

Twilight stood in the doorway of the guest room, looking down upon Storm as he slept. The foal was clearly at peace; he was rolled over onto his back with his legs curled tightly to chest and belly way and wings unfurled to the sides. As she watched, he wriggled a bit in his sleep, yawning hugely with a curling of his tongue before settling back into a deeper repose.

She, however, was anything *but* at rest... either emotionally or physically. Stomach tying itself in knots for the third time that night, Twilight found herself re-reading a portion of the letter she had received from Princess Celestia... and Princess Luna.

‘A little over three thousand years ago, Equestria found itself at a crossroads. Magic and technology were both in ascent and found themselves at cross-purposes. The unicorns felt threatened by the advent of science and technology as non-unicorns, under the right circumstances, could indeed perform virtually all of the tasks accomplished by magic. Earth ponies relished the idea of technology, as it would lessen their reliance on the unicorns. Pegasi were somewhat upset, as they felt that flight and the ability to control weather were all that set them apart from the others.

The best and the brightest minds of the age came together in order to discuss this and to try and work it out. It was, in all honesty, one of the shining moments of the earth ponies; they opened their presentation with the recommendation that technology *not* be permitted to flourish and spread unchecked. The costs were too great in material and being the custodians of the earth, they realized that resources were not infinite. Should technology take full hold, the day would come when there was not enough to go around. They foresaw strife brought about by want, and conflict arising amongst friends becoming common.

They proposed that technology not be abolished, as much good could indeed come from it. That they felt that it should be tightly regulated and integrated in a safe manner to Equestrian society is the reason the negotiations were so short; the pegasus and unicorn delegations were anticipating an argument to end all arguments over the issue. Neither ever expected the earth ponies to recommend partial shelving of their ideas!

Indeed, the presentation was magical in its simplicity and forthrightness. It was both recommended and immediately approved that the only uses of this technology should be limited in scope to areas that could actually reduce the impact on our environment as well as medical applications, for all ponies value life. Therefore, the construction of dams and other methods of generating electricity were authorized in order to power things like furnaces for warmth as well as ovens for cooking. Both applications had required the burning of wood previously, but no longer. They made a case for refrigerators, due to the

increased preservation of food as well as lessening the impact of the summer's heat on the elderly and the young. Historical notes have it that they'd built an 'air conditioner' for the meeting hall and had it running on magically supplied electricity. That certainly helped in keeping tensions to a minimum; nopony is at their best when baking in the humidity of summertime.

In light of such a noble position, the pegasus and unicorn contingent requested that the earth pony scientists be granted lifetime stipends; it made sense, since they would not be able to pursue their natural talents any longer. This was unanimously approved amongst the unicorns and pegasi, but the earth ponies protested. They felt that they should continue to be contributing members of society, and asked that instead of a stipend, they instead be given jobs to perform in perpetuity. They wished to earn their own way and remain useful rather than be paid simply to remain silent and idle. Respect for the earth ponies reached an all time high, that day. Their request was granted, and the matter was resolved... for the most part.

There were two scientists that did not agree and that left the conference before it was concluded. These two felt, perhaps even rightfully so, that technology had even more to offer than what was being allowed. Their motives were benign; they wished to push ahead on the medical and scientific fronts. They wished to eradicate all disease, suffering, and want from the world around them.

These are noble goals, but unachievable through technology alone. Success came in the careful combination of magic with technology, and the even more delicate integration with the results to Equestrian society at large.

Herein lies the danger that Storm represents. Consider the damage his arrival caused! Only now, months after his arrival, have we successfully restored Canterlot's arcane crystals. It is theorized that the event that brought Lightning Storm to us was purely technological in nature, and no thought had been put into combining it safely with magic. It is this purity that caused the damage to the crystals, but it is also the same purity that the renegade scientists espoused.

We believe most firmly that Lightning Storm is being completely honest with us; we believe that he does not actually remember what happened in his life before his arrival in its entirety. He has, however, demonstrated a command of mathematics and science that rivals that of even the most educated of ponies at the Gifted Unicorn Academy. Even in his brief conversation with you he proposed giving flight to the flightless, which is one of the very cornerstones of the renegade's position.

