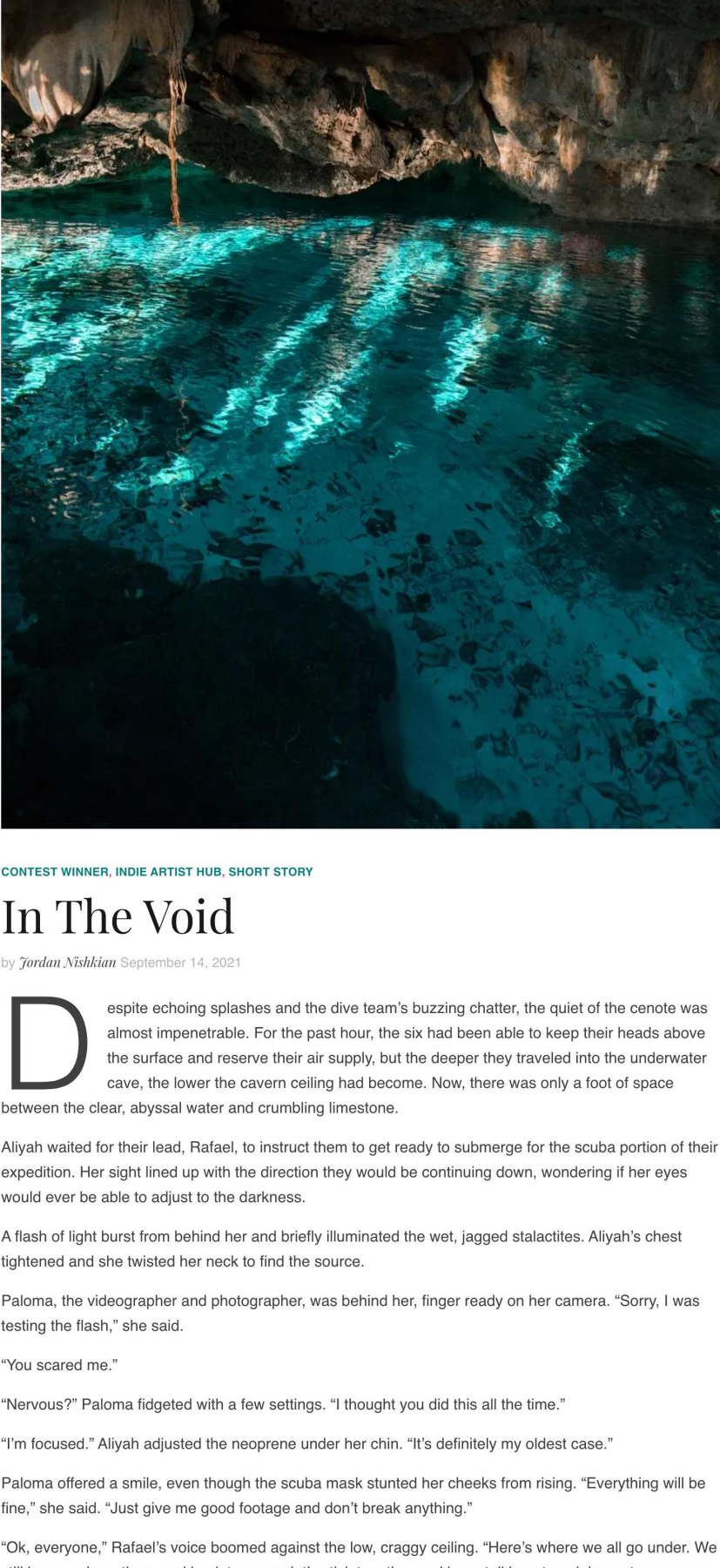


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CONTEST WINNER, INDIE ARTIST HUB, SHORT STORY

In The Void

by *Jordan Nishkian* September 14, 2021

Despite echoing splashes and the dive team's buzzing chatter, the quiet of the cenote was almost impenetrable. For the past hour, the six had been able to keep their heads above the surface and reserve their air supply, but the deeper they traveled into the underwater cave, the lower the cavern ceiling had become. Now, there was only a foot of space between the clear, abyssal water and crumbling limestone.

Aliyah waited for their lead, Rafael, to instruct them to get ready to submerge for the scuba portion of their expedition. Her sight lined up with the direction they would be continuing down, wondering if her eyes would ever be able to adjust to the darkness.

A flash of light burst from behind her and briefly illuminated the wet, jagged stalactites. Aliyah's chest tightened and she twisted her neck to find the source.

Paloma, the videographer and photographer, was behind her, finger ready on her camera. "Sorry, I was testing the flash," she said.

