

Nothing.

Applejack noticed immediately that nothing was around her, under her, covering her. When she didn't feel her blanket or bed, her eyes shot open immediately. She was met with a hazy orange sky, filtered slightly by a thin layer of clouds.

She shot to all four of her hooves, looking around in an angered panic. *What the hay is goin' on?* She looked down. Below her was a thick white layer of clouds, but she couldn't feel them or see through them. In fact, she wasn't sure what she felt. She knew she was standing, but she couldn't... feel a floor. It was like she was suspended with some kind of magic. She glanced around her. Endlessly, the clouds above and below her stretched on, hiding the orange sky ever so slightly as the horizon went on. She decided to sit down. *No use standin' around when there ain't anywhere to go.*

She felt a breeze. It was the first thing she felt in this... place. She looked back towards where she had felt it, and saw before her an earth pony. She also had orange fur, green eyes, and her mane was blonde except for a stripe of maroon that ran through it, not unlike the purple that ran through Twilight's hair.

"Applejack is your name, correct?" The pony said, in a clear cut, regular voice. Applejack had almost expected to hear the southern, Appleoosan accent that she spoke with. She looked exactly like the farmer after all.

"Right. And you must be Honesty. Ah've heard a little about these Epiphany thingies already, so just cut to the chase."

"That saves us much time, as we have very little. Applejack, as you sleep, I am being pulled from you. Someone is attempting to take me." Honesty spoke curtly.

"But... hold up a minute. So somepony wants to take you, okay. I get that, but... the only way to have one of these Epiphany thingies is for some really strong magic to be cast on me, right? So..."

Honesty nodded. "Whoever is trying to take me is using the spell NOW. It is very powerful."

"Th-that's... kinda bad. What am ah supposed to do about it?" Applejack could barely maintain her composure.

"Simply stop whoever is trying to take the element. I do not know the vicinity in which the caster has to be of you, but it cannot be that far; she must be in town. Do not worry yourself so quickly; at the moment, I am perfectly safe. You are as well. Not that I know if anything would even happen to you if I were to be taken."

"But... none of us know who's doin' it yet! We don't have any idea who this pony might even be!" Applejack grew more desperate. *Well, that's not entirely true, but ah definitely got no proof of it...*

“Then I suggest you never lie over the next day. Lying has been what has weakened our connection, and lying more will only make it break.”

Applejack raised a curious eyebrow. “But... Ah haven’t been lyin’. Ah don’t lie to my friends, or anypony.”

“That’s not for me to judge or know. Just make sure to tell the truth and all will be fine. If you can keep true to your values, and who you are, then nothing shall befall you.”

Almost instantly, the body of the mare before her vanished, as if she were a mist being stricken away by a particularly strong wind. Applejack moved forward instinctively, as if to grab her, but immediately found herself in her bed, in her room, in her house. She was sitting up, with the same hoof extended. She shook her head slowly. It was late, and she had another big day tomorrow. She rolled back onto her side to try and fall asleep yet again, but thoughts were reeling through her mind. *Ah... ah might be the first pony to have mah element of harmony taken... but ah just want to live on the farm with my family and have good friends... why can’t ah just... have that much?*

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Fear.

A primal feeling any creature could have when they feel their life is in danger. Any living being that was concerned with self-preservation could feel fear. There is a food chain (that Fluttershy monitors very carefully); ponies being attacked isn’t unheard of (though it is very rare and only happens in huge cities like Manehattan); everypony will die someday (she had gotten over that fear long ago). Applejack had occasionally felt afraid; she had had minor doubts when the 6 of them had fought nightmare moon; the dragon that was taking a nap in Equestria and filling the sky with its smoke was frightening; when Rarity had fallen at the Best Young Fliers competition, Applejack had felt fear for her friend; even the minor conflict between the buffalo and Appleloosa that sparked a battle had worried her, bringing forth some kind of fear for the town’s safety. But these were passing, brief, brought about by an immediate threat. She had never been truly afraid for her own life; there wasn’t anything to be afraid of before. She was strong, had her friends. She could handle anything.

