

Excerpt: Sinkhole

A juncture between water and air appeared above, a rippling distortion of cave features. He shivered in relief. Kicking upward, he reached the surface in seconds, ripped off his mask, and breathed. In and out. Slowly. *You made it, Delaney. Through the Pit of the Damned and into the first passage of the Underworld. Now breathe.*

“Well, it’s about time,” said Jorge.

Mark looked up and saw him perched on a ledge above the water’s surface.

“I thought you’d drowned already.”

“Would have . . . made you . . . happy, wouldn’t it?” Mark said between gasps.

“Not entirely,” said Jorge.

Mark swam over to the rock bank and crawled out of the water. He slumped on the ground and lay there, heart practically fibrillating. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” asked Jorge, but the smug look on his face said he knew exactly what.

“The bodies,” said Mark. “The skeletons. Where the hell did they come from?”

Jorge looked at the slimy walls of the cavern, his eyes traveling over daggers of white rock and spearheads of crystals. The light refracted and blinked on the spectacular natural formations. “Sacrifices,” he said matter-of-factly.

Mark struggled to sit up. “Like the decapitated bodies on the motifs?”

“Exactly,” said Jorge. “This was a sacrificial well—a portal to the Underworld, Xibalba, or so my ancestors thought. You saw the stepped platform on the border of the cenote. That was where the priests killed them, spilled their blood on the altar, ripped their hearts out, chopped off their heads, and then hurled them into the well. It was common practice, especially where cenotes pierced the water table. Edward Herbert Thompson, an amateur archaeologist, dredged and dove in a famous cenote at Chichén Itzá in the late 19th century and found it filled with bones and offerings. It’s nothing to get excited about.”

“Excited about! Are you kidding? First I nearly get gunned down by some paramilitary nuts, then you take me to a pyramid stacked with bodies, and now there’s some well filled with *sacrificial victims!*”

Jorge shrugged. “I told you there was a curse.”

Mark stared at him. The man would not blink.

"Are we ready to continue yet?" asked Jorge, standing and shrugging off the dive and the sacrificial burial ground as if they'd just gone out for a Sunday afternoon swim. "We have a long way to go."

Mark eyed him suspiciously. "How much longer?"

Jorge gave him a blank stare again. "As long as it takes. There are rumors that the deepest cave is at two thousand meters or deeper."

"Two thous—" Mark choked out. "That's almost seven thousand feet. And how deep are we now?"

"Maybe a hundred and fifty. But the cave climbs and dips throughout. It isn't straight down."

"Great," said Mark, feeling exhausted as much from the terror as the taxing dive. He hauled himself to his feet, searched through his waterproof pack for the Nalgene water bottle Jorge's men had included, and slugged some life-restoring fluid from the lip.

"Eat one of your energy bars too," said Jorge, pointing to the foil-wrapped food stocks in the backpack. "You're going to need it."

"No doubt," Mark grumbled. He snapped up a bar and tore the wrapper off. He was about to let it flutter to the ground, hardly caring at this point about the pristine maintenance of the cave, but Jorge shot a severe look that stopped him cold. He crumpled the wrapper and slipped it ostentatiously into his pack. "All right. Let's get this over with."

Jorge nodded, slid out of his drysuit, and donned some coveralls from his pack. Mark sighed and followed his example. Then Jorge spun around on the very slick rock and strode toward a hole in the wall that was no larger than an air duct in an office building. He bent down, pushed his rebreather ahead of him, and crawled in.

"You've got to be kidding," said Mark.

"Just a short crawl to the next cavern."

"Short crawl. Crawl!" He'd known this wasn't going to be a picnic, but he just hadn't bargained on how difficult it would be. How excruciating with the tons of rock over his head and the dense darkness surrounding his feeble light. Now he would have to wriggle like a worm through a passage fit for nothing better.

