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Lindsay Newey

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There is a reason why they call it the “mouth” of a cave.

The life of a hired diver is not an easy one. Not many people get to end up in jobs they are happy with, but at least most don't require you to budget your breaths- even if you do feel like your desk job is a waste of oxygen. From the nitrogen in your blood turning into poison at certain depths to facing suffocation every day, it's not the easiest day job.

Today I dive into Fiche Dó Cave. You see, it's close to a car manufacturing plant and they've hired me to figure out if the tunnel at the bottom would make it unsuitable to be a run-off spot for waste products. If the tunnel leads anywhere that's illegal to dump into...well, wouldn't want to ruin anything that isn't the peaceful lake they're dumping into. I sincerely hope there's some endangered fish down there just to stick it to these assholes.

We're at the edge of the rocky shoreline of the lake, a sad pitiful sort of lake hidden in the forest. It's shallow and murky and wouldn't be missed by any tourists looking for something to do. Invisible from the surface, just beyond where we are putting on our diving gear right now, there's a hole that leads to the most dangerous cave I will probably ever go into.

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I guess that the one benefit of hired diving - if I make it out alive I have bragging rights. Telling other divers on the internet that I went into a famous diving cave that no one is allowed to dive in anymore is priceless.

But that's the thing though, if I make it out alive. Fame and diving are synonymous with near death experiences. If you haven't halfway asphyxiated then you're just another chump with flippers.

My partner Marge and I finish suiting up and make our way to the mouth of the cave. When we get there, the approximate 5 foot opening is covered by a metal grate opposite a beat-up rusty metal sign. The sign is one familiar to me, as it is to many diving masters. Any cave where too many people do something stupid and drown feature this sign- a warning to turn back if you aren't an experienced diver and a big drawing of the grim reaper to really get the point across. A little melodramatic, but hey, some people need a picture book instead of words.

Marge looks at the sign and then back at me. She shrugs. Somehow without words she still manages to crack a joke. We take the crowbars out of our packs and pry the grate open. We leave the crowbars on the edge of the hole, no use having extra weight on the journey down.

We enter the hole and descend into the first chamber of the cave. This first chamber is around 40 feet in depth. As we descend and the light from outside begins to filter out, my breathing becomes the familiar loud rhythmic pattern I rely on. The hiss of the oxygen can be annoying, but it is often the only constant beyond danger in my paid jobs.

I watch the rocky walls of the chamber dip in and out, rough and random, unlike my breath. We are about to reach the bottom of

the chamber then - I bump into Marge. She had stopped in front of me and I wasn't paying attention. We must have just reached the bottom of the chamber, but she should have been moving along the floor by now. I swim forward to her position.

I come face to face with a corpse. It must have been a while, they were unrecognizable and the wetsuit around them was falling apart. Their eyes had...left the equation, but it still seemed to stare at me nonetheless.

I force the lump in my throat back down and put my hand on Marge's shoulder. When our eyes meet through the fogged plastic of her blue goggles, we exchange a nod and the "ok" hand sign and continue on.

We crawl across the floor of the chamber until we come up to a hole in the ground. It's much smaller than the cave opening. Marge flashes her light along the edge of it until a red line of paint appears. This is the entrance to the next chamber.

The hole was very small, so small in fact that to get through it we would have to take off our oxygen tanks, push them in front of us, and then shove and inch our bodies through after it.

I point at the hole and nod, it's my turn to go first. It sounds terrifying, but I used to love this part. It felt like a McDonalds play palace, but for adults. I was being a kid and being impressive all at the same time. I was an explorer.

In fact I used to love diving, lived for it. You don't put yourself through that much training, debt, and risk by accident. It used to be a thrill, it used to be exploration and connection to nature and the unknown. But without the freedom to just bail in danger, what once was a hug from those limestone walls was now a strangle hold.

I force myself through the tunnel. I can't see anything in front of me except my tank. I try not to think about getting stuck and I push forward.

Why did I show up today? Why not just give a good fake cough to the boss and go back to sleep. These jobs may pay well but you never know when the next one is coming. With the debt I have? I take the job. Calling in sick means someone else is getting your food budget for the next month.

I make it into the next chamber and put my gear back on while I wait for Marge. I look to the new void that has opened up below me.

This chamber is nicknamed "the Cathedral". How romantic.

Once she gets through we assess the room around us. The hole we just went through has a rope attached to the side of it, it goes all the way down disappearing into the nothingness below. Algae sways from it like tentacles. This was done by previous divers on account of all the false openings on the ceiling. Only one leads back to the first chamber, and the rest only lead to dead ends. Very easy to get lost and run out of oxygen.

The other feature of the Cathedral is "baby's breath", the air pocket at the top right corner. The name is a morbid joke about how little breathable air is actually in this bubble.

After this quick reorientation, we begin our descent along the rope. Marge goes first.

This part of the cave is just...empty. Just an 80 foot pool of nothing, no light. Pointing our flashlights down, the beams hit nothing.

It's like being swallowed by space without any stars.

As I follow her down, I try to occupy my mind from the emptiness. I remember the story she always tells every time a cave has one of these air pockets. She would always tell me about this macho guy that always went cave diving with a knife. Well one day he got stuck in one of these pockets with no possible way to

get back to the surface alive. He finally got to use his knife. He stabbed his own chest because he was too afraid to drown.

