Peter Ellison

Mr. Palshaw

English IV

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A Bad Investment

The shadows were different in the Trench. They didn’t change right. Not growing and shrinking, but instead just deepening over and over. Three hours of grey half-light, an hour-and-a-half of growing darkness, then seventeen hours of inky black. The thousands of feet of vegetation overhead allowed only the faintest glimmers of light from above. To the unadjusted the Trench seemed like some kind of unique hell, and to Dari Culain, it was.

Dari hung in the air like a spider on a thread, his tether bolted by into the thick bark of a wyrmwood tree thirty feet above. The tether attached to Dari’s harness before snaking into a dense loop on his belt. Dari stretched, his movement causing him to sway softly in the air, the tether straining at each movement as it prevented him from falling hundreds, if not thousands, of feet into the darkness of the Trench. The wyrmwood tree he was bolted to extended into those depths, its trunk thicker than an average house on the homeside, the branches that snaked from it were similarly gargantuan. The scientists said that the wyrmwood trees, or tree to be precise, was the largest organism in four light years. Apparently the branches and roots are so interconnected that it counts as a single plant covering the entire Trench.

Around him, other men hung, the ten of them evenly spaced in an area the size of a large sports pitch. Even with the rudimentary night vision from his goggles, the jungle around him was bathed in twilight. Mist drifted through the air slowly, spinning and dispersing as light breezes played with it like a child splashing through water.

A bit of naked metal extending from Dari’s visor vibrated slightly, almost imperceptibly to someone not specifically expecting it. The radio vibrated in a strict pattern that was too fast to recognize, but the ancient computer—more akin to an abacus than any modern technology— attached to it quickly translated the pulses from morse code and weakly projected the message in English onto his lense.

“targets moving into sector 7 - prepare to repel - over”

For better or worse, it was what they’d been waiting for. The antenna extended and vibrated as Lieutenant Shrike, or Shriek as he was known, activated the FM broadcasting beacon planted on a branch 300 feet or so below. The early expeditions into the Trench were total massacres but what information their were able to report before their deaths from one deathtrap or another was that communication was tricky in the depths. The modern tech was made useless by the dense trees, but the old shit was even worse. For one reason or another, the trenchers were drawn to radio waves like a shark to blood. Dari’s unit needed the coordination to fight, but it drew every predator in the Trench straight to them, like throwing chum into a shark infested waters.

“Beacon on, testing testing. Beacon on,” Shriek’s voice crackled into Dari’s headset. “You know what this means boys, step to it. It won’t be long now, and if you’re lucky this might be yer last day in the Trench.”

A few in the ten-man unit talked uselessly, exchanging jokes and laughing nervously. Dari didn’t join in, he never did. Enthusiasm was a valuable resource that ran out years ago, back in boot, before we had realized what war meant to our superiors.

A howl emerged from somewhere in the gloom. Close. Dari shifted while glancing into the darkness, looking for the luminous yellow eyes that stalked the Trench. Without looking he reached over his shoulder and pulled his grey-metal rifle into his hands. Covered in oil and grime, it was sticky to the touch. He swung it in a loose arc, checking the sight, the other end of his tether was attached to the rifle as well, running all the way to an eight inch harpoon on the bottom of the barrel. Mobility was to important in the trench. If you couldn’t run, you died.

“Any minute now losers. Look alive.”

The jungle grew quiet as the sound of Dari’s heart beating filled his ears, his vision faded on the periphery, as if he was staring at the world through a pair of binoculars. It was all so far away, too far away. Yellow glinted in the forest, just for a fraction of a microsecond.

*Bam. Bam. Bam.* Dari began firing shots, as the jungle surrounding his unit came alive. A hound leapt from where it was hiding directly at Dari, the 50 foot distance between them erased in an eyeblink. It bit. Once. Twice. The teeth dug into Dari’s shoulder, carving through his flimsy body armor. The pain obscured Dari’s vision as he brought the rifle up, thumbing both triggers wildly into the beast’s chest. Dari’s ears complained as his radio was suddenly full of static from grunts and shouts and cries of pain. The harpoon launched. It slid into the creature but didn’t fly like it should’ve. The creature, enraged, bit into the offending arm. Dari spasmed, the pain overriding any control he had over his body. His fingers jerked uncontrollably as consciousness faded. The static in his ear faded into comforting white noise.

*Where is that screaming coming from?*

Dari realized—almost as an afterthought—the whole situation seeming very far away somehow, that he was falling.