Mark removed the rebreather from his back, shoved it into the hole as he'd seen Jorge do, dangled his pack behind him on a long feeder rope strapped to his belt, and thrust headfirst into

the tiny aperture. The white rock loomed, smoothly carved by water, but with the occasional jagged knife edge from a stalactite, and a constant bleeding of moisture that drip, drip, dripped on his head. He felt the frantic energy build in him again, his breathing quicken, and his heart start to gallop. No! He wasn't going to let it take hold this time. He had to do this.

He pushed in the tank, elbowed forward, dragged his leg up, then thrust himself forward with his foot. It was a tedious method of propulsion and agonizingly slow. His heart still pounded a highland jig. All he could see was the silver metal of the tank and the rock surrounding him like the coils of a serpent. Push, elbow, thrust. On and on, until his joints screamed and he just wanted to raise his head. Of course he did a few times, cracking his helmet into the ceiling, but at least the vibrations in his brain were dampened by the protective foam of the headgear.

The crawl seemed to go on for miles, up and down, through spiral turns that nearly snagged Mark's pack as he dragged it behind him. The only things he could hear were the scrape of the rebreather cylinders over the rock and his own harsh pant. Anything Jorge was doing up ahead was inaudible. Any view of the guide, blocked. It felt as though he was alone in a cocoon, wriggling to get out. Alone in the dank, fetid darkness . . .

Get hold of yourself, man. You can do this. No insects were crawling over him, no bats fluttering above his head. He hadn't seen any life at all. Maybe they'd descended too deep already, past the zones of trogloxenes, cave visitors such as bats and spiders, or troglophiles, cave lovers like salamanders and cave crickets. This wasn't his nightmare. Not the one he was used to, anyway.

A cramp seized Mark's leg in a strangle hold. He screamed, his body trying to curl inward, which was impossible. It only resulted in bruised knees and battered elbows. The knifing continued for another minute as Mark tried to reach down with one hand and massage it away. When at last it eased up, he collapsed on the floor of the tunnel.

"*Doctor Mark?*" Jorge's voice sounded as if it was deep down a well, very faint and hollow. "Are you okay?"

"No," said Mark, gritting his teeth. "I'm not."

"Well," came the merciless reply. "I can't help you. There is no way to turn around. You're going to have to help yourself or you may be stuck for a long time."

"Damn pitiless bastard," Mark said.

“And that wouldn’t be good for me or your wife, since this is the only way out that I know of.”

Mark swallowed the remnants of pain and burrowed on. Push, elbow, thrust. The cramp tried to take hold again, but he ignored it. Tears streamed down his face, but he still ignored it. He had to get out of this godforsaken tunnel. He was still pushing, elbowing, and thrusting when he suddenly realized that space had opened above and beside him. He’d emerged like a baby from the womb, and it hadn’t even been that much farther on. In fact, Jorge could easily have crawled back in and helped him.

He gasped, sat up, and stretched the leg until the pain receded. Then he spun toward Jorge.

“You son of a bitch. You could have helped me.” He stood a little drunkenly and faced the guide, whose face was no longer bland. It appeared to be shining.

“*Doctor*,” he said, “you will never get down to your wife if you can’t crawl through a thirty-meter tunnel. This is only the beginning of a very long, very hard journey. Toughen up.”

Mark felt like throwing a fist in Jorge’s face, but he could still feel the steel muzzle of the man’s gun from their last standoff.

“Fine!” he said. “Fine. I’ll toughen up.” He limped over to a rock and sat down, massaging his calf. Only then did he notice the great cones of stalactites and the shimmery beads of slime hanging from them. One large dollop of what looked like snot dangled right above his head.

“I wouldn’t sit there,” said Jorge.

“Why not?”

He wasn’t about to move yet. His leg still ached. But as he spoke the slime elongated and began to drip from the cone. Jorge grabbed him and shoved him from the rock. The droplet landed right where he’d been sitting and sizzled as if it were bacon in a frying pan.

“Because you don’t want to die,” he said. “Yet.”