

Luna was the princess of the night, and as such knew a thing or two about being quiet. Without the merest hint of sound, she slipped into the antechamber of the guest quarters in Canterlot Castle where one Dr. Coltle met her.

"How is he?" Luna asked in a whisper. No further explanation was necessary, for given the events earlier in that day, there could be only one soul being referred to.

"Settled and sleeping, finally," Coltle replied. Even whispering, Coltle's voice seemed to carry far further than ought be possible. "In all my years, I don't think I've ever seen a foal that disconsolate, and I've seen foals at some of the worst points in their lives."

Nodding, Luna sighed quietly. "It is understandable, considering his worst fears have been realized. He is cursed with the same affliction visited upon my sister and I, Doctor. Agelessness is not something to be wished upon one when at such a relatively young physical age."

"I'm a doctor, not a philosopher, Princess," Coltle grouched. "Seems to me that the purpose of life is to live. You and your sister have put your years and experience to good use by guiding the rest of us. Maybe what that little one is meant for is to remind the two of you of more innocent times and fun."

Luna looked at Coltle from the corners of her eyes as she narrowed them suspiciously. "'More innocent times and fun'? What *precisely* do you mean by that, Doctor?"

"I'm saying that Lightning Storm has it better than either you or your sister, Luna." Coltle stared at Luna intently, lending a certain amount of emphasis to his words. "Consider this. I have been your physician for three years, and Celestia's for decades now. I know every square inch of your hide. Can we at least agree on that much for the moment?"

Reluctantly, Luna nodded. It was true, after all. "Yes, but I both fail to see and fear where you're going with this line of thought."

"Alright, then." Nodding firmly, Coltle fixed Luna with an extra-intense stare. "Let's cover some other things I know about you and your sister. First, I know full and damn well neither you nor Celestia have taken a lover. I also know *why*."

"*Excuse me!*" Luna hissed, aghast. "I do *not* recall this being a part of your duties as physician!"

Coltle smiled gently, a reaction so unexpected that it literally set Luna back a step and caused her to sit on the floor. "Luna. I'm your doctor, but I'm just one of

many that came before. You think we don't keep notes on such things? I've an entire *library* filled with notes on your health, both physical and mental. You haven't taken a lover for the same reason Celestia hasn't. It's too hard to form attachments and then have to lose them. That's why Storm has it easier. He's going to be forever too young to form *that* sort of attachment. It's also why he'll be good for you and your sister."

"He's someone to care for," Luna whispered, lowering her head as her mane draped over her eyes.

"Precisely," Coltle agreed. "He's someone that it is *safe* to love, for he's never going to leave. He can't. Being so young, if he were to walk out of the castle, he'd be picked up by the guard for school truancy. If he were to try and fly away, then the pegasi would have him corralled fairly quickly and herd him right back here. My advice to you, Princess, is to enjoy him for what he is."

"What would that be?" Luna asked as she met Coltle's gaze with her own. The stallion might be mortal, but he had wisdom beyond his years just the same.

"Think of him as a little brother. Pesky at times, but adorable just the same." Coltle gestured with a hoof to the closed door behind which Storm slept. "Forever innocent. Knowledge beyond his years, yes... and that *will* be a problem on occasion. As with all things, a balance will be found."

Luna considered that a moment, then nodded slowly. She brushed her mane to the side and draped it back over her shoulder where it belonged. "That... that *feels* right," Luna admitted. "I can see that working quite well." Managing a chuckle, she glanced at the closed door. "At the very least, we can spoil him and give him what we've been denied for so long."

"From what little I've seen," Coltle said slowly, knowing he was treading on even more unsteady ground than before, "he might just be the key to bringing your parents home. Give the kid some time, Princess. *Then* spoil the hay out of him. But even if he can't manage it, don't hold it against him. He's going to *need* you in the years to come. He's forever a foal, and is going to be dependent upon you."

"And Cadance," Luna added with a bit of a smile. "I daresay she and Shining Armor might just enjoy having a foal to look after for a time." Her gaze became a little hopeful. "Any word on that?"

Shaking his head, Coltle lifted a hoof. "Doctor's confidentiality, Princess. Not even for you could I violate that. All I can say is that with a sample size of three and all of them mares, we just don't know." The old doctor's eyes sparkled with a tint of mischief as he added, "If there's even the slightest chance of it working, then it'll happen given the amount of practice those two are getting in."