The renegades were finally brought before the King and Queen... our parents. They were given the option of abiding by the accords and giving up their

science, or banishment. They chose banishment, but noted that they would indeed return some day to provide the fruits of their labors to the land that they held so dear in their hearts.

With that, they were gone. In their wake, they left worry and tension; would they come back? What would they bring with them? Could science and technology unbridled unseat the more tempered blend? These questions drove the citizens at large to beg answers from our parents... answers that could not truly be provided. It was decided, then, that the King and Queen would replicate the scientist's line of study and attempt to bring them back home again.

As you know, our parents never returned. Ordinarily, either Luna or myself would perform a dream-walking spell upon Lightning Storm in order to better determine his origins and disposition. However, we cannot in good faith do this. Storm might very well represent the single best chance... perhaps the *only* chance... of the King and Queen returning home to us. We cannot rule out bias with absolute certainty, and so we turn to you, my most trusted student, to do what we cannot. With eyes open and judgment unclouded, we beseech you to cast the dream-walking spell upon Lightning Storm on our behalf.

We do not ask this lightly, Twilight. You must understand that these are circumstances potentially as dire as any threat Equestria has faced. Everything Storm has told you so far is accurate to a point. The dam on the outskirts of Ponyville does indeed generate electricity in the manner he describes; turbines do spin magnets over coils of wire. As you surmised, the current generated is accumulated and transported to the point of use via magic. It is important to note, however, that his method of transferring the energy is also valid and *would* work. In theory, wire could be strung across Equestria and provide the same function as the magical transmission.

In reality, Storm is only wrong in that the dam is not extracting magic from the water. Magic is everywhere, and with the proper knowledge and with care, it can be obtained from nearly anything. Take the crystals that power Canterlot's backup shield; were we to have unicorns recharge them, then the poor ponies would literally be sucked dry of all arcane energy and left an empty husk.

We must ask you to determine if Lightning Storm is one of the scientists returned, or if he is an innocent caught in events beyond his control. If he is indeed an innocent, then he might hold the key to bringing Mother and Father home. It is for that reason we ask that you do this for us, Twilight. We might overlook many warning signs in our desire to have our parents back, and we trust that you will not be so blinded.

With deepest respect,

Princess Celestia
Princess Luna'

Twilight sighed, levitating the letter over to the nightstand next to where Storm lay, oblivious. *There really is no choice, is there?* Twilight thought. *I mean, their concerns are valid, and if the Princess' fears are realized, the danger is appalling. I have to use the dream-walking spell.*

Mind made up, Twilight opted for a cup of calming tea before starting. She was a bit too wound up, and doubted her own ability to cast so delicate a spell. Thus, a few minutes later, Twilight found herself back in Storm's room, sitting at the head of his bed with her hooves resting gently on his temples.

What happened next was beyond anything she'd ever experienced before.

One moment Twilight was standing on all four hooves in the guest bedroom of her library, looking down at a sleeping foal. The next instant she found herself standing on two leg-like appendages looking out what had to be the most detailed painting of a star-scape she'd ever seen. Glancing down, Twilight saw that she was holding onto a railing of sorts with two hand-like appendages. *Huh. No scales or fur. Four fingers to Spike's three, but still has an opposable thumb.* She wiggled her fingers in sequence. *Good dexterity, too. Fantastic sense of touch!* Twilight noted as she ran her fingers through her long, ginger-colored hair. Glancing down at her chest, she smiled wryly. *Obviously female and mammalian. Glad for that, not even sure what I'd do if I were cold-blooded or male.*

"It never gets old, does it?" asked a voice right by Twilight's side.

Twilight flinched and spun around, only to now find herself face to face with another one of these strange creatures. This one had a brown mane that was close-cropped but tinged with grey at the temples. He wore a moustache and beard, also tinged with grey, but the soft green eyes and gentle smile at least softened her surprise. He was wearing a uniform of sorts that wasn't too far off from her own; there was also script written on it, though she couldn't decipher it.

