

In the dark of night, a unicorn dreamed. He felt himself floating in a creamy white fog, like he was swimming through a bowl of milk. He paddled through the strange landscape, only feeling the sensation of movement without seeing where he was going. The buoyant mist made him giddy as it flowed into his nostrils, giving him a light, bubbly feeling in his head. He giggled boyishly and spun around in a corkscrew, not knowing and not caring which way he was going, or where. He was lost, but somehow that was okay, since he knew he was safe, deep in these lost recesses of world and mind.

With a flap of his limbs he jetted forward, laughing and whooping as he did loops and tight, twisting turns, *flying* through the strange foggy void. He was a young foal again and he didn't want to lose this sense of majestic wonder, of being simply okay with ignorance, since that meant so much opportunity to learn new things. He was young and carefree. Somewhere behind him was a vast darkness that would swallow his innocence, a gulf that was consuming everything and threatened to open his safe little haven to the infinity of the outside world. But he just wanted to cavort and play like any little foal.

He continued to whirl and swing without a care in the world. His horn sparkled brightly, sputtering with uncontrolled, undirected magic, making cheerful little pictures as the motes of light drew out images in his head. Here was a neon blue bunny rabbit, hopping and smiling, here were pink flowers that tumbled through intangible winds, there were birds of limitless colors and sizes, all of them drawn with childlike simplicity yet as alive as any creature. He picked out a bright green manticore and dropped on its back, riding it through the soupy back corners of his dreams like the whirligig rides at a festival. Soon he was surrounded by bright colors and shapes only imagined, all of them dancing and twirling as he laughed and laughed and cantered back and forth on the back of his imagination.

At length through the shifting fog he heard a voice. It was a breath across a crowded room that caught his ear like a hook.

"Verity! Verity, come here! It's time for supper!"

He kicked his back legs into clean spring air, stamping fresh grass underneath his hooves. The sun was bright on his face, Celestia's blessings raining down and gracing the moment with her watchful gaze. His azure eyes drank in the sights and sounds of Equestria opened up to his imagination. He charged up a hill and realized that it wasn't real grass underhoof, it was the rough, scratchy surface of a book's page. He looked around and saw everything had gone flat and thin, pressed into parchment.

His hoof was bigger when he ran it over the page, letting out a wistful sigh. If only he really *had* lived in those days.

"Verity, are you listening?"

He shut the book and sighed again, looking around at the study. It was such a sparse place. So few books were left of the times before, and now he was being interrupted. He enjoyed being cloistered here. There wasn't that much to get done before tomorrow morning, couldn't they just let him alone?

"Verity!"

He turned his head away from the grey, dying landscape and watched the storm clouds gathering near the village.

"I have to do this," he told his father, his azure eyes meeting the implacable amber stare of the older stallion. "We were safe until my powers matured. I can't hide anymore."

"Verity, *please*, there are so few of us left... there's only three families that even had foals this year! You must stay."

Verity said something he didn't remember. It was unkind and he remembered feeling guilty. His father stamped the ground nervously, trying to think of an excuse to delay him. "Windamere. Poor Windamere will be heartbroken--"

"She'll be dead if I stay. My aura's too strong. All the other unicorns can see it. They'll *find* us unless I do something, and this is my only chance! The griffons can *protect* you here, I promise... you'll be safe... you all will..."

And what about you, Verity?

He was drifting away, watching his father fade into darkness.

Who will keep you safe?

He was back in the white mist, watching a dot float in front of him. It was a little black dot, and then suddenly it was a giant, monstrous shadow that swallowed everything, his mind, his spirit, the world. Towers collapsed into nothingness and starless night swept over the land. The giant shadow sprouted wings and dove upon him with a blood-curdling roar, and there were flames and screams and a bright light like the sun, but it wasn't the *real* sun. It was something harsh and terrible and full of rage. He ran. He rolled and sprinted; he twisted and jerked, scrabbling desperately just ahead of the terrifying light that was coming. And then it snatched him up into the air and he felt himself burn, burn away, and he was no more...

He awoke in darkness. It felt like a blanket of dead things, icy and smothering.