Now, she was afraid. She was more afraid than she had ever been. She couldn’t stop thinking about what might happen if the element was taken from her; the elements were connected to their souls, their bodies, or their minds or something. She knew somehow that ripping something like that from somepony would be anything but harmless, and she couldn’t think of what might happen if her family was suddenly without her, her friends left without her. Be it death, a coma, memory loss, some internal... function being lost, anything bad happening, she didn’t know, but all she knew was that she had to be there for her family, for her friends, and that she had to stop it from happening so she could always be there, to be the most dependable pony possible.

She avoided meeting her sister, brother, or grandmother that morning, leaving a note to say she was seeing her friends in town. *If even one were to ask if ah was okay... ah'd have to tell them everythin'. Ah can't do that, ah have to see Twilight. Ah'm sure she can help me out of this mess.*

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Lying.

Applejack detested the very action of not telling the truth. If somepony asks, say what you think. Why not? If it hurts them, they learn from it. If they don't want to hear it, why did they ask? If they don't agree, what does it matter if everypony agrees with something? Lying didn't get anypony anywhere, and it certainly never got Applejack ahead in life. She avoided lying as best she could, only occasionally taking to it to avoid her friends getting incredibly angry, or to avoid spoiling something for a friend (*though Pinkie Pie did get a little out-of-shape about her surprise birthday party last year...*).

Walking down the path towards town, she thought about what her element told her, during her brief Epiphany. *So she's usin' the spell now. So... what does that even mean?* Applejack sighed in frustration. She didn't know nearly enough about magic to know what that meant. She had to see Twilight, the only pony who might have an idea of what was going on.

She reached the library after several uneventful minutes. Upon reaching the door, she knocked, and found Twilight opening it only second later. It was only nine in the morning, and Applejack hadn't even expected her to be awake. Twilight stood before her with a disheveled mane, tired eyes, and an almost lazy stance that made her look like she would fall on her rump, asleep, at any moment. She met the farmer with surprise. "Oh, Applejack! I didn't expect anypony to be coming by this morning."

"It... it wasn't in my plans either. But we need to talk a bit."

"Come in, come in. I've been examining some of my notes for a while, and haven't really found anything, and was taking a break when you knocked." She stepped back and motioned for the farmer to come in. Applejack obliged, closing the door behind her. Twilight then suddenly became aware of how she looked. "Oh, gosh I look awful! I'm sorry I couldn't be... more presentable."

"Now don't go all Rarity on me; gettin' a little messy just means you've been workin' hard. Even ah can see that Twi." Indeed, it was more than obvious from the state of the library; the equipment that had been unused yesterday now sat dirty, some with liquid still and others empty, scorched and even one or two broken ones. Books were strewn about the room, most open. Pages upon pages of notes lay across a stand Twilight had set up near the table. While it looked messy, Applejack could somehow sense an order to the room.

"I've... I've been very busy trying to figure out the kind of magic we're dealing with." Twilight levitated some of her notes over in front of her face, flipping through them as she spoke to Applejack,

eyes scanning the pages continuously. “I haven’t really found a lot. There isn’t much magic that deals directly with feelings or emotions that I can find.”

“That’s what ah’m here for, Twi.” The unicorn raised an eyebrow. “Ah... ah had an Epiphany last night. And honesty told me that whoever’s messin’ with us is after... me. Ah’m next.” Applejack looked down, as if defeated.

Twilight’s face became a rare mix of surprise and worry. “Okay so how... what... augh, I need more to go on than that. What else did honesty say?”

“She said that ah have to... not lie today. If ah lie again, whoever’s doin’ this may... take Honesty.” Applejack shivered. “Do you have any idea what happens if we lose our elements?”

Twilight seemed to recover her own composure quickly. “As I said, I haven’t really found out anything. There’s so little research into the elements. Before us, they were just what everypony thought they were before I came to Ponyville; and old mare’s tale, something that isn’t real. So no research was made into them and their nature. We should be thankful the elements know as much as they do.” She moved all of her notes back to the stand, save for one solitary page. “I have one single lead into whoever might be trying to manipulate us. And it’s this.” She looked to a window sill, and levitated over a certain potted plant. It was an odd yellow color, leafy with a single, several-inches high stem, and the odor, which while sitting in the room before, now took full reign over Applejack’s senses as it was brought closer. It smelled rotten or decaying.

“What in tarnation is this thin’, Twilight? It smells awful.”