Rain was falling. Fat, juicy droplets that smacked and then burst into a million pieces on impact. The feeling was nice, like a percussive massage across Dari’s face and chest. He was laying down, half sunk into a wet mud. Far above him a light shone, he could see nothing else. Nothing else mattered. The light visibly moved in waves, growing and shrinking. Crashing into the shore of Dari’s exposed eyes. Dari experienced and experienced, until there was nothing left. Nothing but the feeling of water lapping at his sides. Wearing him down, Like a rock left in the surf.

Dari gasped, shooting into consciousness as if propelled from a bad dream he couldn’t remember anymore. He was covered in a thick black mud, sticky but also cool and soothing against the skin, intermixed in the sludge were specks of green and brown vegetation. White-gray mist obscured the flat surroundings in lazy-moving sheets. In front of Dari, rising up like a titan in the depths, a wyrmwood tree sprouted from the ground, trunk impossibly wide. It was like a terrible parody of a skyscraper: one stood orderly and shining, with infinite rows of spotless glass, while the other loomed in the mists, with knots and twists in the wood that made it look more like a primordial muscle laid bare to the world than what could be called a tree.

Dari felt himself shrinking, in a terrifying reverse-vertigo the tree grew infinitely taller, spreading wider, it teetered back and forth. Dari was back on the ground, the back of his head sinking into the mud. Above him the violet mists swirled, specks of green and yellow light dancing in them like fireflies on cocaine.

*That’s strange. Was it like that a second ago?*

“Ahem,” a voice from behind Dari cleared their throat. “I see you’ve woken up, that’s a start. Better than the last one at least.”

Jumping to his feet and whirling around, arms raised in a fighting stance, his dark eyes were wide and wild. Maybe thirty feet away, sitting on a boulder half submerged in the muck, a snow-white panther sat. It had whiskers about a foot long and it’s eyes were bright yellow with flecks of purple in them. Flexing one of it’s plate sized paws idly, curved claws sliding in and out hypnotically, the panther scanned Dari with an almost amused expression.

“Wonderful! It understands. Took you long enough, even in the waters you slept for days. And then there was the question of whether it’d fry your small brain or not. Very nicely done.”

“W-who are you? What is this?”

“Me? How kind of you. I’m nobody really, just a lonely old hermit. It’s you I’m *far* more interested in,” he drew out his words, a purr emanating from his throat. “Tell me about yourself, and do be specific.”

Dari looked down, suddenly sunk to the waist in the slime. He could just make out his reflection in the viscous surface, except the other him had leaves sprouting from his head, and fangs sprouting from his jaw.

“Right here buddy. I aaaaaasked you a question. You stupid or somethin?”

“I’m, I’m Dari. I’m a soldier.”

“Oooh, I don’t know that word,” it reached up a paw to scratch its twisting horns. “What’s a sol-deer? Did I say it right? Sorry if I’m being obnoxious.”

“A soldier? I fight things, I kill things. Rinse and repeat.”

“Oh, I understand. Why would you go and do something like that?”

Dari opened his mouth to respond, but the panther was gone. The boulder was gone too. Only then did Dari remember what had happened. Reaching for his shoulder in anticipation of pain he must’ve somehow forgotten. The three parallel claw marks were filled to the brim with black mud that bubbled and swirled in the wide wounds. Dari couldn’t imagine all the alien and germs and shit that must be swimming in it. A squad two man had a cut last month, just a tiny nick, it got infested and festered. The entire arm had to be chopped off, the entire camp had heard him screaming for hours. He didn’t last long after that, eaten alive by some kind of flying snake. A one-armed soldier is a bad investment, command had said. A failed investment and perhaps the worst sin of all, an unprofitable one. Panting, Dari scraped at the mud, digging his hands wildly into the wound. World spinning, pain, blood, and despair came from the wound like the opening of Pandora’s box. He collapsed back into the mud, biting his lip as he writhed in pain. Looking vermillion against the dark mud, blood spread in a pool, the two liquids mixing and swirling like a film of soap over water. He sunk back into the filth, sinking deeper and deeper as he thrashed around. He kept digging, but as fast as he could bail the mud out it rushed back in. The mud burbled and laughed at him, at his worthless efforts. Blood, red like ketchup, ran down his fingers and oozed into his skin. He could smell it, coppery and sweet against his nose.

*bum. Ba bum. Ba Bum. Ba Bum. Ba BuM. Ba BuM. BA BUM. BA BUMBA BABUMBBA.*

The drum in his chest pounded, propelling the crimson juice through the twisting tunnels and roots that extended in Dari’s body, through his toes, then his fingers, through his ears. The sound rushed like a living wave right out of his body and into the cold world.

“Woah there buddy. Calm down now, relax, take it easy,” a bird swam in a lazy circle over Dari’s head. It’s head turning to look at him with yellow and purple eyes. “What are you doing to yourself?”

