

Wonderland*

The slick stone of the cave wall against her back, Selina took a moment to rest and get her bearings. She braced her legs and peered up, back the way she had come. She could still see light and the shapes of trees, the shadows shifting as Loch continued his own descent. Below her, the dark shaft stretched into the earth. The tail end of her rope was lashed around the trunk of a young deciduous tree on the surface, the other end and its slack curled through her harness and around her arm, allowing her to control her speed. She reflected for a moment that a length of nylon and a ratty old harness were all that kept her from plummeting into the darkness below, but she was unfazed.

“You okay, Seal?” Loch called down.

“I’m fine,” she answered. “Just taking a breath.”

She closed her eyes and breathed in the moist smell of the stone around her, hearing the steady patter of water on her helmet. If someone had told her three years ago that she would spend her mid-20s lowering herself into holes in the earth for the sheer joy of it, she wouldn’t have believed them. She’d never considered spelunking to be something she would enjoy: too wet, too cramped, and definitely too dangerous. Her usual pursuits tended toward the relaxing, painting especially, which she’d once thought to make a career of. But that had been before Loch.

Only two months her senior and hailing from the same town in Michigan, it was a wonder the two had never crossed paths. As it happened, they met by happy accident on the streets of Atlanta, hundreds of miles from home. Selina was fascinated by the man, who projected an air of quiet

mystery, and the two got to talking. As they moved from the street to a park to a restaurant to her hotel room, the nature of their conversation changed. A tall, lean college dropout, he claimed to have left school to see the world, the urban sprawl of Atlanta merely a pit stop on the way to bigger, better things, (specifically caves), which he made a living documenting. He'd been a one-man crew up to this point, but was thinking of expanding his operation. "After all," he'd said, smirking, "there's safety in numbers." Alone in a big city and with no career aspirations in sight, Selina asked if she could join him. She took to spelunking naturally, and it wasn't long before she could keep steady pace with Loch, whether they were suspended over cliffs or crawling through dark tunnels. She hadn't looked back.

A drop of water landed on her eyelid, breaking her meditation, and she wiped it away. Loch was inching closer, so she started up again. Pushing off with her legs, she released a short length of nylon and allowed the force of gravity to drop her a few inches, gently catching the wall again with the toes of her boots.

"Steady now, babe," Loch said from above. "I don't want to put too much strain on these harnesses."

"Oh stop, you're making me blush." Selina rolled her eyes and looked at the harness strapped around her hips and legs. The edges were frayed but the ancient thing was still capable of bearing her weight. Loch was experimental and a bit of a daredevil, renting equipment locally rather than keeping his own, just for the fun of it. Selina didn't think the mock thrill he got out of this made any sense. While what they got was used, it was always still in excellent shape. She wouldn't have started down an undocumented hole in the earth had she not trusted

the equipment with her life, whatever Loch's inclinations.

There was a groan of wood from above as the wind whipped through the trees, and a flurry of leaves found their way into the mouth of the pit, flailing hurriedly down like inelegant feathers. They brushed Selina's face and settled in her hair. With them came the suffocating smell of a gathering storm.

"Fine weather we're having," she called up to Loch. She blew off a leaf that had settled on her nose, letting it spin away into the darkness. "I thought you said we weren't expecting rain."

"We shouldn't be," he replied, with a hint of concern.

Brazilian storms had a reputation for catching people unprepared, or so Selina had heard. Something about the warm air at the equator and wind currents from the Andes Mountains not getting along. She hoped they weren't about to be caught in one, suspended as they were.

"Should we start back up? I don't want to be down here if that thing hits."

Loch looked down at Selina, the worry gone from his face, replaced with a look that always relaxed her. "I don't think it'll hit us. The sky's still blue, and the wind is pushing the clouds west. Steady on. We'll be safe when we hit bottom."

"What if we hit an aquifer?" she asked, hesitantly continuing her descent. "Or a cave that floods when it rains?"

"Then we'll deal with that when we come to it."

Selina scowled. "You know I hate it when you get all cavalier."

Loch didn't answer her. He was devoted to his work, an explorer through and through. Selina

liked that about him. She just didn't like when that devotion put them in danger.

But the damage had already been done. From above the pit came a great ripping sound and a shower of soil. Selina felt her rope give—and then, dreadfully, weightlessness. Her entire existence lay before her, making one second of suspension feel endless. There was her childhood, a brief blip. Shunted as she was from parent to parent, neither taking full responsibility for the product of their love affair, her early years were a confused blur of their alcoholism and self-pity.

