

Adelaide Advertiser, 1 September 2022

CAVE DIVING EXCITEMENT AT LATEST SINKHOLE OFFERING

In a historic first, Australia's leading cave diver, Mya Rennik, will tomorrow afternoon enter the pristine waters of a Limestone Coast sinkhole that has until now been unmapped. The owner of the land on which the sinkhole sits has reached a deal with Cave Diving Australia for limited use of the cave below his property.

'We've always known about the sinkholes,' Mr Frank Doyle stated. 'Back in the day, people used to throw old tractor parts and carcasses down them. Now we've discovered this one here, well, what with all the interest in the area, might as well find out what's down there.'

Ms Rennik estimates the initial underwater cavern to be roughly 200 metres wide and 30–40 metres deep, with numerous tunnels leading to other as yet unexplored caves. 'Given the extensive network of the Limestone caves, we hope to begin mapping the tunnels and laying out lines so that cave divers from all over the world can appreciate the beauty that lies beneath this unassuming land,' she said yesterday.

PROLOGUE

Away from all the cameras and the spectators, Mya does what she knows best, what she longs to do, and that's be underwater by herself. For all her accolades and recognition in the field, it comes down to this: the sense of beauty and wonder she feels in the subterranean world. It's an honour, of course, to be chosen to be the one to lay line in an undiscovered cave, and there's even talk of naming the chamber after her. People go on and on about her supposed fearlessness and competitive nature but all that stuff fades away when she's down here, in the blue.

Through the small hole up on the surface, she can still make out the rounded shadows of heads peering down. They'll be taking note of her time, checking the equipment, side-eyeing the press and onlookers who've come to gawk at her achievement. Most of them are open water divers; they don't understand the attraction of what she's doing. She gives them a thumbs up before returning to focus on her shimmering surrounds. The white limestone, the water, clear as air. She holds the reel below and beside her, then tugs on it gently, feeling its tightness. Her first tie-up is to a jutting rock, tinged with green. Divers that

come after her will appreciate its visibility and distance from the cavern walls.

Down, down another thirty metres and she's almost at the bottom. She chooses a white rock shaped like a wizard's hat to make a second tie. Now she scans the surroundings, the stalactites, the cave coral, and the waving emerald fronds, and there – *there!* A gap in the cavern wall.

Mya slows her breathing. She knows to do this when she feels an adrenaline surge and, using small ridges in the limestone, she glides over to the gap. Her torch highlights a definite hole and, tantalisingly, another dim light in the distance beyond it. It's narrow – cave divers don't refer to such places as 'squeezes' for nothing – but she's been through tighter. She can do this. Timing is good, oxygen levels good, breathing good. Her tank is side-mounted for this reason, as she'll need to be as flat as she can to get through.

She ties off a sideline to take with her and moves into position, angling into the space, the tank scraping the wall, disturbing a small amount of silt. She waits a few seconds for it to settle. The squeeze continues for half a metre. The floor of the tunnel grazes her face as she edges forward. Calm. Slow, slow. The space is too tight for her to look at her watch, but she knows she needs to get a move on, and besides, she couldn't turn around in this space if she tried. Slow. She can do this.

There's a small rock in front of her; she moves it and continues. Another touch to the right side of the tunnel and this time she waits only a second before gliding through the silt that billows as a result, to where the space becomes a tunnel, around one metre high and two metres wide. Light in front, that's good. Timing is fine, though she'll have to think about returning soon.

She's nearly at one third of her oxygen and that's the rule to head home: a third to get down, a third to return and a third for emergencies. The tunnel opens and she's through, she's through!

The space is enormous. It's a cathedral, glittering dark blue and silver. She makes a sound in her mask, a muffled whoop. As big as a football stadium – bigger. *This is why we do it*, she thinks, as she twirls around. This feeling: you're the first human ever to set eyes on a place.

Prickles of light glisten on the walls around her, more tunnels. There are years of exploring to do here, years, and the thought gives Mya immense pleasure. She takes a minute to soak it in and just marvel at the space. But practicalities remain; this was only meant to be an observation dive. She has to get moving.

First, she must tie off the sideline – it will make it easier for divers after her – and she looks around for a suitable place. There's a ledge nearby and she glides over to it, quicker now. In her haste she swipes the side with her flipper and silt fills her vision, thicker than before. She swears, but manages to find a protruding rock on the ledge and begins to work the rope, tying quickly in the torchlight fastened to her head. The silt clears slightly and just for an instant she sees a dark shape on the rock shelf. A moment of confusion. The silt grows thick again and she blinks. It's gone. But even so, she glides down towards the shelf, and as she does so, the silt begins to clear.

The oval shape is there. Can it be? A stab of confusion. *Keep calm*, she thinks. She reaches out to touch the object and when it rolls towards her, she feels a deep dread. Her breath is becoming heavier and she takes out her hand-held torch, the strong one, and rests it on the ledge for further clarity, peering at the thing once more.

It's an old oxygen tank, covered in thick silt. A tank. Here? No time to ponder its presence. Get moving. Her flipper scrapes the wall.

More silt and – no! Now the torch is caught in her sideline. In the beam of her headlight, she attempts to untangle the rope from the torch, tries to slow her breathing. One loop over the torch, it should be easy, but the rope is a snarl of blue string and, looking at her watch with a start, she decides to leave. The tangled rope and torch will have to stay.

It's time to go, it's really time to go.

Mya glides for half a metre before she's jolted to a stop. Looking behind her, she sees something impossible – another line? Her sideline is blue and now this, an orange line which is tangled up with her flipper. She bends down, grabs onto the rope and yanks it. The effort takes too much energy. *Breathe*. She's trapped in the rope. *Breathe*. Oxygen levels now into the last third.

Leave. Now.

Mya takes out her knife, flicks it open and moves to cut the orange line. It's become entangled with her sideline now, a snarl of orange and blue. *Cut the rope!* Her hands are deliberate and then frantic as she fails to free herself. She's breathing too fast. Silt rises again in a cloud. *Too much movement.*

Her hands are shaky, panicky, but she does not stop. She tugs the rope, and there are more tangles now and maybe she's cut her finger and her knife is making strange slicing movements – and yet, it is only when she becomes aware of the looming figure rising up in the silt and sees the ghostly mask, inches from her own, that Mya understands she won't be going home.