"Wh...what doesn't?" Twilight swallowed hard; heart pounding oddly in her chest. *This has got to be Storm in his native form!*

Chuckling as the corners of his eyes crinkled in amusement, Storm lifted his hand and offered her a steaming cup of something. "Here, have some coffee. Looks like you need it, Liz." Once she'd taken the cup, he lifted his own and gestured towards the painting. "The view. You and I always did come here when we were stressed or we needed to remind ourselves what we were working towards." Storm

paused a moment, sipping from his mug before continuing. "Now we come here when we're stressed and to remind ourselves where we're trying to return to."

Since it seemed expected of her, Twilight sipped from her own mug. The brew was strange, being both bitter and sweet at the same time and with the distinct aftertaste of a small amount of alcohol. *Well, I can't imagine he'd give me something like that if it were bad for me. Perhaps whomever I am here liked it? Regardless, I need to start finding out what's going on. At least I can clearly rule out him being a pony! He's definitely not one of the scientists.*

Storm sipped at his mug and stood next to Twilight, gazing out at the darkness. A look of sadness crossed his face, and Twilight could swear he aged another decade in those few seconds. "Five *billion* dead," he muttered. "All because someone didn't follow containment protocol. We cured it, though. Took four years, but we cured it." He sighed, emptying his mug in one long pull. "Four more years, and they'll be home," he murmured. "I received the latest telemetry from the shuttle fleet about an hour ago. The automated systems are functioning perfectly, and the stasis chambers are all in the green."

Not knowing what to say, Twilight just stared into her steaming mug and nodded. *This is so very strange! I don't know what to say, or to do! Celestia help me, what if I say the wrong thing?*

Fortunately, her nervousness was precisely what was expected. A gentle hand rested on her shoulder and shook it, accompanied by the words, "Hey. I miss them too, but we had to save those we could. Once we cured the plague, there was no reason for us all to stay here and die. You did a bang-up job on building the stasis units. Max and Irene gutted the shuttles and turned them into cargo haulers. The station AI took it upon itself to redesign the shuttle's computers so that it could copy it's functions and fly the shuttle fleet along the course I plotted."

"But..." Twilight choked up, unable to continue. *So much is making sense, now. Storm and his people were trying to fight a plague. But how does that relate to him arriving in Equestria?*

"I know." Storm grinned sheepishly. "We never intended to have our daughter, but I'd not change it for anything. I just wish we could have had *that* blessed accident nine months earlier so I could have put you two on one of the shuttles."

"*What?!*" The exclamation burst out of Twilight before she could stop it. "Daughter?"

Storm turned to her, expression going cold as he stared at her. "Excuse me? What did you say?"

Oh, haystacks! Twilight thought. *Okay, Twilight. Improvise, improvise! How can I get out of this mess?* Sighing, she set the cup down and turned to face Storm. "Sorry. I... I had a dream that we'd managed to get another shuttle built and evacuated some of the others. I guess I wanted it to be true so much that I just believed it."

Expression softening, Storm even smiled as he took Twilight's hands in his. "If we *had* managed to get another built, you know full and *damn* well I'd have put you on it even if I had to bolt your stasis pod to the outer hull!"

"As if!" Twilight said spontaneously as she squeezed Storm's hands in hers. "You need me here, and you know it!"

The tactic worked. Storm laughed and nodded, letting her hands go. "Yes. Yes, I do. Your work has been nothing short of brilliant." Folding his hands behind his back, Storm turned to face the stars once more. "It's because of you and Jen that our food supplies lasted as long as they have." He shook his head, looking at Twilight over his shoulder. "We could have tried the grand experiment several years ago, but decided to test and review until we were just about out of supplies."

Twilight nodded, mental gears whirring away. *Makes sense. If there's that much on the line and no reason to rush, why not run the clock out a bit? Refine the data, test and re-test everything.* "You're sure it will work?"

