

Megumi Mandish

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Digging

I scoop away another handful of dirt and dump it into the pile behind me. Or, I think it's a pile. I hope it is. There's definitely dirt next to my foot; whenever I shift, I can feel it spilling into my shoe, wedging itself into the folds of my sock. It leaves a crawling sensation on my ankle, like spiders on my skin. I stomp my foot and scoop a handful of dirt.

There's a rustle down to my left.

"You doing okay?" I ask. Just like last time, I hear two clinks against the stone.

"Cool. I'm almost through. Just... keep laying still."

I scoop another handful of dirt and check my watch. '11:45', it reads, or that's what it looks like. I squint harder at the faded, glow-in-the-dark numbers, a sickly green that blurs and flickers before my eyes. It doesn't really matter what time it is. I didn't check when our group entered the cave. I didn't check when we split away from the tour guide, or when we fell down into this dead end. But it makes me feel better. At least I have a source of light, even if it's useless. And I know what time it is.

My nails scrape against stone. Pain snaps through my fingertips, and I yank my hand to my chest with a yell. My other hand comes away wet when I feel ripped skin and torn nails. The dirt stings, and for a second I gag, imagining how gross my hand must look. I stomp my foot again. Focus. Focus on getting out. Hurting my hand is a small price to pay for freedom.

I take my shoe off and stick my injured hand in it, then go back to digging. All my muscles feel sore. My lungs burn, and every breath I take sounds wheezy and loud in the silence. I can feel my shirt and hoodie sticking to my skin. Has it always been this hot in here? The dirt

feels cold against my hand, and I think about just stopping and laying in it for a little while.
Maybe just for a little.

I scoop another handful of dirt.

"You doing okay, man?" I ask.

I'm met only with silence. My heart leaps into my throat.

"Jason? Can you hear me?"

My heart's pounding so fast in my ears that I don't think I could've heard him even if he did answer. All other thoughts vanish. I scramble up the mountain of earth and plunge my hands into the depths. I shovel away handfuls of dirt. I reach stone again. It's hard to catch my breath. I reach stone again. The numbers on my watch swirl in my head, glowing, counting down the seconds. I reach stone again. My wheeze turns into a cough. I scoop away another handful of dirt.

My hand meets empty air.

Air.

There's a breeze.

I can breathe.

We can escape. We can leave the cave. I'm going to see my parents again.

Fresh air enters my lungs, and my muscles scream as I go for one last push. I take my shoe and carve through the dirt and shards of stone, enough for me to stick my head and arm through the gap. My head is spinning, but I don't care.

I can see a light.