The Cave

By Aurelie Jones

Levi tossed his bag onto the ground, the zipper coming undone, spilling the contents everywhere. He cursed to himself, kneeling to grasp his papers and books. He shoved them back into his bag and finally sat down in his seat. He had just two weeks to come up with something for his film assignment or he would fail his class.

Two weeks wasn't enough time, not at all, considering he had had all year to figure out what to film. He had let the year slip away, and now the deadline loomed over him like a specter. This was supposed to be the easiest project for this class. He was known as the one who didn't have to work hard at things like this – as a so-called creative genius. After focusing on other interests and demands on his time, now he was hitting a mental block on this simple project and it could cost him a good grade. A ping from his laptop alerted him to a new notification. He groaned and rolled himself closer to his desk, the screen blinding him for a moment as the computer came to life when he clicked on his keyboard. He squinted to focus on what the on the news bulletin.

It was another news report, about cave explorers going missing; the police refusing to comment on the mystery. From the evasive answers to the reporters' questions, it was obvious they had no clues to find the missing people. The reporters pondered how thrillseekers still ventured to this cave, where five people had already gone missing. Some were speculating there was a monster in the cave.

What a ridiculous and superstitious notion, Levi thought.

Levi concentrated on the screen, a curious expression crossing his face, as he thought of something.

Interrupting his thought, Levi's roommate, Denzel, suddenly came bursting into the room, entangled in the arms of some beautiful Latina. They made it to Denzel's bed without even noticing Levi was in the room.

Levi glanced at them briefly, and then returned his attention back to the computer, working through an idea in his head. Maybe this cave was what he needed to get past his creative block. Something exciting, dangerous, and unknown to prompt his "genius", he thought as he snickered to himself.

He turned slowly in his seat, his gaze falling on the couple writhing on the bed across the room. Maybe he needed someone oblivious to world events to help him. Maybe he already knew the perfect person for the job.

"Are you sure about this Levi? This seems really… like a super bad idea," Denzel said.

"Don't you want to help me graduate?" Levi asked. The two roommates wandered up a semi steep hill, weaving between the variety of erect and fallen trees.

"Yea, man…" Denzel said, although it sounded a bit wary, it was honest.

"Good, then this is just what I need," Levi gasped out while trying to catch his breath.

Denzel said nothing more and they continued to hike in silence for another twenty minutes before reaching the top of the hill. This place wasn't exactly hidden, but it also wasn't someplace a person would easily stumble upon. It was mid-day and the sun bore down on them between the treetops. They both had backpacks in addition to Levi's camera, all of which seemed to get heavier the further they went.

The mouth of the cave appeared ordinary, nothing horrifying or mysterious about it, just a regular damp dark cave.

Levi traipsed forward without a second thought; this was his chance to get something accomplished. Denzel regarded the entrance with a brief moment of uncertainty but finally followed his friend inside. Levi did not notice the small smile that briefly flashed across Denzel's face.

The inside of the cave remained level for just a short distance before it slantedd downward a bit, then curved to the right. They both pulled out their small high-intensity flashlights, turning them on to illuminate their surroundings. They scanned the surrounding, but still nothing interesting to see. Just rock, rock, more rock and the occasional spider. Levi sighed with frustration. This was not what Levi expected.

They followed the flow of the cave, now completely dependent on the light from their flashlights; the cave entrance far behind and out of sight resulted in no ambient light. Now Levi hung back, allowing Denzel to be the leader. Denzel took some convincing to do things, but once he was in, he was all in. It made it easy to use him. Levi chuckled to himself as he thought of all the times he took advantage of Denzel's compliant nature.

Levi mused momentarily over the fact that Denzel has grown up in a house bordering the edge of a forest. He had told Levi plenty of stories of his adventures exploring the forest, the one place that was forbidden by his mother. Levi was counting on Denzel's knowledge and experience in exploring nature. Levi, a city boy himself, never ventured into anything more wild than a community park. The kind that has bathrooms, proper lighting for all times of the day and

night, paved parking, water fountains, picnic benches, and manicured sections of grass and foliage.

Yes, Levi really was counting on Denzel to get them through this adventure successfully. And so Levi followed close to him, camera trained on Denzel and the space in front of them ready to catch anything on film.

With a scream, Denzel had disappeared suddenly from the view of his camera. Levi couldn't process what happened in that split second. He had been watching, but not thinking about their immediate situation.

"Denzel?" He called out as he took a step forward, trying to see where Denzel had gone. His feet met with no resistance as the floor evaporated from beneath Levi's feet and he fell with a shout. His back slid against a particularly wet wall, and he landed in a shallow puddle, the force jarring his ankles and knees. He stumbled forward, almost fell on his face, and he threw his hands forward to brace for another impact. Denzel reached out a hand and caught him.