Storm nodded, eyes sparkling a bit. "As sure as I can be. The math works out perfectly. Ivan assures me the reactor can handle the output necessary. If this works as well as the simulations do, then we'll be back home this time tomorrow. A brief respite, then our *real* work begins."

Feeling her cheeks grow warm, Twilight stifled a cough as she turned away from Storm as well as the expanse before her. *With so many dead, he can only be talking about repopulation. I don't even want to think about two aliens reproducing and how they might do it! It's bad enough I'm wearing somepony else's body!*

With a snort, Storm wrapped his arms around Twilight's waist and pulled her so that her back was against his chest. "Yes, there'll be plenty of *that*, too. I'll have you know I was more referring to teaching and preserving knowledge! It isn't *all* about procreating. Though now that you mention it..." Lifting his head, Storm leaned over to kiss his wife's neck, but stopped when he caught the look of horror on her face, reflected in the pane of glass. Blinking, his eyes went wide and his hug loosened. "Liz? What's wrong?"

Flinching, Twilight pulled out of Storm's arms and staggered forward a few steps before catching herself on the railing. "Let *go* of me!"

Confused and more than a little hurt, Storm lifted his hands and backed

slowly away. "What'd I do? Liz, I'm sorry... whatever it was that I did or said, I'm sorry! What happened?"

Twilight turned to face Storm, unable to completely mask the revulsion completely. "I'm sorry. I just..." She couldn't bring herself to complete the sentence, as a shudder shook her.

Heartbroken, Storm's hands dropped to his side. "I..." He swallowed hard, then sighed. "I'll be in the lab, all night. Don't worry, I won't be back to our room. Tell our daughter that I love her, and I'll see her soon." Feet shuffling across the carpet, he opened the elevator doors and stepped in. Before the doors closed behind him, he turned and looked at Twilight strangely. "Liz? Did you ever have déjà vu before something happened? I could've sworn that we had this discussion before. Just... that it ended differently." He cast a look at a nearby table and a slight ghost of a smile quirked the corner of his mouth upwards. "Very differently," he murmured as the elevator doors closed in front of him.

The doors aren't the only thing closing, Twilight noted. It's not the spell ending, Twilight decided. Whatever I just did triggered some kind of defense. Storm doesn't want me in here, anymore.

Reality re-asserted itself for Twilight; the walls began to melt and re-shape themselves from cold grey metal to the soft earthen tones of her bedroom. She herself began to change, much to her relief; being in a strange bipedal body was disconcerting, and she found herself grateful for having two of her four hooves firmly planted on the ground. Twilight was still standing at the foot of the bed Storm was sleeping in, her hooves gently pressed to his temples. Storm sighed softly as Twilight took a step away, breaking contact. Smiling down at him, she chuckled then whispered, "I'm sorry, Storm. I'll make it up to you when you wake. I'll get some cupcakes from Sugar Cube corner, but sleep now... you must be exhausted after that."

Deftly, Twilight tugged the covers up over Storm's shoulder; the foal didn't even move. As quietly as she was able, Twilight went downstairs to find a very put-upon Agate resting her head face-down on the tabletop while Fluttershy pestered her and Spike tried to stifle a worsening case of the giggles.

"I'm *really* very sorry!" Fluttershy said, nearly frantic with the need to be forgiven. "I didn't mean to step on your tail. I thought you were—"

"Miss Fluttershy," interrupted an aggrieved Agate, "please by the light of the Royal Sisters, *stop!* For the thirtieth time—"

"Thirty second!" Spike snickered. *I might get yelled at for that later, but it'll be worth it! When Fluttershy gets on an apology roll, she does not fool around!*

Agate continued after a long-suffering sigh. "For the thirty *second* time then, there's nothing to forgive. My tail is fine, the ducks are safely at their pond, and we've got the ice cream and sprinkles out of my feathers and fur. This Gilda doesn't sound very pleasant, and after your last experience with her, it's understandable that you'd be a bit twitchy. I startled you, after all. Please, I beg of you... Let. It. *Go!*"

"Okay," Fluttershy whispered. Agate sighed in relief just in time for Fluttershy to continue by murmuring, "If you'll forgive me..."