The floor was cold. *He* was cold. Dirt was everywhere. In his mane, his pelt, under his hooves, even crusted onto his horn. He *ached*. He ached from pain, from hunger, from want. He wanted to know where he was, and how he got here. He wanted to know why he was covered in bruises and stinging cuts, and why he felt like he hadn't eaten in days. He wanted something to eat, he wanted to be outside again, not in this black space and horrified at his condition. More importantly he wanted to know just who he was. He thought for a while, and then it came back to him.

His name was Verity. He must have suffered quite a knock to the head to be jostled free of his own memory for a time. He rubbed a hoof against his temple; it came away dirty with dry blood.

Gingerly he tried to stand. His rear left leg buckled under him with a jab of pain, and he attempted to tug himself forward on his front legs, crawling on his belly over the scratchy, cold gravel. His ash grey fur and navy blue mane blended well with the dark rock beneath him.

Everything hurt so *much*. He was confused, scared and alone, and what terrified him the most was that

he couldn't remember how he had ended up here. So to the matter of thinking and remembering he put all his mental effort.

He saw himself running through the forest. Which forest? The Ashwood, that was it. He was running because something was chasing him. Something his magic couldn't handle. It was a blur. Horrible shadows clawed and tore at him, goading and teasing with the inevitability of his doom. He remembered not caring which way he went, not caring if he broke all his bones, only that he got out of that chase alive. He shivered as he crawled along the hard, dead ground, not from the cold but from the horror of the memory.

His horn glowed in the dark. Comforting blue light shined onto the blank stone all around him, and somehow knowing he was in a natural cave instead of some terrible void made him feel a little better. There were stories that told of dark, horrible places where Nothing resided, and sought to devour anything that touched it so they would become Nothing too. He wouldn't be surprised if such a thing were real in a world like this. Ponies these days didn't have the luxury of just brushing off old, scary legends.

He continued to wrack his brain, searching for memories, sights, and sounds, vibrant and pulsing as they flowed before his eyes in a confused jumble. He didn't know what most of them meant, seeing faces he didn't quite recognize, hearing voices that he couldn't place. He used his magic to silence the gnawing pain he felt all over his body, and help calm him inside. Being calm was one of the most important things a unicorn performing magic could do, as if the body was under stress, the magic would not flow properly. He remembered his first rudimentary lessons taught by the only other unicorns who lived in their little village, passing on their knowledge in a desperate bid to help it survive to better times.

Magic, they said, was more a matter of mind and spirit than of science. It was an art, a manifestation of everything a unicorn was inside. It reflected who a pony really was. With no textbooks on magical theory left except in the great libraries in the fabled hidden cities, everything had to be felt by instinct. Every spell had to be teased and cajoled from out of the ether. A deep understanding of one's place in the world and among ponykind had to be developed. The horn glowed brighter and he began to see he was in a large tunnel that stretched on and on, seemingly without end. His heart sank. How was he going to get out of this mess? There was no way he could just walk on out and find somewhere safe. There was nowhere safe these days.

All he could do was use his magic to support himself until he got out of here.

He walked for what felt like hours, his horn the only illumination he had. The tunnel kept making all kinds of twists and turns until only his magic could give him a faint idea of where he was underground. It was a useful spell for unicorns who had been forced to go underground to avoid the enemy. He reached out with his magic and felt only cold, hard stone all around him. Not even cave creatures lived this far into the dark, and he felt very alone. But he had to keep going, in spite of the pain that made him jerk with every step, and the crushing desperation that he felt creeping back into his mind. It had been gone while he was unconscious, but now he was very much aware of how dire his straits were.

At length he reached a great sloping precipice, down which the rock tunnel flowed like a petrified waterfall. Using another spell from his inventory, he reached out through the ground again, looking for something, anything that might be a clue to getting out of here. Animals, movement, anything. He sighed calmly and reached out through the ground, and at the edge of his senses he felt a whorl of cold

slide over his horn, sending goosebumps trailing over his skin. Water was nearby. He clambered down the smooth, slippery face of the rocky rapids. It wasn't long until he had come to a long, straight tunnel carved out by the flow of water hundreds of years ago. He wondered where it went, or if it had once supplied the overgrown swamp of Equestria. He had only heard stories of that place, where monsters roamed and magic was wild and untamed. Ponies had once inhabited it, though he couldn't see how. The swampy forest that blanketed the land was nigh impenetrable, home to monstrous creatures.