Twilight nodded. “This is a kind of magical plant. The scent it gives off is some kind of deterrent, but it seems to only smell that bad to ponies. Animals like it just fine.” She set it on the table. “I don’t know its name, and it’s not listed in the Supernatural’s book, but Fluttershy knew about it, and so did Trixie-“

“Where has she been anyway? Ah haven’t seen her since she came home with you on your birthday.” Applejack suddenly recalled how surprised everypony had been to discover that, since saving Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash by teleporting them several miles out of the forest they had been lost in, that Trixie had lost her ability to perform magic. The overly-powerful teleport had placed Trixie into a coma, and when she awoke, she hadn’t had any magical ability to speak of. Twilight, sympathetic and somewhat proud that the once arrogant and show-off unicorn had reformed somewhat, offered to take her in, and help her get her magic back. Beyond this, Applejack had absolutely no idea what Trixie was really doing in Ponyville. She hadn’t seen her while bringing the cart into town, and no pony had even talked about her. She almost missed her.

“She’s off to Fillydelphia again, to report on her findings on this plant, which was the original reason she was coming to Ponyville anyway. She left about five days ago and should be back tomorrow. But that’s not important; this plant is the same one that Fluttershy gave Rainbow Dash while they were

lost in the forest.”

Applejack’s memory seemed foggy for some reason. “Plant? What plant? Ah’m not really followin’ ya here, Twi.”

Twilight sighed. *She must be back to her usual self, if she’s annoyed bah mah lack of knowledge on this stuff again*, Applejack thought to herself. “When Rainbow Dash was hurt, Fluttershy found this plant, and mistakenly thinking it was medical in nature, she gave it to her. Instead of healing some of her internal wounds, it, for lack of better words, made Rainbow fall in love with her. The plant takes whatever feeling the pony is feeling at a moment, such as fear, sadness, anger, happiness, or maybe in her case, companionship or friendship or gratitude, and amplifies it to almost ridiculous levels. Afterwards, because of the magical and foreign nature of the plant’s effect, the mind doesn’t remember what happened. At all. It’s like they miss entire hours or days of their life, a targeted permanent amnesia. It’s not even retrograde, which means the pony will never remember what happened.”

“So... gosh, that seems sort of similar to what’s goin’ on now, isn’t it?” Applejack connected the dots much better than Twilight could have hoped for. She clapped her hooves together in a sign of happiness.

“That’s precisely it, Applejack. If I can study the magical effects this plant has, maybe I can imitate that effect with a spell, and with that, we can devise some kind of counter-spell.” Her face grew serious instantly, making Applejack step back in surprise. “Until then, Applejack, you’re in danger. I think it might be best if you tried to avoid everypony today. You can’t tell a lie if no one asks you anything, right?”

“So... you want me to just stay here and not talk to anypony?”

“Except me? Pretty much. I won’t ask you anything remotely invading, if I ask anything at all. I know it’s... boring, and kind of extreme, but it’s the best way we have of fighting this.” Twilight set the plant back on the window sill and walked back to her stand, re-arranging her notes.

Applejack’s eyes narrowed. “Ah’m not doin’ that Twilight.”

“Why not? Do you want to risk something happening to you?” Twilight didn’t even bother to turn around to answer.

“Ah don’t know if you’ve been payin’ much attention, but Pinkie Pie’s been really off recently. She’s scarin’ me, and keeps wantin’ to see me. I couldn’t see her much yesterday, and that shook her up bad. Ah said ah’d see her today, and ah’m not about to break a promise; that’s as bad as a lie in mah book.” Applejack slammed a hoof on the ground in frustration.

The indigo unicorn shrugged. “It’s just Pinkie, AJ, I’m sure she’ll be fine after a day to think it over or something. You know how weird she can be sometimes.”

“Twilight, she almost broke down sobbin’! No, I’m goin’ to see her today, because she needs a friend to be with her. Ah promised I’d see her today, so I’m gonna keep that promise.” Applejack knew she was being stubborn, but something also made her want to snap at Twilight for judging their friend so quickly.

“She wanted to see you? Not to be rude, but you two don’t... talk often. Why would she want to see you?” Twilight was both genuinely curious and incredulous.

