

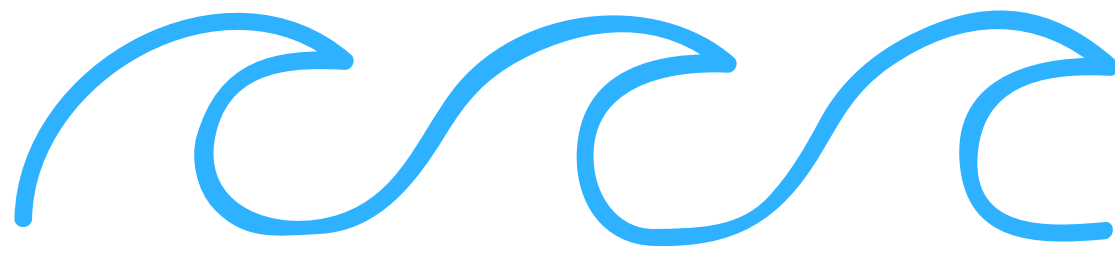


# The Dive

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Level 4

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I used to like thunderstorms. But, after a month of storms, I was just as excited as my friends from the archaeology graduate program to spend a day in the sun on the beach. We are not an athletic group—unless you count carrying textbooks around campus as weightlifting. Therefore, we spent our beach day splashing in water and laying on the sand. I swam out the farthest. There I was just tall enough to barely stand on the rocks. A wave hit me, and I kicked the rock. I cut my foot on something sharp. When I put my head underwater, I could not see what had cut me at first, just the brown-and-white rocks. White? Since when were the rocks here white?

I swam down to get a closer look. I saw the spine my foot had crushed and gulped a lungful of ocean water. By the time I had finished coughing, I called my friends over and contacted the proper authorities. We watched the skeleton be lifted out of the water. By then it was late in the evening. The police and a team of marine biologists argued over whose lab the skeleton belonged to for a long time. The marine biologists eventually won, and the strange skeleton was shipped back to the university lab.



I think I was in shock through most of that. My mind replayed the images of that grinning, human-like skull, the tangled hair, the spiny ribs spread over the rocks, and the fine bones falling out of the skeleton's tail fin. Those images continued to haunt me. I needed to do something. I needed to know more about this sea creature.

At first my friends came along on my dives to find out more about the skeleton. Then, one-by-one they would start to just shake their heads and look at me with concern.

“Somebody probably just glued a fish tail to a skeleton. Forget about it!”

“If it's real, the professionals will find out long before you do.”

“Diving is boring. You're not even looking anywhere with cool fish!”

“Are you sure you're okay...?”



I kept searching. It was not like I had a choice. Dreams of long green fingers and seaweed hair would keep me up at night. Somehow I began to sleep without dreaming.

I always checked for news on the skeleton before my dives. The morning of my sixth dive, one headline stood out among the numerous “Hoax?” articles:

“Scientists reveal local mermaid was alive this year; will not confirm authenticity”



Their working theory was that a recently deceased human with unusual bone structure formed the top half of the skeleton, but the creature as a whole was a hoax. They were also setting up a team of professional divers to investigate the area further. How could it be a hoax if they had an expensive marine investigation?

That same day I had my first real stroke of luck, if you could call it that. I was swimming along the bottom of a tall cliff. It was farther south than I had searched before. I spotted a crack in the rock just wide enough for me to squeeze through. As I swam into the passage it got bigger, and I saw a metal bowl covered in strange carvings half-filled with sand.

I swam faster. This was it! More object showed up stuck in the sand, so many that I could not stop to look at them all. At the sight of another skeleton curled up in an overturned cart I had to pause and gather my nerves. This one was still surrounded by crabs and other fish, although I could not see any flesh remaining. My heart beating loudly, I swam through a turn in the passage. There was an opening half-blocked with objects, trash, and skeletons.