Chuckling politely and thankful for the shadows that hid her blush, Luna nodded as she turned to the exit. "Very well, Doctor Coltle. If you'd be so kind as to let me know when he wakes?"

"Of course, Princess. I'll send word as soon as he's ready for visitors," Coltle assured her.

Silently, Luna slipped back out of the guest quarters and into the hallway beyond. Nodding to the guards, she walked down the hall towards her mother's study. Ever since Storm had managed to unlock the puzzle, both she and her sister had taken to stopping by every few hours almost as if there was some fragment of hope the door might open and their parents emerge. It hadn't happened yet, but then they'd also rather given up hope the door could even *be* unlocked. They'd been proven wrong once before so perhaps they might again.

Before Luna even made it to the proper hallway, the sounds of a commotion met her ears. Perking them forward, she listened carefully as she picked up her pace.

"I don't *believe* this!" Celestia yelled in surprise and shock. "*Mother!* How *could* you?"

*That* was all Luna needed to hear before breaking into the fastest run she could manage. Her emotions were running high, and this was reflected in the violent way her mane was flipping about; she hadn't been this agitated about something since before she'd fallen to the Nightmare.

Wings flared, mane flapping like a flag in a tornado, Luna skidded around the corner, nearly crashing into Celestia. "*Where is she?*" Luna demanded, almost frantic. "*Where is Mother?*"

After her initial outburst, it was all Celestia could do to keep from bursting into tears and collapsing in a heap right in the middle of the hallway. She wasn't even aware of Luna's *presence*, so shaken this situation had her.

Seeing that Celestia was unable to respond, Luna followed her sister's stare. *The door*, she thought. *Of course! Storm must have unlocked it, somehow!* Eyes bright, Luna focused on the door herself and never caught the motion of caution from her sister as the door shut behind her.

For Luna, it was a walk back in time since everything in the study was *precisely* as it had been over twenty five hundred years before. The room was *impeccably* organized; bookshelves filled with scrolls and tomes of all shapes and sizes lined three of the four walls. A black granite workbench with arcane sigils etched into the surface and inlaid with gold and silver rested directly across from

the door and in the center of a circle on that bench rested a thick tome. Luna knew the book well, for it was the one her mother used to record the results of experiments or projects in.

On the far wall to the left of the door stood an ornately carved archway made of the darkest obsidian that had been etched with silver runes. The archway itself might be blank, but Luna could sense the fierce power contained therein; she wasn't sure what it was, but was *certain* it had something to do with her parent's disappearance.

However, before she could take even four steps towards the archway, Luna was brought up short and frozen in place by a voice she'd not heard in a very long time indeed.

"Luna? Sweetheart, is that you?"

Instantly, tears began to flow from her eyes as Luna slowly, almost reluctantly turned around. "Ma—" Luna swallowed, her voice being choked off by the fierce emotion. She knew the voice, oh yes... there could be *no* mistaking that which she had only heard in countless dreams for several thousand years. But this time, this time it was *real*. "Mama? Is... is that you?" Her voice sounded so thin and frail, even to her own ears. But how could it *not*?

"Oh, my dear little Luna. You always did try and follow your sister everywhere. Especially, it seems, when she was doing something she shouldn't!"

Luna completed her turn and was both elated and disappointed in the same moment. On the one hoof, it wasn't her mother after all, but a guardian spell cast in the *image* of her mother. On the *other*, it was something that Queen Nebulae had left for *her* to find; this was meant for *Luna* and no pony else. Looking up, Luna let her eyes trace over the mother she'd not seen for so painfully long.

Queen Nebulae was considerably larger than Luna but a smidge smaller than Celestia; this wasn't a surprise given the age difference between the two sisters. Her coat was even darker than Luna's, and her mane and tail shone even more brightly with multi-colored pinpoints of light that seemed to shift of their own accord. There was no mistaking the mirth in her emerald eyes or the amused tolerance in her grin. "Come here, dear."

Luna found herself levitated off her hooves and pulled into an embrace that certainly *felt* real enough. Closing her eyes, Luna began to sob. "I've missed you so *much*!" She couldn't control herself; the pain and loneliness that had been weighing her down *demand*ed release.

"Shh. Shh, I'm not mad at you, dear. But you do need to be punished," the

image said gently. "You know what the rules are and that you are *not* allowed in here without permission?"