In frustration, Agate made a strangled gargling noise before lifting her head.

Before the young gryphoness could begin to bash her own head against the tabletop, Twilight walked over to Fluttershy and rested a hoof on her friend's shoulder. "Fluttershy, it's okay. I think it's fairly clear Agate doesn't hold anything against you."

Agate glanced over at Twilight, expression so grateful that the mare had to grit her teeth to keep from dissolving into mirth. Spike had no such compulsion; the little dragon collapsed on the floor, paws holding his belly as he howled with laughter.

"Okay," whispered Fluttershy, now fully self-conscious about the goings on. "If you're sure." Without waiting for confirmation, she turned to look at Twilight. "How's Storm doing? Spike said that you were using a magic spell on him."

At Twilight's arched eyebrow, Spike sat back up, rubbing the tears of laughter from his eyes. "You'd have wound up telling them anyway, Twilight," he pointed out. "That, and it kept them down here so you'd not be interrupted. Even *I* know that it's dangerous to interrupt that sort of spell."

"True," Twilight admitted. "I'd have wound up telling you *all*, really. I'm sure the Princess would approve. After all... Fluttershy, you're one of my best and closest friends as well as the bearer of the Element of Kindness. I need your opinion on the important things we deal with. Spike, you're my number one assistant and have helped quite a lot when I get stuck on something." Having acknowledged her two friends, Twilight turned to Agate. "You probably know Storm better than most of us, anyway. It wouldn't be fair to keep you in the dark, and you might know something we don't."

Twilight sighed as she took a spot at the table. "What I'm about to tell you has got to stay in these walls. Don't tell anypony else, not even the others; I'll take care of that when they get back." She waited until she got nods of acknowledgement from Spike, Fluttershy, and Agate before continuing. "The short form is that the Princesses were worried that Storm was actually a renegade scientist from long ago. She asked

me to find out.”

“Um... I don’t understand,” Fluttershy said, softly. “Why didn’t she find out herself? Weren’t he and Agate staying at the orphanage at the castle?”

“We’d been brought to the castle proper, once Storm was well enough,” Agate said, settling back down. She ruffled her one wing instinctively, which drew another pitying glance from Fluttershy. “I figured it was because Storm had opened the study door.”

“Partly, yes.” Twilight levitated over a pitcher of water and poured glasses for everyone. “But there’s a few things you need to know, and it’s going to bring up a whole lot of questions. I’ll give you the history later, but I’ll answer the big questions first. For now, just accept that there was once a King and Queen of Equestria and that they were the Princess’ parents. They left some three thousand years ago in search of a few renegades, but never made it back.” Twilight glanced into the eyes of those assembled around the table meaningfully. “The reason why the Princess didn’t use the spell herself was a good one. She was not only concerned that Storm might be one of the renegade scientists, but also worried that he might hold the key to getting her parents back. She didn’t want to take the chance of overlooking any sign that Storm might be a threat.”

“Wait,” Spike said as he waved a hand and lowered his head in disbelief. “You mean to tell me that the Princess was willing to give up any chance of finding her folks again just on the off chance Storm might be dangerous?”

“Not only willing to,” Twilight murmured, eyes slipping out of focus at the thought of it. “Not only willing to, but that’s precisely what she did. That’s *why* she asked me to use the spell.”

“Is he?” Agate asked, bluntly. “One of those scientists or a danger, I mean.” Idly raking her talons over the table, Agate glanced up to where Storm was sleeping. “None of you were around the first few days after he got here. He was so *painfully* lost, and I don’t just mean he didn’t know where he was. He didn’t know *who* he was, where he came from, who *we* were, or anything *else*. I just can’t believe he’s any of those things.”

“That’s where things start to get even stranger,” Twilight sighed. “The spell let me into his dreams, and I can tell you beyond *any* shade of doubt that Lightning Storm is *not* one of the renegade scientists.” After taking a sip of her water, she looked around the table again. “The problem is, I don’t know *what* he is.”