"What the fucking hell just happened?" Levi shouted.

"Fell in a hole, man," Denzel replied. He aimed his flashlight around their new surroundings and then focused the beam to the hole above their heads. Levi followed the trail of light with his eyes. It didn't appear to be that far, but there was nothing to grab onto, no way to climb out without standing on someone.

"I think I shattered my knee," Denzel said more to himself than Levi, sounding strained., Levi aimed his light at Denzel's knees. He could see blood pooling under his left knee, seeping through and staining his jeans. Levi grimaced. Shaking his head he aimed his own flashlight around the hole. It wasn't enormous, nor was it very deep.

However, it was enough to be a challenge and made Levi wonder how the hell they would be getting out of there.

"Yea, your knee seems to be bleeding pretty bad man." Levi said, turning his thoughts somewhat absentmindedly toward his friend as he concurrently considered their escape plan. Instinctively, Levi pulled out his cell phone to dial for help. No bars. Damn! Why didn't he think of that possibility that his cell phone wouldn't work inside the cave. Who knew where they were? No one would even think to look for them for days; and then, they would never think of looking for them in this cave. If his phone didn't work, Denzel's phone wouldn't either.

"Yea, I guess… my adrenaline is still pumping because I don't really feel it too much… wait! Look!" Denzel exclaimed, drawing Levi's attention back to the present and towards where Denzel's flashlight was aimed. It looked like a mere crevasse, but upon further inspection Levi could see it was actually a passage, going straight through to another chamber. Levi got down on his hands and knees and crawled forward. But he wouldn't fit because of his backpack. He stopped and removed it, then tossed it forward through the hole before trying to crawl through again.

Levi only needed to crawl five feet before the hole opened up into the large chamber. Levi stood up, brushing dirt and leaves off his clothing, idly wondering how leaves got this deep into the cave. But his attention was quickly diverted as a rank smell reached his nostrils. He recoiled, pinched his nose and aimed his light around the room. He was startled to see backpacks and other hiking gear scattered around the room, most of them with tears and rips. As he surveyed around him, the most horrifying feeling that permeated his brain was the concern about the overwhelming smell of rotten meat. Levi noticed dark streaks on the cave floor and walls. He carefully touched one of the sticky gobs and realized it was blood.

He had made a mistake; this cave was too dangerous. Now he was stuck down here, with no obvious way out and an injured friend. Before he could yell back to Denzel to stay where he was, his friend gingerly crawled through the passage, favoring his hurt knee, to where Levi was standing. Denzel rolled over on his back to catch his breath and then gave a quick look around before cussing to himself, and pulling out his cell phone. Just as Levi had already discovered, no bars.

Quickly Levi had decided they would simply go back the way they came, and perform some acrobatics to get themselves out of the hole. But first, Levi lifted his camera and recorded the surroundings; might as well get what he could since they came all this way.

Holding the flashlight along the side of the camera, Levi panned the camera around the space. A flash of vibrant yellow appeared in the view. Levi jumped, his heart raced, as panic evoked all sorts of sensations across his body. He dropped his flashlight, causing it to turn off on impact losing some light in the area.

Denzel turned his flashlight towards Levi to help just as something large slammed into Denzel. Denzel's flashlight danced across the walls, revealing a hint of claws and something black. As full force of the creature moved through Denzel's body, his hand opened, and the flashlight hit the ground, shattering, plunging everything into darkness.

Against the backdrop of an anticipated silence, Levi could hear a rough panting nearby.

"Hey! What the—ahh!!!" Denzel shouted.

Levi scrambled around the ground for his flashlight as the sound of scrapping claws and Denzel's fading cried of terror finally left Levi in silence as well as darkness. With trembling hands, Levi found his flashlight, turned it back on and shakily aimed it around him.

No sign of Denzel or the creature. Levi strained to listen. It was eerily quiet, unbelievably so, but despite the painful silence he didn't feel alone. Something about the deep darker area of this cave, it felt alive. Almost as if he could feel the walls breathing around him.

Levi picked up his camera, relieved to find that it wasn't damaged despite it hitting the cave floor hard. He looked around once more, thinking about his escape plan. Momentarily he thought about leaving Denzel to his fate, Levi grunted in frustration as he realized he couldn't get out without him; escape required two people. So, first task was obviously to find Denzel, rescue him and then return the way they came in.

Finally, Levi noticed a slim crack in the wall. The walls pressed in against his chest every time he took a deep breath, as he just managed to squeeze through. He kept his bag and camera dragging it along behind him, determined to get the project footage no matter what happened. Sometimes he really hated his career choice, especially right now, in this deep dark cave with his roommate missing and some creature on the loose.