"I'm sorry, Mother," Luna choked out in between ragged gasps for breath. Despite the soothing hug provided by the image of her mother, she just could *not* calm herself. "It's been so *long*!"

"Pish-posh," Nebulae murmured into Luna's mane, adding a gentle nuzzle. "Your father and I left this morning, and we'll be back before dinner. My stars, dear! Whatever has you this worked up?"

"Mother!" Luna cried plaintively, squeezing Nebulae even tighter for a moment. "It *hasn't* been just a day! It's been almost three thousand *years*!"

"Luna, now what have I told you about exaggerating?" Nebulae, still smiling, gently bumped Luna's nose with a hoof. "It might *feel* like that long, but it really hasn't been."

"But *mom*!" Luna complained, lifting her muzzle to stare into her mother's eyes.

"But nothing, young mare!" Laughing, Nebulae gently shook her head. "Such a teller of tall tales, worthy of a bard! All right then, time to put a stop to this for the moment. Since you like exaggerating so much, you'll be eating alfalfa for the next week, understand?"

"Yes, Mother," Luna whispered. She could feel the magic binding the image to the study beginning to wane. It made her sad; who knew when she'd have such a chance again?

"Alright, then. Run along, and I'll be home soon!" Nebulae smiled and hugged Luna tightly. "I love you, you silly little filly."

"Love you too, Mama," Luna voice cracking as she realized she was about to lose her mother yet again.

The spell spent, Luna was gently pushed out the door and back into the hallway where Celestia waited with open wings. For several minutes, the Princesses could only stare into each other's eyes as they brimmed with tears. Which princess broke first is a matter of no debate, for the sisters themselves simply did not care. One moment, the tears were contained and in the next, the carefully constructed emotional barriers came crashing down under the weight of several thousand years of broken hopes and dreams that had been carefully set aside.

Celestia recovered first, wiping first her tears and then Luna's away with a

gentle wing. Swallowing hard and clearing her voice, she achieved something resembling her regular tone. "What'd Mom do to you?"

Misery breaking under a wistful and wry smile, Luna shook her head. Sighing resignedly, she replied, "What Mom always does. Alfalfa for a week. She didn't say it just now, but oh, how I can *hear* it anyway! 'Alfalfa is good for a growing filly!' Luna made a gagging sound and shuddered. "I *hate* alfalfa!"

"You don't have to, you know. Eat it for a week, I mean." Celestia smiled and winked. "I could issue you a royal pardon and you could avoid the dire fate of the alfalfa monster."

With surprising vehemence, Luna shook her head and emphatically stated, "Don't you *dare*, Celly!" Luna met Celestia's surprised gaze and added, "I think I need to. I know I *want* to, if only to feel a little closer to Mom again. I mean... she... she wanted this. It was her favorite punishment, and *today*, her sentry ordered it as my punishment for entering her study." She smiled slightly as she caught a knowing look in her sister's eyes. "And I bet as awful as it will taste, it'll never have tasted so sweet. So, what'd mom do to you?"

Celestia turned away, but not before Luna caught the growing flush in her cheeks. "Celly! Come on, I told you what she did to *me*!"

"She... spanked me," Celestia whispered, barely loud enough to be heard as her cheeks flushed deep red. "For being a bad influence on you."

Luna couldn't have held back, even if she wanted to. After the emotional release that bordered on torment, the reveal that her older sister had been spanked like a little filly was simply too much to be borne.

As the thunderous laughter of the Princesses of Equestria roared up the hallway, Dr. Coltle smiled and made a note in his medical journal: *'The Princesses have weathered the emotional crisis in good form and appear to be closer to each other than ever before. Recommend several days of rest, but knowing them, they'll be back at work in the morning. Will attempt to require them to take the rest of the day, however. Even Celestia and Luna need some time to share memories and heal.'*

The laughter, much like Doctor Coltle's smile, didn't last nearly long enough. As the echoes of mirth faded, he slid the Princess' medical file into a satchel and withdrew another, this one much thinner than the first. With a soft sigh, Dr. Coltle's smile faded completely and an expression of deep concern replaced it. Carefully, he opened the dossier and made an addition.