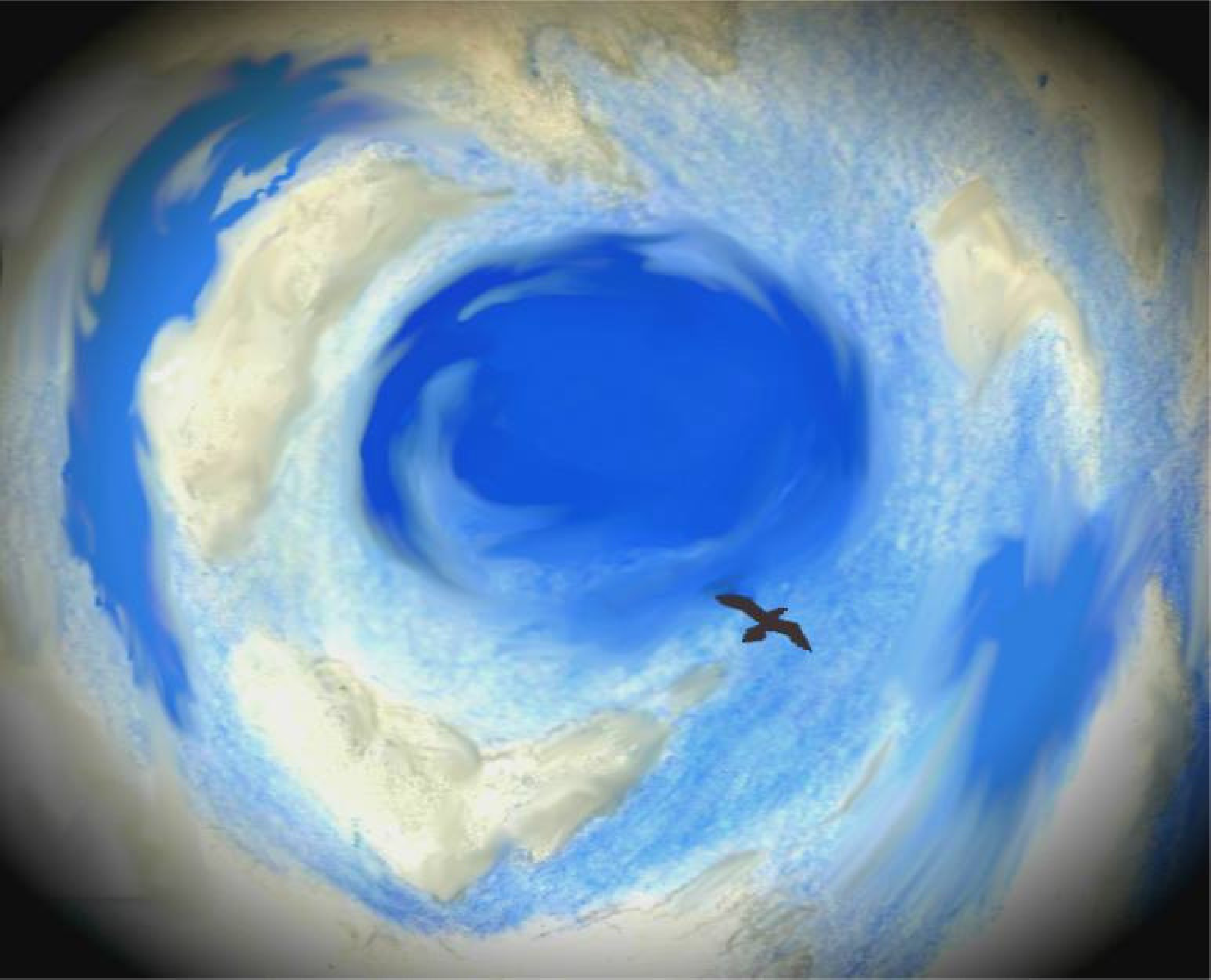


Skeletons were scattered over the floor of the long cavern. Carts and trunks lay abandoned in the sand, some smashed in half and others overturned. The contents were spilling out. All pointed towards the opening to the passage from which I had come. It seemed like the only exit. Some of the skeletons wore torn fabric or large colored stones. The stones were piled on as if they wore them around their necks rather than carry them. Some skeletons were disturbingly small. One clutched a doll.

I swam on. Every instinct told me to turn back. This scene could not be more than a month old, judging by the lab's report and the number of creatures still eating the bones. What were they running from? Where was it now?

The cavern narrowed again and ended in a rounded stone door. The door was tucked beneath an overhang of rock and covered with skeletons. A large boulder had been pushed in front to block the door, but it was still open a few inches. I could not see anything inside, but the stone of the cavern glowed from behind. A weak current of colder water flowed out, moving the nearest skeleton's hair. I laid my shaking fingers on the door and all went black.





When I opened my eyes I was laying on my back, staring up at a blue sky. It was a proper blue, not the murky green of the ocean. My legs were soaked by waves running up the shore. Further investigation revealed that they were bound together with complicated knots of seaweed, as were my hands. My head pounded too much for me to untie the knots. All my diving gear was missing.

The surfer who found and untied me also called an ambulance, even though I said I was fine. I must have looked pretty bad.



As soon as I was able to, I called the lab with the first skeleton to set up a meeting. It did not go as planned.

“Many divers report seeing cities, statues, or even strange fish that later turned out to be rocks,” the scientist said, much too gently. “And the nurses even tell me you suffered a hard blow to the head. Just take care of yourself. We already have a professional team working to track the origin of the hoax.” He walked out.

Two weeks passed. Two weeks of seaweed nightmares. Two weeks of reading heavy books on mermaid stories. Two weeks of politely declining friends’ invitations to sushi dinners.





When the doctor said I could swim again I was ready. I set out for the cliff face with brand-new gear, an underwater camera, and the largest, most shiny necklace I could find for a gift, just in case.

I stayed around the entrance to the passage this time, photographing the crack in the wall and searching for any signs to track in the sand. If any of the creatures —“mermaid” seemed much too fairytale a term, I had decided—escaped, they could only have come out through here. I also had no desire to revisit the horrors inside the cavern.

A glimmer of light at the corner of my vision made me turn just in time to see a large tail whip behind a lone rock that stood on the sandy floor. I followed carefully, in case it had teeth. That tail was half the size of the first skeleton’s, so it was probably just a big fish.

Coming closer, I could see the rock was entirely absent of life. I sighed, bubbles floating away in frustration. Even the fish here were mysterious. I took a few pictures of the rock and the marks in the sand around it anyway and flipped through them to check the exposure.



Then I looked up.

Slowly, carefully, I pulled the necklace from my bag as the creature blinked at me.



"Hello."



The end.



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