The rest Selina saw with intense clarity. There was the dog she would pass when biking to school, a great black beast with fierce eyes and a restless tail. There was her mother the last time she had seen her, with fury in her eyes and tears on her cheeks. There was her first day of college, alone and bewildered, looking at a dorm room far too big for her meager belongings. There was her 20th birthday when she had last seen her father. There was her trip to Rome, a failed attempt to escape to somewhere more magical than Michigan; the hostel had smelled of piss and the streets were little better. There was college graduation, none of the thousands of spectators there for her.

And there was Loch. Their first date. Their first cave.

And now.

The weightless feeling ended, gravity was restored, and Selina began to fall. Too stunned to scream, she instinctively flung her arms out to brace against the walls, sliding against a layer of lichen. Trying with her legs proved little better; her boots skidded against the same growth, too slippery to cause much friction. Her fall continued, gain-

ing speed as the light was lost, falling deeper than sunlight dared to venture. Further attempts to brace against the walls were met with scraped palms, the lichen vanishing along with the sun and leaving only stone, rougher here than at the mouth of the cave.

Just as Selina began to think that the fall would never end, she felt her leg collide with something solid. Her scream was cut short as she plunged headfirst into water, her helmet ripped from her head by the force of impact. She inhaled liquid and struggled to right herself, her sense of direction thrown by shock and crushing darkness. Waving her limbs frantically, she felt her hand break the surface. With a powerful thrust of both arms, she emerged, choking and sputtering, into cool air. Attempts to tread water were in vain, and she cried out as a blinding jolt shot through her leg. It was almost certainly broken and would do her no good. She floundered again and grabbed her rope for any support it could give her, kicking her one good leg to keep her head above water. Her arm brushed against something in the water and she flinched, her mind thick with thoughts of snakes and crocodiles and blind things that lurked in the dark. She nearly slipped back under in panic as it continued to bump against her. Grabbing a fistful of leaves, she realized it was the young tree, her tether, pulled down the shoot with her. She clung to the trunk, using it as a buoy as she vomited water.

She floated like that for a while in the still water. At one point, she thought she heard Loch calling and tried to respond, her shout coming out more like a groan. Most likely he'd go for help, as one person suspended from a rope would have a hell of a time lugging an injured person from this deep underground. All assuming he thought she was still alive. Even then, the nearest town was well over a

day's hike away. For now, at least, she was alone.

After a brief time, the tree hit land, dully thumping into a shelf of rock. Relieved, Selina slipped off the tree, grabbing the outcrop with bleeding hands and hoisting herself up. Her leg screamed in pain, but she did her best to ignore it until she was out of the water, collapsing on her back in a wet heap. Splayed out on the spur of rock, she was battered and waterlogged, but alive.

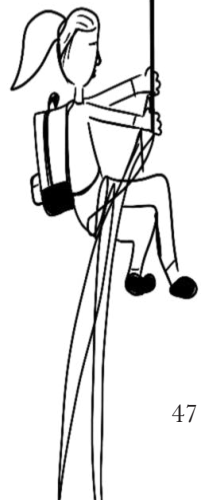
She lay there a while, staring into the distance. She convinced herself she *could* see the ceiling, though more likely it was just endless darkness. As her eyes became accustomed, she realized she actually could see. The very air seemed to glow faintly, and Selina could make out the faint forms of thick pillars where stalagmites and stalactites met in the gloom. She couldn't locate the source of the glow but found some relief in it all the same.

Just then her adrenaline levels dropped, pain kicked back in, and she felt her leg light up like a firecracker. She yelped and her voice trailed off into a whimper. She sat up and tried to assess the damage, but could only make out the faintest outline of her legs, seemingly in the far distance. Great swells of heat radiated up her body. She reached down, gingerly groping her way along her leg to the source of the pain. Her hand scraped against bone, and it took all she had not to throw up again. She could feel it now as if it had nerves of its own: an inch of pale bone protruding at a harsh angle from her calf, snapped jaggedly in half by the force of her fall. Breathing deeply, she grit her teeth and made herself touch it again, her shoulders tight and back arched as she examined the wound. To either side of the fracture, she could feel that her skin had split, and blood oozed through her fingers. The rest of her leg seemed comparably undamaged. "Shit,

Seal,” she said between strained breaths. “I’m gonna... have to... put you back together.”

Selina had no official medical training, though she had picked up some first aid basics from her father, Loch, and a particularly intense roommate. She’d only seen broken limbs popped back into place on television, but given the circumstances, that was going to have to do. Seizing her knee in one hand and her foot in the other, she pulled forward with what strength she had left. She cried out and collapsed backwards, tears streaming down her cheeks. She focused on breathing deeply to keep from passing out. Her leg felt like it was on fire, the exposed bone grating against her flesh.