"You scared me."

"Nervous?" Paloma fidgeted with a few settings. "I thought you did this all the time."

"I'm focused." Aliyah adjusted the neoprene under her chin. "It's definitely my oldest case."

Paloma offered a smile, even though the scuba mask startled her cheeks from rising. "Everything will be fine," she said. "Just give me good footage and don't break anything."

"Ok, everyone," Rafael's voice boomed against the low, craggy ceiling. "Here's where we all go under. We still have an hour there and back to go, so let's stick together and keep talking at a minimum to conserve our oxygen."

With her hand grazing against the rough rock above her, Aliyah steadied herself as she turned on her oxygen tank. She glanced at the rest of her team, but her eyes couldn't help but notice how the downcast light from Paloma's camera caught the pedaling movement from her fins. Aliyah's eyes followed the path of light straight below them, thinking perhaps she'd see the floor or the glistening scales of fish, but the illuminated stream continued, uninterrupted.

"You good?" Paloma asked.

"Yeah," Aliyah answered. Even in the low light, she could see Paloma's huge brown eyes and where her mascara had caught in her waterline. Her mom was like that too—always wearing eye makeup regardless of the activity.

Rafael's words clicked into their headsets. "Can everyone hear me?"

The team answered into their mics.

"Alright, let's go," he said before plunging his head below the surface.

Aliyah followed suit, letting her underwater scooter propel her forward until she was behind Rafael. She paced herself, pairing her legs to the rhythm of his kicking flippers to stay warm in the chilled water.

Most of her work as an underwater crime scene technician took place retrieving evidence and bodies from lakes and large rivers, but she'd done archaeological dives in the ocean as well. Even in murkiness, most open water—the kind where only the bubbles from her mask could tell her the direction of the surface—there were still traces of sunlight. This was like pushing through ink, like floating through the dark matter of an unborn universe. She focused on slowing her breath, on feeling the individual muscles working in her legs, and on the loud, continual stream of her thoughts. It would be too easy for her to feel devoured.

As grateful as she was for the opportunity, nerves gripped her belly. She'd signed up for excavations at Yucatan's ancient sinkholes for the quick dives and the chance to study prehistoric animal fossils like sabertooth cats and giant sloths, but the last thing anyone expected was the discovery of an anatomically modern human skeleton by one of the AI diving drones.

"Aliyah," Dr. Burke had approached her last week at her workplace while she was brushing sediment off the lower mandible of what she thought belonged to a short-faced bear. "You have experience excavating human remains?"

"Yes, I've been an underwater crime scene tech for five years and earned my forensic science certification last year," she answered, trying to hide her confusion. As a summer volunteer, Dr. Burke had only spoken to her once or twice before, so all she could manage at that moment was a recitation of her resume.

He nodded. "Good. Could you join me, please?"

Aliyah followed him to his workstation: a canopy tent where four men had gathered around a thick, black laptop. "One of the drones found human remains in a remote part of the cenote," Dr. Burke explained, pointing at fuzzy photos pinned to a corkboard. "Female, I think, and presumably around ten thousand years old, give or take—but we won't know for sure until we see it in person. We have a dive team and guide to help you get there, but I was hoping with your experience, you could retrieve the bones."

"Of course" popped out of her mouth before she could process the situation—how she wouldn't get any credit, how dangerous it could be, how she'd traveled here for the summer to specifically get away from handling dead humans.

After a week's worth of preparation and a shaky walk into the cenote this morning, her team of six was ready to embark. Aliyah stared at the overhead opening of the sinkhole while three of her younger, more eager teammates waded into the water. After studying the drone footage, she knew it would be the last bit of sunlight she'd see until they returned. From where she stood, she couldn't see much of what was happening on the surface. There was a rough ridge of shadowed earth, and beyond that was pure blue sky. It made her think of the time her mom took her to the roof of her apartment building to sunbathe.

Dr. Burke's body came into view, silhouetted from the bright sky behind him. She strained her eyes to focus on his weathered face, but all she could make out were the wisps of hair that peeked out from his hat. He gave her a thumbs-up, which she returned, then walked away from the overhead ledge.

Now, a couple of hours later, she was cutting her way through cold, hermetic water bubbles other than the occasional, raspy check-in from Rafael, the only noises Aliyah heard were the flood of whooshes from her apparatus and her all-too-obvious heart rate.

Dr. Burke was expecting a near-complete skeleton, which was why every diver's scooter was equipped with a padded box for safe transport, but Aliyah was unconvinced. The cenote was rife with the skeletons of predators, and any other bones they found had evidence of teeth marks or scraping. What were the chances that all 206 bones had stayed near each other over the course of multiple millennia? Even when she was retrieving relatively recent corpses, intact bodies were few and far between thanks to currents and hungry animals.

