**The Fall**

*By Madeleine Sullivan*

The ground beneath my feet seemed to disintegrate as if it had never even been there to begin with. Despite the fact that only mere seconds ago, my aching feet had been rhythmically pounding against its hard surface, in a futile attempt to outrun my pursuers, it was no longer there. The only thing that remained was air. Cold, intangible air.

My stomach seemed to drop as I plummeted, steadily towards the oncoming earth. My instinct to do something—anything—to somehow stop my inevitable landing was inconsequential. There was nothing I could do, and the mere seconds of security that seemed to stretch on forever, were over in a painful flash.

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After a long while, each of my senses slowly restored to their original effectiveness. I opened my weary eyes with much difficulty and glanced around my immediate surroundings. The great strain and affliction that seemed to consume my body was only increased as I tried to sit up.

I placed my shaking hands on the ground behind my back, pushing myself up into a sedentary position. My arms trembled under the weight of my body and I gritted my teeth in defiance, unwilling to allow my weak, broken body to fall back to the ground, where it would indisputably be unable to get back up again.

With tremendous effort, I managed to haul myself to my feet. Hunched over, in a stooped position, I placed my hands against the dusty cliff face to prevent myself from falling back down again. I looked up, into the blaring sun, which was just disappearing behind the edge of the cliff, plunging the deep gully into near darkness.

Ignoring the undeniable pain that consumed my entire being, I started to make my way along the ravine, using my hands to brace myself against the cold cliff face. I walked for hours, maybe even longer—considering the amplified darkness and the increasing length of the shadows that stretched across the gorge and up the cliff face—yet to no avail. The high, looming walls stretched on and on, into the distance, as far as the eye could see. Their dusty orange finish, turning black in the approaching dusk.

With one final spurt of energy, I managed to haul myself forward, without the assistance of the wall and drag myself beneath a low overhanging rock that was protruding from the cliff face. Pulling myself into the little nook it formed in the wall, I curled up into a fetal position and closed my eyes as tight as I possibly could. Maybe if I tried hard enough I would wake up and it would have all just been a bad dream.

But, like most aspects in my life, I was not so lucky. When I opened my eyes the following morning, I was momentarily blinded by the harsh sunlight that was filtering into the dark canyon. With a grumble of contempt, I crawled out from beneath the overhang and stood to my full height, with significantly less struggle than the previous day.

It seemed the restless night’s sleep had restored some of the energy to my body, and I could—at least—manage basic exertions, like standing.

The sun had barely scratched the edge of the cliff face, yet its harsh rays were relentlessly burning my retinas. Placing a hand over my face, to shield my eyes, I continued along the same route I had commenced yesterday.

For the remainder of the day, I struggled along the canyon, desperately searching for a way out, but no matter how hard I looked and how fiercely I pleaded, the steep walls remained unchanged. Still stretching up, endlessly, towards the sky.

By the time the sun began to set, I could feel the strength flowing out of my body, as the little hope and optimism that still remained, evaporated into mist. The scene in front of me looked exactly as it had yesterday. For all I know, I could have been walking in endless circles, without realising. That is how identical every aspect of the gorge appeared.

Just as I was prepared to completely give up, I spotted a large opening in the cliff face. It was deep and intimidating, but a tiny sliver of light, refracted in the darkness made my heart skip a beat. I lunged towards the entrance and picked my way through the maze of scattered boulders, until I reached  the light fragment, white against the dark, moist wall of the cave.

I turned to face the direction the shaft of light was entering from, only to see a small, polygonal window embedded in the stone, about twenty feet above the ground. I sighed in despair. My last shred of hope was slowly shrinking into insignificance, along with any dignity and optimism I still possessed. I was going to die down here. No one would find me. My pursuers would think me dead after witnessing my fatal plummet. No one would even suspect me to be stuck down here, withering away in my solitude and deprivation. I would remain here forever, or at least until my body shut down from the cold and lack of food.

In one final attempt at salvation, I picked my way up toward the opening, the bright light acting as a magnet—like a pigeon chasing a shiny object. I hauled myself up the wall, using large rocks and small indentations as hand and footholds.