*'Lightning Storm has recovered fully from what should have been a permanent and crippling injury. According to the first responders, the primary structural bone in*

*his right wing had been splintered into multiple pieces by blunt force impact. However, medical staff could not verify this as the wing had literally pulled the pieces back into place before operatives could arrive on scene. Said staff noted damage consistent with a broken bone two or three weeks into the healing process. Visible malformations caused by broken bone and sinew healed literally as staff watched; by the time attending physician and Princesses arrived, the wing had been fully restored in appearance if not in function.*

*It is due to this fact that I see no reason to not begin monitoring Lightning Storm in much the same fashion as the Princesses; he shows every sign of being as ageless as they. We need not truly fear for his physical safety; he has shown an astounding resiliency rivaled only by that of the Princesses themselves. While the Princesses come by their agelessness naturally, Lightning Storm's is clearly induced by some manner that has nothing to do with magic. The mechanisms are irrelevant, however; the fact remains that he is ageless.*

*Storm's physical condition may not be of concern, but the same cannot be said of his mental condition. The meltdown at the Flight School was the third such incident since Storm's arrival or perhaps reanimation; I shall research that particular fact later. The foal is showing signs of increasing mental instability as evidenced by these particular episodes. The first of course was when he sang a lullaby to a young filly in the hospital. This induced a fugue-like state that lasted for approximately six hours. The second incident was when he solved the Riddle of the Door using mathematics that should have been far beyond his means. While less debilitating than the first incident, it still resulted in a brief malformation of his eyes and the seepage of a strange silvery substance that evaporated almost as quickly as it appeared.*

*The third incident, the one at the Flight Camp, is the most severe of all in my medical opinion. The foal was clearly in agony and felt every shift of broken bone and sinew despite every attempt to provide magical or chemical relief. What was worse than that, perhaps, was the mental and emotional damage done when he realized that he was not going to grow older and pass away of natural causes. The foal is simply not mentally equipped for such a burden no matter what knowledge he holds in that mind of his.*

*This then is my main concern; I theorize the foal is not immortal. Given catastrophic damage resulting in sufficiently severe damage to the brain and body, I believe Lightning Storm both could and would pass to the Summer-Lands. The foal may be sporadic in producing or displaying his intellect, but I believe it is only a matter of time before he puts those pieces together and comes to the same conclusion.*

*Given the displayed mental instability to date, I fear what the foal will do at that point in time. I am certain that he is fully capable of engineering circumstances that could result in the catastrophic damage I suspect is necessary. I believe he both can and will attempt to do so; it is only a question of when.*

*Therefore, it is my informed medical opinion that Lightning Storm be monitored at all times. He seems to trust both Sunny Skies as well as her gryphoness ward Agate, so the three of them should be moved into Canterlot Castle. It is also my opinion that he be encouraged to apply himself to whatever lies behind the door that he himself unlocked. This will accomplish two things; first, he shall have something other than his problems to focus on. The second thing is perhaps a bit more morbid; Lightning Storm represents the single best chance for the return of Luna and Celestia's parents. Should this opportunity be lost, I fear what their reaction might be; it might be sufficient enough to drive them both to despair. As displeased as I am with myself for thinking this, we must encourage Storm to do whatever he can to bring back the King and Queen before whatever madness awaits renders him incapable or unwilling of doing so.*

*I pray that I am wrong. I pray that I am just an old fool who worries too much. Yet I cannot deny that this entire situation unsettles me beyond words! What am I supposed to do with a foal that doesn't follow the laws of magic and seems to dance around the laws of science with as much ease as a breeze tosses a feather?*

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"Ow!" Storm yelped as he rubbed his ear with a hoof. "What'd you do *that* for?!" Glaring at Agate didn't do much of anything, as the gryphoness simply glared back.

"Well, for starters, you've been sleeping for twelve hours and I'm hungry. She grinned, preening the ear she'd just bit on him. "You're *still* too scrawny to make a meal of."

"I'm not hungry," Storm said with a sigh. He flopped his head back down on the bed and mumbled into the covers. "I just wanna go back to sleep."

Without even missing a beat, Agate nodded and shrugged a shoulder. "Okay. You wanna mope a little more, that's fine. Me, they're serving waffles and I don't want to miss out. I'll be back after breakfast." With that, she turned and padded towards the door.

Storm stared at her in shock, and felt a sinking sensation in his chest as the door closed behind her. "Agate?" he called, lifting his head to look towards the door. When no reply came, he forced himself out of bed and walked slowly over to the door. "Agate!" Storm said a bit louder, worry leaking into his voice. Had she really left him?