“What do you mean, Twilight?” Spiked asked. “He’s a pegasus pony, about as old as the Crusaders... maybe a year younger at the very most.”

“That’s just it, Spike. He’s not only a *lot* older than the Crusaders, but he’s not even a *pony*. Not in his mind, at least. He was old enough to have grey in his mane, moustache, and beard, and he had a wife... and *daughter*. I don’t think it ended well for them.”

“Oh *no*!” Fluttershy gasped, covering her muzzle with her hooves. “That poor pony! To lose his family like that... it’s just *horrible*!”

“But Twilight just said he’s not a pony!” Spike protested. “We don’t know what he is.”

“Yes, we do!” Fluttershy disagreed firmly. “Whatever he was before doesn’t matter. *Now* he is a pony that has lost everything. He’s going to need a lot of rest, care, and friends to get through this.”

Twilight recognized that tone; Fluttershy had all but adopted the foal in her quest to see that he was properly healed. Smiling gently, Twilight nodded. “Yes, he will. That’s *part* of why he was allowed to stay after the magical accident brought him to Ponyville.”

“If that’s part of it,” Agate asked as she preened her chest feathers idly, “what’s the *rest* of it?”

“He’s unstable.” Twilight rubbed between her eyes with a hoof as she heard gasps around the table. “Storm is a non-pony stuffed into a pony body. He’s already had a few meltdowns and some brutal shocks. Doctor Coltle is worried that he’ll slowly start losing his mind.”

Spike got a strange look on his muzzle, and slid off the table. “I’m going to check something, Twi. I’ll be right back.” Barely audible, Spike muttered, “Now where did I read that?” before he disappeared into one of the stacks of books.

Agate looked at her talons, then raked them over her crest feathers. “I guess I’ve got to disagree. If anything, Storm seems more solid than ever. Consider that those ‘meltdowns’ as Coltle called them happened pretty much after he got here. The first was even before I met him, and I met him on day two or three. The one at the door was from him being over-worked, and the one at flight camp shouldn’t even *count*.” She looked meaningfully at Fluttershy. “Come close to losing one of your wings and see how *you* react.”

Fluttershy nodded a little. “Oh, I could do quite well on the ground. I spend most of my time there, anyway!” She shivered, hugging her wings tight to her sides. “But I get your point. I don’t even *want* to think about what Rainbow Dash would do if she lost her wings!”

"The tales would be legendary, and each one would be worse than the previous. It's the stuff of nightmares, to be sure," Twilight agreed with a shudder. "Fortunately, I really doubt that'd ever happen." After shaking her head to clear it of those awful thoughts, Twilight glanced at Agate and Fluttershy. "No, it's a bit worse than that."

"Yeah, no kidding," Agate agreed. "He's going to live as long as the Princesses." When Twilight and Fluttershy shot her a look of shock, Agate simply shrugged a shoulder. "Storm and I are attached at the hip. You think Doctor Coltle *wouldn't* tell me? Storm's stuck, exactly as he is right now."

"You mean he's not ever going to grow up?" Fluttershy asked, aghast.

With a mildly sour expression at having her thunder stolen, Twilight nodded to Fluttershy. "No. No, he's not. We're going to live maybe another sixty or seventy years. But his life is measured in *thousands*, now. That's a heavy weight for any pony to bear."

About that time, Spike came out from behind a stack of books with one particularly dusty tome clutched to his scaled chest. "He might not have to worry about that, Twilight," he said a bit quietly. "I think we might've hurt him."

All eyes turned to Spike, and not a soul blinked. After a long few moments, Twilight found her voice. "What do you mean? How could we have hurt him? And what's that book you have, there?"

"Twilight, d'you remember when you were trying to figure out Pinkie Pie's Pinkie Sense?" Spike waited, until he saw her nod of affirmation. "Well, one of the things you were talking about researching was a way to see what Pinkie sees, and maybe experience that Pinkie Sense for yourself."

