

Episode 10 – “Troglobite”

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[Radio scanning stations, crackles into doowop rendition of the hymn “Rock of Ages,” and continues to play in the background.]

INTRO: Hello, everyone! Welcome to the final episode of Rock of Ages. Rock of Ages will take on a different form as we all adapt to the challenges of this year. This project has been made possible by the diligent work, research, time, and vocal talents of the interpretive staff at Carlsbad Caverns National Park. In this episode, we have some fun. We travel forward in time, imagining how stories about this place have been shared, and how they might continue to be shared in the future. So, for the last time, sit back, relax, and enjoy our future.

[Music fades to silence.]

[Clapboard clacks closed. Deep, otherworldly, suspenseful sci-fi music plays in the background.]

NARRATOR: The year is 2030. [Quiet male voice in the background echos “2030.”] Carlsbad Cavern is quiet, water dripping from the ceiling, its appearance not dissimilar to the way it looked a century ago in 1930, when it became a national park. Delicate soda straws and stoic stalagmites watch the drama of the [stopwatch ticks] years unfold before them [stopwatch fades to silence]. A lone person shuffles past Lower Cave [quick footsteps echo in cavern chamber]; a ladder sticking out of the darkness. Her head turns as—slowly—a figure emerges from the pit. Is it a caver? A visitor who has lost their way?

MONSTER: [Growls quietly in the distance.]

NARRATOR: Maybe it’s someone’s gurgling stomach, ready for lunch. . . .

MONSTER: [Growls loudly as it emerges from the pit. Continues to growl quietly in the background.]

NARRATOR: That’s no rumbly tummy. Our unidentified crawling creature reaches the top of the ladder, and a flashlight beam swings around to shed light on it. How appalling! Disgusting! It’s unhinged! This unimaginable being clamors out of the depths of the cave! It blinks into the light! Has it ever seen the light of day?

MONSTER: [Growls loudly.]

NARRATOR: It disembarks the ladder—keeping three points of contact—and makes its move! [Footsteps echo in cavern chamber.] Perhaps our heroine can escape, [monster growls loudly, threateningly] or perhaps terror welds her to the cavern floor. She screams!

ACTOR: [High-pitched scream, monster growls loudly over top.]

NARRATOR: What can it be? How did it come to be? Has it been here all along? Waiting, lurking, try—

DIRECTOR: Cut!

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[Clapboard clacks closed, background music stops, film equipment reset.]

ACTOR: Uch. It’s not working, is it?

DIRECTOR: It’s just—it’s just not believable!

MONSTER: [Voice very muffled as speaks through mask.] What am I supposed to be?

DIRECTOR: What was that, Jim?

MONSTER: [Louder, voice still very muffled.] What am I supposed to be?

ACTOR: [Frustrated.] We can’t hear you through the monster costume. You’ve gotta take the mask off.

MONSTER: [Unzips mask, pulls it over his head. Sighs in relief as able to breath, voice a little breathless.] P’s, I was saying—what am I supposed to be? I think I’m messing up because I don’t fully understand the character. How did I get into the cave? Did I adapt here?

DIRECTOR: You’re overthinking this. You’re a cave monster!

ACTOR: I think what Jim is trying to say is that in order for us to be believable, we need some amount of truth in the scene.

DIRECTOR: The truth is that you’re genuinely afraid of this actual, real cave monster. The truth is—we’re in an actual cave! I could’ve done this for half the budget on a green screen—or even just done a horror podcast—[defensively] but instead we’re here, in the footsteps of many great filmmakers who have found inspiration in this place.

ACTOR: Yes, we know—[sarcastically] gargoyles and dinosaurs and spiders, oh my!

DIRECTOR: Our viewers won’t overthink this, so you don’t need to overthink this. The cave is scary. Life in the cave is scary. We’ve got our permit to film—we can use it how we want—provided we stay on trail and don’t touch the formations, etc., etc. End of story.

ACTOR: You’re wrong!

DIRECTOR: I’m sorry, what?

ACTOR: How we represent the cave does matter! There’s history here in these walls, of discovery and exploration, lives of people come and gone. The future is here, too! How did you get the idea for this film? Microbes completely alien to us, found in this park! Why not start from reality? Sometimes truth can be stranger than fiction.

DIRECTOR: And we can still have some of that truth on screen! But, who’s going to watch a film about microbes?

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MONSTER: [Thinking out loud.] So . . . am I a troglobite? A troglophile?

DIRECTOR: Not now, Jim.

ACTOR: Believe it or not, we can do both. As an actor, I have to start from something real.

DIRECTOR: No. As an actor, you have to hit your mark and say your lines—

ACTOR: Wow! [Angrily] That’s considerate and totally how you should talk to your actors—

DIRECTOR: I don’t get paid to manage your feelings—

[They argue, speaking over each other.]

ACTOR: That is rich. . . .