Though, Verity thought that if he did end up there, there could be worse places to be. Anywhere he could hide now was welcome, and the thought of thousands of tons of rock between him and the shadows that had been hunting him ever since the Pony Dales was comforting more than intimidating.

"Maybe father was right," he whispered brokenly, his voice as quiet as a thought. "Maybe it would have been better if I stayed."

The end of the tunnel suddenly began to open up, the walls swinging away into nothing and the floor widening out. Verity perceived through his magic that he was in the middle of a giant, ancient cavern. Curious, and knowing that nobody would know what he was doing down here, he pulled the magic in from the world around him, and then pushed it into his horn, increasing the output of light from its tip. There, just a few feet from his hooves, was what appeared to be a sea. It stretched out into the darkness, a seemingly limitless gulf with a surface as smooth as glass. He stepped closer to the edge, shining his light into it. Purely out of curiosity, he pushed his magic just a little harder... and found a hidden miracle.

The light of his horn had become just enough. The energy he gave off caught on the veins of some unknown, precious mineral that snaked through the rock that made up the pool, and they... glowed. Something had been activated, and Verity found his eyes widening with wonderment as the jagged trails of light pushed out far beyond the range of his horn, lighting up a good deal of the space around him. He was surrounded by lightning bolts cut into the living rock, which glowed a pale, comforting green. He stepped back and watched the scene unfold. The water rippled, its perfect stillness broken, and the energy the rocks had gathered from his horn was released, drop by drop. Little orbs of magical energy slid up from the water, from the veins of magical ore all around him, and gently floated upwards, surrounding him in an inverted snowfall of magical energy, going up and up to the ceiling. Verity, struck with amazement, stared at the tiny, pixie-like spheres, and reached out with a hoof. The one he touched burst into glowing green ashes that dissipated to nothing before his eyes, but he could still feel the spurt of energy given off by the tiny explosion. He smiled. The tiny return of strength felt like a gift. It seemed he had somehow unleashed the gathered magical power stored within these rocks. He touched another orb and watched it burst like a bubble, surprising himself with a boyish giggle. That one had tickled. He touched off another, and another, and soon he was setting off a cascade of bursting magic orbs, surrounded by a beautiful, miniature fireworks display. Colors were everywhere, just like in his fevered dreams. He reared up as far as his leg let him and kicked a whole bundle of orbs, feeling the magic flow into him like a river.

It was a wonder that nobody but him would ever see, and he paused at the solemnity of that thought. He looked back down at the pool of water and saw that the shore stretched out for only a short while before dropping precipitously into darkness again. Verity gulped. He could handle walking in a cave... but what if that had been a sheer drop? How far down did it go? Was it some kind of massive aquifer that was slowly draining out into some lucky waterfall or river?

More importantly, what *lived* in a place like that, if anything?

"I really am lost," he said to himself. This place was secret and beautiful, and only he had found it, and only he and the mysteries that dwelled here would know what was laid to rest in these waters. Loneliness crept in again, and he knew he had to push onward, to survive if nothing else.

He took stock of his surroundings. The orbs were lesser now, but still gave off light, and he heard their pops echoing as they burst on the ceiling. It was solid rock up there. He had to find out how big this place was. Using the stored energy from the magical shower, he pushed himself as far as he dared. The giant pool was indeed massive, stretching far out no matter how much he pushed his light. There were great islands and columns of rock, however, that pierced the surface at irregular intervals. He could teleport between those if need be.

Seeing no other way, he walked to the edge of the cavern wall and slid along the edge of the shoreline, skirting the deep waters, ignoring the abyss right next to him as he walked. More magical stones were lit by his passing, and he created a trail of the glowing veins behind him, a friendly green path that seemed to him a gentle reminder that not all was dead and lost in the world. The shore he had come in on soon disappeared behind, and the wide curve of the underground lake continued on and on and on.

