

Trapped

By Mitchell Hornsby

I crash through the brush, swiping away vines and branches as I dash through the trees.

Despite the darkness of the forest, I manage to scramble forward. Not so far behind, dead

branches snap and falling trees thud. I'm not sure what could be big enough to topple trees, but I

don't want to find out.

My lungs burn and my feet feel as heavy as cinder blocks as I run between the trees.

There's less of them in this part of the forest, allowing me to open up to a full sprint. Directly

ahead, I see light breaking through the forest. Though my body urges me to stop, I break towards

the light as the sounds of cracking wood get closer.

I reach the edge of the forest, the bright light blinding in comparison to the darkness of the forest. I have to stop. My hearts feels as though it could burst, and my throat and lungs burn

from running so far. As my eyes adjust to the light, I find myself upon a tall precipice

overlooking stunning scenery that stretches for miles. The entire landscape seems to be sunken

down, similar to an arena, with the walls being formed by the very cliffs I'm standing on.

Looking down into the pit, I see a tall waterfall pouring down into the sunken landscape to the

west; to the east I see a dense forest. North, I barely make out what appears to be a large crack in the cliffs.

The now-distinct footsteps of the beast abruptly remind me of my dire situation. I quickly glance to my left and right, looking for someplace to hide, but the barren cliff stretches for miles in either direction, ringing the chasm below. There's no way I can outrun it on flat ground; the only reason I've been able to make it this far is because I'm small enough to slip through the trees and it's not. The ground is shaking now; each stomp of the beast's gigantic feet can be felt distinctly. In a panic, and seeing no other way out, I get a running start and leap into the verdant chasm below.

...

I don't remember hitting the water; I just remember feeling weightless, and then waking up on the shore of a large lake. I slowly push myself up off of the ground, onto all fours. I'm totally spent. My arms and shoulders can barely withstand my body weight and my diaphragm smarts against me with every breath. I crawl to a small boulder sitting along the shore, and manage to flip around, to sit with my back against it. From here, I glance at the entirety of the sheer cliff face. The rock wall must be at least fifty feet high.

I twist around to my left, surveying the landscape. The lake I'm sitting next to runs right up against the jungle I noticed earlier. Within the jungle, I hear strange, exotic birdcalls and occasionally notice shadows shift in the underbrush. There's no telling what's in there; just looking into the fluid darkness of the jungle makes me uneasy.

I slowly turn the other direction, and can just barely distinguish the swirling mists of the waterfall. I need to get to the crack in the walls to the north, as the beast is likely too large to follow me in. While a direct path through the jungle would provide the quickest path there, a slight detour past the waterfall seems like a safer bet. I look up, noticing the sun at its peak. Noon. Not wanting to see what might come out of that jungle at night, I haggardly climb to my feet, using the boulder for stability, and set out westward.

After an hour or so of walking, I've put some distance between myself and the jungle. I now stand in an open field that lies in the center of the pit. I pause to look around. I scan the rim of the cliffs, looking for any sign that the beast could have climbed down. My gaze makes it three quarters of the way around the rim when I locate something troublesome. A landslide has caused several large chunks of the cliff to fall inward, creating an impromptu incline from the top of the cliff side down into the canyon. The massive chunks of rock would be extremely difficult for a man to traverse, but would be no obstacle for something as large as the beast. The beast is, undoubtedly, on the prowl at this very moment, so I hasten my pace toward the waterfall.

As I walk, I try to remember how I came to find myself in this situation. The only thing I can remember is waking up in the dark forest above, nothing before that. Nothing. Somewhere inside me, I can feel there's a truth waiting to be unlocked. But as of right now, my entire reality centers on survival. It doesn't matter how I got here, but I'm here.

...

