

Echoes from the Deep

“Again, none of them came back,” someone whispers nervously. “Are they going to send us down there, too?”

“Don't worry, the search team is doing their best. They've been trained for this kind of situation and will bring them back,” another answers.

I look up from my meal at the two members. It's May 21st, eight in the morning, and twenty-two hours have passed since the second team went into that cave, searching helplessly for a prediction. Their oxygen tanks are supposed to last only about seven hours. If they had succeeded in finding that creature, they would be back and cheering for their result, or at least their survival, by now. But no.

Since the first team was announced missing a week ago, the hall has been oddly quiet. Everyone knows that the task will eventually fall to them if the previous teams fail to return with the specimens.

We are going to be the next ones. I am going to be the next one. I am assigned to the third team.

Maybe this is our fate.

I look down, finishing up my meal, trying to ignore my fear—my fear of death.

Two weeks ago, a traveler from Ireland stumbled upon this cave during an exploration. This news shocked the entire scientific community. The cave seemed to have appeared out of nowhere; no one knew anything about it. At first, no one bothered to investigate—until many

people started reporting strange growling sounds coming from inside. The sound was like the painful screams of a giant, injured monster.

I close my eyes. I don't understand why our boss chooses to handle this situation in this way.

Does he ever care about our lives? If we ever succeed in researching the creature, our boss will get all the recognition and profit that comes with it. But who will talk about the lives that were sacrificed along the way?

But what can I do? What can I say?

And yes—it is our fate. It is my fate.

I still feel like daydreaming as we jump into the clear, dark blue water. The rescue team couldn't find a single clue about what happened to the second team, nor the first. They weren't able to find anything, not even the bodies. So now, the burden of both recovery and discovery falls on us.

The water is warm, and it somehow calms me. It's not only for me; people in my group start cracking jokes as we dive deeper into the darkness. Unlike other caves, the water of this one has remarkably high visibility. Strangely, there's no sign of life. This kind of water is often considered ideal for diving, especially for inexperienced tourists.

The nervous atmosphere gradually lightens, but I become more fidgety.

If it really is that easy, why haven't the other two groups come back? Where are they?

Suddenly, someone taps me on the shoulder. I shudder and look back immediately.

“Hey, what are you thinking?” Eric smirks, trying to act cool. “Don’t be so nervous, this seems like a safe place. The other teams are just lacking in training. We’ve been training for this for years. We are going to be their saviors.”

I can’t see his face through that dark helmet, but I can feel his smile. Somehow, in my mind, his smile grows increasingly eerie—like the grin a horror-movie clown wears after a massacre. Our suit made the smile creepier.

I shake my head intensely, trying to get rid of the scary thought. Maybe I’m just being too nervous.

As our group investigates the seemingly harmless cave, we decide to split up for better efficiency. The cave is divided into different sections by its rock walls, which are where the survivors will most likely be.

I am assigned to the first section—the one closest to the entrance. As I navigate through the water, I see a faint light shine through the deep blue water. It must be from the flashlight mounted on our diving suits.

There’s someone there! I quickly turn towards the light, flashing mine to signal them while diving deeper to catch up.

What a relief—the missing team members might still be alive. But how?

I don’t want to overthink the situation. The relief I feel is so strong that I want to hold on to it, even if it means I might be underestimating the danger.

“Hey! Where are you?” I shout as the light disappears, even though I know they probably can’t hear me. Still, I don’t want to risk the chance.

Then, I feel a light shining from behind. I turn around, hoping to see a person.

It is not a person at all.

What comes into view is a huge glowing ball of light. Then, it turns out to be a huge lantern fish—around ten times my size or more—staring at me quietly with its bloody mouth wide open. Its mouth looks like a deep black hole that can devour me at any moment.

Fear consumes my whole body. I can’t move. I can’t move at all.

The giant creature seems to sense my fear. It starts swimming closer to me. My survival instinct forces my body to swim quickly toward the entrance.

I have to be fast. I have to be fast. I have to find the entrance.

That is the only thought I have.

The giant seems to grow tired of playing catch-up with me. It doesn’t give me any more time. As I accelerate, it matches my pace. Suddenly, a sharp pain shoots up my leg. Adrenaline rushes through my body, numbing the pain. I don’t even bother to check what happened. All I do is keep swimming until the light behind me disappears.

Terror and exhaustion push my body to its limit. I finally stop to check my leg. All I see is a stump where my left foot used to be. The giant has bitten it off while chasing me.

At least I’m alive, I tell myself. At least I’m alive.

The pleasure of survival makes me ignore everything. All I want now is to find an exit and get out of this nightmare as soon as possible.

I turn around toward the entrance.

The bloody mouth of the giant reappears, rapidly accelerating toward me. It has been behind me this whole time, waiting.

“Hey, are you okay? It’s time for our group to enter the cave. We are going to save the second team.”

I jolt awake. The terrifying scene is still vivid in my mind. I can still feel the adrenaline rushing through my body.

It was a dream. Or was it? I can’t tell.

“Did you have a nightmare?” Eric smiles warmly, patting my shoulder. “Our group decided to let you stay at the lab since your left leg is injured.”

Almost instinctively, I look down at my legs. At the exact spot where I was bitten in the dream, I now have an artificial limb.

I slowly look up toward the television.

It’s eight in the morning, May 21st.