Now I would always brush this story off. I mean come on, that guy was an idiot, stabbed himself AND THEN drowned. Can't really tread water with a stab wound, can you?

We dive deeper and I run out of clever distractions. I focus on the deafening breathing noises like a meditation. This works for a bit but then...they get quieter.

That had never happened before, they were always so loud and I was still breathing the same but- there it was slowly becoming softer.

It was a relief from the noise but it felt so off. Then I hear it. I whip my head around out of instinct but there is nothing there.

I was hearing whispers.

Soft and low, but clearly voices. I can't make them out but just the idea that impossible words were hitting my ears was driving me to panic. I try to just keep going and ignore them, panicking would only deplete oxygen.

One word rises above the fragments and hits my ears.

"Leave"

Before I could even react the flashlight picked something up again. The bottom, the end of the void. We are reaching the tunnel.

I feel my whole body rush in protest. Like my limbs are full of static.

Marge gets out of the way of the entrance to the tunnel and looks at me. It's my turn to go first but I can't move.

I am choking on my own breath, eyes unable to close. I plead with

my body to move forward, but I am stopped by Marge's hand on mine.

Her eyes show her own fear, but also a strength I don't have.

She goes first into the tunnel. I watch her go head first into the belly of the beast and disappear.

I want to run away, get back to the surface where my airway wasn't bound by lock and key, but I force myself not to.

I am a coward but I'm not leaving her behind.

I squeeze my arm until it hurts to ground myself then I push forward into the tunnel.

I extend my flashlight forward but it only illuminates the cave walls and fails to light up anything further in the tunnel. I only waited a second, how could she be that far ahead of me? I continue to crawl and keep the flashlight facing forward, but still nothing.

In fact the light doesn't stretch any further down the tunnel. I am coming closer to the darkness, not breaking it up.

Only now, reaching the edge of the light that the darkness personified itself. It's alive— some sort of organism, a creature.

A morphing black cloud of spines rolling in and out of itself sits before me, like a sea urchin that had come undone. Its movements are sickly and hypnotic, making me twitch.

An object begins to rise from the tendrils, spit out of the dark, a flash of a blue.

A diving mask.

Bile rises in my throat and tears fog my vision.

With the feeling of my brain beginning to disconnect from reality I force my arms against the tunnel walls and push myself back. I turn the panic into methodical steps pushing toward open space.

None of this is real, none of this is real, this is nitrogen psychosis, it isn't real.

My legs begin to feel free and I flip my body onto the guideline, wrapping onto it like bait on a hook. I turn on my floatation device and climb the rope fueled by adrenaline, the bends be damned.

If I can make it to a single breath of real air, then the damage of the pressure exchange would be worth it.

In this moment, salvation feels like rope burn from under a wetsuit.

Then the line slacks.

It's impossible, that's impossible. But I am getting out of here. I will get out of here.

I fly blindly towards the ceiling, faster than I have ever swam in my life.

Just as thoughts of all I will miss creeps into my head, my hand hits the ceiling. I feel the hole next to me, no idea if it's the right one. I feel for the notch where the rope should be but there's nothing. I go to the next one, and the next and rue the irony of dying so close to the surface.

Then the next hole is smaller than the other ones, and I swear it's the same size as the connecting tunnel. I look in to inspect it and I swear I see a glimmer of light, a flash like a stained glass window coming through from the surface.

This has to be the right one, none of the other holes should have light in them. I take off my tank and slam it into the hole. I dive

in, squeezing and pushing with all the force I have. My body scrapes along edges when my arms begin to feel light, the edge of the tunnel opening up to release them..

With one last push I should be free to-

Pain.

My head throbs with agony. As one hand grasps at my head the other reaches and hits rock.

I had hit my head on the top of a false tunnel. I think I passed out.

How long have I been here?

I check my oxygen tank. It will be hitting zero any second now. I only have a very slim chance to go back and use the last breath to make it to the surface, maybe to the top chamber at least so my body could be found.

I raise my flashlight. It's there.

Blocking the entrance, doubled in size, the beast blocking my only way out. Its spines had grown, extending into the walls.

No way out.

I stare at it, and it stares back with its lack of eyes. Why is it not moving, why not eat me immediately?

I hear beeping and look back down at my tank, and that's when it hits me.

My tank is empty. It was waiting for me to drown.

I can feel it devouring my fear as my breath begins to sputter. I choke on the mouth piece gasping, desperate to keep it in my mouth regardless. But instinct kicks in without me and I cough it

up.

I keep my mouth shut staring at the mass in front of me in protest.

A spine grows slowly and pierces my leg. In shock I open my mouth. My lungs force a gulp and water floods them.

I grab at my chest, my brain on fire. I look up to see the mass begin to move. The spines roll over my legs and up my chest, stabbing me with each step. It goes up my neck and to my lips.

It pushes its way into my mouth, forcing its way down my throat. Gagging is added to my collection of pain.

When it reaches my stomach it stops. Then the spines begin to expand once more.

As they grow and blood pools in my organs, stomach acid leaking out, I feel regret.

I can't believe my last thought before the spikes pierce my brain and lobotomize me was this:

I should have brought a knife.