

a cave

a short story

“This is it,” my brother announced.

Kaile and I stared at the cave. “This is it?”

It honestly looked terrifying. Tiny stalactites jutted out from the ceiling of the cave, and the sides were lined with jagged spurs of rock that looked like they were just *daring* me to enter.

Also, the cave was about three feet wide.

“The rocks aren’t as sharp as they look,” he said, entirely misreading my look of horror.

I tore my gaze away from the dark tunnel. “That’s not it! You know I have—”

James rolled his eyes. “Don’t even start. Everybody has a little bit of claustrophobia; besides, the tunnel is short. It opens into a cavern; it’s actually pretty spacious, as caves go. You’ll be *fine*.” He dropped to his knees and crawled into the cave. “You brought your flashlight, right?”

“Yeah.” I reluctantly fished in my pocket and pulled out the penlight, staring at the cave apprehensively. “Kaile, wanna go first?”

She grinned. “Nope. Go ahead.”

She gave me a little push. I stumbled forward and paused in the opening. “James... you’re *sure* it opens up soon, right?”

“I already told you it does.”

I bit my lip and hesitated. “But...”

“Just go!”

I stepped into the cave.

I got on my hands and knees and crawled forward, holding my penlight with my teeth. Kaile came right behind me. The stone was rough but not too sharp. The tunnel sloped slightly downward, and I could feel the air growing cool and damp, with a thick earthy scent.

James abruptly stood up and sat down on something I couldn't make out yet.

I crawled forward a little more, and then my penlight illuminated the cavern.

It was huge—way bigger than I'd expected. James was sitting on top of a lumpy stalagmite, and the ceiling arched a good fifteen, twenty feet above us. The cave was almost as wide, and stalagmites and stalactites speared up and down like jagged arrowheads.

I shone my penlight around, and I found a short, blunt stalagmite. I sat down on top of it and ran my hands over the cool stone.

The cave suddenly gave a jolt. The ground trembled beneath my feet.

“Um.” Kaile glanced around with a bit of panic. “James? Does it... normally do that?”

A stalactite broke off and smashed on the ground. James yelled and lurched to the side. Fragments of rock were crumbling from the ceiling as cracks spiderwebbed across it, the stone beneath our feet shuddering and jolting.

“We have to get out!” I shrieked.

James dove towards the tunnel and instantly recoiled. “We can't go through the tunnel! Rocks are falling from the top!”

I coughed out the dust and staggered into a corner. “What do we do?!”

“Take cover!” Kaile declared. “Stop, drop and roll! Uh, no, that’s for a fire—I think we’re supposed to take cover!”

“Cover your head with your arms!” I yelled.

“No!” Kaile exclaimed dramatically. “I mean, no. Look, it’s stopped.”

She was right. I took a cautious step forward. The dissipating dust revealed the rubble coating the ground, dark, rough chunks of rock scattered across the cave like an abandoned mine.

Kaile dusted off her clothes and coughed. James blinked dust out of his eyes.

“Now we get out,” Kaile announced, and instantly ran to the tunnel.

I beat her to it. It was sort of terrifying to be in there, in the middle of all the dust and rock rubble; it *seemed* like the earthquake had ended, but what if there was another wave? I needed to get out. The air was smothered with rock dust, and it felt hard to breathe.

I hesitated at the opening and bit my lip. What if another earthquake hit while I was *in the tunnel*? If any rock fell—if the roof collapsed—

“Go ahead,” Kaile said.

I stepped into the tunnel and flicked my penlight forward.

I couldn’t see anything from here—just blackness. That made sense. The air was still foggy from the dust, and...

I crawled a few paces forward and realized that there was a huge chunk of rock in front of me.

“Zoe?” James called, his voice pitching slightly higher than usual.