"I remember," Twilight said. "But that would've been a mindreading spell and not a dream-walking one. Pinkie would have been awake, and Storm was asleep."

"But they're kinda similar," Spike insisted. "In both, you're putting one mind in contact with another, right?"

"Right..." Twilight admitted reluctantly.

"Look at this, in the *Codex Mentis*. It says that you shouldn't read a mind of a pony that is already being subjected to a mindreading spell." Spike put the book down in front of Twilight, having bookmarked the requisite page.

Twilight's mind started to whirr as she read the paragraph. "Right. That'd be

three minds in collision, rendering the host mind unstable. The host *can* hold three, but only for a *very* limited time. Mere minutes, before damage starts taking place.” She looked up from the book and glanced at Spike. “What are you thinking?”

“Well...” On the spot and with so much at stake, Spike found himself suddenly self-conscious. *I can do this*, he told himself. *Twilight is taking me seriously for once!* Spike inhaled deeply, and then sighed. “Storm is a non-pony mind in a pony body. We don’t know how he got in there. The *original* Storm’s mind might’ve been gone, but there’s still another mind *in* there. What happens if the ‘empty’ one still counts?”

Twilight mulled it over for a moment, and glanced down at the book. “I was in there for a good twenty minutes. If you’re right...” She felt a growing sense of worry, and saw that it must have carried over to her eyes for Fluttershy left the table and practically flung herself upstairs to where Storm lay sleeping. “I hope you’re wrong, Spike. But if you’re not, then you might’ve just saved his life.”

Spike shook his head. “I don’t know about that, Twi. Read the next page.”

Twilight paled as she did. “Oh, no...”

Agate looked from Twilight to Spike, without receiving so much as a syllable in explanation. Librarian and assistant were locked in a pitying gaze with each other, which made Agate feel a bit annoyed. With a gusty and whistling sigh, Agate reached over and started to pull the book away from Twilight.

“Hey!” Twilight protested, horn igniting as she sought to levitate the book back.

Agate simply grinned slightly and waggled the talons on her free hand. “Gimme, or the book gets it.” She shook her head slightly, letting the unicorn know she would not, in fact, shred the book. Slightly mollified, Twilight let the book go and watched cautiously as Agate read it over.

A few moment later, Agate nodded. “Bad, but not *that* bad. Not as bad as you two were making it out to be.”

“How can you *say* that?” Twilight gasped. “It says quite clearly that only a family member can enter a mind-locked pony! Storm’s an *orphan*. He *has* no family!”

“Don’t be silly,” Agate said as she snorted derisively. “Of *course* he does. He’s got Miss Skies and myself. You ponies and your *weird* ideas as to what constitutes family!” Fixing Twilight with her best piercing stare, she continued. “After all you’ve been through, you don’t consider Applejack, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, or any of the other heroines of Equestria to be *family*? You don’t consider Princess Celestia *family*? You don’t consider *Spike* family?”

"Of course I do!" Twilight retorted. "That's *different*. We've known each other for years and have been through a *lot*. You've known Storm for a few months, and are *family*?"

"We've been through more than you think!" Agate said heatedly. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, letting the breath out in a slow, even hiss. "Sorry, Miss Twilight. Still working on the famed gryphon temper. Look, we might not have been through things *together*, but we've been through the *same* things." A bleak look began appearing in her eyes as she recounted the similarities. "I was left for dead... I can't ever go back. I at least can see a gryphon fly by, but Storm will *never* see his people again. So, we've both lost our kind." The bleak look became one of almost despair, as she continued. Her claws began sinking into the heavy wooden table they all sat around, but nobody could see fit to interrupt her as she bore her heart for all to see. "Storm's wife and daughter are dead. His parents are likely, too, if he was as old as you hint at. My family bound my legs together and bound my wings, dragged me out of our aerie, and left me in the cold winter's air. I'm dead to them, and them to me." Agate's breath caught in her throat, but she held up a hand before either Twilight or Spike could interrupt. After a moment to gather herself together, she looked at the unicorn and dragon. "Sorry. It's why I tend not to think or talk about it, much. Still hurts." She shuddered, gritted her beak, then made an effort to relax a little. She had a small measure of success, and was able to add, "Storm cried under my wing, those first few nights at the orphanage. I was there to comfort him, and to keep him company as he adjusted to being a pony. I helped him learn about Canterlot and Equestria. Miss Skies, Storm, and the Princesses are the closest thing I have to a clan."

