The Waste

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by WirelessW

Summary

A young prey boy in a predator-supremacist society meets his end in one of the brutal Culling Camps.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Dylan the deer was under no illusions about his chances as he stepped into Dr Botha's medical practice. When his letter from the government had arrived, he'd had to have his younger brother read it to him. He did that for all of his mail. Dylan was blind.

At 14 years old, he had reached the age when he would be required to undergo evaluation. Prey animals had to contribute to society, to be of use to their Pred superiors. Given that Dylan represented a drain on society's often strained resources, he would have to be somehow exceptional in order to be permitted to live. A blind predator had the right to life, and to any assistance they needed. A blind prey animal was a liability.

He'd managed to find his way to the doctor's office without too much trouble, at least by his usual standards. Fortunately it was easy enough for him to find the reception desk in the waiting room. He walked up to it slowly, being careful with his cane, and once there he asked about his 11:00 appointment to be processed.

"You're Dylan, right?" asked the incongruously young voice of a girl who couldn't have been any older than him. "Take a seat, Dr Botha will see you when she's available."

As it happened, he didn't have too long to wait. Two patients went in before him, each a quiet individual, and then it was his turn. Dylan went through the standard gauntlet of tests and procedures, from a weigh-in and a blood sample to other, more intrusive checks. Eventually there was nothing to do but sit down at the doctor's desk and wait for the verdict.

"I've been forwarded your last few years of standard tests, and the truth is..." Dr Botha sighed. "Well, kid, there's really only one thing I can say. You've been marked for immediate termination."

Dylan swallowed. "I...I understand, Dr Botha." Although he had been expecting it, he had not been able to resist the temptation to hope for some kind of miraculous sudden reprieve.

"Good." Another sigh, and then she muttered "Sometimes I hate this job". Dylan wasn't sure if he had been meant to hear that. The idea that a Pred could be anything other than totally assured in their natural authority was shocking. On any other day than this, it would have been world-shattering.

He went to fold his hands in his lap and found that somehow, without his say-so he had started hugging himself. "When am I going? To, uh, to the camp".

He heard her typing briefly. One of the other prey kids at his school had once described a computer to him, though of course he had never used one. "This Saturday. You're to report to Staines Field bus station at 7 AM, do you understand?" She punctuated this by taking a sip of something.

"Yes, Dr Botha."

She shuffled some papers on her desk. "Good boy. You may leave. Oh, on your way out, tell Penny that if she ever puts sugar in my tea again she's getting a night in the box."

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The pre-dawn car ride to the bus station was a difficult one for Dylan. He had often wondered if his parents would have preferred a more useful son, a better son who might have had a chance of passing his evaluation and being permitted to live. They had denied it when he had asked, but over time the denial had grown less and less convincing. Dylan didn't know whether he was getting better at detecting a lie or if they just weren't putting the effort in. Lately, when he spoke pessimistically about his future they had not objected. Barely a word was spoken the entire journey.

He took some small comfort in the fact that at least his brother Dean wasn't there. He was glad to know that his possessions, meagre as they might have been, were to be given to someone who might make better use of them. If his parents had decided to put all their energy and resources towards Dean, then Dylan was happy. At least they wouldn't be going to waste, like they would on him.

To avoid an awkward silence, his father had put the radio on. The dignified, serene voice of the Pred newsreader had acknowledged the recent disappearance of several personnel and slaves on farms near the Piualtu mountains, and had assured them that the police and the army were doing everything possible to bring the prey-separatist militants to justice. Dylan shivered. The locations of the culling camps were kept secret, but it was well known that at least one was in that area. He hoped that when he died, he could at least die peacefully and not get wrapped up in someone else's political fight.

As Dylan brooded on his fate, the news ended and the programme switched to the latest single by Millie. It was always rare for a prey animal to become a big star, due to the obvious danger of a wasted investment – of course, Millie herself would be up for mandatory culling within the next 10 years. But for the time being, she was able to croon about lost loves and lonely nights and Dylan was able to appreciate that one of them had made it.

Eventually, inevitably, they had to arrive at Staines Field bus station. Dylan reflected on the fact that he did not have any luggage to worry about stowing on the bus, and he thanked Man for small mercies. His father bade him a perfunctory farewell and his mother wept quietly. He shut the car door forcefully and stood as they drove away. He was alone.

He knew that he was early, and he had expected to have a while to wait until anyone else was around. However, he could hear several other subdued young voices, and he made his way over to meet them. Just as he was arriving someone else was too, and he heard a girl ask "Is this where the slaves wait for buses?"

"Slaves and meat cubs, yeah." replied one of the boys.

"That's a relief", replied the girl, "Wouldn't make a very good slave if I got lost on my first day, would I?"

Dylan piped up "Are they sorting us out here, or at the camp?"

"It's here, I think", replied the same boy who had answered the young slave's question, "Because we have to go to different camps."