When there was no reply again, Storm nosed the door open and peeked out into the hallway, where he was promptly pounced and dragged into the hallway by a certain gryphoness that could not stop laughing to save her life.



"No, I'm *not* gonna leave you, kiddo! But I am *also* not going to allow you to mope in that room, no matter *how* comfortable it might be." Much to both her amusement and that of Storm, she proceeded to drag him down the hallway by his scruff despite his giggles, squirms, and flapping of his wings.

"Okay, okay! I'll walk!" Storm said when he couldn't take laughing anymore. "Leggo!"

Agate did, lifting him by the scruff and setting him onto his hooves. "Good, because scrawny or not, you're *heavy*!" Together, they ambled down the hallway towards the dining hall.

"Agate?" Storm asked quietly.

"Mmh? What's up, kiddo?" When she turned her head to look at Storm, he wasn't at her side anymore.

"This is for biting my ear!" With an evil grin, Storm leaned down and chomped on Agate's tail-tuft.

"Awk! Why you little... *get back here!*" Agate bellowed as she began to chase a laughing Storm down the hall.

Storm led Agate on a merry chase that culminated in his diving through the dining hall door and taking a hard right turn that required a bit of a wing flap to pull off as tightly as needed.

Agate, with her greater mass and but a single wing, was unable to make the turn and continue pursuit. Instead, when she *tried* to follow Storm into his tight turn, her taloned forepaws and leonine hindpaws lost all traction and sent her sliding on her belly across the smooth and polished granite floor... and right into Princess Celestia.

"Aheh... Sorry, Princess," Agate mumbled apologetically before shooting daggers at Storm. Storm, for his part, stuck his tongue out at Agate and grinned widely.

"Don't be, Agate," Celestia said with a quiet chuckle. "It has been a very long time since these halls echoed with such laughter. Too long. You may wish to be a bit more careful, however." Celestia grinned mischievously and winked to the gryphoness. "After all, I have been known to retaliate in kind."

Agate opened her beak to reply, but was interrupted by a gravelly voice.

"Ah, Princess Celestia. I was wondering if I might have a word with you and Princess Luna?" Coltle asked, nodding his head in his version of a bow.

Arching her eyebrow, Celestia nodded. "Of course, Doctor." She turned to Storm and Agate. "If you would excuse us...?"

"Princess?" Storm interrupted before Agate could agree and turn to leave.

"Yes, Storm?" Celestia turned and smiled gently to the colt who stood, uncertain if he should bow or not. His wings were half-unfurled and fluttering slightly, creating the gentle sound of feathers rustling. It was, she decided, extremely cute.

"Agate's really hungry... could we get some of the waffles to take with us? Please?" Storm sat down and looked up at the Princess with eyes as wide and pleading as he could manage.

Unable to handle it, Celestia burst into laughter. "I am not going to starve you, you silly colt! You and Agate eat your fill. Doctor Colte and I will talk in the gardens." Eyes bright, Celestia nodded to the doctor. "Shall we?" before turning to lead the way to a different door than the one Storm burst through.

"Of course, Princess." Before following, he turned to Agate and Storm. "Agate, you stick with him and keep an eye on him for me, alright? And you, Storm... try not to do anything else that's stupid or dangerous? I don't think my mane can get any greyer than it is!"

Giggling, Storm nodded and smiled brightly. "Okay, Sir. I promise I'll try."

With that, Storm and Agate were left to tuck into the prodigious supply of waffles that still were on the serving carts.

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"We need to talk about Storm," Coltle declared as soon as the guards closed the doors to the gardens behind him.

"Goodness," Celestia murmured delicately. "This cannot be good if you are starting out that direct, Doctor." Walking over to the fountain in the center of the garden, Celestia gazed into the serene waters and at her own reflection.

"I'm afraid not, no," Coltle agreed.

With a gusty sigh, Celestia turned to look calmly at the Doctor. "Very well. Let us summarize so as to save time. Storm is ageless through means unknown, and will remain as a colt for the rest of his days. You fear for his mental state and are

convinced that when the burden of agelessness is too great that he will attempt suicide. You are about to suggest that Storm be restricted to the castle and be monitored at all times. Unless I miss my guess, you are also about to recommend that he be encouraged to work on bringing my parents home as quickly as possible because you fear that he may not remain so amenable."