Still, it was the first time Aliyah had seen a total absence of marine life. As far as she could tell, she and her teammates were the only living things that had been in this cave network in the past ten thousand years. Without the torches and movement from her team, she thought the cenote's primordial belly would swallow her—that she would lose her light and her air and she'd become another fish in the school of drowned ghosts.

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears and her breath fought its pacing. Keeping her light on Rafael's tank, she tried to ease the muscles she didn't need and allow the jets to do the work.

"Let the bike do the work," her mom's voice muffled the sound of her pulse. "You're pedaling too hard."

In a vivid flash, her memory of trying to keep up with her mom during that afternoon bike ride rose to the front of her mind. It was her first bike, and despite being eleven, it was only a week after she'd learned to ride it. Her mom paced next to her on the winding park path.

"When you pedal that fast, you can't feel any resistance anymore, right?"

Aliyah nodded, trying to keep her helmet straight on her head.

"That means you can stop working so hard," she continued. "That's as much work as the bike will let you put in so it's no use wearing yourself out."

Aliyah nodded again, slowing her feet and letting the wheels spin. She gripped the handlebars and fought for her balance, but had to smile when her mom said, "Good job!"

Watching her pedal ahead, Aliyah tried to soak in the image of the mid-summer sunlight catching her mother's hair and the sounds of her teal zip-up flapping behind her. Capturing the memory was worth it, even after she fell and scraped her knee through her jeans moments later. For weeks after, Aliyah fought her grandma when she tried to dab honey on the cuts to keep them from scarring, but eventually, time and sunlight had erased the marks she tried to treasure.

"Halfway mark," Rafael cut through her thoughts. "One."

"Two," Aliyah answered. Paloma followed third, then dive assistants Shelby, Miguel, and Cassandra as fourth, fifth, and sixth.

Memories of her mom didn't come up much anymore, but in the sensory vacuum of the cenote, it was easy for Aliyah's mind to wander toward her. Her mother, Ida, was beautiful with caramel skin and ink-black hair she always kept at waist-length. When Aliyah was younger, she was curious about her father, but after years of being raised by a grandmother who avoided the subject, that curiosity dimmed. She looked so much like the women in her family that there was no doubting where she came from anyway.

Ida was a talented healer, and Aliyah always marveled at her gift for it, even after she realized that the only pain Ida's antidiotes could heal were the ones her cutting tongue caused in the first place. She was personified chaos, and loving her was like having to swim into a wave to avoid being toppled. Aliyah pressed her torso into the scoter, thinking of the times she would be lying face down on her bed after Ida's voice finished shaking the walls of her grandma's home. A few minutes of quiet would pass, then the next things Aliyah would hear were the turning of her bedroom doorknob, light footsteps to her bedside, then the creaking of the mattress as Ida sat down beside her. Aliyah always pretended she had slept through her mom and grandma's fighting—that she didn't hear her name get volleyed and flung across the room downstairs. As a seven-year-old, Aliyah wasn't a talented actor, but Ida always played along and rubbed her back until she fell into true sleep, telling her how loved she was and how she would always be there when she needed her.

The latter turned out to be false, but Aliyah never doubted the former, even when her mom's presence would ebb and flow into her life sporadically. Aliyah wasn't surprised that these memories were cropping up—Ida's frequent absence and eventual disappearance were what inspired her career choice in the first place.

"It's been too long," Aliyah reported after months of not hearing from her.

"She has a history of disappearing," a young officer in the police station told her.

"Yes, but she wouldn't miss out on things like this: my birthday, prom, graduation?"

"She has before," her grandmother retorted from her recliner, not looking up from her magazine. "She's only ever done what she wants to do."

"I haven't heard from her at all," she pleaded with a ranger at a national park in the neighboring town. "But I know her boyfriend liked to take her to the lake here."

"When did they last make a trip here?" the khaki-clad man asked while stirring a mug of instant coffee.

"I don't know, but he was abusive. She said he tried to drown her in the bathtub once."

"What's his name?" the officer asked, fingers ready at the keyboard.

"I don't know."

"Why do you think she's in the lake?" The ranger took a sip of his coffee.

"I don't know."

"Why can't you accept that she's gone?" her grandmother challenged, scraping dried rice from a steel pan. "Don't you think you'd be happier if you stopped trying to find out what happened?"

"I don't know."

"When can you start?" her interviewer at the lab asked as she extended her hand.

"Next Monday," Aliyah answered, returning the handshake.