“What?!” I yelped, panicked. “No! It’s fine, we’re all good, ALL FINE NOTHING WRONG. I’ll—I’ll find a way around it—”

“Around WHAT?” Kaile demanded, then grabbed my arm and pulled me out. “Zoe, calm down! You’re having a panic attack, but it *will be okay*. Do you hear me? Sit down. And CALM DOWN!”

I laid back against one of the stalagmites, groaned, and clutched my head in my hands. I felt dizzy. Dizzy and sick.

“No light,” Kaile reported importantly, popping suddenly back out of the tunnel. “I felt a little crack, but nothing we could get out through. You all right, Zoe?”

“Back up a second,” James objected. “Did you just say that the tunnel is totally blocked off? And there’s no way out? And you’re still acting TOTALLY NORMAL about it?! I can’t believe—”

“Hey,” Kaile said lightly. “Freaking out isn’t going to help. Guys, turn off your lights. We could be here for a while. We’d better save the batteries.”

We could be here for a while.

A while never sounded so bad before.

...

I dusted off my hands and felt around for a stalagmite. “No luck?”

We’d spent the last hour or so running our hands along the perimeter of the cave, feeling for another opening. We only turned our penlights on when we found a possible exit—which wasn’t often, and none of them led anywhere.

“Not a thing.” James sighed.

Kaile’s voice materialized behind me. “Zoe, where did you search?”

“That part over there.” I pointed, then realized how dumb that was. “I mean, the section between the tunnel and that one big lumpy stalagmite.”

“This one?” Her voice sounded like it was coming from about the right location.

“I think so, yeah.” I closed my eyes. It was unnerving that it made no difference if your eyes were open or closed; everything was just dark, blackness swallowing every feature of the cave until you couldn’t tell a pebble from a boulder from empty space.

I reached for the stalagmite and froze.

“Kaile,” I said in a low voice. “Please... turn... your penlight on.”

The second the light flickered to life, I heard a high-pitched squeal, felt the fluttering of leathery wings on my back, and the small furry body exploded into the air and streaked for the top of the cave, wings beating frantically.

“BATS!” James shrieked.

I looked up just in time to see it disappear into a small hole near the top corner of the cave. A minute passed, and then its tiny, bright-eyed face peeked out.

It flapped out of the hole, gripped a stalactite with its tiny feet, and tucked its wings around itself.

“Uh-oh,” James said.

“Uh-oh, what?” Kaile said.

Another bat slipped out of the hole and settled itself next to the first.

Another flew up and hung from a jagged spur of rock.

Then another came. And another. And another.

Suddenly there was a torrent of bats pouring out of the hole, giving shrill yips and high-pitched calls that nearly shattered my eardrums. I felt a bat land on my elbow, and Kaile lurched away as a bat flew towards her head. James screamed and toppled backward as two bats fluttered down to land on his shoulder.

“Wait a minute,” I said, shaking off the bats that had alighted on my arm, which hastily flew up to the roof, now blanketed with hanging bats. “How could all those bats come from such a small hole?”

“We don’t know it’s *such a small hole*,” Kaile pointed out. “It could stretch on pretty long.”

“Look at the opening!” I exclaimed. I suddenly felt a rush of adrenaline. “It’d be big enough that we could squeeze through—”

“No way,” Kaile protested. “I know what you’re thinking, but *no way*. Where would the tunnel come out? And *how the heck* would we even get up there?”

But I wasn’t listening to her anymore. Something had caught my eye. I stood up hastily and ran beneath the hole.

A glimmer of light—blue light, sky blue.

“Boost me up,” I said to Kaile without even really realizing what I was saying.

Her bright green eyes widened and her lips formed a silent question. But she instantly ran forward and braced herself against the wall.

I stepped shakily onto her shoulders and reached into the hole.

I barely registered what was happening, only that my hands were finding the holds and I was climbing up and then Kaile was behind me and so was James, and then, and then I took a breath of fresh air, and the sunlight was surrounding me.

I pulled myself all the way up and flopped onto the ground, exhausted.

“James?” I said.

“Yeah?”

“I am *never* going into a cave again.”