

A Karst Of Shadows

By Leah Miller

Tiny rivulets of water seeped down through ancient rock strata formed from the discarded shells of ocean dwellers long since dried up. Like tiny, insentient, explorers, they curled and twisted through the cracks that splintered the rock, dissolving away a little of it in their passage. The millionth drop wiggled free into a subterranean cave, sliding along the curve of the roof, until it leapt off the edge and plunged a great distance to the floor.

Plip.

With a minute splash, it landed upon the spire of a stalagmite, which seemed to have grown out of the cave floor to meet it. The stalagmite rather resembled a melted candle, with the drop forming a tiny pool of wax upon its flattened top. Each subsequent drip, falling one upon another, until the wax poured down over the sides, adding another visible layer to the stone.

The last drop fell, froze, suspended above the rippling waxy pool like a watery candle flame, glimmering still with the light of the land far above this strange, otherworldly place. The soft illumination painted shadows across the walls, which went moving across the floor like leaping, spinning dancers about a campfire, though their feet never left the ground. Those dancers were anchored there for eternity, rooted to the ground that held their last earthly remains. Their heads forever cast downwards, accepting that their ultimate fate was tied here in the cold, humid underworld.

Amongst those whirling silhouettes emerged something else, one shadow that didn't move as they did, but instead prowled across the walls like a wraith... *circling... circling...* trapped within this ancient oubliette, a life long gone and forgotten within its damp, cavernous belly. Upwards the shadow's nose pointed, ghostly claws tracing worn, crisscrossing scratches upon the walls etched long ago, a silent cry caught dead within her throat. It appeared futile.

Futile! For each time she pulled herself higher, digging her claws into the cracks and crevices of the stone, she tipped more and more backwards, until she was suspended only by her forepaws, hindlegs scabbling at the curving wall in a desperate search for purchase.

Her weight was too much, or the stone too weak, and she tumbled backwards onto the muddy earth. Back amongst those feverish, faceless dancers, who continued on relentlessly, passing by her as if she were nothing more than another of the rock formations that decorated the space.

Sprawled shamefully amongst gleaming fragments of bleached white, which shone through her striped, ethereal pelt, she refused to remain there. Refused to accept the futility of her situation, which the others had long ago accepted.

Lifting herself from the mud, from the damp and the cold, even though each part of her ached from the fall that had brought her there, her soulful eyes lifted upward searchingly. Her body arched towards where a rough cut circle of blue had once been suspended between the open fingers of rock overhead. What had been the ground had become the ceiling, her world turned over between one blink and the next, leaving her disoriented.

Now, those fingers had closed tight into angry fists, squeezing out the inviting blue, and leaving nothing but endless, jagged grey behind. Sealing her in, confining her here in this airless place, where her brother, the gentle wind, could not find her. Without him to whisper her name to her, she could no longer remember what it was.

Who am I?

She asked it of those shadows, who moved ever onwards in their endless processions in that flickering, watery light, searching their empty, vacant eyes for some acknowledgement.

Yet, they did not pause. Did not stop. Did not answer. Like time itself, they moved ever onwards, leaving her behind in their circular wake.

Have you forgotten too? Is that why you do not answer?

The droplet of light started to sputter and gutter, thickening and deepening the gloom that wrapped sticky as tree-sap all about her. It clung and clutched at each of her limbs, ghoulishly tugging her back towards where she'd fallen. Towards the sharp, bleached stones that curled up in the imprint she'd left behind. That gloom permeated everything, even as she fought its tug, it inched its way through her short, striped pelt so it could creep beneath her skin. If it got there, it would dissolve her away, melting her back into the shadows and stealing what little of herself remained.

Her fear grew ten-fold, for she was certain that if she gave into the unrelenting pull of the dark she would become another in that long, circling parade of dancers. She'd be bound, imprisoned, with no means to escape and gain back her name.

Darkness descended in a rush, the droplet falling into that pool with a resounding *plip*, which sounded as loud as a thunderclap that could shake the very earth beneath her. In the sudden Stygian darkness, she paused and crouched, and even then she felt their movements carrying on, remain implacable and final. They had become an endless cycle like that of the seasons, one following another in a steady, undeviating pattern.

Plip.

Plip.