"I'm sorry, Agate," Twilight murmured, offering a comforting hoof. "Sometimes I think we ponies forget that not every race believes or behaves as we ponies do. I can see your point, though. You and Storm have been through similar things, so you two can relate with each other."

Agate nodded slightly. She tugged her talons from the table and rested that hand over Twilight's hoof, giving a small squeeze. "It also helps that he considers me his big sister... and no creature values family more than a gryphoness given a second chance at one."

"I can't fault that," Twilight said with a slight, but comforting smile. "I'd be the same."

"If anypony is going to try," Spike offered quietly as he wrung his hands, "then it *ought* to be Agate. The book *said* it was dangerous for anyone other than family to."

Fluttershy came downstairs with tears flowing freely down her muzzle. "Twilight, I'm *so* sorry. I *tried* so hard, but I just can't wake Storm up! He's in a coma,

and I tried everything I knew, but he just won't wake up..." The rest of her words disappeared in little gulping hiccups, she was so distressed.

Spike, Twilight, and Agate all surrounded the crying mare and offered gentle hugs. Agate covered them as best she were able with her wing as well; a gryphon gesture of affection. "We know," Twilight whispered. We know. It'll be okay, Fluttershy. You'll see."

"You're... you're sure?" Fluttershy managed to whisper in-between wracking sobs that shook her frame.

"As sure as we can be," Twilight affirmed. She turned to Agate and smiled slightly. "You sure you're up for this? If things don't go right, this could be dangerous."

"He's my kid brother," Agate said firmly. "I *wish* he could go a while longer without getting folded, spindled, or otherwise mutilated in some fashion, but he's my kid brother. Besides, if he doesn't let *me* in, who else is there?"

"Even if there was," Twilight sighed, "there's no time to *get* them here." She pointed at the book accusingly, as if it were responsible for the information contained therein. "We have only a few hours to get started. You sure you're up for this?"

"I'm sure." Agate nodded resolutely, and rose from the table.

As Twilight followed Agate up the stairs, she tried her best to prepare the gryphoness for what awaited her. "It's going to be strange, Agate. It's like nothing you've even thought of, before. Deal with it as best you can, but try and get Storm to come back with you as quickly as you can. You can't force him, but you can persuade him to go. He'll probably be the first thing you see when you get in, so try and play up the bond you two share."

"Right," Agate said as she curled protectively around the sleeping Storm. Draping a wing over his side, she could've sworn she saw him smile a little.

"Just close your eyes and relax, Agate. That's it, deep breath..." Twilight's horn flared, and Agate's head landed next to Storm's on the pillow. "And there you go. She's in."

"It'll be okay, Twilight," Fluttershy said reassuringly, giving her friend a gentle hug and nuzzle. "You'll see."

"I hope so, Fluttershy. I just... I just wish I could go in Agate's place to undo everything I did wrong the first time. I *hate* making mistakes!"

“I know, Twilight,” Fluttershy soothed in her trademarked gentle voice. With a knowing smile, she gently prodded Twilight’s chest with a hoof. “But not every adventure will be ours to have. Nor will every problem be ours to solve. Sometimes we have to take a step back and make way for another pony to fix things. We *can* still be here for her, though.”

“Welcome to my world, Twilight,” Spike grumbled as he folded his arms across his chest with a perturbed expression on his face. “What you’re feeling right now? That’s what I feel. Every... single... time you girls go off without me. And no, it *never* gets any easier to deal with.”

Twilight had no real reply, so she just levitated her grumpy assistant over to her side, whilst she leaned against Fluttershy for comfort. “Then we’ll stand vigil, together.”