The sun is low as I approach the edge of the waterfall's basin. The sun's soft light falls gracefully upon the white-pebbled shoreline, and creates a rainbow effect on the fall's mists. For the moment, I'm hypnotized by the surreal scenery. I stand at the water's edge, gazing up towards the magnificent falls, now golden in the light of the setting sun, just listening to the thunderous rumble of the water hitting the basin. I catch myself admiring the overwhelming sense of serenity, quieting the anxiety bubbling within my stomach. If the circumstances were different, I might even think this place tranquil.

I stoop down beside the water, cupping it within my hands and lifting it up to my mouth to drink. Never in my life have I ever tasted anything as sweet as this fall's water. I drink my fill, then wade out to the shallow water, and begin to wash the sweat and dirt from my body. The water feels as nice as it tastes; my body's aches and pains seem to seep out and into the very water itself.

Then, I notice the birds.

When I first approached the basin, I noticed one or two long legged birds with long necks and narrow beaks that slightly resemble flamingos, except they're orange. At the time, I didn't pay them much attention since they stood close to the falls and didn't appear to be moving. But now, I glance around and notice they've been slowly marching towards me while I bathed. There

are more of them, too. I stand up, the water level about waist high, and walk backwards toward the shore as the birds surround me from the front.

I'm close enough to the shore that the water only comes up to my knees, but a sizable group of about twenty birds has amassed in front of me. They form a semi-circle, with me at the focal point. They stare blankly, slowly shortening the distance between us. Their watchful, knowing demeanor scares me. I've violated some unspoken rule, but I'm realizing it too late. This is their home, and I'm an unwelcome trespasser.

One bird, who must have been marching faster than the rest, now stands alone in front of the group. He looks directly at me, and opens his slender beak, revealing two rows of fine, saw-like teeth that seem to shimmer in the setting sun's light. I back away quicker. He picks up his pace, raising and lowering his head rapidly in a show of bravado. I turn, and make a break for the shore, when the alpha bird lets loose an ear-splitting shriek.

The water around my shins makes sprinting nearly impossible. When I get to within ten feet of the shoreline, a hot pain radiates from my left leg. I scream, and fall forward. The alpha has my lower leg in its mouth, its fiery orange wings fluttering wildly as it resists my kicks. It uses its beak in a sawing motion, sliding it forward and backward, grinding those sharp teeth into my pant leg and flesh. I kick it repeatedly with my right foot, desperately trying to free myself as I cry out. Incapacitated, the other birds close in, striking at me with the points of their sharp beaks. I flail my limbs wildly, striking and kicking to no affect. I grip a smooth stone from

beneath the water, and jerk forward, striking the alpha bird where its beak meets my leg, cracking it. It releases me, and lets out another ear-splitting call, but this time the call is distorted. The other birds yield, unsure how to react while their leader staggers backward. I climb to my feet and quickly limp to shore.

I turn back, slowly limping away as I watch them. None of the birds look me now, as they all have their eyes trained on their leader. One by one, each bird takes a turn thrusting its long beak forward, spearing the wounded alpha as it wallows in the shallow water. One bird's beak finds its target, puncturing the alpha's heart. The old leader's body goes limp. The new alpha slowly withdraws its beak, now covered in the blood of the dead alpha, and turns back towards me. It stands alone in front of the group, and they march toward me again. Behind them, the golden sunlight falls upon piles of orange feathers floating atop the bloody water surrounding the dead alpha's carcass. This image burns itself into my memory as I whirl around and run as hard as my broken body will permit me towards the jungle.

The birds don't pursue me very far beyond their waterfall. Even in my damaged state, I lose them somewhere along the plains that separate the eastern jungle and the waterfall. I slow to a trot, and then collapse into a heap. As I lay there in the tall grass, the image of the dead alpha's corpse flashes through my mind. Despite the damage he's caused me, I can't help but feel slightly sympathetic towards him. The other birds turned against him so quickly, the second he showed weakness. In this land, the weak don't survive.

They aren't allowed to.

...

