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Fantasy  
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The Rune Seeker

By

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## 0.1 (Prologue)

He should have followed his first instincts. No matter how much they begged him, he should have just followed his instincts.

*Why does it always end up this way?* There were a million reasons he could have chosen for why this wasn't a good idea. One of those reasons slammed its filthy, furry pincer to the ground, missing his torso by only a hand's length. Had he hesitated for even a second, it would have pierced through his abdomen, and they would surely be at his funeral, crying uncontrollably over his untimely demise.

They'd conveniently forget, of course, that they goaded him into the so-called "Cave of Death."

The name was another one of those millions of reasons he could remember quite clearly.

He remembered complaining about the long, painful climb to the mouth of the infamous cave. There was a fog surrounding it that hadn't lifted for days, and yet they felt it was the best time and the best day to sneak into its innards, hoping to get a sniff of a worthwhile treasure that could salvage their faltering shop.

It was one of the few things he hated about his occupation. The hazards sometimes far outweighed the rewards.

His thoughts snapped back to the damped cavern and the monstrosity that stood before him, as it nearly snagged on of his fiery-red locks of dreaded hair. While his frame was thin, he wielded his short, broad stone sword without trouble. The spider-beast before him quickly found that out when the same leg that nearly severed his hair, was now severed in two itself. Black, oozing blood sprayed from its limb, and for a moment it lost its own balance, nearly toppling over on them all. It quickly made up for its lost appendage and shifted its weight to the other seven legs it held

in reserve. The striped-black fur that covered its body, wet from the water that surrounded its resting place like a moat, shivered. It shrieked - a shrill sound that could only be equaled by the likes of a banshee's bloodcurdling death knell sung over the numbing sound of chalk scratching a board. The cave walls shook from the sound, and bounced it back and forth through their ears.

Even the monster itself seemed surprised by its own howl.

"Magna!" He could barely hear her voice over the screeching, but the young girl somehow managed it. His hands still covering his ears, he peered over to her, teeth clenched as he fought to keep his brain inside his head.

"I'm going to blind it!"

Magna felt like he should argue against it. He always worried about the lithe girl that often rushed ahead of them all. She always had something to prove, whether it was her knowledge or her usefulness. Not to him - he knew that she was as valuable to their team as always.

No, she had to prove it to their other ally.

"Being foolish, Lily." The screaming of the monster had died down a slight bit, allowing the more calm voice of reason to be heard. She uncovered her ears, and focused her silver eyes back on the beast before them. The ebony, silver-haired woman drew her side arm, a large revolver that held a specific kind of ammunition for such an occasion. "We can do this from far away, no need to get close."

"Who said anything about getting close?" Lily flashed her comrades the grin she reserved for those moments when she knew she'd surprised them. Magna also knew that grin usually meant trouble was imminent.

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She reached into her violet satchel, yanking out a pair of vials

filled with a light-blue powder. "Can you hit it with those flare shots Ruby?"

Ruby's silver eyes narrowed, and her smile curved even further. "You doubt me? I'm flattered."

Lily snarled at her, but turned her glare back to the spider as it reared forward. She ran towards the beast, and on the fifth step she lunged, hurling the vial forward.

Just as the vial soared towards it multitude of eyes, Ruby rested her right arm over her crossed left arm, steadying her aim as best she could.

The moment her bullet hit the vial, an explosion shook the very foundation of the mountain. The three of them fell back on their collective bums, covering their eyes from the bright white-orange flames that erupted in the face of the beast. Its screech was notably quieter this time. More of its black blood spewed about, spraying the walls, and even the three of them.

The spider fell to the ground, screaming as best it could as its pain only increased. It jittered here and there, banging into the left wall of its nook, then the right, then the left, nearly flipping over as the flames enshrined its body.

"That, wasn't what I expected." Lily put away her second vial, as well as her dagger. "That would explain why the rest of the nest was frightened by the torches."

"We should probably be sure its dead," Magna added. "Not exactly trusting something that brutal to just... quit so easily."

"Always the pessimist." Ruby teased, giggling a bit. "So, anyone have a big stick to poke it with?"

"How about we just burn the body to ashes?" Magna scratched his head. "I mean, that's the most sure way, right?"

