

Chapter 8: Reflection

Twilight flipped through the files laid out on the desk with fierce concentration. It may have been the third time she had looked through these, but there had to be something, *anything* that would help explain what had been taking place all over the place, in each and every Ponification center.

It had been weeks since the first incident had occurred. Weeks since she had seen her friend James vaporize in some fancy lightshow. Yet no matter what Twilight, or anypony else did. There just wasn't anything to explain just what had happened. No alterations had been found in the traces of chemicals left over from what had been used to begin James' ponification.

The magic had been perfect, there had been no tampering with anything that James had come into contact with that they could find. He hadn't even eaten beforehand, which threw out any theories of possible food taint, out the window. The only lead they had was where he had gone the previous night, but that too had been proven negative. Princess Luna sent her own student to check it out. Though they wouldn't tell Twilight what James had eaten that night, they confirmed that it too had been clean of any tampering.

"It just doesn't make sense!" Twilight screamed to herself.

"Sounds like ya ain't having any o luck with them papers there Twi" A voice said behind her. She jumped, turning to see Applejack standing in the doorway. Twilight hadn't even heard her friend trot up.

"I'm afraid you're right Applejack. No matter how many times I go over the information we have on these people, I just can't find anything that explains what happened to them, or *WHY* it happened to them in the first place!" Twilight slammed the papers down on the desk with a push of her magic. She was tired and she was frustrated.

But the thing that bothered her most of all was that she was clueless. Clueless as to what had taken her friend from her.

"Simmer down there Sally." Applejack said gently. Before trotting up beside her friend. She looked Twilight straight in the eyes with that 'no nonsense' look of hers.

"I know yer feeling mighty flustered bout this whole thing-a-majig. But you ain't gonna make any progress like that!"

Twilight sighed as she struggled to get her feelings back under control. She was usually a lot more organized and collected than this. Guess losing a friend can be hard on anyone.

"I know AJ, and you're right, but I can't help but feel responsible. I lead him right into that room. I was right there watching it happen, and I couldn't do anything to help... I...I just..." The words failed to continue.

"I know sugarcube. I know." Applejack said while looking at the files upon the desk herself. "We all feel mighty terrible over it. We all feel like we failed..."

Applejack hung her head ever so slightly before lifting it up with a determined look upon her face.

"But you can bet your betsy we'll find what happened! Ya all can quote me on that!"

"I hope you're right AJ. I really do..."

The faces of each and every human in those files flashed through Twilight's mind. James's picture standing out especially. Eleven of them. Eleven people in total.

They were eleven people who had just vanished without a trace. Nothing to explain why, or to connect them with one another. The entire thing was a mystery.

"You find anything with that ol' medical file on that one human?" Applejack asked. Sadly, Twilight had to shake her head no.

"While it is stated on that person's file about him only becoming a pony due to a health problem, it was clearly stated that the problem was due to stomach ulcers. Even more, his medical records proved that he had been suffering from them for a long time." Twilight had been shuffling through the files with her magic, attempting to find the exact file in question. When she finally had found it, she opened it to the corresponding page.

"See there?" Twilight said, while manipulating a pencil with magic in order to point at the text that stated the person's medical stats. "It says right here that he had been suffering from this problem since a child. The only other person we know for certain to go through with ponification due to a health problem is James. But his were just headaches, and there appeared to be nothing wrong with him whenever *HE* had a checkup! The facts just don't connect!"

"It does seem like a mighty bit of a stretch there..." Applejack said rubbing her chin with a hoof.

"What if ya suppose that there HLF group got to them before us? Maybe what ever those scoundrels did just sick-a-fied them differently or what not?" Again Twilight had to shake her head.

"It would be a sound theory, but James had told me he had been dealing with those headaches for months. I just can't see any sort of chemical being able to stay in the human body for that long without killing them, and that still leaves the problem of the other person having the ulcers since a child!" She trotted over to the window to gaze out across the grounds. She could hear Applejack reply behind her rather sheepishly.

