

The Shaggy Gnome

This is the story of a shaggy little gnome who decided to clean his lair.



The clutter, accumulated over many years, was of such volume that he no longer had a clear memory of what much of the floor looked like.



He gathered together articles of clothing scattered about the dwelling, folding and stacking them neatly.



From piles of debris he sifted out trophies of battles fought long ago, arranging them along the wall in rows.



And not least, he hauled load upon load of unneeded items up to the surface and tossed them onto the ground for the scavengers to pick over.



As the little gnome was clearing a particularly ancient pile of trash from one corner of his dwelling, he spied a small round hole in the wall, near the floor. He did not recall the hole having been there before, although the sight of it stirred vague memories.



His curiosity aroused, and the hole being just big enough for him to fit through, he decided to find out what was on the other side. He grabbed a torch to light his way and, with some effort, got himself through the hole.



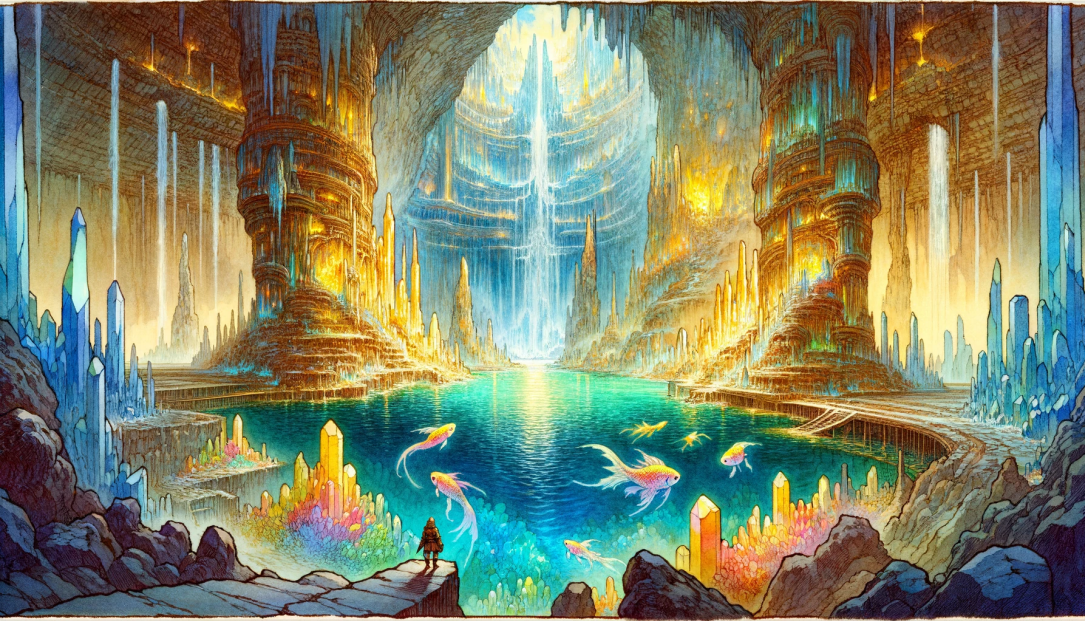
The gnome found himself in a narrow passageway that widened out quickly into a rocky but negotiable tunnel. He began to walk. After some twists and turns, the tunnel began to slope quite steeply downward. Deeper and deeper the gnome descended.



After a journey of some hours duration, the gnome noticed that the tunnel was becoming wider and less steep, the walls moist and smooth like ice. He could hear a faint distant roaring. The sound of rushing water?



Suddenly, after a sharp turn, the tunnel opened out onto a magnificent vista: a great crystal cavern, extending for what must have been a mile, with a ceiling hundreds of feet high, the whole space illuminated by the golden light of eerily glowing stalactites. In the center of the cavern was a vast lake of deep, clear, incredibly blue water. Beneath the surface of the lake, enormous multi-colored fish swam lazily. At the far end of the cavern could be seen the source of the roaring noise: a towering waterfall, starting at the roof of the cavern and plummeting over the crystalline rocks to the floor below.



Memory came flooding back to the gnome. He had visited this cavern often, in the days of his youth, ages and ages ago. Here he had found peace, renewal, and inspiration. But as the years — the centuries — had flowed by, he had become occupied with other matters, the little entryway in his hovel became concealed by debris, and he had forgotten the very existence of this place. Now it was his once again.

The shaggy gnome smiled, rubbed his beard, and said to himself, "Amazing, the treasures you rediscover when you clean your room."



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