Ruby nodded, then reached into her own black satchel. Magna peeked at her hand as she sifted through various rounds of all sorts of colors and metals: silver rounds, gold rounds, bullets covered in red dust, an emerald-tinted bullet...

"Not seeing a burn-the-gigantic-spider-to-a-crisp bullet in here, hon'. I could use another Flaring Round, but I've already used four of them in one night and I can't guarantee it'll do the job. You know how expensive those are."

Magna sighed. "Geez, really Ruby? I'll pay you for your ammo later. I'd just rather be sure we're safe."

"Magna, I'm insulted!" She plowed through her array of bullets again until she pulled out one of the rounds covered in red. "Did you really think I was going to charge you by the shot?"

Magna's brow rose. "You did last time. Was pretty expensive, too."

"That was different. I didn't volunteer to travel with you on that expedition. And even then I only accepted after you practically begged to pay for it if I joined along." She slid the bullet into the chamber, then spun chamber with a flick of her fingers. "And besides, you couldn't afford to do that this time anyway."

"That many, huh?" He smiled, shaking his head. "Just flare it up. Maybe whatever it was protecting will pay enough to cover the ammo."

"Or at least cover the shop's overhead for another month? I'd settle for that."

The already scorched carcass exploded into flame yet again, and its legs and body began to fold inward, losing their structure and hardening into a darkened piece of burnt black flesh. However, the fumes that erupted from its burning innards were toxic, at best.

They quickly covered their mouths and noses from the offensive stench. "Who knew burning spider meat smelled so atrociously

rancid?" Lily looked as though she was about to vomit right into her hands. \*

"Ugh. Not the best idea we've ever had, huh?" Ruby looked to Magna, hand covering her face. \*

"Like I was supposed to know that?" \*

"Well you're the resident master of wildlife, aren't you?" \*

Magna rolled his eyes hearing that. "Ruby, that is not *wildlife*." \*

She laughed at his tepid answer. "You're unbelievably serious today." \*

"Yeah, well, giant spiders kinda' put me on edge, I guess." After another moment of walking about and examining the dead spider, he finally pulled his hand away from his mouth a bit. "Either way, I'd rather it stink than still be alive." He grinned at Ruby. \*

"Where's Alex, by the way? He's the one that told us to come to this god-forsaken cavern and march through these spiders, and yet as always, the idiot himself isn't here!" Now that the imminent danger seemed to have pass (save for the lovely aroma that threatened to make them all vomit to death), Ruby remembered that their "team" was supposed to consist of four members, not three. \*

Magna hoped she wouldn't remind him. \*

*That* member seemed to always go missing whenever work was to be done. The constant tardiness to their expeditions - which usually saw him appearing just as the heavy lifting was completed - was not granting him any favors with Ruby, that much Magna could tell. If he up and left that very day, she'd probably be pleased. \*

Magna knew of his value to the shop, attendance woes aside. He was a blacksmith - a rarity in their time. Most weapons that were even being made were being mass-produced in the few factories strewn about the land, operated by steam engines and electronic \*

contraptions. \*

Yet Alex had the uncanny ability to make swords that made anyone, even the most rigid of sword critics, drool just at the sight of his work. \*

The problem was, they could count on him showing up late almost without fail. \*

"Wow. Well, I've gotta' say, you three did some amazing work in here. Glad you're on my side." \*

Magna sighed at the hopeless Alex. "Really? You're hours late and *that's* the best you can say?" \*

"I told you guys to wait for me! But you're so impatient—"

"*Hours late,*" Ruby reiterated. "You don't have a shop to run, you flake. We do."

"I'm aware of that, thanks." Alex flicked some of his emerald hair out of his face, and then continued as if nothing happened. "So, as I was saying, my tip was right. There should be something of immense value back there." He pointed behind the burned corpse, into the shadowed cavern ahead. "Right in that nook." \*

"I swear Alex, if we go in there and nothing of importance is in my hands when we leave, I'm going to kill you in the most inhumane way I can think of." Ruby marched forward, still taking a second here and there to wipe away that black blood from her grey tunic and skirt. \*

"You don't really mean that." Alex slowly followed behind her. \*

Ruby paused, whipped around to face Alex, and pointed right at his nose. "Remember, Alex. Most inhumane way possible." \*

"Okay okay, death by the most inhumane way possible. I get it. Now can we go and see if I'm going to die?"

