

Samantha and Jasper

Samantha took a minute to enjoy the approaching sunset. The rich ruby colors were deepening into crimsons and violets. Her brief walk with friends had turned into a much longer trek alone across the hilly grassland. She had only planned on seeing just around the bend. Was that really three hours ago? Kyle and Mandie will be worried sick. Checking for cell service, she stumbles over a rock protruding from the grass. She hadn't seen a rock big enough for tripping in hours. She bent down to inspect it. Thoughts of contacting her friends were pushed far from her mind. She clicks a picture and straightens. Trying for the umpteenth time to see over the next rise, a flash of red light catches her eye. It could be the sun reflecting off some water or shiny metal. She thought of her friends, insisting she had an unhealthy curiosity. She laughed as she thought of Kyle and Mandie arms crossed, refusing to go any further. How could walking a few more feet really hurt? Satisfying her curiosity once again, she readjusts her survival pack and walks on.

A few more feet bring her to a cliff's edge. The brilliant red light is coming from the rock below. She quickly climbs down the rocky face and swishes through the soft sand. As she nears the rock omitting the light, she notices someone had hewed out a perfect doorway, and the light is coming from within the rock.

As far back as she could remember, she avoided going in caves. Her brothers teased her mercilessly every time she wouldn't join them on a cave tour. Lucky for her, her mom was afraid and enjoyed her company. The girls would hang out in gift shops and make up wild stories about the monsters that lived inside the caves. Her dad, of course, was the mighty hero that would rescue her brothers and bring them back safely. But both mom and daughter knew the dragon or troll or whatever cave dwelling monster kept the pretty young girls. That's why they

could never venture inside. Now she had a cave entrance standing between her and the mystery light. Weighing her options and feelings, she pulled out her jacket. She could go in the cave for shelter and warmth or build a fire in the open air. Still unsure about the cave, she walked on tired legs looking for firewood. The cliff she had climbed down had left her in a sandy pit. She would have to climb out to build the fire or toss down enough firewood. The task seemed overwhelming to her. She could hear a heavy wind blowing on the plateau above. She would have to work in that wind if there was firewood to gather. The hike had been mostly rolling grass hills. No, she decided, she would go inside the cave. If she stayed near the entrance, she reasoned with herself, she would be warm enough and could quickly escape any unwelcoming creatures. Besides, everyone knew monsters lived deep within the cave, not just a few feet inside. She promised herself to go just inside the opening; she wouldn't let the entrance leave her sight.

Once inside the cave, she found the light, which still tickled her curiosity to be much more subtle. It wasn't red at all, but a pale yellow. It must be the red rocks near the cave entrance that caused the ruby brilliance. The pale yellow light was emanating from near the floor about 100 feet away. That was about ninety-nine feet further than she planned on going inside. As the sun's light dimmed, the mystery light gave her a small amount of comfort. She didn't need to worry about the moon's phase or if she had packed fresh batteries for her flashlight. The strange light provided plenty of light to see.

Letting her curiosity get the best of her, she slowly crept along the cave wall towards the light, keeping her eyes on the entrance. Maybe her friends were right. Her curiosity may have grown to an unhealthy state. But lots of people go inside caves, she reasoned. She never heard about them getting eaten or held captive. But she wouldn't if they never surfaced to tell their tale. She noticed her

imagination was also growing to an unhealthy state as well. Afraid of getting lost, she didn't turn away from the entrance. Regardless, within a few quick minutes, the entrance was black as the walls. She turned to study the soothing light. It shined through a rectangle cut out near the floor. A sudden need to find that light source coursed through her. She slipped off her backpack and squeezed through the hole. The next chamber was breath-taking. Although the source of the light was in yet another room, she could see every glorious detail. All her worries of dark, wet caves were quickly being stripped away and replaced with a sense of wonder. This wasn't the home of an ugly monster, but a beautiful princess or majestic dragon. No flesh eating monster would pick a place like this to live. It was so beautiful. She listened to distant water dripping, small invisible creatures stirring, and a constant open echo. The sound of the cave's echoes was causing her to feel relaxed and peaceful. Yet as she stood still, gazing at the majestic rock formations, the noises were coming closer; it seemed. Then she heard a rustle near her. She jumped away but couldn't see the cause of the noise. Checking her phone, she regretted not contacting her friend when she had the chance. The local search and rescue might greet her first thing tomorrow morning on her walk back to camp. She should've let her friends know she was okay. Who would have thought she of all people would find shelter in a cave?