Plip.

Each falling drop fell as drum beats for the dancers, urging them ever onwards, steadying their rhythm and step. Or was it the heartbeat of this prison? A throbbing life that went on and on without stopping or slowing... wearing everything away until it all collapsed.

I am still here, she raged against it all. *I am not gone*.

Overflowing out from the pool of stony wax, a pearlescent drop streaked down the side of the stalagmite to be swept up in the tiny trickle that wove its way between the channels in the earth. Even that speck of light was enough to cast long shadows across the floor of the cave, making all of those dancers seem all the larger, casting them up across the walls until they seemed to reach the vault of the ceiling. They crowded in, as oppressive as the gloom that waited to descend upon her once more. Threatening to steal back every ounce of her individuality, reducing her back to nothing but empty bone.

She pounced upon the droplet determinedly, long, sleek muzzle nosing into the water determined to catch that errant drop of sunshine that had somehow slipped between the bright world above and this one. It had brought with it some facet of the life she'd lost over all the years she'd been trapped in the belly of this geological beast.

Yet, try as she might to capture it, it darted past her nose, swirling this way and that along the small crevice, falling away from her.

Down...

Down...

Down...

It was swept away...

...by subterranean currents unseen...

... slithering and sliding into the earth.

That sparkle twinkled in the watery darkness beneath her, and she saw it carried away by the lifeblood of the earth and glistening stone. *Where was it going?*

For an instant she looked back at the creeping shadows in their endless, mindless dance, lost to time and then to darkness. Looked at the curled up scatter of white laying there upon the stone floor, half buried in mud and grime. *No*, her heart railed at this world, *I will not dance*.

For she could feel that her name was down there, quickly flashing like the scales of a fish's tail away into the rippling darkness of the unknown. She could almost hear it breathed by the sighing waters as they passed her by deep down in that strange space beneath her paws.

Her nails bit into the stone, trying to widen that fracture, to chip away at the rock so that she might squeeze herself through, might wiggle her way through. Refusing to give up, she fought for every inch, every small give in the stone, her head pressing downwards into it, her

nose almost able to touch the boundary line between herself and where the light was continuing moment by moment to be swept further and further from her.

Shaking off the grasping, tugging limbs and nipping jaws of the shadows as they tried to push and tug at her with each relentless circle, she refused to give in, refusing to lay down. Refused to forget. They would not have her! For her name was there, just there...! She could almost make it out! Harder and harder she pushed herself into that gap, until suddenly she seemed to slide all the way through.

Down...!

Down, she went!

Plunging into the cold... the dark... and the wet.

No air.

No breath filled her lungs.

But she swam with all her might despite that, chasing through the oppressive, unrelenting blackness, through the twists and unseen turns after the tiny flicker of light that was ever before her. There and gone, vanishing past every curve and obstruction, tantalising her with its promise, leading her ever onwards.

Time was distorted as she pushed and crawled through a submerged, labyrinthine current, flowing about her... through her. It stretched her, changed her, forcing her to squeeze through passageways that were tight and close against her sides, forcing her to crawl and squeeze and go beyond all endurance to get to that light, yet she continued on relentlessly.

Almost there.

Almost.

So close that she thought could feel the touch of her brother's gentle fingers running through her fur, whispering into her ear that which she most longed to know.

Before her, the teardrop glow blinked out, wept out into the world beyond, trickling down a wall of colourless white, faded to grey at the edges. And she followed, the current taking her out... out into the world beyond...

A ghost of sand, ochre and charcoal stained the white canvas of stone, eyes drawn as if by a caring hand gazing out at the sweeping, shimmering swaths of green... and up to a sky so true and beloved blue that she wept for the sight of it.

Plip.

Plip.

Plip.

Brother! She cried. Brother! I am here!

He came across the treetops and hills, invisible and ephemeral, yet so real to her. His gentle fingers brushed away the tears that she had shed, so that they might not streak her coat, might not blur her outline. Might not render her into a grey, indistinct shadow, washed clean of colour and shape upon this white limestone wall.

Who am I, brother? Those curving, swooping lines of her pleaded.

And the wind smiled, whispering sweetly into an arching ear at long last the name she'd forgotten, reminding her for all her days who she was.

Thylacine.