Magna made his way pass them, and into the nook itself. A school of tiny spiders scurried along the walls. These mites didn't even compare to the large beast they'd felled a short while before, but Magna knew that those mites weren't a good sign.

"We really need to get out of here."

"Well that's obvious Magna." Magna felt Lili grasp his right arm almost unconsciously even as she said that.

Ruby's squeal of joy drew his attention back to the cavern ahead. at the end of the cave she stood, with Alex only a step behind her. Magna could just barely identify what had her so happy. She was awfully joyful about the silver bracelet he saw in her grasp.

As he approached, he could see that the metal wasn't simply silver. Ruby's reaction alone should have told him that much. She of all people would know how to identify something valuable. It was her job as a merchant, after all.

"Magna, this is all made of Platinum!" She held the bracelet up, into the air as if to catch rays of sunlight that no one else could see. Still, the light from the few torches within the chamber that reflected of the moist walls gave just enough to prove its luster. Magna watched as she slid the bracelet on her arm, smiling like a child with a new toy. "This isn't just Platinum though."

Lily let go of Magna's arm, then lifted a necklace from the pool of platinum treasures. "So a bunch of Platinum jewels were just left here? That seems unreal."

Ruby started to argue it, but just as she opened her mouth to argue, she halted.

"Wait," she mumbled. "This isn't right at all."

"What isn't?" Magna looked to Lili, who was just as confused.



Ruby stared at the jewels for a moment, then at the bracelet she'd just recently adorned around her arm. She snatched it off, tossed it into the cove and stepped back. "What a clever curse."

Again, Magna looked to Lili, who met his confused glance with her own. Realizing she wasn't any more aware of what Ruby spoke of than himself, he asked Ruby himself. "Wait. A curse?"

"This isn't the real treasure. It's cursed jewelry. And those spiders..." Ruby looked about the room again, eyeing the mites that crawled about here and there.

Magna walked onward, further into the cave, beyond that bright cove. "That platinum is made to attract those spiders, isn't it?"

Ruby nodded. "Yes, indeed it is hon'." She pointed to the trove where the Platinum jewels sat, and all about it, hundreds of those mites swarmed along the walls.

"There's got to be more than just that one leviathan-sized monster in here." As Magna suspected, when they'd stepped away from the jewelry, the spiders that slowly gathered dispersed as well. "Alex? Why the hell would you lead us here? Something we should know?"

"A very good source told me that there was an abundance of treasure to be found here and possibly even something powerful. That source hasn't failed me yet, and so far she's been right."

"Oh. She," Magna mumbled. He didn't want to think it, but it was the natural conclusion that everyone jumped to.

Of course, he could count on Ruby to voice her opinion without question. "So you got the information from one of your jilted lovers, who could easily be out to get you killed. I'm somehow not surprised."

"How nice of you all to give me the benefit of the doubt," he whined. "She wasn't some love affair I tossed aside!"

Magna didn't need to see more than his face as he spoke those words. That was *exactly* what she was, and she no doubt had every intention of getting him killed that day. She just had no idea that he would instead nearly get his allies killed instead.

Realizing the discussion wasn't going to get them much further, Magna decided to move on from it, talking as he walked along the walls and examined them. "Well not to brag about our team or anything, but, I doubt every hunter in the world got that far into this place." Magna had reached the back wall, far enough from the torchlight that he could no longer be seen against the vibrant, lit emerald veins in the stone. "This monster, this whole trap, was set for something way bigger."

"I don't suppose we could just sell the Platinum, huh?" Ruby peered back at the trinkets. "I mean, after all, people pay lots of good money for cursed objects."

"Ruby, you're kidding right?" Lily was already making her way back to Magna's side. "That would be moronic. We'd just be inviting those things outside the cave! Not sure about you, but I don't wanna' be responsible for the destruction of a city or two if those things spread!"

"I'm sure someone else has left the cave before. All that talk is just superstition to keep people from venturing in here. Whatever else is in here probably pales in comparison to those jewels."

"Well, only one way to find out, right?" Magna ran his hand along the rocks, as if his fingertips could read what lay behind them. He looked about the cave again, towards the ceiling, then the walls surrounding them... there was something there. It was faint, but he could just barely see small reflections here and there, as if trying to draw his eyes to the walls like some sort of code. Without even turning his glare away from the ceiling, he spoke, almost as if mesmerized by what he was seeing.

