

Directions

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Read this story. Then answer questions XX through XX.

As Amy will discover, her first day exploring a cave without her parents will demand using her experience in a way she had never imagined.

Beyond the Twilight Zone

by Nikki McCormack

Our first rope drop was into a large, dark room. I could hear water splashing noisily down into the bottom from the other side of the huge chamber.

“Tight squeezes, huh?” I muttered.

5 Jake winked at me and returned to his work. His crooked grin made it hard to be annoyed, so I dug into my pack and pulled out my seat harness with the rappel device¹ and climbing gear attached.

10 After checking the rope, Jake slipped into his harness with remarkable speed and finesse, then watched me finish. I felt a surge of irritation as he rechecked all the connection points on my harness. It was silly, since he also checked Sean’s and Sean checked his, but I felt as if he had expected a mistake.

“You comfortable with this? It’s a ninety-five-foot drop,” Jake said, his expression serious now. “There’s never any shame in turning around.”

Turn around! What would my parents think?

“No problem,” I replied quickly.

15 Jake raised an eyebrow, but he nodded and turned to the rope. “On rope,” he called, taking hold of it and winding it into his rappel device. He checked the device, then eased himself over the edge. I heard him zipping down the rope from where I stood, well away from the edge to avoid knocking down loose rock. After a moment, his voice rose from the bottom. “Off rope!”

20 I glanced at Sean, who met my gaze with an almost fatherly expression of patience. He nodded. I stepped up and took hold of the rope. “On rope!”

I wound the rope through my rappel device, checked it, and eased myself over the edge. Up to that moment, I had been nervous, but once I was actually hanging on the rope, a familiar comfort washed over me. I enjoyed rope work, and my nerves relaxed as I

¹**rappel device:** a system of ropes and levers used to descend in a controlled way down a cliff

25 settled into the process of letting myself down. I watched the growing speck of Jake's
headlamp, glancing occasionally at the marble wall in front of me to admire its
water-washed surface.

30 When my feet hit solid ground, I
detached from the rope and crawled out
of the rock fall zone before hollering up,
"Off rope!"

35 Sean joined us quickly, and we
continued without removing our vertical
gear, which meant another rope was
coming up. We were in walking passage
now with blue-and-white marble walls
and a stream down the center. We
straddled the stream to keep dry and to
avoid contaminating the water.



40 A collection of limestone draperies cascaded down the walls of the passage like
magnificent waterfalls of transformed stone. I focused my light on the breathtaking
formations. Minerals in the water had given some of the flowstone a dark orange color
that contrasted with the brilliant white of the rest. It was moist, living formation, beautiful
in a way so different from the rugged, imposing beauty I had seen to this point.

45 The passage opened into a large room with a big rope ascent. We stopped at the
bottom, the cold creeping in on us like a deadly virus. We ate quickly and shared our
extras—cheese chunks, jerky, and bite-sized carrots—then packed up.

Jake sent Sean up the rope first as we sat at the bottom and turned off our head-lamps
to conserve batteries.

50 "How long have you been caving?" Jake asked.

"Most of my life," I boasted.

"Me too," he replied with a chuckle.

Silence followed, and we heard Sean breathing hard with the effort of the climb.

"Off rope!"

55 "Your turn," Jake said.

60 I clipped on to the rope and started my climb. Climbing requires a harness and a
series of small devices that you slide up the rope with your hands and feet. These lock into
place when you put weight on them, allowing you to ascend. There is something
exhilarating and frightening about climbing rope in the dark, especially on a long climb
where you get halfway and can see neither the top nor the bottom. Jake and Sean had

turned off their lights to conserve batteries, and the dramatic effect sent a chill down my spine. I continued climbing, listening to my labored breathing over the sounds of running water in the cave. I was eager to get to the top where I could sit down and have a much-needed drink of water.

65 I moved my hand ascender up, then stood in the foot loop, but suddenly there was no resistance. I was falling!

As it turns out, there really isn't enough time for a person's life to flash before their eyes in one of these moments. The only thing flashing before my eyes was a cave wall lit by a circle of light from my headlamp. My chest constricted with fear so quickly that I
70 could not even scream. Something large zoomed past in the darkness, followed by a loud crash. I jerked abruptly to a halt. A moment of silence ensued, followed by several exclamations from above.

"What happened?" Jake called up, and I heard the waver in his voice. He must have been out of the fall zone when the rock hit, but he was clearly shaken.

75 "The main rig point broke," Sean hollered back.

"Amy, are you all right?"

I remembered to breathe then.

"I guess," I called back, my voice trembling.

"You're close to the top. Can you finish the climb?"

80 I wanted to scream that I couldn't, that someone needed to save me, but I knew better. If the backup rig point was at all unstable, I had a better chance of making the top than I did of switching to my rappel device and descending before it gave. I didn't respond. Fear clenched my throat too tightly as I resumed my climb.

"She's heading up," Sean called.

85 The breath was rasping in my throat, and I felt as if I couldn't get enough air, but I kept moving. Slide the hand ascender up the rope, stand in the loop to move the chest ascender up, sit down in the harness, and repeat. I was so intent that I started with surprise when my hand ascender contacted the lip of the drop. My legs trembled as I pushed away from the wall to get enough clearance to move the ascender over the lip.
90 With a desperate heave, I pulled myself over and moved as far as I could from the edge before disconnecting.

"Off rope!"

The wavering cry was a female voice, so I knew it was mine. Sean patted me on the back.

95 "Good job."