The water touched his hoof. He shrank back from the sudden cold and looked down, seeing not that he had stepped in the lake, but that it had washed up to him. He watched as another little wave washed up, splashing innocently on the rocks. Verity felt himself grow sick. He hadn't done that. The orbs hadn't done that. The water had rippled somewhere far from shore, from something strong...

Something was *in* the water.

He pushed himself up against the cavern wall and increased the light from his horn even further, until it was a strain and he got a headache. But he didn't want to be in the dark, not with the terrible *something* that-

Over there! He swore he had seen a ripple, a splash. He pushed himself into the wall as if trying to melt away, to hide in the stones. Another splash, from something *big*. A thundering rumble of churning water as it turned towards him.

"No, no, no!" he whispered. His own light had destroyed him, the thing had *seen* him! Then he saw the eyes. Great, pale slits of eyes that had seen nothing for hundreds of years, the

blank, indifferent stare of an otherworldly being that had thoughts nopony could understand. The beast seemed bigger than the pool, than the cave, than the world, and far older, or was that just terror making his imagination run wild? A dangling tendril of flesh poked up from the water. On top rested a small glowing sac that brightened as it got closer, the orbs that had once been Verity's silent companions being drawn into the fleshy thing like a vacuum cleaner plucking up dust.

And then Verity understood.

It's hunting by magic.

The unicorn had a brief moment to curse his so-called gift before the water dragon burst from the pool, and fell upon him with a mighty roar.

Its jaws parted, revealing two rows of needle-like teeth, and a throat that seemed to be the entrance to eternity.

Verity felt himself quaking, but everything suddenly seemed so dull and unimportant. The way the light caught off the flumes of water was so beautiful...

RUN!!!

Verity kicked into high gear and teleported away from the cavern wall, appearing on a nearby island as the dragon's giant head smashed into the stone, with a boom that rattled Verity's bones. The stone cracked. The dragon was only dazed. Its magical feeler swung back and forth over its unseeing eyes, and its nostrils opened up. Its sniffs were like the bellows of a furnace, every twist of its huge head like the turning of a mountain on its axis. Verity was looking upon an apex predator, a beast that had no enemies and knew no fear.

He trembled as the feeler swung towards him, and blinked to the nearest island he could see, hearing the dragon's jaws snap shut as it missed him by a moment. He looked around for an escape. There were just more rocks! He blinked again, farther away this time to gain some ground on his pursuer. The dragon roared with frustration. It could feel his magic, but it kept jumping here and there. Annoying prey was the worst kind. It surged down into the water, coiling its serpentine body around the columns of rock, and the chase was on. Verity's mind struggled with the instinctive fear that welled up inside him, and had to think on the fly, and he blinked as fast as he could, just trying to keep some distance for now.

What do I do how do I get away I don't want to die please don't let me die please!

He screamed as the jaws came at him again, and he blinked away, trying to draw as much energy from the stones as he could. Even with all the raw fuel for his magic he could need besides his natural abilities, the strain of so much use at once was already becoming too much. His head was *pounding*, but that was nothing compared to the icy terror gripping his heart. He readied himself for another attack, already breathing heavily, and blinked away at the last

moment, but saw the dragon's head swirl towards him just as he reappeared. It sensed the magical outburst from his re-integration! He looked around to another island and flew there, seeing the dragon patiently following his movements. It could smell him and see his magic... he had to find some way to confuse those senses. He looked down at a vein of glowing rock beneath his hooves, reacting to his frenzied escapes.

Of course!

Another great splash made him look up, and saw that the dragon had grown tired of the chase. It had slammed its tail down into the water, sending waves careening over the tiny islands. A wall of water rushed towards him, and instinct took over.

He bowed his head as a bubble of light encircled him, strong and unyielding. At first the wave broke upon the shield, washing all around it, but the effort needed to keep away that kind of force overcame him in milliseconds. With a gasp he fell to his knees and the shield faltered, the water rushing in. A solid blow knocked him down into the grip of the frigid water, and it was a moment before he felt the knives of cold cutting into him. Where was up, or down? He struggled and flailed in the roiling current, opened his eyes, screamed into the water as he saw the glowing feeler and massive teeth surging towards him. He shut his eyes and his horn glowed. There was a pop and a snap as dragon jaws met only water, and Verity found himself on solid ground. He took gasping breaths, feeling like his heart was about to burst from fright. Where was the dragon? Where was *he*? The islands of rock were rushing past him in a blur. His own island was... moving?