More and more cubs arrived, some chatting amongst themselves as if nothing unusual were happening and some, like Dylan, remaining gloomily silent. Eventually, he heard a larger set of footsteps approaching and a cheery-sounding woman called out “Hello there, my little morsels! My name is Miss Harris and I’ll be here to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

Dylan chorused the respectful “Hello, ma’am” the others gave, and inferred that she must be a Pred.

Miss Harris continued, “Now, I’m going to be splitting you up into your two groups – meat and slaves. Can all of my meat cubs gather round me now, please? Slaves, just stay where you are.”

Dylan followed the press of the crowd towards her voice.

“Hands up, meat cubs!” she called out gaily, “Up and towards me now!”

Dylan did as he was told and was more than a little concerned when he heard a series of low, soft thumps moving towards him. To his relief, when it was his turn he felt nothing more than a stamp on the back of his hand. The process continued until Miss Harris was done. She spoke up once more, “Right, then. That stamp will tell you which line you belong in.”

Dylan raised his hand once more. “Excuse me, ma’am? I can’t read mine.”

“What are you, blind or something?” snapped a boy’s voice besides him.

“Yes”, replied Dylan blandly.

“Oh.” The other boy fell silent for a moment, and then a strange sound escaped him. Dylan realised that he was trying to hold back laughter. That set him giggling, which in turn made the other boy lose all control. Before long they were both laughing uproariously, leaning on each other for fear of collapsing on the pavement. Eventually it petered out, and his new companion managed a breathless “Oh, Man, I needed that.”

“M-Miss Harris?” asked another cub in a tremulous voice.

“Oh, don’t worry about them, dearie. It happens once or twice in every group.” She strode over to them, and clamped one hand on each boy’s shoulder. “Now then, is it all out of your system?” she asked, in the tone of a woman granting an indulgence.

Dylan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Very good. Now, let me take you to your proper line”. She fitted action to the word and pulled him firmly by the hand to one of the waiting groups of children. “Wait here, and wait quietly” she instructed him.

Dylan managed another timid “Yes, ma’am”, and then lapsed into silence until the buses started arriving and the kids were herded onto them. One of the other boys had said it was a converted schoolbus. If that was so, then it was by far the quietest schoolbus Dylan had ever taken. After they left the city there was some interest in the mountains, or at least in the

foothills of the mountains before the true range further West, but soon enough that faded. Each passenger was sitting quietly, absorbed in their own fate.

The ride took several hours – by design, both the labour camps and the culling camps were always built out in the middle of nowhere. The bus grew steadily warmer as the morning wore on, though thankfully never truly hot. With no air conditioning and the windows sealed shut (one girl stated authoritatively that they had been welded) he shuddered to think what the journey must be like in summer.

A shock of excitement ran through the cubs, and Dylan realised that they must be nearing their destination. Camp Kilo – the place where they would die. Some of them started to pray to Mankind, ancient and infallible, to grant them painless deaths. None prayed to be allowed to live, for they knew it would do no good. Dylan found that he did not have the heart to join them, and continued his own silent contemplation.

The bus slowed, and then halted. Dylan assumed that they were shortly to be let off, but there followed about 20 minutes of stopping and starting, as the bus presumably headed to this or that part of the facility. Eventually, it stopped for good and the doors hissed open. The children ahead of him trooped out, and when it was his turn he followed them.

The day was still and dry. Dylan expected a repeat of the wait for the buses back at Staines Field, but he was denied even that brief suspension of his sentence. They were quickly hustled through a series of buildings. First they were stripped, which caused a great deal of consternation among the others – though, naturally, it made little difference to Dylan. It probably didn't help that they hadn't bothered to segregate the children by gender. The assorted children were gone over with a fine-toothed comb, and then shunted into the showers for a thorough washing. This done, they dried off and were eventually given a set of pyjamas. One of the other boys complained that the pyjamas made him look "like a queer", though how that worked Dylan wasn't entirely sure.

One by one, they were taken into a smaller room and stood against a wall. Dylan was among the first, seemingly more by luck than judgement. He thought for a horrible moment that this was it, that here was the firing squad – *no need for a blindfold, gentlemen, and I'm too young for a cigarette*. He was strangely disappointed when he heard a camera go off, and a man's voice from somewhere ahead of him say "That'll do, go on out the left door".

And so once again he found himself in a large room. If anyone had told him ahead of time that the hardest part of being executed would be the boredom, he didn't know if he would have believed them. The room slowly filled with the rest of the kids until half of them were taken outside, leaving Dylan to wait with the remainder.

They didn't have too long to wait, however. He was part of the second group corralled by a small team of Preds and lead outside. They were taken on a short walk until Dylan could hear a clang of metal on metal coming ahead of them. "In you go", said a man's clear voice, "into the pen. You'll be out again soon enough, never fear."