Concern pushed aside for the moment, she decided to locate the source of the cave light. Her dad had always told her that caverns were lit, otherwise you couldn't see their beauty. Maybe she had found a back entrance to a public cave. Despite her dad's inspiring descriptions, she always questioned how could caverns be any prettier than what she could see in the open fresh air above? Being inside her first cave, she finally understood. She couldn't wait to tell her brothers about the day's adventures. None of them had ever stayed the night in

a cave. They would never believe her. She'd have proof of her bravery with a single picture. She could take more pictures on her next visit when someone knew where she was. Flashing a selfie inside the cave, she turned the phone off to save its battery. As the phone flashed, she heard a rush of cave noises. Had she disturbed something? Studying the walls, ceiling and floors, she saw no change. Gaping up, looking at the huge stalactite above her, she stumbled and fell. Instantly, she heard a babbling brook right beside her. She quickly leaped up. The sound increased. Samantha searched the ground but not only was there no river, there was no water. The ground was dry.

For the first time, she wondered, was she alone? "Is someone there?"

All the sounds in the cave stopped. The echoes muted and disappeared. Unsettled by the changes in sounds, Samantha searched for the light, hoping the light source would provide human contact. Samantha's worry dissipated when she turned the corner. Sitting near a pool was the source of all the light, a simple lantern from the 1950s. Laughing at her previous thoughts of monsters and trolls, she settled back against the wall and waited for the owner of the lantern to return.

While she rested against the wall, she studied the beauty of the cave. The room she sat in was vast. The lantern light didn't touch the far wall. It could go on for miles. The thought troubled her, so she focused back on the ceiling. She remembered hearing her dad talking about the stalactites and stalagmites. Mites were on the floor because she might trip over them. She always laughed when she remembered her brothers pretending to trip over rocks on the hikes to the caves. Now her heart ached for all the times she had missed out. Caves were exceptional.

Listening for footsteps, she noticed a rhythm to the cave noises. The echoing sound was coming in a steady pulse. Almost like her breathing was causing it to change. She held her breath for a moment, but the steady pace continued.

Letting her mind go wild, she could almost imagine a subterranean creature whose breath sounded like the cave echoes. Her laughs would be the bubbling brook she heard when she fell. The distant and faint drips would be her words. She couldn't believe how her thoughts ran crazy as she sat waiting for the owner of the lantern.

She opened her pack and took out her dinner for the night. As she unwrapped the bar, she heard the rush of scratchy critter noises. Her mind could imagine the entity telling her not to leave any trash. She smiled to herself, "I wouldn't dare leave a mess." She said out loud. The absolute silence returned. With a small glimmer of hope that she wasn't going crazy and nothing else to do, she let her mind play. "Of course, I heard you." The silence slowly but steadily changed to an eerie wind blowing along the cavern chambers, yet not a hair twitched on her arm. She felt the overwhelmed dread and fear coming through the sounds. "Don't be afraid. I didn't hear you. I just..." The silence returned. "I thought you were my imagination. Really?" Samantha set the half eaten bar on her lap. "Is someone really there?"

She heard a distinct drip.

"Can you say 'yes'?"

The same drip sounded.

"Can you say 'no'?"

The drip sounded shorter and farther away. Was her imagination that good? She waited a few moments. If she kept going, she may not return to the human world

again. The underground world might suck her into a world of creatures that spoke through drips and drops and scratches and echoes. The wind sound had stopped when her questions started. Now she heard only the surging open echo. It must be the sound of the creature's breathing. She had considered it earlier, but now it was the only reasonable explanation. She laughed to herself. Nothing about this was reasonable.

"Please say yes once more." The same drip.

"And no?"

The shorter, distant drip was clear. She was going down the rabbit hole. How appropriate since she had crawled through a small hole to get here. She calmly finished her bar and listened. The soft sounds of water running and a few drips could be distinguished. "I wish I understood what you were saying. My name is Samantha." Samantha closed her eyes and listened. She tried to focus her thoughts on just the sounds being formed. "Jasper?" The same drip for yes came and a rush of flowing water. "I don't believe this. I just don't believe this."