"Ruby? Could you give us some light?"

Her answer was a soothing "of course." She reachd her into her satchel again, this time fishing out what looked to be nothing more than a small pebble. She closed her eyes, only for a moment, gathering every thought she could into the pebble, clenching it tightly in her palm as if trying to crush it. She flinched, and then exhaled.

As she did so, the pebble emitted a glow so bright that it looked as though the entire cavern was immersed in the light of day.

Now they could clearly see what he saw, and felt, along those walls: they were covered with engraved passages, words written in a tongue long forgotten. Many around the realm simply referred to it as "Runespeak."

They were all speechless. Whatever they'd stumbled upon in this cavern, this place that Alex was led to accidentally by a woman scorned and nearly got them all killed..

It turned out to be much more than any of them ever imagined.

Lily immediately pulled out a notebook and ink pen, furiously scribbling every word she could translate. Ruby was quickly at her side, feeding her as many of those words as she could - the two of them worked like one unit, and Magna knew that they would be able to translate that entire cavern within a few minutes. *A historian-in-training and a descendant of mages*, he thought to himself as he glared at the two of them. *Couldn't really ask to have anyone better working with me, could I?*

"This is amazing Magna..." Ruby paused for a moment to look about the ceiling again, then her eyes traced the lettering down the walls, and eventually back to Magna's stare. "All of this... its spells."

"Spells?"

"Yes. This is the remnants of someone's magic research, likely a

spell book in progress. I can't think of too many ways that the contents of the book would have gotten all over the walls and even the ceiling, other than the original writer needing a way to hide her work from someone."

"Well she'd have to be a hell of a climber to write his spells on the ceiling," Alex added.

Magna noticed that Ruby's smile this time wasn't that wry grin that they were used to.

She was worried.

"I can't even translate all of it. There's Runespeak in here that's far older than what's been recorded. If what Lily and I have managed to gather is right so far..."

Ruby looked to Lily, and in response Lily peeked back to her own notebook, and nodded. "The spells are written along the walls as part of some sort of seal. But nothing that I can think of matches anything I've studied. Granted I'm still a bit early into my advanced field work."

Magna nodded. "It makes sense. That also explains the spiders and the cursed jewelry."

"It does?"

"Yeah. If you were trying to keep people from finding something that dangerous in any way possible, how far would you go? Leave a giant monster and its ilk to guard it, cursed jewelry to throw off greedy hunters, a curse in case someone gets the secret outside with the jewelry... and then throw the whole thing on the walls."

Magna had to admit, seeing Lily staring at him so blankly and just blinking was amusing. "That, is a lot of protection."

Magna laughed. "Yeah, well, I can relate. Either way, Could you try to write up as much of it as possible so we can reference it

later?"

"Reference it later? You mean we're leaving after finding all this?"

He nodded, and shifted his view about the cave again, still searching for something. "I mean we can't stay here much longer anyway. Unless we want to deal with the other spider-beast-things that are in this cave."

"How do you know there's so many more?"

"Because that was still too easy," Magna answered.

"Well, your insanity aside?" Lily let out a little curt laugh, "We really should do somethin' about the whole thing. No telling what moron would run in here and luck their way past that thing, only to get their entire town overrun with giant, man-eating spiders." Lily continued writing and mapping the cavern. "Anyone have any ideas what to do though?"

Alex nodded, then made his way towards the cove of jewelry. "Ruby, gonna' need your help. And one of those flare rounds you're so fond of."

Magna simply shrugged and smiled at Ruby. "Be nice," he mumbled to her. Ruby then marched towards Alex with a strangely vicious aura about her.

"Magna..." Lily brought her notebook to him, and pointed at one of the passages on the ceiling that matched Ruby's translation. "It might be better if you draw some of it out."

He nodded, and accepted her notebook and ink. "Good point. Got another notebook?"

Her bright smile made it impossible for him not to return it with one of his own. "Still..." His attention returned to the markings all about the cave as he grasped the spare notebook from Lily. "I

just can't think of who could have been this powerful, to have their spellbook sealed like this?"

"That's if its true," Lily noted. "After all, for all we know once we research this it could be some sorta' prank." \*

He hated to admit that it was a possibility. "Let's hope not. If this really turns into something, it could save our shop." \*