A chill climbed up her leg as Shelby accidentally brushed into her. She had recurring dreams that went like that: she would be searching for her mom along the cloudy bed of the lake, then feel a hard, unforgiving grip on her ankle. The image of her mom's pale, peeling face and the sound coming from her screaming, unhinged jaw would scare her so much that she'd wake up kicking.

Two months after getting her CSI job, Aliyah started spending a few hours every Sunday morning at the ironically named Clearwater Lake in her own scuba gear to comb through seaweed with plastic baggies and a cheap waterproof camera. Ida was legally presumed dead by that point, but Aliyah struggled to accept that her mother's life had an ending that was open to interpretation. For almost a year, she would return to the sandy banks empty-handed, exhausted, and emotionally depleted, then cross off sections on the grid map she made of the 70-square-mile lake. Her investigative work honed her abilities to swim and identify evidence faster, but handling bloated, decomposing corpses and learning how to identify dismembered body parts through unopened trash bags killed her hopes of finding her mom in a pristine or recognizable condition.

"You'll have plenty of time to miss me after I die," Aliyah's grandma told her once after she saw her scribbled map resting on the passenger seat of her car. "But I'm missing you now." After that, Aliyah's weekly trips to the lake became monthly, and then quarterly. Now, most of their Sunday mornings were spent together at her grandma's favorite pancake diner a few blocks away.

"Finally," Paloma said into her mic. There was a collective shift in energy once the six streams from the divers' torches illuminated a pale limestone wall ahead of them.

"Almost there, team," Rafael's words filled her ears. "Let's descend about ten more meters and we should be able to see it."

Aliyah took in a deep inhale. The waiting and diving were unnerving, but the real pressure was encroaching. The bones were going to be brittle after being submerged for this long, especially the all-important skull.

She stayed focused on Rafael as they all steered their scooters downward. After a few minutes of scanning the ledges and nooks of the wall, Aliyah's eyes caught what were, unmistakably, human bones.

"I see them," Aliyah said. "Headlamps on, everyone. Follow me but give Paloma space to work."

Smaller lights flicked on as Aliyah shone her torch onto the remains. Paloma swam by, documenting the bones and surrounding area. While she worked, Aliyah looked to the surface. It was a long, long way up.

"We're in a deep gorge of the cenote," Miguel said. "Whoever that person was didn't end up here on purpose."

She nodded. The drones had performed a topographic analysis of the site earlier in the week, and after examining that data, she theorized that this prehistoric person had gotten lost in the network and fallen into the gorge. Now, after thousands of years of rising tides and resting in place, they would be seen and touched by another human.

"I'm ready for you, Ali," Paloma said.

She made her way to the bones and Paloma fit her into her camera's frame. "Cassandra, keep your lights over here, please," Aliyah instructed. "Shelby, I'll need your help as I place the bones in your container, and Miguel, I need you to stay below me with your container open in case anyone drops."

They all swam to their positions and Aliyah unclenched her hands while surveying the pile and plotting the order of recovery. She was skeptical when Dr. Burke was excited by the prospect of a complete skeleton, but after seeing the bones in person, she was beginning to see it as a possibility too.

When the group was ready, she reached for the right femur. She allowed the water to do most of the work and let the brittle bone rest on her hands as she maneuvered it into the container. She repeated the task for the right tibia and fibula, then the left tibia, fibula, and femur, all while trying not to disturb the smaller tarsal and metatarsal bones. From her quick glances at the femur, she noticed that the growth plates had fused together, a likely sign of them being a teenager or adult.

"Close your container, Shelby, and switch with Cassandra," Aliyah said. "You'll head back over when we're working with the smaller bones in their knees and feet."

The two switched as Aliyah positioned herself to grab the pelvic bone. Using only her fingertips, she lifted the bone and watched as two pieces fell away from a deep crack in the ilium.

"Paloma, did you get that?" she asked.

"Yes, I'll zoom in," she answered.

While waiting for the pieces to settle into the sediment and for Paloma to get the shots she needed, Aliyah studied the pelvic bone. There was no evidence of that crack healing, so it could potentially be what led to their death, which made sense with her falling theory. Judging by the wide subpubic angle, the skeleton was female. Aliyah fixed her eyes on small pockmarks on the inside of the bones—she had given birth.

"We've got a Jane Doe," Aliyah announced while resting the pelvic bone in the bed of the container. "Rafael, did the drones capture any more visual footage lower than this or was that just topographic mapping?"

"Both, why?"

"She gave birth, so we may want to look out for a child or a baby."

"We didn't see anything else, only her," he answered. "But I'll make a note for another sweep just in case."

"Why would someone bring a child in here?" Miguel asked.