I wake up the next morning, crumpled on a bed of tall grass. The sun is already high, illuminating the lush environment. I can barely move; lacking adrenaline, the wounds I sustained are nearly unbearable. When I finally manage to sit up, I examine my leg. Yesterday's attack shredded my left pant leg. Ripping through the thin material reveals two gnarly lacerations, one on the front and one on back of my leg. While these wounds create a nagging pain, they are only skin-deep and shouldn't hinder movement too much. I lift my shirt to find my torso riddled with long cuts and small puncture wounds, but nothing serious. All things considered, I'm fortunate to be alive.

I pick myself up, and then look around. No signs of danger. I notice the jungle spans from the east all the way around to the north, cutting off my path to the opening in the cliff. If I want to get to that cave, I'm going to have to brave the jungle eventually. I limp northward, hoping to cut through as fast as possible.

As I walk, the pain in my leg seems to gradually fade as I grow accustomed to it. Soon, I'm almost walking normally. My thoughts turn back to the pack of birds I encountered last night. I might not be able to remember much about the world beyond this arena, but those birds didn't seem natural. Birds shouldn't have teeth, and wounding their leader should have sent the group into disarray, but instead the group just stopped. They didn't try to help their injured

comrade, nor flee with fear. They acted too collected, too calculating. I'm beginning to suspect a greater force is at play here. This perfectly circular arena, my lost memory, animals acting abnormally... It's all too deliberate. I have a growing suspicion that the cave holds all the answers.

As I approach the edge of the jungle, the sun is at its peak. I hesitate at the edge of the jungle, looking in at the darkness. Compared to the eastern section of the jungle, this part seems eerily quiet. Cautiously, I venture forward.

...

I journey through the dimly lit jungle, trying my best to be silent. This jungle, I've decided, is far too quiet. The eastern section was brimming with life, while here I've not heard even a single bird call. In light of recent events, I decide that's not necessarily a bad thing.

The farther into the jungle I venture, the more wary I become. I notice small things; a stray claw mark here, a clump of fur stuck on a branch there. Signs of a struggle. I also notice a horrid stench that seems to grow bolder with every step. After a while, the air is thick with pestilence, making it hard to breathe.

Near what must be the heart of the jungle, I encounter a tall, thick tree with sprawling roots. The putrid smell emanates from this tree. As I get closer, I understand why.

The tree is riddled with the corpses of this jungle's wildlife.

The discarded corpses of birds drape over the broad branches of the tree. Mammals, small and large, fill the hollowed trunk to the brim, festering in the heat of decomposition. The roots of the tree seem to be resting upon a heap of death. I stand, horrified, as I witness the grotesque effigy. It's easy to understand why this tree, at the heart of a silent forest, is so much bigger than the rest.

A shadowy figure slinks out of the shadows to my right, pulling me from my stupor. Instinctively, I dive into the low bushes to my left. I breathe through my mouth, both to stifle my irregular breathing and avoid the stench. I follow the figure with my eyes. It walks though forth into a sunlit spot, lighting up the creature's jet black fur. It is an immense panther carrying a full grown deer in its jaws. The creature leaps onto a low hanging branch, still about twenty feet in the air, while holding the limp carcass. I watch as it throws the deer onto the growing pile of bodies, then lies down on a wide branch.

For what must have been thirty minutes, I watch the panther for any sign of movement. I crawl backwards, from under the shrub, and lean up against a tree opposite of the panther. I take a deep breath, barely noticing the horrid smell, and creep out from around my tree. Silently, I take up a position behind an adjacent tree, planning to hop from tree to tree until I've circumvented the panther. Slowly, I poke my head from around this new vantage point. My heart drops.

The panther isn't on its branch anymore.

Stunned, I retract my head. I'm hyperventilating now, my eyes peeled wide trying to locate the danger. I cannot hope to defeat this monster. It's emptied the entire jungle of life; what would I be to this killer? A snack? An annoyance? It could be anywhere.