They pressed onwards, and joined another crowd already inside. There was enough room to move around, more or less, and Dylan tried to make his way to an edge. If nothing else, at least he could know where he was. Evidently he did not move quickly enough, for he soon

found himself struggling to make it through the mass in front of him, buffeted and shoved by hands unseen.

“Let him through”, called out a boy with a pleasant voice. “Come on, he’s blind or something, make some room” Obligingly, the crowd parted and he was able to make his way to the bars of the pen. He took one in his hand and breathed a “thanks” to the boy who had helped him.

“No problem” replied the boy, “I’m just here to help.”

Before Dylan could ask what he meant, he heard one of the guards call out “Who wants a little anaesthesia before they bite it?”

Dylan started to raise his hand, but the kind boy grabbed his wrist and held it down. “No, you don’t”, he said, “trust me.”

Dylan was puzzled, but he did as the older boy said. This decision was soon vindicated as he heard a loud, resounding thump. The girl fell to the floor, sobbing. The noises continued – the guard must have kept kicking her, to really make his point clear. The press of prey animals was shifting away from the scene, perhaps for fear of being the next one.

“It’s their little game”, said the kind boy as Dylan heard an unhealthy-sounding crack and a high-pitched wail. “You know, like a practical joke.”

Dylan slumped to the ground, and hesitantly asked, “Why are you helping me so much, anyhow? Who are you?”

“I’m 217-B”, replied the older boy. “I’m a camp slave. I’m helping you because it’s my job to help any meat that needs it, and I thought you might need it.”

“I’ve heard of camp slaves,” said Dylan, “we learned about you in school. You were born here, right?”

“Uh-huh”, agreed 217-B. “I was born here, I work here; and in 19 years, Man willing, I’ll die here.”

Dylan sniffed, and realised all of a sudden that he was holding back tears. “Could...could you describe yourself, please?” He started as he felt the slave take his hand, not as a warning this time but as a comfort. “I want to know what you look like.”

“OK, Dylan. I can do that.” Dylan felt the older boy sit behind him. One hand was still holding his, and the other wrapped around hm. It was like an anchor. “I’m a hare. I’m pretty tall for my age, I guess – I’m taller than most boys we get coming through here. I’m wearing pyjamas kind of like yours, though mine are sturdier.”

“Well, you’ll need ‘em longer, I guess”, mused Dylan.

“That’s right”, agreed 217-B.

“19 more years.”

“Man willing. Officially your pyjamas are all supposed to be pink, though between you and me yours are more of a grey. That happens sometimes when they get a bad batch of dye, or if there’s shortages.”

“There’s always shortages”, muttered Dylan mutinously.

“Not in here”, replied 217-B.

“So yours are really pink, then?” asked Dylan. Idly he wondered what pink looked like, and if it was very much nicer than grey.

“Hmm? Oh, no no, camp slaves wear dark blue. I’ve got green stripes down my sides to show I’m in 3rd team. Cleanup team have brown and it clashes horribly, poor devils.”

Dylan managed something resembling a smile. “Next time you see them, tell them I said they look lovely.”

217-B laughed softly. Dylan loved the sound and wished he could hear more of it. He wished he had *time* to hear more of it, and thinking about that just made him want to cry again. 217-B must have sensed this, for he shifted position and took Dylan against his chest in a gentle hug. Dylan leaned back and rested his head on a broad shoulder. 217-B stroked his hair and murmured “my good boy, my sweet boy” until he had calmed down.

Dylan never wanted to move. “Will it hurt?”, he asked plaintively.

“Only for a second”, replied the slave, “and then you’ll go to heaven. You know what happens there, right?”

“Y-yeah”, breathed Dylan, “I’ll get to serve a Pred. Somewhere up there is the perfect Pred for me and I’ll get to belong to them forever. And-and I’ll be able to see!”

“That’s right. And maybe I can come visit you, eventually.”

“In 19 years.”

“Man willing.”

“Man willing.”

They sat in silence a little while longer – or maybe it was a long time longer – just the two of them alone in the crowd. They could have been the last two people in the world until Dylan heard one of the guards shout “Open Pen 4! Out you come, you little morsels!”

All around them were the sounds of movement, some of it cringing and reluctant and some imbued with a fatal desire to just get it over with. Dylan stood slowly but steadily, still holding 217-B’s hand. They left the pen together and Dylan could feel the warm sun on his face. It was a beautiful day.

End Notes

Thank you for reading The Waste.

This was written quite a while ago, during a particularly dark time of my life. In fact it had a sequel in progress from another camp slave's perspective, nearly as dark, but a computer failure effectively destroyed it and by the time that happened things in my life had turned around enough that I found I simply could not tap into the same feelings and reproduce the document. So I suppose that's a good sign.

I've posted it here because I do feel it can stand on its own merits, that history aside.

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