Once she gathered her energy, she grabbed the rope and rolled her upper body out over the water, tugging the nylon until leaves brushed her arm. The trunk of the tree was too bulky to pull onto the shelf in her condition, but she managed to yank its leafy end up beside her. She grabbed a skinny branch, feeling a satisfying pop as it snapped off into her hand. She stripped it of leaves and held it between her teeth, gnawing it to ensure it wouldn’t break when she bit down. “Okay,” she said, grimacing in anticipation. “Let’s try again.” Grasping her leg the same as before, Selina pulled hard. There was a fleshy squelch and a deep, unpleasant crunch, and darkness consumed her.



She dreamed about the black dog with the fierce eyes. Every morning on her commute to school it would bark at her, running alongside its fence as if she were an animal it was pursuing. Living on a little dead-end street, she had no choice but to pass it. It terrified her, and she would avert her gaze and sing to herself to try to block it out. This worked until the day it broke loose. She tried to flee the galloping hound but, in her haste, fell from her bike. She scrambled over the bike, now on its side with wheels spinning, and braced herself for an attack that never came. The dog merely approached, more slowly now, licked her face, and settled at her feet. The fierce eyes, she saw, had only ever been curious, and the violent tail had been wagging happily. But in the dream, its face melted and morphed into that of her mother, eyes ferocious again, mouth open in a wicked smile. Still on all fours, the mom-beast barked hate at Selina, spouting things that terrified her, before going for her throat.

She awoke shivering, her hand at her neck. The cave had been dank before, but night must have fallen since, and the water had cooled on her skin. In addition, she was sticky, drenched in sweat. She suspected she was running a fever. Her leg throbbed, but it appeared to be in one piece, caked in dried blood and swollen to twice its usual size. She was going to have to make a splint.

Selina hauled herself up into a sitting position, leaving her wounded leg stretched out in front of her. Her center of gravity partially restored, she pulled the tree farther onto the rocky outcropping, only stopping to rest when she had stripped it of four branches. The roots of the tree looked intact. “You damn thing, you pulled yourself out of the ground,” she said. She gave the tree a look of disdain that it ignored.

Her hand found one of the cave's walls, so she scooted closer, leaning her upper body against smooth stone once more. Rummaging in her pockets and pulling items off her harness, she was pleased to discover that she still had everything she fell with. A half-full bottle of water dangling from her harness, attached to a carabiner emblazoned with her name. Two wrapped protein bars, soggy but edible, on which she had written her initials, the same as Loch did on his out of some bizarre sense of good luck. One multi-tool, including pocketknife and miniature saw. An old harness, a length of strong rope, and a tree.

She took a swig of water and unwrapped one of the protein bars. Holding one end of the bar in her mouth, she popped out the saw blade from the multi-tool and began sawing at the branches. She untied herself from the rope, laid the calf-length pieces of wood on either side of her leg, took off her drenched shirt, and set her food aside. Hoisting her wounded leg up a few inches, she quickly wound the shirt around her leg, following it with the rope. By the time she was done knotting the rope, her leg was successfully encased in a sheath of wood. Tears streaming down her cheeks again, she took a long moment to rest, out of breath but victorious.

Hours passed as Selina lay there, shivering in the dark. Her leg still throbbed, but she tried to pay it little mind. There was nothing more she could do for herself in her present state, so she rested, chewing on her protein bar, and let her mind drift.

Selina remembered her father vividly. He had never been a happy man, prone to dark moods and dark words. While her mother lashed out, her father bottled up as he drank away the day, making her time spent with each of her parents very different. She'd enjoyed being with her father more. The

fact that he often wasn't around, and didn't beat her, greatly contributed to her enjoyment. He made sure she got to school on time, pushing her out the door at 7 a.m. sharp on the bike he bought, occasionally with a packed lunch. He started a savings account for her college education, which he only sometimes used to buy himself drinks. She loved him anyway, even if he found it hard to reciprocate her affection. He'd seemed so eternal, it shocked everyone when he died, though it didn't shock anyone how.

Selina's 20th birthday had been a small affair, like all her birthdays. She invited a few friends over and they went out, like they had every year without fail, to the local skating rink. As children, it had been a favorite place to play, taking part with relish in activities throughout the day. As they grew older, the games they took part in changed, and it became a prime spot to flirt with boys. When they returned to her house, they'd huddle on the couch and watch a few movies, accompanied by a towering bucket of popcorn. That latter part ended unusually early that year. Selina had been feeling tired most of the day and bowed out of their evening traditions to go to bed early. After a round of hugs and "feel better"s, the other girls went home, and Selina was left to wonder where her father had gone. She didn't have to wonder long, and the pink line he left around the edge of the bathtub never quite washed out. Happy Birthday, Selina.