"Oh right, guess that doesn't make any ol' sense huh?" Twilight couldn't see her friend, but she had a feeling the orange pony was blushing.

"Besides," Twilight began, "If it was the HLF, then why haven't they said anything yet? All this work and then not take advantage of the situation? That doesn't add up either. No matter what theories I go through in my head, I keep coming to a brick wall!" She turned again to trot back over to the desk.

"There has to be something I'm missing Applejack. Something that connects all these dots. I simply can't believe that James died for no reason!" Twilight began to scan the files again, before Applejack slammed her hoof upon them, startling her into looking up at the pony.

"Now don't you go sprouting off nonsense like that now!" Applejack said forcefully, "Nopony may know what went down in that room, but we sure as hay don't know it killed any of them folk!"

"But AJ, what else-" Twilight tried to say, but Applejack was having none of it.

"But nothing missy! We didn't give up hope on you when we was all fighting Nightmare Moon in those ruins, so don't you go loosing hope on him! I told ya we'd find out what happened! Til then I say we keep our heads up! Whadda say there Twi? You're not calling me a liar on us solving this thingy now are ya?"

The look Applejack gave her then was that same stubborn look she always gave when determined to do something. At times it could prove a hassle, like the time she didn't want to

admit that trying to Applebuck the entire Sweet Apple Aches orchid was too much for her.

But at other times, such as this one, it was the look of a dependable friend. The look that told you to keep trying until you made it happen. No matter what the obstacles. Twilight didn't realize just how much she had needed that look then.

"Call the pony a liar, who stands for the Element of Honesty herself? I'd never dream of it AJ." They laughed after that, feeling better than either had in a while.

It did feel good to laugh. Even if her heart was still in pain. Still, it had been such a long time since she had shared a moment like this with one of her friends. Twilight realized with a groan that she had been doing nothing but pour herself into the task of finding information, without enough breaks in-between. If she kept this up she'd burn herself out.

"Thanks Applejack. I guess I should relax a bit more. It may take us several more weeks, but we have to find the answer eventually!"

"That's the spirit Twi! But don't work yerself too hard now. You taught me that the hard way!" They laughed again at the memories. Applejack had tried so hard to do the job of Applebucking herself, that she had caused all sorts of trouble in Ponyville. Perhaps Twilight take heed and get some time to think away from the center for once.

"I think you're right Applejack. I suppose a good trot will do me wonders right now. Can you hold things down while I'm gone?" The orange pony nodded.

"Shoot, not much to hold down what with all the ponying on the hoof like this. Which reminds me there. Folks are starting to whisper bout that. May need to do something soon." Twilight nodded as well.

"I can't say I blame them. It's been at least a couple of weeks since we issued the news of the serum being out. Anybody would think something is up with this long a delay. I only hope we can figure things out before the situation gets out of hand." Twilight sighed as she thought of all the possible things that could happen if nothing was done soon. None of them were appealing in the slightest.

The only option they seemed to have as a solution, was an offer from Princess Luna herself to oversee any ponifications that were made. Twilight was certain it had the possibility of stopping whatever had been happening completely. But even if it didn't, Princess Luna should be able to detect what went gone wrong immediately if it happened..

The only problem with that course of action is that it required a possible human sacrifice. Princess Luna would no doubt be able to see why the human would react in such a way, but there wasn't any certainly in the Princess being able to STOP it from happening.

No pony was willing to take that chance.

"Anyway, don't you go getting yer tail in a knot over what's going on round here. Go relax a bit there. Ya probably need it more than the rest of us knowing how much *YOU* study!" Applejack said playfully. Twilight smiled as her thoughts came back to the present. She couldn't even remember the last time she had gone for one of her walks.

"Will do AJ, let everypony know where I'm going okay? I don't want them worrying" Applejack promised to spread the word and ushered her out of the office.