Slowly and steadily, I maneuvered my way closer to the opening. WIth every step, the light became brighter and my heart beated faster. I could see through the gap now. The bright, lush green of the outside world, tempting me with its freedom and familiarity.

I latched an aching hand onto the rim of the window, and with my remaining vigor, pulled my body through it and onto the grass at its opening. I rolled over onto my back, breathing heavily.

Above me, a thick canopy of trees shielded me from the sun’s harsh rays, though thin slivers of golden light managed to penetrate its foliage, creating a rippling effect of  light on my face.

I sat up, glancing around. To my right was the cliff’s edge, from which I immediately scrambled away from. Subsequent to all my recent adversity, I would not allow myself to fall—literally— back into that dark place.

I stood up, noticing some minor differences to my surroundings. Contrast to when I had run through here in a desperate attempt to escape, this place–though similar— did not look like my home.

The small huts that were usually situated along the line of trees were non-existent. In fact, none of the infrastructure that was supposed to be there was. The place was deserted and the decrepit foundations of the houses that used to stand were all that remained.

Suddenly, a loud whirring noise attacked my ears. I slammed my palms over the sides of my head and looked around wildly, trying to locate the culprit of the deafening pandemonium. But I could not see anything out of the ordinary. Then, without warning, the wind began to pick up at an exponential volume. Its power nearly knocked me off my feet, causing me to stumble unceremoniously into the nearby thatch of trees.

With an air of great equanimity, I peaked out of the bushes to see what was causing the emphatic ruckus. But what I noticed made my stomach drop. Hovering low, over the treetops was a large metal object, littered with dishes and mottled alloy panels.

I ducked my head in shock and terror as the great object travelled over my position, I remained deadly silent until I could hear it in the far distance—still whirring, though quieter than before.

I turned around in my spot, searching for any other abnormalities in my forest. There was something unequivocally wrong with me. There had to be. There was no other plausible explanation to justify what I had just seen.

I spotted a thick tree trunk a few feet away and immediately lunged for it. I reached up and wrapped my hands around a sturdy looking branch, just above my eye level. I hauled myself onto it and repeated the sequence until I reached the highest branch that could support my weight.

I parted the topmost branches and looked out over the vast forest. The steel monstrosity was still barely visible, hovering over the trees a few miles away. I swivelled my head in a moderate panorama, assessing everything in the visible vicinity.

In the near distance, where I recall there being a decent cluster of huts, a large metal structure, stretching up towards the sky stood instead. In fact, all around large, shiny constructions were erected from the ground, pushing up between the trees and reaching up—like sunflowers— towards the clouds.

I think I might have been in a state of shock as it was impossible for me to move. My muscles were unresponsive and I couldn’t take my eyes off the disconcerting scene before me. Something was horribly wrong, there was no denying that. I just could not pinpoint what exactly that was.

I turned around in the tree, grasping the branch for stability. The long gorge below me stretched off into infinity. Its inevitable end, hidden somewhere over the large mountain range on the horizon.

The place where I specifically recall fleeing my pursuers was somewhere past the treeline, concealed by the shrubbery. There was no one there. No one was looking for me. Not my family. Not my peers. No one. As a matter of fact, there was no one anywhere. No matter where I looked, there was not a single, visible living being, where there should have been a few hundred at least.

I started to panic, now coming to the realisation of how terribly alone and confused I was. I slid back down the tree, my feet crunching loudly against the leaf mould. I ran desperately towards the edge of the cliff, retracing my steps along it until I reached the place where I had toppled over the edge.

I stood still, my toes feeling nothing but air as they hung precariously over the edge of the cliff. I looked down, the memories flashing before my eyes of the fall. Suddenly, I felt a presence behind me, but before I could whip around to identify it, strong hands pushed me backwards and my feet slipped off the gravelly edge. I desperately grasped at the edge of the precipice, but to no avail. My momentum prevented my frenzied hands from obtaining a secure hold on the dusty surface. My palms scraped against the rock as I—once again— plummeted to the bottom of the gully.

The figure leaned over the edge of the cliff, watching me from beneath a hooded cloak as I lay sprawled on the ground. I watched it, my eyes wide and my body unmoving, as it turned away and disappeared behind the edge of the cliff. Just before my vision fizzled out, the large metal vehicle flew silently over the chasm and disappeared from view.