She was jolted back to her present predicament by a roaring sound. Bolting upright, she quickly found its source: water was pouring in from the ceiling, loudly splashing into the lagoon where she had fallen. "So much for that rain, huh, Loch?!" she shouted towards the flow.

Wide awake and no longer blinded by pain, Selina started to get a sense of the cave's geography.

The ceiling was about twenty feet up, a fraction of the length of the shaft she had fallen down, where the water was now pouring in. The light, she was fascinated to find, was emanating from clusters of mushrooms, kept alive by the moisture that ran down the cave walls. The same water had sculpted mesmerizing shapes in the rock, from towering pillars to delicate shards of stone that Selina could have snapped between two fingers. Bats wheeled in and out of the light cast by the fungus, chirping like birds as they caught insects she couldn't see. "Now this would make quite a painting," she said aloud. "I've fallen into Wonderland! Glowing shrooms and flying mice and God only knows what else. And my only friend is a tree." She laughed at the absurdity of it all. "Hey, I'm waiting for that smoking caterpillar! He'd be fun!" The stone drank up her words with hardly an echo of "fun!"

Alone in the dark and surrounded by unusual beauty, Selina thought about Loch. Their first dive together hadn't been far from Atlanta. They hid their vehicle amongst some trees at the side of the highway; it was a scant five-minute hike to a gaping chasm in the earth, yawning wide like the maw of some beast. Selina had been afraid, but Loch coached her through it. It was a favorite little spot of his, he said, and quite safe. Tying off to some sturdy trees, the young couple harnessed up and lowered themselves into the hole. After some coaching, Selina was surprised by how fun she found it. What started as an escape from an aimless life quickly became something she actually enjoyed. She loved every aspect of the job: the discovery, the camping, the climbing, the documenting. And she liked Loch, and loved the escape he gave her. She just wasn't sure, even after three years, if she loved him for him.

Long hours passed in this fashion. The low light never waxing or waning, sleep and consciousness started to blur together. Both were plagued by dreams which became steadily more horrible. Food and water alike were gone, attempts to ration defeated by the onward marching of time. Selina felt her skin growing clammy. White heat still pulsed deep in her leg.

When rescue came, it came as a rustling from the hole above her, which Selina mistook for yet more rain until a pair of legs appeared. “Hey. Hey!” she shouted hoarsely, and was greeted by swift, rambling Portuguese. In a daze, she was gently moved back across the water by the combined efforts of three men and laid on a thin cloth stretcher lowered down into the hole on ropes. Warm daylight greeted her when she finally emerged, helped up from her prone position by two more men. She tested her splinted leg and was able to put a minimal amount of pressure on it, allowing them to walk-carry her away from the pit.

“Seal! Baby!” Loch appeared from the direction of the cave, where he must have been directing the rescue attempt. “Oh my god, I can’t believe it! I came as soon as I could!” He was panting from exertion, eyes baggy, pants torn and muddied. He looked exhausted, but his face was lit up like the sun as he rambled his relief. “I called for you, and I thought I heard you, so I ran to town, I’m so—”

“Hey, you.” She could feel the relief on her own face and would have latched onto him and squeezed had she been able to stand up straight. “No more tying off trees, okay? I really don’t want to do, you know, *that*, again.”

Loch shook his head, promised to buy the sturdiest stakes available, and rushed elsewhere to get her a towel. She heard little of it. She was feel-

ing the sun on her face, a cool breeze whistling past her ears. It felt surreal, and tears rolled lightly down her cheeks as she soaked in the world.

One of the men holding her spoke to Loch in rapid Portuguese, and Loch responded in kind, though a good deal slower. “He says he’ll take you side saddle, because of your leg.” When Selina cocked her head in confusion, he gestured behind him to the six horses grazing where they had made camp before the climb. She noticed that he had gotten her that towel and wrapped it around her shoulders, and was now offering her a protein bar, identical to those she had savored underground. His scrawled initials stood out on its unbroken wrapper. She looked at him, at the relief in his eyes. Not rage, like her mother. Not dispassion, like her father. He felt relief, and she felt something pass between them that might have been love.

She grinned, despite the pain in her leg, as she was hoisted up onto one of the horses. “It was beautiful down there, Loch. I want to see it again. But next time, we’ll be more careful, okay?”

“Of course. Anything. I don’t want to lose you again.”

“Well I won’t be able to go anywhere for a while. I guess I’ll have lots of time to paint,” she said, looking at her leg. “So. How do you like my splint?”

by Ryan Murphy

**Content Warning: Implied Abuse, Addiction,
and Suicide*