Samantha settled back. She slowly sipped her water. She listened for any change to the surrounding noises. When it seemed like the game was over, and she could think about her return hike tomorrow. She heard a twitter of wings and a few drips come from right in front of her. She opened her eyes. "Can I see you?" Focusing on the surrounding cave, she saw a tiny glimmer. It looked like the light caught a dim reflective edge of a rock. "Again?" Samantha asked. The same brief flicker happened. "Wow." A rush of sounds and echoes flooded her mind. She tried to pick out some meaning but failed. "Please say it again slower." Samantha closed her eyes and concentrated. She couldn't hear words, but a sense of excitement and eager friendliness flowed through her mind. "Friends?"

The yes drip reoccurred. “Yes, of course. I just wish I could understand when you talk.”

Samantha felt a calming sensation spread over her as the unseen, unfelt water trickled down beside her.

“I never liked caves. I was always too scared to go inside.”

An urgent sense of danger slipped through her mind and then left as quickly as it came.

“You’re afraid of the outside?”

“Yes.” She could hear the word through the drip.

Samantha and her friend talked and listened and sensed long into the night. If this was communing with nature, she could really take an interest. Neither of them wanted to sleep that night. They didn’t want to miss a moment of their unique opportunity.

Samantha woke rested by the pond. She listened for her friend while she questioned her sanity from the night before. But then, she could hear the swell and dip of breathing. In fact, she could hear a distinct click, like two rocks tapping each other every half second. Jasper was snoring. Afraid of waking her friend too early, she lay down and listened to the miracle. She knew she needed to let her friends know she was okay, but she didn’t want to leave this magical place. If she left, she might never return.

Samantha heard a long whoosh followed by a rock turning over down the tunnel from them. Jasper must be waking. She quietly tried to roll her emergency blanket into a ball, gathered her empty water bottle and bar wrapper to stuff them into the pack. She had jokingly dropped the wrapper and bottle all over the

cave floor last night. Jasper would grump and complain each time, and she'd move it to another spot. He would laugh, letting his bubbly noise fill the chamber.

They talked about many things last night, but not how the lamp got here. As she stared at the lantern, she picked it up, and she heard Jasper let out an alarmed noise. She stopped. "I would not take it. Where did it come from?"

She listened. A rush of wind accompanied by a close waterfall and splashes flooded the room. Samantha concentrated to feel the story Jasper was telling. Although exact words were impossible, she understood a young boy had brought the lantern and left it for Jasper many years ago. The boy returned often with fuel and maintained the steady glow. The boy was becoming a man and an older man. Then Jasper began howling. His howls were full of sadness. The man, his friend, stopped coming by. Jasper had been waiting for his friend when she arrived.

"That's so sad. I hope he comes back soon. Are you still afraid of the dark?"

"No." he answered with a drip. Then a loud howl of wind.

"You miss your friend."

"Yes." He answered.

She didn't want to leave him, especially now, but she knew her friends would be worried. "I should be going. My friends will be worried and looking for me."

She felt his sadness deepen. "I'll come back. I promise."

It did not ease his sadness. She heard him say 'no' while she walked to the small opening that she had crawled through. She pushed her pack through the hole.

“I will come back.” She heard Jasper’s sound for ‘no.’

“Why not?” she asked and listened.

She felt his fear. The rumbling of rocks around her head made her nervous as she waited for Jasper to finish. “I will never tell.” She said. “Everyone would think I was crazy.” She pushed through the hole and turned. “I will come back.” The hole in the wall slid shut, blocking the light. She could feel the open air to her back. She turned to see the first light of day spread over the cliff. In her heart, she promised to never tell another living soul about her discovery. She called her friends to let them know she was okay and started back to their camp.

A few weeks later, when she questioned the possibility of her encounter, she walked back out to the cliff opposite the cave. Sitting on a rock, studying the face of the cave opening, she saw nothing unique or special about it. She climbed down to the opening and crept along the wall as she had done before. The small opening was not there. She looked for the crack or lines that show there was an opening, but the light was too dim. Remembering her bright phone flash light, she shined it on where she believed the opening had been. It was solid rock. She must have had one night of absolute craziness. She walked back to the cliff and sat on the ledge, staring at her touch with the insanity. As she contemplated telling her friends when she returned home, she heard the openness of the cave settle beside her. A very distant feeling of nervousness and fear came with the noise. Jasper had come out to see her. He was braving her world to spend a few moments with her. “I wish I could see you so I could hug you.” She heard the magical sound of a babbling brook. “I told you I’d come back.”