Levi stumbled free of the narrow passage, flashed his light around and quickly backed towards the passage keeping eyes forward in fear. In front of him was a large pool of water, deep and completely black. There was nothing immediately visually frightening, but the horrendous smell had gotten more intense and some instinct was telling him to be very afraid. What was before him was not natural or safe.

Levi saw a ledge that circled the pool, leading to a wider area of rock. He slunk along the edge slowly, not wanting to fall into the water, holding his breath as he went. The stress and shock started to overwhelm him, so he sat down to catch his breath.

After a moment he focused his camera and continued to film this new area. He quickly wished he hadn't. Coming into focus, he could see dismembered human body parts scattered on the ground, some hanging over into the water. Once again, the stench of rotten meat became overwhelming quite suddenly, so much so his eyes watered in response. Nevertheless, he continued filming and scanning, knowing he had to find Denzel, hopefully alive and in one piece. His thoughts momentarily strayed as he thought maybe this footage would even win him an award and he could sense the rewards of his upcoming achievements.

Back to reality! He almost stepped on a body part he realized as he looked down. On closer inspection he could tell it used to be a piece of a leg. Large gashes and huge teeth marks marred the remaining piece of flesh. There was something unnatural about this cave, and this creature.

"Pssst!"

Levi looked around, letting his flashlight and camera lead his eyes. Nothing stood out to him for a long moment; then something moved into the periphery of his left eye. He approached slowly, noticing an overwhelming mass of limbs laid on the floor in a somewhat organized pile. As Levi was thinking that creatures don't organize their food list this, the pile began to move. Levi jerked back until he realized Denzel was hidden underneath it all.

"I… I figured if I was… covered in dead parts it wouldn't be able to smell me," Denzel whispered stammering out his words. He seemed unable to stand, slumped on the ground covered in blood that came from his camouflage.

"Fuck man, how are you even alive right now? I thought you were a goner!" Levi said, a bit louder than intended.

"I don't know man; I thought that was it for me…but it dropped me once we got here, and then it dove down into the water. I haven't seen it since," Denzel said.

At that moment there was an ominous splash making a sound that echoed around the cave walls. Levi quickly aimed his light towards the pool. He made out something large, and dark bobbing along on the surface of the water. His curiosity overcoming his fear, he walked slowly towards the edge of the rock.

Now closer, he could see it was a dead wolf. Half of the body was submerged into the water while the other half was rotting away. Occasional glimpses of bones were visible through the flesh, sinew, and fur. He backed away slowly, retreating back to Denzel. Levi knelt close to him, shoving aside the body parts to poke Denzel's knee.

"Can you stand on it, or are we both fucked?" Levi asked harshly.

"In normal circumstances, I would say fucked. But I'm really not too keen on dying down here, so I'm going to at least try to get the hell out," Denzel replied. Levi did not notice the calmness in Denzel's voice.

Levi held out his hand to Denzel, which he begrudgingly took. He managed to pull Denzel to his feet as he flinched and gulped hard to swallow a cry of pain. Even if he was able to move, it was going to take a long time. Levi supported his friend, helping him back towards the crack in the wall.

"The thing that took you man, was it like a wolf type thing?" Levi asked glancing behind them, while they wobbled closer to getting out.

"I think so, mostly. But some of it… felt like scales," Denzel mumbled. He winced with every step.

Levi helped Denzel balance himself before he slowly made his way around the edge of the pool of water. They made it to the crack and Denzel started to wiggle his way forward and out of sight. Levi was close behind, wanting to put as much space between them and that pool as soon as possible. He was trying to not think about the dead bodies. Or the unpleasant smell he was certain would be permanently burned into his nose. Especially not think about the creature that grabbed his friend. Levi could have sworn it was the wolf creature who had taken Denzel. But then seeing it on the side of the pool, dead, Levi couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that something else had been controlling the body of the wolf.

Denzel made it slowly into the first space they had both originally fallen into; he collapsed to his knees and violently threw up onto the cave floor. He could smell blood mixed with his vomit, and he recoiled in fear and disgust. He sat back, trying to catch his breath just as Levi came into view. This was more than he had bargained for; what had he been thinking? Denzel had Levi's flashlight pointed to the passage while Levi had made it through by touch. Levi shielded his eyes from the light as he came through and Denzel quickly aimed the beam of light away. Levi huffed loudly as he pulled himself up to stand.

"Why does it smell worse in here now?" Levi grumbled, his eyes scanning the space before landing on the puddle of bloody throw up. Levi's lips curled but he didn't say anything, walking closer to where Denzel was slumped on the ground. Now, with video footage in hand, and seemingly the least scary part of the escape before them, he was short in patience to get the rest of the way out.