Doctor Coltle, veteran of the Royal Guard as well as decades of duty in the hospitals, faced his greatest challenge to date as he met Princess Celestia's gentle gaze despite picking up more than a few traces of disapproval and disappointment. "Princess," he said firmly as he quelled the desire to apologize, "somehow you make that rhyme perfectly with slavery and criminal neglect. I would have hoped you'd know me better than that."

Eyebrow arching in surprise, Celestia canted her head to the side a bit. "Am I wrong, then?"

Coltle shook his head and sighed. "You're not wrong, Princess. Neither, however, are you *right*. Try and look at it from a medical perspective."

"I'm listening," Celestia assured him as she made herself comfortable. *I'm not sure where he's going with this*, she thought, *but I owe it to him to at least hear him out.*

"I've got three patients, Princess, and I'm responsible for their health and well-being. You and Luna had put the pain and anguish of your parents behind you over two thousand years ago. All that healing was undone the instant Storm unlocked the door. You were *hurt* when you saw the spell-cast sentry of your mother." He narrowed his eyes and stabbed his hoof accusingly to the Princess. "*You look me in the eyes and tell me you can contemplate never seeing your mother again, should Storm's mental state decay!*"

Struck speechless, Celestia found herself unable to meet Coltle's eyes. Eyes misting with tears, she felt an unwelcome clenching in her chest around her heart. "I..." She swallowed, unable to continue.

More gently, but only slightly, Coltle completed his statement with a devastating idea. "That, Princess, is a danger to my third patient. He's as ageless and eternal as you. You have never asked anything of your ponies. Yet you would be denied the only thing in recent memory that you've truly *wanted*... and needed. If his mind decays to where he can't or *won't* bring your parents back, do you truly think you can look at him *forever* and *not* feel bitterness and resentment to him?"

Princess Celestia closed her eyes and lowered her head. "No. At first, I would feel that, but in time I would get over it. I have had experience with that before, as you know."

"What of Storm then? In the centuries it takes you to forgive him, what would be left of the foal before you today?" Coltle gestured with his hoof towards the dining hall where the foal had last been seen. "Consider the effects on him. He's an orphan. An orphan that is never going to die and will be facing an endless sequence of foster mothers and fathers. No family to *ever* call his own. To have the only two constants in his life *actively hating him for any length of time will kill him!*"

Meekly, Princess Celestia conceded defeat. "What do you suggest?"

"We take care of him, Princess. We love him as he has never been loved before. We encourage him to work on bringing your parents back, because as I see it, that is the *only* chance any of you three have for a happy outcome. We watch him closely, and we keep him closer than we watch. We do whatever we can to help him remain happy and stable, and to do that, I think we need to keep him here in the castle."

As soon as he uttered those words, a pinkish-blue flash of light burst into being and when it faded, a scroll levitated in its place. Glancing over to Coltle, Celestia smiled a bit. "A note from my student, Twilight. One moment, please."

"Of course, Princess." Coltle sighed; from his perspective, things had gone about as well as they possibly could have. That is, until Celestia started laughing and shaking her head.

"It seems, my good Doctor, that Storm and Agate are both now in Ponyville." Celestia managed to stifle the laughter, though a smile seemed affixed rather permanently to her muzzle.

"*What?*" Coltle demanded incredulously. "How'd he manage *that*?"

"He didn't, Doctor." Celestia grinned mischievously. "It seems *Agate* accidentally set off something in my mother's study and it transported them to Ponyville. Where they ended up left a bit to be desired, though!"

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Agate glanced over at Storm as he read through a book he'd found in the study. *He* was having the time of his life investigating every nook and cranny in the place and had all but exploded with enthusiasm when he'd found Queen Nebulae's research notes. Nothing would do but to drag the book to the workbench and begin leafing through it.

*She*, on the other hand, was *bored*. "Storm, are you done yet?" Agate complained as she paced the length of the room again.

"Huh?" Storm lifted his head and saw the decidedly vexed look on his gryphoness friend's face. "Oh. Sorry, Agate, but I'm just getting started. I know a *little* about what she was doing. The Queen, I mean. But there's just so much to try and figure out!"

Faking interest, Agate perked her ear tufts and padded over. "Like what?"

"Well... take that arch over there." Storm pointed with his hoof then flipped a few pages in the notes. "I'm not sure how yet, but that thing focuses some kind of energy and uses it somehow to open a kind of door."