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Despite Applejack managing to lighten Twilight's mood, the very thought of everything that had been happening still weighed heavily on her mind. The scene where James had... Vanished threatened to come to the front of her memories. Grimacing, Twilight pushed it once more to the back of her mind.

She had seen that same thing play over and over again in her nightmares many nights since. Each and every time she had been unable to do anything to stop it...

How was it that this human would not leave her mind? Twilight knew he was a friend, and the loss of that friend had stung. But she just couldn't help but feel that something was off about the whole thing. It just seemed to hurt a little more than she had expected.

Could it really be this terrible to lose a friend? She had only known him for three days! How would it feel if she lost anypony else? What would she feel if it was Applejack next? Or Spike?

Twilight had to shake the unpleasant thoughts from her head. There was nothing to be gained from dwelling over things like that. With luck she'd never have to worry about it.

But still... When would this ache in her heart go away?

Twilight had been walking through the parking lot of the center, on her way into town when she came face to face with another irritating object. Something that once more forced her thoughts down a path to her missing friend. Was life just laughing at her?!

Directly before Twilight sat a plain white motorcycle. It had long been abandoned, but that's not the reason it stood out. The problem was that it reminded her of what still lay in the storage unit, near the back of the center.

About a week ago, Twilight had pondered over what she should do with the motorbike James had left locked away. She had no thoughts of throwing it away of course, she could never do that to something he had treasured so much, but she also didn't know how long they could keep it in there.

A faint smile tugged at her lips as she recalled part of a conversation she had been having with James during their picnic...

"So did you enjoy your ride?" She remembered asking James while she ate. James had been sitting there, looking perfectly fine then. Having no way of knowing the horrible fate that awaited him the next morning. In fact he had been rather enjoying the apple tart he had picked up.

"Oh it was great! First time I've been able to really let loose with that bike too!" He had said after swallowing a bite of the tart, "I'm sure going to miss riding her..."

Twilight remembered the look in his eyes at that moment. Despite the sorrow at losing something that was apparently precious to him, she could see he had no regrets about his decision.

No regrets...

"What are you going to do with that thing anyway?" Twilight remembered Spike asking. The answer James had given, along with the following dialogue almost managed to bring a smile to her face even now.

"Well, thanks to the center I can keep it in there for a while. Least till I figure out how to ship it to Ponyville."

"You're going to take it with you?" Spike had asked surprised.

"That thing was a gift! Of course It's coming with me!"

"But you won't be able to-" Spike had begun before James had cut him off.

"It's *COMING* with me." He had said through gritted teeth.

Twilight remembered the arguments that had followed, trying to get James to 'See Reason' about taking the bike, but he had refused to budge on the subject.

With a sigh, Twilight turned her thoughts from the locked away bike. She still had plenty of time to figure out what to do with it. Right now she needed to think about something other than James and the mystery of the incidents.

Try as she might though, Twilight couldn't get the thoughts from her head completely. Even her walk didn't seem to help her any. It only managed to make her think of other unpleasant memories. Such as the human who had pointed out to her what the empty buildings meant in the first place.

Finally, after trying so unsuccessfully to forget the past, she found her way to an elementary school, where she had decided to pause for a rest...

It was here that she had felt the shiver so much stronger then it had ever been before. It was here she saw the snake construct, designed for children's play, spring to life by the aid of the strange shadows.

It was here that she screamed at the unnatural monster that was even now hissing at her in a way that was right out of a nightmare.

Then with a heavy heart. She realized it was here she was probably going to die.

Tidbits:

-Princess Luna's student. Yay! Midnight Shadow did something in my story! XD Even if it was off handily mentioned.

-'They Were Eleven' Okay this is a stupid reference I put in there, but I couldn't help myself. The entire reason there are eleven cases is because I decided to 'allude' to one of my favorite movies of all time. 'They Were 11' which is also why I wrote the sentence in that way. Just so I could put 'They Were Eleven' in the story.

Yes I'm a silly person. Shut up!

