phew!

(*Now here comes Sunburst, scooting backward on his haunches toward her and scared out of his wits.*)

**Starlight:** What are *you* doing?

**Sunburst:** (*sighing*) Hiding from my mother! She’s started making up friendship problems for me to solve!

**Starlight:** (*laughing scornfully*) My dad won’t even let me talk to anypony in case they’re strangers. (*She adds air quotation marks with her hooves on that last word.*) I’m a grown mare!

**Sunburst:** (*sighing*) We’re never going to find the friendship problem with them around, let alone solve it.

(*On the start of the next line, zoom out to frame the baker and his cart now standing alongside the pair; he holds one of his rock-hard loaves.*)

**Baker:** Maybe you two should start looking for it on your own?

(*He demonstrates the durability of his product by gnawing mightily on it, teeth grating against crust without even so much as scoring the surface. Sunburst begins to mull over the suggestion, stroking his beard as Starlight shoots him a tentative, hopeful grin. Snap to black, then to an extreme close-up of a tabletop as a small desk lamp is switched on to illuminate it. A patch of bookshelves is visible in the background; zoom out slightly to frame Starlight seated behind the table, steepling her front hooves together with a pleased grin. The following exchange is delivered in hushed tones except where noted.*)

**Starlight:** (*slightly out of breath*) Okay. So we wanted to talk to all of you—you know, in private. (*Sunburst leans into view next to her.*)

**Sunburst:** Just to see if there were issues any of you had with your friends.

(*Both expectant faces lean forward over the table, Starlight propping hers on hooves. Cut to behind them; they have been addressing the baker, booksellers, and perfumer.*)

**Perfumer:** Got it. Just one question—why are we whispering?

(*A longer shot of the area discloses the full shelves that reach from floor to ceiling, as well as stacked and loose books that take up space on floor and tables. This can only be the bookshop, and the gathering is taking place in a dimly lit back room. Not a single living soul is in the place except for these six.*)

**Baker:** (*normal volume*) They’re avoiding their parents.

**Booksellers, perfumer:** Ohhh!

(*They trail off into a round of understanding nods and murmurs as Starlight and Sunburst react with some trepidation.*)

**Sunburst:** No, not avoiding, just…taking a break.

**Starlight:** Yeah! (*Laugh.*) We needed to focus—oh, but we’re definitely not avoiding them.

(*Both fugitives hunch down behind their side of the table with weak grins, but their audience is nowhere close to satisfied.*)

**Unicorn bookseller:** So you’re whispering with all of us in the darkest corner of the shop, where nopony can possibly see, because you’re *not* avoiding them?

**Starlight:** (*as she and Sunburst nod*) Mmm-hmm. (*They sit up again.*)

**Sunburst:** Uh, but they definitely can’t hear us in here, right?

**Baker:** (*normal volume*) No way! This is the antiquities section. Nopony ever comes back here. (*Long silence.*)

**Firelight:** (*from o.s., normal volume*) There you are!

(*The pinkish-violet mare gets the scare of her life from hearing those three words. Zoom out to show him standing at the top of a tall ladder propped against the shelves behind the table. Normal volume resumes.*)

**Firelight:** But what are we doing in here? (*Gasp; he jumps down to them.*) Is the friendship problem in my favorite section of the bookstore?

(*Far too many books follow him to the table, manipulated in his field; Starlight and Sunburst groan at his arrival, Sunburst going face-first into the pile for good measure. Behind a rain of other well-aged literature, the view wipes to the exterior of the bookshop. Reading from a new acquisition held in his magic, Firelight leads the six conspirators out.*)

**Firelight:** And then, I thought the best way to look for a friendship problem in the present— (*Starlight stops.*)

**Starlight:** (*exasperated*) Dad! (*He doubles back to her.*)

**Firelight:** (*briefly shoving book into her face*) —was to look back in our town history even farther! (*She growls.*)

**Flare:** (*from o.s.*) Sunburst! (*She zips up to him.*) Oh, finally! Now, I know you don’t want me to make up a problem— (*floating up an open scroll, thrusting it in his face*) —but what if I start one? (*Sunburst pulls it away.*)

**Sunburst:** That’s not how this— (*She covers his mouth with a hoof.*)

**Flare:** I mean, nopony ever became a success by following *all* the rules, right? (*He snarls quietly; she addresses herself to the o.s. Firelight.*) How are things on your end? (*Cut to him and Starlight.*)