DIRECTOR: You just need to say your lines—

ACTOR: I am here—

DIRECTOR: —as written!—

ACTOR: —using my artistic integrity—

DIRECTOR: —and watch your talking back—

ACTOR: —to portray this—

DIRECTOR: —you were—

MONSTER: [Loud and forceful over the argument.] TROG-LO-BITE!

[The Director and Actor’s argument comes to a sudden stop.]

ACTOR: [Confused.] Trilobite?

MONSTER: No, troglobite!

DIRECTOR: I’m sorry, Jim, but what on earth is a troglobite?

MONSTER: A creature that’s adapted to live permanently in a cave.

ACTOR: [Dismissively.] And what about it?

MONSTER: Am I one? Not me, Jim, obviously, but my character—the monster. If so, then, consider that for the moment—I’ve never set foot outside this cave, never seen the sun, never even known it existed. Not that I would need it. I’d know how to get my energy from the world around me, from other critters living in the cave, maybe from chemical interactions in the rocks themselves.

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[Excitedly.] And now, there are guests in my home. Could you imagine? Heck, I would probably be more afraid of these intruders than they are of me. [Pauses.] Wh-what? [Hesitantly.] Did I say something wrong?

ACTOR: Jim . . . that’s really good.

DIRECTOR: Could we work that into the scene somehow?

ACTOR: [Thoughtfully.] What if . . . what if instead of cowering from fear in the corner, my character was more curious, leaning forward?

MONSTER: And, what if, instead of being menacing and threatening, I was hesitant, experiencing something new?

DIRECTOR: [Excitedly.] Yes, yes! That adds so much more depth! All right. Reset, everyone, and we’ll try this again.

[Film equipment is set up in the background and footsteps echo as actors move back to position.]

ACTOR: Even if we nail this scene, that still doesn’t change the fact that the cave monster slowly eats every member of the main cast until my character’s the only survivor. . . .

DIRECTOR: Yeah, well, we’re not changing the whole script. We’ve already shot half of it, and I’m still making a horror film, not a documentary. [Concedes a little.] But maybe my next film could tackle microbes, or extinct bats, or gnomes, or a visit from Amelia Earhart—

ACTOR: Or maybe a team of explorers could use balloons to reach never-before seen cave chambers!

DIRECTOR: Nah. No one will ever believe that.

ACTOR: Despite the clichés, it is a good script. And maybe it will inspire people to look deeper, to come to this cave or others, to think about all the unbelievable—but true—things that have happened here, about everything that we’ve learned from this place.

DIRECTOR: And everything we have yet to learn.

ACTOR: Exactly!

DIRECTOR: Hmph. All right, that’s enough of that. Places, everyone! Lights . . . camera . . . action!

[Clapboard clacks closed. Deep, otherworldly, suspenseful sci-fi music plays in the background.]

NARRATOR: The lights fade out on our future storytellers. They have found their own way to connect with the cavern and share it with others. [Music fades to silence.] It’s hard not to think of the many people, known and unknown, who have walked through the echoing chambers of Carlsbad Caverns National Park and found their own lives taking incredible or unexpected turns in the midst of the mystery and grandeur. Maybe it is fitting that a site so extraordinary has its own

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share of extraordinary history. There are stories at Carlsbad Caverns that dance within the realm of possibility, some that stretch the limits of the imagination, and some so wild that they help you believe in the impossible. In whichever directions these stories pull you, whatever chords they strike, whatever questions they raise, remember . . . they are only the beginning. The unbelievable story of Carlsbad Caverns National Park is still being written.

[Doowop rendition of the hymn “Rock of Ages” begins and continues to play in the background.]

OUTRO: And for the final time, we hope you enjoyed this episode of Rock of Ages. This episode featured the voices of rangers Colin Walfield as Jim, slash, the Monster, Sally Carttar as the Actor, Abby Burlingame as the Director, and Aubrey Brown as the Narrator. This episode was researched and written by Abby Burlingame. Recording production was done by James Gunn and Anthony Mazzucco, music and audio engineering by Gabe Montemayor, with Abby Burlingame and Aubrey Brown [whispers of previous episodes begin] at the creative helm.

[Narration stops, whispers of previous episodes continue to fade in and out, overlapping each other.]

COLONEL BOLES: —the great honor of experiencing our traditional Rock of Ages Ceremony—

AMELIA EARHART: —be in control of my own destiny—

JOHN BROADBENT: —We still have some brave visitors up at the surface—

DR. VERA SMALL: —in complete darkness—we find life—

NARRATOR: —believe it, or not!—

WALT DISNEY: —I’m flabbergasted!—

HANNAH LOVECRAFT: —I do feel like an astronaut—

DR. CONSTANTINE: —that hike was worth it in more ways—

EUGENE DAVIS: —Dwayne and Eugene, the Davis Brothers, together forever—

TOM BEMIS: —All we can do now is hope the stalagmite anchor will hold and wait for word from the top.

[Whispers of previous episodes stop, outro narration continues.]

So, for the last time, we just wanted to say: Thank you for listening . . . and happy trails!

[Music crescendos, fades to silence.]