

Rutger's Magnetic World,

by Paul Arinaga

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Rutger was afraid. He didn't like dark, narrow places.

But the doctors said he had a tumor. Every few weeks he had to go into the big machine again so that they could have a look.

It was noisy, cramped, and dark like the cave by their house.

It was only 8:00 in the morning and Rutger still was sleepy, but as he rolled into the gaping mouth of the machine he caught a last glimpse of his mother. She smiled wanly, trying to reassure him. But Rutger could tell that she was worried, too.

The rolling bed stopped halfway into the machine, then rolled on all the way in. Rutger had to suppress the urge to get up and run out of there. He gripped the sides of the rolling bed tightly.

Then it started. The whirring and moaning of the machine. It sounded like a big, bad monster, and little Rutger was now feeling really afraid.

Then Rutger remembered something his Dad had told him.

"Just imagine you're exploring a giant cave, a cavern," he'd said.

Rutger closed his eyes and dozed off.

Next thing he knew it he was in a cave.

It was no small, dark cave. It was an enormous cavern. Huge, colourful stalactites hung from the ceiling and instead of the monotonous droning of the machine now all Rutger heard was the soothing "drip, drip, drip" of drops of water falling from the ceiling.

Rutger realized that he was standing up now, not lying down. He walked forward, but instead of walking he seemed to float above the floor of the cavern. He floated over giant boulders and down sheer cliffs, deeper and deeper into the cavern.

It became darker and darker, but instead of feeling frightened Rutger felt like an explorer. Then he noticed a light on his head, a headlamp. But instead of being like the one his father sometimes strapped on, this one seemed to be part of his body. Rutger touched the light and it went on as if by magic.

Now he could see the true splendour of the cavern. Aside from the multi-hued stalactites, giant stones lay upon the cavern as if tossed there casually by playful giants. Strangely patterned stalagmites seemed to pierce through the cavern floor like the dull teeth of ancient dinosaurs. And a small river ran through the very bottom of the cavern deep below.

Then Rutger saw a golden gondola. It was like the ones he'd seen in books about Italy. Only this one was more beautiful. It was decorated with gold and precious gem stones, and covered in beautiful flowers.

Rutger sped down towards the beautiful boat and was about to step in it when a voice made him stop.

"Only the protector of the cavern may ride the raft of return," boomed the voice again.

Rutger looked over his shoulder but couldn't see anything. "Show yourself" he commanded in a soft voice, feeling a shiver of fear for the first time.

To his surprise, a small creature stepped into the light. It might have been a dwarf or an elf except that it was gnarled and humpbacked and had rough skin like the cavern walls. Yet despite this, Rutger didn't feel afraid. The little creature's eyes shone like sapphires.

"Only the one who stops the destruction of the cavern may ride the raft of return," said the creature, this time sounding more grandfatherly than threatening.

With this the creature scampered away into the darkness.

"Wait!" shouted Rutger. He sped after the creature.

They raced through the cavern, twisting and turning through passages. Soon Rutger was lost and the strange creature was gone. It was much colder in this part of the cavern.

Rutger's light went out.

He tried touching it with his hand but it wouldn't go on again.

Rutger stumbled around in the darkness, bumping his head on the low ceiling. Gradually, his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. With just a sliver of light shining through, he was surprised by how well he could see.

Then Rutger heard it. A distant rumbling at first. But it became louder and louder. Somebody or something was approaching. Rutger ducked behind a large stone.

"Boom, boom, boom!" five enormous cave trolls came out of one of the passageways. They each stood higher than a two-storey house and their barrel chests and tree-trunk sized arms were decorated with precious gemstones. Each troll carried a large pick axe.

They soon got to work. "Crack! Crack!" with a deafening pounding they chipped off huge pieces of the cavern walls to get at the gemstones and unusual stones embedded within them. Each time they got a precious stone out of the cavern wall the cave trolls roared with satisfaction.

Without thinking, Rutger shouted "STOP!" and stepped into the light.

The cave trolls stopped their work and peered down at Rutger.

"Who dares tell us to stop!" demanded the biggest cave troll.

"I do," said Rutger without hesitation.

With that, the cave trolls threw down their pick axes and rushed at Rutger, roaring like wild beasts.

Rutger flung his arms out and all the loose stones and gemstones in the cavern flew into the air. He clapped his hands together and the stones rained down on the cave trolls.

"Bonk, bonk, bonk" one by one the cave trolls fell to the cavern floor. Next Rutger's eyes lighted up like the sapphire eyes of the strange creature he'd seen and molten lava flowed from them covering the dazed cave trolls.

The biggest cave troll lay just an arm's length away from Rutger's feet.

Rutger breathed a sigh of relief and an ice cold mist blew over the cave trolls. They turned to hard stone where they had fallen.

Rutger strode through the maze of passages as if guided by an unseen light, and emerged back at the golden gondola.

"You have done well," said the gnarled creature he had seen before.

"You may now ride the raft of return."

Rutger hopped into the golden gondola and waved at the strange creature as the gondola flowed away carried by the river's current. A feeling of deep relaxation and contentment flowed over him as he enjoyed all the beauty of the cavern for one last time.

Presently, Rutger emerged from the cavern into the bright sunlight.

"Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!!!" he screamed. The golden gondola tipped over the edge of a waterfall and landed in a large pool of water.

Rutger jumped out and rushed into the open arms of his Mom and Dad, forgetting all about his cave adventure...for the time being.