**Firelight:** (*closing book*) Couldn’t be better. (*crossing to Flare*) New leads and such.

**Starlight:** (*softly, warningly*) Guys…

**Flare:** We really are providing excellent assistance, aren’t we?

**Sunburst:** Guys!

**Firelight:** I daresay our children should be grateful for our help.

**Starlight:** GUYS!!

(*Two horizontal panels slide into view to fill the screen: Starlight in the top half, Sunburst in the bottom.*)

**Starlight, Sunburst:** WE DON’T WANT YOUR HELP!

(*The panels slide away, giving a good clear view of their suddenly dumbstruck parents, and the camera cuts to a longer shot of the tense tableau. Firelight’s book and Flare’s scroll lie abandoned on the grass as their respective children glower at them. Zoom out slowly and fade to black.*)

Act Three

(*Opening shot: fade in to the four ponies and zoom in slowly.*)

**Flare:** (*offended*) I’m sorry. You don’t want our help?

**Firelight:** (*laughing uneasily*) That’s—that’s ridiculous! What reason could you possibly have for that?

**Starlight:** *Because you’re driving us crazy!*

(*This outburst stuns the older generation into a moment’s silence.*)

**Flare:** Oh, really? And just how am I driving you crazy?

**Sunburst:** (*levitating one of her scrolls; several others fall out of his cloak*) By always coming up with plans! (*ripping it apart*) I don’t need a plan! I mean— (*sputtering*) —maybe I do, but it’ll be mine! Not yours! (*He turns his back to her.*)

**Flare:** (*voice breaking*) Well, I’m sorry for trying to help! (*She gallops away, sobbing; Starlight advances on Firelight.*)

**Starlight:** And *you’re* not any better! I’m not a filly! I’m a grown pony with a job to do, and I’ll do it on my own!

(*As she backs off, her father gathers whatever might remain of his dignity and raises his nose.*)

**Firelight:** (*stiffly, levitating his book from the ground*) Well, I’ll let you get to it, then.

(*He trots away with it, leaving the younger two alone.*)

**Starlight:** (*sourly, to Sunburst*) Great. Now we have to smooth things over with our parents on top of finding and solving a friendship problem.

**Sunburst:** (*stroking his beard*) It’s almost like our relationship with our parents *is* the friendship problem.

**Starlight:** (*fearfully*) You don’t think that’s it, do you?

(*Their ruminations are interrupted by the sound of a throat being cleared; cut to a longer shot that frames the four from the bookshop meeting looking on.*)

**Baker:** That’s what all of us think.

(*To which Starlight responds by groaning loudly and keeling over backwards.*)

**Sunburst:** (*to Starlight, covering her face*) Why couldn’t we have been sent to stop a war or something?

(*Dissolve to Firelight in the family home, morosely using a field-held cloth to wipe his blackboard clean as Starlight cautiously enters.*)

**Starlight:** Dad?

**Firelight:** (*very stiffly*) Hello, Ms. Glimmer. (*wringing cloth; composure slowly deteriorates*) How is your friendship problem search going? I only ask as an interested observer, since I know you are an adult who’s capable of doing things without help from anypony else.

(*Tears have gathered in the brown eyes by the time he finishes, and he whimpers almost inaudibly before using the cloth to dab them away.*)

**Starlight:** (*smiling*) Actually, I think Sunburst and I figured out what it is. (*Cut to Firelight.*)

**Firelight:** (*dropping cloth, turning to her*) So Stellar and I weren’t really helpful after all.

**Starlight:** (*crossing to him*) Well, we haven’t actually solved it— (*lifting his chin*) —and I don’t think we can. Not without you.

(*Now the brown eyes widen in genuine surprise as the mouth below them curves into a smile of its own. Wipe to Flare behind the perfumer’s table, a pencil and clipboard held in her power so she can take notes. She brings up an atomizer, sprays a burst into her own face, and immediately bursts into a teary-eyed coughing fit that forces her to drop all three items as Sunburst walks up.*)

**Flare:** (*wiping eyes*) Pungent!

(*Noticing the arrival of her son, she becomes all formality in a flash.*)

**Flare:** (*turning away*) Oh! Did you come by to be driven crazy by more of your mother’s plans?

**Sunburst:** No, I came to apologize.

(*Disbelief flickers across the golden brown face before she pivots back to him.*)

**Flare:** Well, it’s going to take more than an apology to make up for telling me you don’t want my help finding your friendship problem.