Wait. This island had scales.

Verity turned and saw the dragon's head rear up from the water, coiling around to growl at him.

"Oh Luna!" he wailed and jumped away, blinking in mid-air. He appeared in the water near another island and scrambled ashore. The dragon screeched in pain as it bit itself trying to get at the pony, and thrashed about like a living tsunami, waves crashing all around it. Verity, gasping for breath, closed his eyes and concentrated. This was his only chance, and he had to do it *now*, or that thing would run him to exhaustion. He had to overload its magical sensors. His horn glowed bright, and the dragon swerved to face him, snarling with rage. Verity reached out into the living rock, using his magic to grab hold of the latent energy stored in the minerals, the water, all of it. He tried to ignore the freewheeling fear in his heart, the pounding in his head, and concentrated solely on the moment, the action of drawing from the well of the world. His life was on the line, and he had to do it right now.

Princesses give me strength...

And with a heave of effort he yanked his head upwards as the dragon surged towards him, the water foaming all around its neck.

Verity was surrounded by a deep green glow as a shower of orbs cascaded upwards, answering

his call, choking the very air around him with magical energy. His mane and tail drifted upwards with an invisible wind. And with the orbs that danced in the air, his fears seemed to float away. The orbs suddenly swirled towards him, blanketing him in a vortex of chaotic, arcane power. It centered around his horn, and the glow around it exploded into a fantastic display, lighting him up like a target for the dragon, and it roared with triumph as its bulk descended on him. Verity did not move. He felt... strange. Calm. He *knew* he wasn't going to die here. Power, indescribable power flowed through him. He had no idea what was happening. He hadn't meant it to, didn't even want it. But it felt so... right. Like this kind of power was exactly what he was supposed to have been wielding all along. The orbs cascaded into his horn, filling it up to the brim, and yet it drank still more until it overflowed. It overwhelmed him, blew away his senses, and took his identity. He didn't just have magic. He *was* magic. Numbing warmth spread from the base of his horn all over his body. He tried to stop the flow, but it was like some other part of him had taken over, and knew exactly what to do. Verity leaned back, lifting one hoof, and as the jaws opened to kill him, he unleashed his wrath.

There was a terrible noise, a rumble that shook the foundations of the mountain that encased the combatants, like the disapproving groan of a god woken from its slumber.

A shaft of pure magical energy made of thousands of years of collected potential exploded upwards, vaporizing the dragon's head into so much gas. Heat filled the cave, then lightning, and thunder, and the shaft smacked into the ceiling, boiling away rock and smashing upwards. It pierced the surface, battering through the raging storm that had gathered, burning through the clouds, dissipating at last far above. Great cracks appeared in the rock below, splintering the once impenetrable fortress, sending the entire roof of the cave crashing down and taking much of the surrounding woodland with it. Hundreds of tons of rock shook the cavern until at last it collapsed on itself, great plumes of dirt escaping into the air in geysers upon geysers of dust. Great claps erupted over the landscape, like the moon had collided with the earth. Everything living nearby was subjected to a calamitous earthquake as a new lakebed was created in a few devastating minutes.

At last the noise of the storm took over again. In the midst of the devastation, Verity alone stood victorious. Encased in a shroud of slowly dissipating magic, he was gently lowered to the ground upon a rock, and he dropped into a deep slumber in the middle of a crater formed by a final pulse of magic. The storm swirled and raged above, heedless of the pony it poured its fury onto.

Far, far away, something evil awoke from a deep slumber. It turned its gaze upward, to the roof of its throne room, and the rumble its massive body made sent its minions into spasms, quivering and shaking in fear as they watched their lord consider the rumble of deep, powerful magic. It blinked thoughtful eyes.

At last, it thought. At last fate has arrived. I told you, didn't I, my dears, of the day the magic would reveal itself again. Soon, now... soon it will be mine. And my dominion of this world will

be complete.