

"No Way Out"

① Black. Pitch Black. Almost as if all of the light of the world had ceased to exist but for the faint beam slicing through the hostile darkness. The light came from the small torch grasped in my hand and barely seemed to penetrate the inky darkness which threatened to swallow it.
 "Oi Magpie! Hold the torch still!" Phil's voice, though forceful, was nearly lost in the darkness of the cave.

② "My name is Maggie! And if you hadn't DROPPED yours, I wouldn't have to!" I shot back. "And maybe if your ego weren't so big there'd be more room in your head for a brain," I muttered.

② A shiver ran down my spine. The freezing water from the underground stream had soaked through my shoes ages ago but my thick thermal top had managed to keep out most of the cold until now. Ever persistent, it was now beginning to crawl under my clothes and over my skin. I could just see Phil's hunched over back squeezed down between the narrow gap of the limestone walls of the cave, as he fumbled around in the dim light looking for his missing torch.

② "Hurry up Phil! We're getting left behind," I snapped in frustration. Damn it. I would give anything to be back in the school van now. I let out a sigh as my thoughts drifted back to earlier that morning...

"Now don't be fooled by this weather folks, the buildup of low pressure on the western side of these ranges means it rains for almost ninety percent of the year!" Derek, our caving instructor loved sharing facts about his beloved mountain ranges. "And remember," he continued, "all the streams are connected one way or another through these hills, which makes them quite unpredictable. In fact..." He continued to babble on but I'd lost interest and turned to gaze out the window once again. The bright sun hovered just above the distant Tennyson Mountains making it hard to believe there was rain pouring down just on the other side of the ranges. I wished I was still in bed but my mother thought it would help me adjust to the new school I hated. Nobody was actually mean, but nobody talked to me either. Except Phil Cameron, my partner for Chem. He just never shut up and apart from being arrogant, he was also a complete idiot. I secretly named him "Phil the Fool" after an episode in Chemistry where he decided to add three times the suggested amount of Sulfuric Acid to the Sodium Hydroxide, which consequently over flowed and burnt his entire hand, covering it in raw red blisters.

All of a sudden the van gave a lurch as we pulled over a rut on the roads edge into a muddy little turn around area for cars, with an overgrown track leading into the bush.

④ "Right. Here we are folks, the Templar Cave system. Grab all your gear; jackets, woolly hats, torches, gummies and don't forget your safety gear and get ready for some extreme caving?!" We didn't have to walk for long before he announced cheerfully, "There it is ladies and gents. The Giant Drop. Once we're in it's onwards and outwards folks, no turning back. And you'll just love The Squeeze..."

① Black. Pitch Black. Almost as if the light of the world had ceased to exist, but for the few faint beams of light slicing through the hostile darkness ahead of me. I could see the others further ahead, silhouetted by their torches.

④ "The Squeeze is just a bit further on folks, time to get down and dirty." I could faintly hear Derek's enthusiastic voice from the front of the group. Great, I thought. We'd been in the cave now for what seemed like forever after abseiling down through the darkness like we were being fed to some horrendous monster. And of course, when Derek had partnered us all up as a safety procedure, I ended up with Phil. Safety? Hah! Not with Phil the Fool!

The light from my torch lit the area in front of me, I could see Phil's legs knee deep in water searching for footing in the darkness. All of a sudden my ankle lurched sideways.! I twisted my body and

groped for the side of the cave just managing to get a hand hold on the slippery wall, to stop myself from toppling into the freezing cold water. Was it my imagination or was the water getting deeper? “Keep it together klutz! We’re already behind thanks to you.” Phil’s voice cut through the darkness. “You’re not going any faster, so shut it.” I fired back.

“If it weren’t for you I’d be leading this pack of morons,” Phil replied. “I’m the Cave Master!” As he swung his arms into the air in a grand gesture, his torch flew from his hand, hit the wall and rebounded through a narrow crack in the wall of the cave.

“Cave Disaster more like,” I sneered. “Now who’s holding us back? Hurry up and find it, you idiot!” “....!”

I gave a start at Phil’s voice. “What now!”

“My torch, it’s ahh... well it’s ahh... broken...” he replied, somewhat deflated. Some safety procedure this partnership was.

“Look just get outta that crack so we can find Derek. Maybe he’ll have a spare? That is if he’s enough of an idiot to lend it to you.”

Phil emerged from the darkness of the crack. “Shut it wisie! Now get your move on.”

I turned my torch towards where I’d last heard the faint voices of the rest of the group. The light danced across the limestone until it stopped short against solid rock. “What the...” I stammered in shock. God this can’t be happening. As I drew closer I saw that the tunnel didn’t end at all. The ceiling of the cave sloped steeply down to the water. It chilled me to the bone.

“Phil...” I said weakly.

“What’s going on?” his voice now right behind me was filled with confusion.

“The Water... It’s risen. We’re trapped.”

There was a long silence until Phil said hesitantly, “I think this might be The Squeeze. It’s a sort of risk perception thing Derek was talking about in class the other day.”

“As if you ever listen to anything in class!” I scoffed.

“Well, no not usually but this sounded a bit interesting.... All we have to do is swim underwater for about half a minute and then we’re on the other side. There’s just one problem....”

“Only one?” I asked sarcastically.

“I can’t swim.”

“Then why did you come on the trip if you knew you’d have to swim?” I shouted.

“Too embarrassed,” muttered Phil. There was another really long silence.

“Phil - I’m a really good swimmer but you’re going to have to trust me....”

“What! Trust a whiny little Emo girl like you? You must be joking. There must be another way out!”

“There is no way out . Are you absolutely sure Derek said it was thirty seconds?”

“Well ... pretty sure.”

“Like 100 % sure, Phil? Not like ‘I’m-pretty-sure- this-is- how-much-Sulfuric Acid-we-use’ sure?”

“100 % sure. Maggie”

If we waded into The Squeeze as far as we could, I thought, and Phil held onto my shoulders, I could swim us under, if we both kicked like hell. And Phil didn’t panic.

“Phil?”

No answer.

“Phil – it’s now or never cos the water is rising really fast..”

“Let’s go,” he said quietly.

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