**Sunburst:** Oh, I’m not sorry for that. Starlight and I already figured out what the problem is.

**Flare:** (*surprised*) This is a terrible apology.

(*Up come the pencil and clipboard for a few more notes.*)

**Sunburst:** Well, if you come with me and help fix it— (*She stops working.*) —I’ll give you a better one.

(*As the items clatter to the ground, she struggles to make sense of this offer and eventually adopts a smile to answer his. Dissolve to a long shot of the town square, Starlight and Sunburst taking places to face their respective parents; the four vendors are out and about as well.*)

**Starlight:** Usually, Twilight or one of her other friends gets called to a place with a friendship problem to fix.

**Sunburst:** But Starlight and I realized we came here to fix a friendship problem we already had.

**Starlight:** (*crossing to Firelight*) I’m sorry I’ve been avoiding coming home, Dad, but…you can’t keep treating me like a foal.

**Firelight:** I’m sorry, sugar bun. (*She grimaces slightly; he sighs.*) Hm. I just know how hard things were for you when you left home. (*Visible discomfort on her face.*) I guess I wanted you to feel safe, like…when you were young.

**Starlight:** Dad, I-I know I’ve made some mistakes— (*laughing*) —and I’ll probably make a bunch more. (*touching his chest*) But I learn from them. I think that’s what growing up is.

(*Now Sunburst moves toward the downcast Flare.*)

**Sunburst:** I’m sorry I never told you how much your plans bothered me, and I know you just want me to succeed—but I need to do that on my own.

**Flare:** I remember how lost you were when you flunked out of magic school. I thought as long as you had a plan, you’d never feel that way again.

**Sunburst:** You don’t have to worry, Mom. I need to find my own way. I definitely don’t feel lost anymore.

(*Now displaying a smile of gentle, genuine understanding, Flare lays her sock-marked hoof on his. The touch starts his cutie mark flaring under his cloak; she floats up the hem to expose it, and in short order Starlight’s has started to pulse as well. Both parent/child pairs embrace as the camera zooms out to put the booksellers and perfumer in the fore, and the camera quickly shifts to reveal the baker and quite a few other residents looking on. All are deeply touched by the show of emotion.*)

**Baker:** (*sobbing*) Oh, it’s so beautiful!

(*Dissolve to the Sire’s Hollow train station as the four unicorns mount the steps to the platform. Flare has let go of Sunburst’s cloak.*)

**Flare:** The glowing cutie mark is such a symbol of accomplishment. (*magically flipping cloak up*) I don’t suppose there’s a way for you to get it to glow all the time?

**Sunburst:** (*chuckling, pushing it down with a hoof*) Pretty sure it doesn’t work that way.

**Starlight:** Not unless we solved a friendship problem every few seconds, and I-I kinda hope this one will be it for a while.

**Firelight:** You know, it seems to me your map is saying we’re not just your parents. Heh. We’re…your friends, too.

**Starlight:** I guess so. (*Her mark and Sunburst’s go quiet.*)

**Firelight:** So if I promise to treat you less like a little filly and more like a friend…will you visit more?

**Starlight:** Absolutely. (*Father and daughter embrace.*) Mmm…

(*Pan from them to Sunburst and Flare.*)

**Sunburst:** (*adjusting glasses)* And if you start to drive me crazy again, I’ll tell you instead of never coming home.

**Flare:** That’s lovely of you to say, dear. But you know, I can always visit you.

(*A jolt of fear runs through the gray matter under the rumpled mane; behind him, Firelight breaks into a big smile.*)

**Firelight:** Stellar, you’re a genius! (*He pulls away from Starlight and crosses to her with a laugh.*) How do you feel about a road trip?

**Flare:** (*levitating a bundle of scrolls*) I might have a few plans for that.

(*Now well and truly scared, the younger unicorns somehow manage to force out a pair of strained grins and chuckles. Almost as soon as the sound of an approaching train asserts itself, they are at the edge of the platform to wave it down frantically so they can get shut of their hometown for a while. Fade to black as it pulls toward the platform.*)