"She might not have. She could have been alone," replied Shelby.

"You think she would leave her kid?" Miguel debated.

"Let's save the discussion for when we're not on a limited air supply," Aliyah said. "Cassandra, I'm going to have you carry her scapula and clavicle too."

One by one, she placed the two scapulae in Cassandra's container, but as she was reaching for the left clavicle she noticed some bone remodeling. She'd seen injuries like this from past cases. Out of habit, she glanced over to Jane Doe's ribs and forearm, where she saw more remodeling in one of her ulnas.

"Paloma, can you get some close-up shots here?"

Paloma approached, zooming in on the places Aliyah was pointing to on the bones. "What does this mean?" she asked.

"Signs of abuse or some sort of domestic violence, but I can't say for sure."

"That's really rough," she said. "Her life definitely didn't seem easy."

Aliyah nodded and began to work on retrieving the bones again. When she was swimming through the cenote earlier, she was wondering how many animal skeletons were settled on the rocky floors around them. She envisioned Jane seeking shelter in the cavern, then wandering deeper into the network seeking food or water. It was only a theory, but Jane had to have known about all the predators that lived there. Someone or something scared her more than potentially facing a bear or sabertooth cat. Aliyah felt her chest tighten. Jane's situation must have been pretty bad if she thought she had a better chance of surviving in here than out there. The idea of finding her child with her or nearby was beginning to seem less likely.

After clearing some of the larger bones, her hands now had an unobstructed path to Jane's cranium. "Ok, Miguel. Go ahead and bring the skull container to me," Aliyah requested. She closed her eyes as the dive assistants rearranged and prepared themselves.

After she crashed her bike, it took a few minutes for Ida to notice that Aliyah wasn't behind her anymore. Even though it was broad daylight and she was only suffering a scraped-up knee, those moments alone scared her so much that she couldn't find the breath to call out for her mom.

She inspected the slopes and angles of Jane's skull, thinking of what her last seconds must have been like; in pain, in the dark, in silence. The light from her headlamp shone through her eye cavities, and Aliyah could see the intricate web of cranial bones. Holding her breath, she placed her fingers around the skull and lifted her carefully, letting her lower mandible stay behind on the limestone. She could picture deep brown eyes looking back at her as she turned toward Miguel and the box.

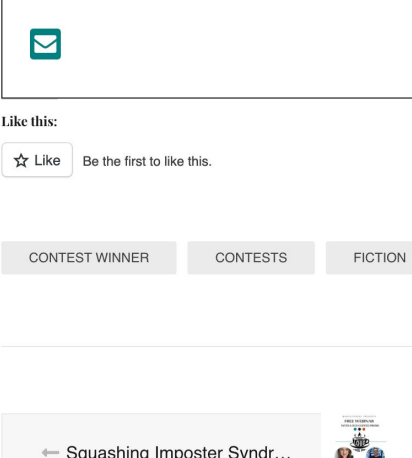
By the time Ida rode back to her, it only took a few seconds for her to leap off her bike and scoop Aliyah into her arms. Aliyah didn't start to cry until she could smell Ida's rose-scented lotion, and she remembered curling her body to make herself as small as possible.

"I got you, I got you," Ida whispered, rocking her and placing a hand onto Aliyah's helmeted head.

"I got you," Aliyah murmured, letting her palm cradle Jane's delicate temple before laying her onto the container's soft, safe surface. "I got you."

About The Author

Jordan Nishkian placed 2nd in the Summer Short Story Contest, August 2021, with her award winning story *In The Void*. Jordan won the \$200 cash prize and publication in Indie It Press's forthcoming *Anthology, 2022: COURAGEOUS CREATIVE*.



Jordan Nishkian is an Armenian-Portuguese writer based in California. Her work has been published in *Overachiever Magazine*, *The Kelp Journal*, the *New Plains Review*, *The Yellow Arrow Journal*, *The Plentitudes*, and more. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *Mythos* literary magazine and has recently published her first novella.

Jordan Nishkian

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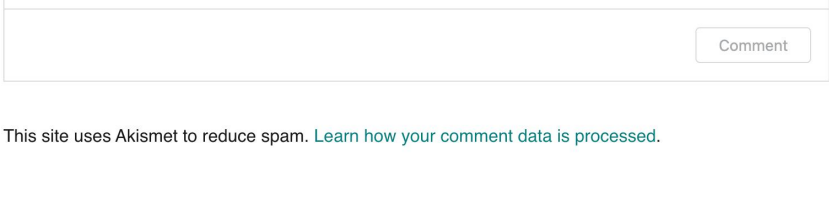
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