Applejack sighed. “Ah don’t know, but she said that she’s been really lonely, and she keeps wantin’ to see me, so ah’m gonna oblige her. She needs to talk to somepony, and ah’ve got to be that pony.”

The unicorn bit her lip. “But what if something happens to you, AJ?”

“Nothin’ should happen, because ah’ll be doin’ what ah always do: tellin’ the truth.”

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Applejack swiftly closed the library door behind her, and started trotting off towards Sugar Cube Corner. *Time to go see Pinkie*, she thought.

It was just past ten; she had spent nearly an hour in the library, talking with Twilight about the nature of the situation. While unable to find out who was using the magic, or how to stop it, Twilight took it upon herself to elaborate on some things for Applejack, for her to keep in mind as she ventured into town.

*“Honesty said that the spell was being cast right now. That probably means it’s a channeling spell; it means to maintain that spell, he or she has to be focused on the spell, and probably can’t do anything else at all. That means most everypony should be normal today, so long as manipulating our emotions took concentration or casting a different spell in the first place. Now, if you get asked an awkward question that you for some reason can’t answer truthfully, then you should try and deflect it, or just out-right say that you don’t want to answer it. Also, don’t say CAN’T, or EVER, so on and so forth. In general, just avoid absolutes say MOSTLY or PROBABLY more often. I know it’s probably not how you’re used to talking, but you’re just going to have to try. Though, I’m pretty sure if you don’t actually know the answer to something, you can give it your best shot; not knowing something has never been the same as lying. I would also avoid halve truths; just say exactly what you mean, or try and do whatever I mentioned.”*

She arrived at Sugar Cube Corner in minutes. Being as brief as possible, she asked Mrs. Cake, who was running the register again, where Pinkie Pie was. According to Mrs. Cake, Pinkie Pie hadn’t even left her room that day, so that’s where she still was. She wasn’t even sure if she had woken up yet that day; she seemed especially troubled by that fact.

“Pinkie Pie wakes up almost every day around six or seven, even on days she has off, to plan for parties early in the morning before going to see her friends during the day if she isn’t working.” Mrs. Cake shook her head. “She’s been so odd lately... and she won’t tell us what’s wrong. I’m worried sick about the poor dearie...”

“Ah think she just needs a shoulder to lean on, somepony she trusts more than anypony else. She asked me to see her today, so maybe she’ll tell me what’s causin’ her so much grief.” Applejack smiled reassuringly. “Ah am Ponyville’s most dependable pony after all. Ah’ll do my best to cheer her up!” With those last words, she headed to the staircase that lead up to Pinkie Pie’s loft above the apartment.

*Climbing the stairs slowly, Applejack began to feel somewhat apprehensive. She’s... she’s borderline bawlin’ her eyes out and thinkin’ nopony likes her anymore... what in Equestria could be such a big deal that she’d think that? She shook her head. No, it doesn’t matter if it’s a big deal or not, because it’s a big deal to her. So ah’ve got to work through it with her, whether or not ah even understand what’s goin’ on.*

It only took moments to climb the stairs and reach a hallway, leading to the Pinkie Pie’s room. The door was bright pink, with a regular bronze door knob. It wasn’t marked otherwise, but somehow Applejack figured that there wasn’t a need to mark the door, since the cakes lived elsewhere. She took a deep breath, steeling herself as she turned the knob and pushed open the door. The room was dim, the only light source being a solitary lamp atop a desk. Applejack’s eyes took a second to adjust to the room, and it took her another second to find Pinkie Pie.

She sat on a chair, in front of an impressively pink vanity, looking at the doorway, and Applejack. Her eyes were boring into the farmer as if her vision was a streak of sunlight cutting through pure blackness. Her hair was deflated, straightened, hanging down against her fur, and her face was solemn, except for those eyes. Those staring, intruding eyes almost looked to swallow up the farmer as she met the impenetrable gaze. When Pinkemina spoke, her voice was quiet, and her words spoken and enunciated perfectly. “Hello Applejack. I was really worried I wouldn’t see you, my best friend today, like you promised, but here you are. I’m glad you came.”

“I-It’s no problem, sugarcube. Ah said ah’d be here today, so here ah am.”

Applejack slowly closed the door behind her, leaving her alone with the dejected baker’s apprentice.