

Stars for the Lost and Lonely by Ngaire North

The cold creeps up on you in caves. I'll be crawling through a rift passage, chin deep in mud, feeling like my cave overalls have become a personal sauna but as soon as I pause to look at a pretty stalactite or the long dead bones of a long dead species of bird, the cold begins to settle over my shoulders, cradling me with its icy fingers. It's particularly bad at those bottle neck points where the group has to seep down a rope. Each person stalls, fumbling to put on the harness with fingers growing clumsy with cold. Waiting alone, I get an eerie feeling. The glow worms shine down at me, like the eyes of an ancient predator, cruel and hungry. Below me sits darkness so complete it's impossible to tell if my eyes are closed or not, if I'm awake or dreaming.

The chill creeps further, absorbed by the pores of my skin until I feel frozen in time, like the bones of ancient birds nestled here beside me. Did they feel the cold seep over them in the same way? Lost, injured, thrashing their way through the darkness, desperate for some kind of warmth, or light -anything familiar in the alien land they'd fallen into. Did they give up immediately, lie down and let the cold take them? Either way, their destiny was set in stone, to become indistinguishable from the cave, as much a part of its dripping caverns as their limestone tomb.

These bones I have made my neighbour are far from any entrance. A fighter, venturing out into the darkness in a last ditch attempt to return to the world of light and life. Maybe, once they'd finally exhausted themselves, shock and hypothermia beginning to set in, they looked up and saw the indifferent beauty of the glow worms. Through the blurred eyes of the dying bird, their flickering light would have looked like stars.

The bones whisper to me, "stay" they say, "join me in the darkness, leave the bustle of life and the garish brightness of the outside world behind. Lie next to me and I will tell you stories of places long gone, of watching stalactites grow and plates shift. Rest here and listen to the groan of the stone as it remembers the life it used to have. Hear the wind sing to us through these empty passages". I sit in the dark and dream of the wonders I have yet to see, millennia of shift and change. Will my bones stand the test of time, will they live forever in this subterranean world?

But my dreams are interrupted by a voice, echoing through the years, calling me back to the pounding of my blood and the warm mist of my breath. It's my turn to slide down into the dark on my nylon spider web, and my torch, once flicked on, drowns out the glow worms. The lonely stories of long lost spirits can wait. Although bright and temporary, the living world calls to my bright and temporary heart. My eyes long for sunlight and my soul aches for warmth. Rubbing the feeling back into my fingers and the stiffness from my limbs, I continue.