"Huh!" Agate exclaimed as she padded over to look at it. The obsidian ring was quiet, giving no indication of what its purpose was or how to make it do anything. "Where's it go?"

"No clue!" Storm shrugged. "That's what I'm trying to figure out. I need to know how that thing works before I can piece together where the King and Queen went. The only thing I do know is that *is* what they used to leave."

"Any chance of it being used to bring them back?" Agate asked, glancing over her shoulder.

"Dunno." Storm sighed and tapped the book with his hoof. "The answers'll be here if they're anywhere. But it's just going to take time to sort through. I don't even know what the thing uses for energy, let alone how to turn it on, yet. Then there's the matter of figuring out what happened to the King and Queen... and then seeing if there's a way to reverse whatever they did."

Storm turned back to his book, and Agate returned to being bored. Staring at the ring wasn't really interesting when all one could see was the granite wall on the other side. Pacing, Agate wandered the length and breadth of the room, talons and claws clicking on the stone. "Wait a minute," she muttered. "That's weird." She may not have been able to fly, but she still had the instincts and spatial awareness of a flier.

"Something's not right," Agate grumbled to herself. "That bookshelf is shorter than the one on the other wall, but the wall's the same height." She padded over to the bookshelf in question and, sure enough, found very faint scrape marks on both the floor and ceiling. "Hey, Storm?"

"Mmh?" came the distracted reply. "What's up, Agate?"

"C'mere, I've found something. This bookshelf's a secret passage to somewhere. I want to see where it goes or what's behind it."

*That* got Storm's attention. He came over, and looked at the bookshelf. Mildly irritated, he glanced up at Agate. "What makes you think this is a secret door?"

"Look at the corners. See the scratches in the stone? Also, this section of shelf is about half an inch lower on the top and bottom than the other. Looks like a hinge. How do you suppose it opens?"

The answer came when Agate stepped forward and placed her forepaw on a certain section of stonework. There was a soft click, and then the bookshelf pivoted open, revealing a darkened passageway beyond. Hanging on a peg just inside the passage was a pair of panniers.

Agate grinned, beak gaping. "Want to go exploring?"

"*Yeah!*" Storm enthused. He turned and ran back to the table, biting the tome with the lab notes in it. "Mrrf!"

"You want to carry the book? Really?" Agate rolled her eyes and took the panniers off of the peg. "Fine, I'll carry it."

"Oooh! These too! Might need them!" Storm proceeded to pick up and carry over about a dozen scrolls, setting them in the pocket opposite that of the book.

"*Hey!*" Agate protested. "We're walking down a *hallway*! You don't need to make me carry the whole library!"

"Might need them!" Grinning, Storm nearly pranced into the hallway beyond the door. "Come *on!*"

Grumbling, Agate followed Storm, but the door slammed shut behind her. "Great. That's just *great!*" Agate complained loudly. She flung her wing to the side, and smacked Storm on accident.

"Um, Agate?" Storm asked quietly. After he'd been smacked, he'd stumbled and could've sworn he'd heard a stone shift under his hoof.

"I mean, *really!* Now we're stuck in the dark in a hallway. Neither of us can cast spells! So, what're we going to do?"

Glancing down, Storm saw that a soft blue light was leaching in between the stone, and it was growing brighter. "Agate!" Storm whispered urgently.

"*What?*" Agate demanded. She glanced down just in time to see the blue glow grow even brighter, nearly enough to hurt her eyes. "Oh."

A second later, there was a brilliant flash of blue light and a sensation of falling a short distance. Fortunately, there was no sense of *impact* on anything, but it was decidedly cold, and Storm found himself squashed against Agate's thankfully warm feathers. There was also the sound of crying nearby, but from what, Storm couldn't tell.

"You alright, Storm?" Agate asked as she tried to wriggle a bit. "I can't move; my wing is wedged against something and my hands are stuck at my sides."

"Yeah, I'm fine, I think," Storm whispered. "I can move a little. Where *are* we, and what's that crying sound?"

The darkness that enfolded them was replaced by bright light and what could only be described as a vivid example of the color pink.

"Hi!" said an extremely cheerful and up-beat pink earth pony. "I'm Pinkie Pie! Why'd you scare Pumpkin and Pound, and what'cha doing upside down in my refrigerator?"