"I've got to hoist you up to the ledge, and then you have reach down and help me up," Levi said, conveying a false confidence they were both physically capable of pulling it off.

In normal circumstances they certainly would have, but they were both exhausted and Denzel was obviously getting much worse by the minute. Denzel just stared at him, in what Levi thought was disbelief. Oddly enough, he simply nodded and remained quiet as Levi helped him climb unsteadily onto Levi's shoulders. Levi rested his hands on the wall to steady himself as he slowly straightened his body from his squatting position.

Raising Denzel up to the ledge, with plenty of grunting, Denzel scrambled up and out of the hole. He crawled forward until he was completely on solid ground. He flopped down onto his back and panted hard. He stared up at the ceiling, seeing nothing in the pitch black, and thinking of the light he left down with Levi.

"Hey! Quit wasting time!" Levi called up to Denzel.

Denzel grunted as he rolled onto his belly, fighting the urge to throw up again. He looked down; while Levi put his flashlight in his pocket still turned on to give them the softest of glows. Levi stood there, ready to jump up to reach Denzel's hands. For a moment their eyes met, and Levi realized that Denzel was not moving to reach out to him.

A wave of pain hit Denzel suddenly, so much so it was all he could focus on. He curled up, shaking violently.

"Get me the hell…" Levi shouted franticly, but suddenly went deadly quiet. Levi heard something loud was coming; a rushing sound that echoed softly behind him. He couldn't quite make it out, as a sudden gust of strong cold air swept up the back of Levi's shirt, followed quickly as ice cold water began flooding the hole.

For a moment Levi was relieved, he realized that the water allowed him to float, and would lift him up to the ledge and then he could get out. As he reached to the ledge to climb out a sudden, immense pain shot through his body; he couldn't move. Levi didn't sink and yet he didn't really float either. He seemed frozen in place and all he could do was stare into the darkness. It felt as if his flesh was melting off his body, like acid eating away his essence.

He could vaguely hear scrambling, footsteps; maybe it was Denzel running away. Levi didn't know, but soon he wasn't able to care. The water pulled him beneath the surface, and he didn't think any longer. The water invaded his ears, mouth and nose until he was completely made of water. It would be better this way he thought hazily as he become something else.

Levi's clothing floated to the surface of the water, nothing holding them down anymore. A flash of light bobbed, shining up through the water before disappearing, revealing for a brief moment the emptiness of the water, no creature, no Levi.

Denzel had stumbled some distance from the water, his desperation stronger than ever, making his way quickly to where they had entered the cave. Denzel breathed deeply for the first time since they climbed out of the car and started this stupid expedition.

He saw the cave main entrance; it was still somehow light out, sunlight shining like a beacon of hope. He struggled on, more pain shooting through his leg. Hot blood seeped down his calf, an unpleasant familiar sound tickling at his ears, the rushing of water right on his heels. He began to panic, desperate to escape the cave; he could feel the splash of water lapping his feet. Denzel shouted in terror, and despite his growing pain he forced himself to limp faster.

With some miracle amount of strength, he stumbled out of the mouth of the cave, rolled down the hill and eventually hitting a log in his path. He lay on the forest floor, staring up towards the sky where the sunset was lighting it on fire with hues of pinks, purples, and vibrant oranges. Water sloshed at the mouth of the cave, but it didn't go past the opening, and eventually it retreated down the tunnels. All the explored spaces, swept clean, no hint of blood, items, or people. It was satisfied for now. He sighed with relief. It had been risky, but it had worked.

Denzel's knee continued to bleed onto the dirt, but he was content to lay there for a while to recover and think about his story. Soon, he was found by hikers who got him to the trailhead and eventually to the hospital. After he was patched up, the police questioned him about what had happened. Denzel feigned losing his memory. He might need the help of that cave again sometime in the future. Denzel sighed in relief when the police finished questioning him and left him alone to heal.

Funny that Levi had never asked him where Denzel grew up; he just might have considered that Denzel might know a thing or two about that cave. It had been a simple thing to lead him to it, a couple forwarded news stories right when Levi was looking for the perfect idea of his assignment. And, well, Levi never hid the fact that he thought Denzel beneath him, a lesser student, a cog in some wheel. Yes, most people underestimated him. And no one knew of the special relationship he had with that cave.

Unfortunately, the cave would call to him again. Every night, when he closed his eyes, he would dream about the cave. Even in his dreams, he would dread the thought of the next journey he would need to make with a new sacrifice, knowing one day, one time, it would be he who would not make it out. No matter how hard he tried, it wouldn't leave his thoughts, as if it was calling to him. As if it had already claimed him.