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By the time her eyes cleared, she'd passed the edge of the ranch yard and was on her way to the sandstone rocks and the tiny cave that had always been her refuge.

When she reached the cave and crawled inside, her pelvis ached all the way up to her teeth. She coughed at the dust she'd stirred, but welcomed the scent of dried pine. Gingerly arranging herself so she leaned against one wall, her legs straight, she wiped the grime from her face once more, then wrinkled her nose at the brown and red dirt smears on her bandana.

She panted with exertion. Her teeth hurt from gritting them as she'd negotiated her way through the rocks. The sound of her breathing almost covered the small drip-drip-drip-trickle of water from the back of the cave. The chant, chimes and gong still rushed like the air in a seashell in her ears.

She closed her eyes and whirls of bright colors streaked inside of her eyelids. The spots would fade as she rested. The rock was cold and hard against her back as her head throbbed with equally hard thoughts. She'd been a fool. All her life she'd wanted love from her father and so had pretended her own love for him was returned. Huh. Well, that was the past. Maybe only the recent past, but time to wake up and fix her mistakes. Soon.

Spark was gone. Her heart twinged, jerking her body. She

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could barely stand that thought. Bill Morsey was a good horseman, and his daughter would be thrilled to have Spark. Calli's lips turned down and a couple more tears leaked from her eyes. She sniffed. Her father had probably done the best thing for Spark. The horse loved to run, delighted in an audience. Calli gulped and blew her nose on the corner of her bandana.

Exhaustion grayed the edges of her vision. Her heartbeat began to slow to normal. Too much emotion and exertion in such a short amount of time had drained her.

Time seemed to slow until it crystalized the moment. The scent of rock and pine, the faint tumble of water, the cold air of the cave pressing around her etched on her memory. Yes, she was safe here in her refuge.

Her eyelashes picked up grainy dust and irritated her. The tinkle of water reminded her that somewhere there was dampness that could clean her face, maybe even a handspan of a pool. Calli glanced into the darkness of the cave, shivered with the cooling sweat on her body. She'd never squeezed through the narrow opening between two sharply jutting rock walls - always afraid she might get stuck, or trapped, or lost. In the dark.

The dark hadn't ever been her friend, even before she was six, before her mom walked away, leaving her locked in the cold, little bedroom as evening fell. The back of her neck tingled. More sandstone grit, probably. She swiped at it with her hand

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and it sifted down into her collar. Calli snuffled. Coughed. Wiped her face on the bandana again, then tucked it in her jeans pocket.

She'd faced disillusionment today, maybe it was time to face one more fear -- then she'd know she was strong and able to deal with the future on her own.

Or maybe finding the water was simply another delay to thinking about what she should do. Fight or run. Would it be running from her Dad, or bravely walking into a new future? How much did she love the ranch?

Palms against the rough floor, then the rough wall behind her, Calli levered herself to her feet. She grabbed the sturdy branch and used it as a cane. Her slow steps to the blackness at the back of the cave were more from her stiffening injury than her dread. The chant had picked up again, weaving around the sound of water in a whole that soothed her. The trickle-drip had changed, too. Drip-drip-trickle-bong. Nothing bad could be back there. Too cold for snakes, too small for bears, no other sort of animal-den smells....

With an outstretched hand she felt the rough projection of the rocks. She sucked in her belly and tucked her bottom, and scraped through. Pain, but nothing she couldn't handle, it had been a tight fit.

Three careful steps later, her outstretched hand touched a

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rock wall -- ahead, then she felt a wall to the left, too.

Cocking an ear, she strained for the sound of water. To her right. She proceeded cautiously, ran into another dead-end, then stilled and squinted. It looked lighter to her left, not black but the darkest of brown-red. The trickle-chime, chant echoed from there, too. Could it possibly be the wind singing through sandstone holes, natural pipes? Her lips curved in a smile at the whimsey. That was possible, but not likely.

Mountain sage scent rose from her scuffing steps. Tart, sharp, clean and bracing. She breathed deeply and pressed on, slowly but with a natural rhythm to her walk that had eluded her for months.

The darkness felt kind, comforting. Maybe she should have explored this little passageway sooner. 'Course she hadn't ever heard the chant and the gong here before.

One last shuffling turn and she came into a bright box-like room. She blinked to accustom her eyes to the light. The space was no more than five feet square. A hawk called and she looked up. A hundred feet above her there was a swatch of brilliant blue sky. She was in a natural chimney. When she brought her gaze back down, her eyes had to adapt to the dimness again.

She narrowed her gaze and saw the trickle of water about four inches wide in the far corner, rambling down a crack. It hit a tiny outcropping, smooth from years of drips, then fell a

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couple of inches into an equally small indentation before disappearing again into the crack. A small miracle of nature.

For a while, Calli just stood there, balanced with her stick, and enjoyed the calm of her emotions. Too many problems had pressed down on her lately, flattening her spirits. For this one moment she could be quiet and enjoy life, let thoughts drift through her mind without jabbing at her heart.

Did she love the ranch?

No. It had always reflected what her Dad wanted, not the kind of ranch she wanted, a horse ranch.

But she loved the land. And she loved the potential she could sense just beyond her vision of a horse ranch. She'd have to fight her dad on that, though. She let the little, angry notion prick her then dissipate. Enough just to be, and be well, right now. This space was special. A holy place, maybe. And maybe she wasn't supposed to have found it until now. She certainly couldn't explain the continuing chant, chimes and gong. Her fancies weren't too strange, right here, but would be laughable in the outside world.

Calli pulled her bandana from her pocket, snapped it a couple of times to send as much grit flying as she could, and took a few steps to dampen a corner in the cupped water. Then she hesitated. It seemed wrong to sponge up most of the accumulated wetness. She dipped her fingers in the little rock

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cup instead. The water was icy. She sucked the fresh droplets from her fingers. It tasted great. She smiled.

Something more had to be done, though. Her gratitude for the moments of sanctuary needed to be acknowledged. She fumbled for a prayer. "God bless," she whispered.

BONG!

The sound came next to her ear, louder and more vibrant than ever. She pivoted, lost her balance and fell. Ah, rats, she was going to hit her head on the damn rock wall.

But she fell through it, into a blackness so deep she couldn't tell if her eyes were open. She choked on a scream. All her emotions that had stilled in the little refuge jammed into her. Fear. Despair. Most of all, a great longing for someone to love. Someone to love her back.

It lasted instants. It lasted an eternity. Then bright colors whirled in her sight - patterns, stained glass! Pillars around the curved walls of a circular room, and rafters with huge crystal ends.

She did land hard on stone. A stone pavement inside a turquoise star.

Pain shot up her hip, stealing breath. Calli didn't believe this. Her throat closed with fear. She must have hit her head on the rock and was dreaming. She rubbed her head, but didn't feel any bumps. Dazed, she examined her surroundings. A big

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round stone room with an altar and colored goblets. A gong.

Calli sucked in air. It didn't smell anything like a cave in Colorado. It smelled like incense in a church. She gulped and shivering seized her.