“... I’ll die. I’ll die if I don’t,” a voice said from very far away.

“You’ll die if you do silly. Do or don’t, you die either way. So, I ask again, why are you doing that to yourself?”

The bird swirled down and landed on Dari’s chest. His body was still, his mind clear.

“I can’t get an infection. I’ll die. I’d be a bad investment. A failure. That’s what they’d all call me, I’d leave that behind and have nothing left.”

The bird leaned close to Dari’s face, head cocked to the side as if asking a question. It’s plumage was oranges and yellows, no, it was on fire. Heat radiated from the bird, causing Dari to squirm.

“What’s an investment? I must seem quite slow to you, gosh. I’m unfamiliar with your strange words.”

“Investment’s where you pay and wait and hope you get your money back an’ then some.”

“My, you’re a terse one aren’t you. So you want to be money for someone else? That seems a little silly. I mean, if I wanted to be money, I’d just pluck a few of my feathers and have em’ handed out. Ooh, you want me to do that for you? It’ll be quick and then you can be money and don’t need to hurt yourself like that.”

The bird reached out with a claw into Dari’s hair, then re-emerged with a large black leaf.

“See, it’d be so easy!”

“Not like that, not like that at all. I need to get back. I don’t have time for whatever this is.”

“Do you *really?* I don’t believe you!” the phoenix taunted. “What happened to the last guy that fell or died?”

“Um, they replaced him. Like always. We need to press on, it’s the only way to win, it’s the only way we’ll be able to go home.”

“What was his name, Dari? Can you tell me his name?”

“He and I didn’t talk much, he was on the quiet side. I never got to know ‘im, ya know.”

“I know. He didn’t matter, just as you didn’t matter. Your comrades have already forgotten you and have cleared your bunk, making way for the next Dari. Look at you, you want to go be an investment? A money?”

“That’s not true!” Dari roared, spit flying from his lips. “You don’t know anything. I was protecting people, I was doing work that needed to be done. They needed me.”

“You meant nothing to them! You were a number before, but now you have a chance. chance to be free down here. There are no commanders, no units, no investments. You can be a free man.”

The bird’s voice had changed, it was a strange sound. It was Dari’s voice. He looked closer at the bird, but it was gone.

“Come back here! Who are you? What’s that supposed to mean?”

The air shifted and turned, but no response emerged. He was on his feet, stumbling forward toward the wyrmwood tree, somehow he only fell once. His hands found the surface of the tree and felt the rough lines in the bark, vines had grown around the tree in a loose lattice that slowly climbed towards the heavens. Exhaustion poured over Dari like a faucet in his body had suddenly been turned on, he collapsed against the tree and grabbed onto a vine with both hands to stop him from falling back to the ground. The wood of the tree dissolved around his fingers, turning into a squirming mass of tiny, crawling black dots that swarmed over Dari’s hands and arms. Despite this, he maintained his iron hold on the vine, willing himself up the tree and towards his previous life. The tiny dots kept streaming from the tree and onto Dari’s body, they crawled through his clothing and over the hills and valleys of his skin. He didn’t resist, numb to the sensation.

*Home. If I can just get up there. Maybe I’ll fly like that bird.*

Dari felt himself gliding up the side of the tree, not even touching the bark. The tiny insects carried him up the tree, thousands of Lilliputians working together to move Gulliver.

*“Excellent choice,”* a voice whispered in his ear. *“I knew you’d find your way to me, it was the only way home after all.”*

The voice was nice. It was myriad. Like a thousand tiny friends, each with their own harmony just for him. The bass tones were rich, deeper than any sound he’d ever heard but somehow just as clear, but the chorus extended all the way to the most sublime of sopranos.

Dari was flying, soaring through the air like a rocket bound for the stars. Wind rushed against his face in a breeze that made him shiver. He was going back, back from this hell.

*“Almost there, I promise.”*

The insects finally slowed as the raced up the side of the wyrmwood tree, they reached a crook in the tree and ran his body along the twisting catwalk. They reached the end and Dari vaguely felt his body rest down upon the wood.

*There we go, Dari, right where I want you.*

A million needles stuck into his body as the insects bit simultaneously, the toxins dulled the pain and Dari smiled at the sensation. Vines grew rapidly, wrapping around Dari’s limp form, they burrowed into his body now full of holes, roots entering his bloodstream and penetrating his muscles. The roots slowly grew through every part of Dari’s body, secreting dopamine as it went, causing pleasure to rush through his brain. The world grew dark as Dari’s eyes closed.

*“More. More. More.”* The wyrmwood tree thought, the sound reverberating through the entire Trench. *“More. MORE. MORE.”*