I leave the perceived safety of my hiding space. There is no safety in this jungle. I walk towards the tree aiming to skirt around it and leave the forest as quickly as possible. I hear a branch snap behind me. I whirl around, just in time to see the crouched animal leap towards me. I scream, instinctively dropping down. The panther soars over me, stumbling to recover. I sprint for the thorny underbrush, covering the short distance before the panther can fully catch up. I run straight through the thorns, ignoring the sharp throngs of pain as they scrape against my skin. I clear the thorns, only to find myself in an open clearing. I grab a long, thin branch off of the ground to defend myself with.

My heart pounds as I make my final stand in this clearing. Closed in on all sides by thorny bushes and tall trees, I cannot run any longer. I swivel around, trying to look in all directions at once. It could attack at any time, from anywhere.

Instead, it emerges from the same bush I did, slinking low to the ground. Its emerald eyes meet mine as it creeps forward. In that moment, I know what I have to become if I'm going to survive.

I need to become as ruthless as this panther.

The whole time I've been in this hell-hole, I've been afraid to embrace this truth. The whole time, I've been scared to confront my aggressors. Not scared of death; my death became certain as soon as I woke up in the forest above. I've been scared to become like the monsters in this arena, to become a slave to the primal rage and frustration boiling within me. But, staring into those cold emerald eyes, I realize that I have no other choice. The birds, the panthers, the giant beast of the forest, they have no moral code to abide by. They don't pity their prey. The only way to beat them is to be more savage, more cunning, and more brutal than they are.

My demeanor changes, I steady my breathing. My eyes narrow in sharp defiance, hands gripping my weapon tightly. I lower the point of my staff to the panther. I will not move from this spot.

The panther lunges in an instant, leaving no room to react. It hurls itself at me, landing chest first onto the tip of my spear. The other end of the spear digs into the ground, refusing to budge. The tip emerges from the other side of the animal.

I step forward, looking over the discarded body of the panther, and notice something metallic hanging from its neck. I bend down to examine it further, when a thin stream of blood runs off the bottom of my chin. The panther's wild claw swipe managed to connect after all, streaking the left side of my face and upper chest. I barely feel the wound.

I grab the round, silvery object fastened to the panther's neck. In examining it, I see myself for the first time since coming here. I barely recognize the thing glaring back. I take the

object with me, traversing the rest of the jungle without fear. I do not fear the jungle, because I have become like it; savage, ruthless, and thriving on death.

...

I approach the mouth of the cave, silver orb in hand. The object begins to glow bright white as I enter the cave, as though it were designed to illuminate the darkness. Guided by the light of the orb, I travel lower into the cave, through twisting passages. Something peculiar greets me at the end of the cave: a large, black metal wall.

I move closer, using the light of the orb to inspect the wall. Suddenly, the orb flies from my hand and attaches itself to the wall. It glows green. I reach forward, barely touching the orb, and the entire wall shudders, then slides up.

I walk into the room, stunned by what I find. Dozens of computer screens displaying various areas of the chasm illuminate the dark room with dim blue light. In the center of the room sits an empty chair.

“Welcome back, sir.”

I whirl around, ready to strike. Instead of a threat, I find a slightly overweight man.

“Holy shit, that place really did a number on you.” The man says, stepping forward to better inspect my injuries. My bloody face, punctured torso, and lacerated leg contrast sharply with the spotless room. I suddenly become very conscious of my ragged appearance. The man walks over to a large cabinet, opens it, and carefully selects a file. He opens the file and quietly

reads something to himself. “Impressive. It took you less than two days to find your way out. We even suppressed your memories, to make things harder. Only a few have ever made it out, and most of them take at least a week.”

I stand, mouth agape, staring at the screens. I see the carcass of the bird still floats beneath the waterfall.

“Still don’t understand?” he asks. “Follow me.” I do as he says, following the pudgy man through a maze of tight, dimly lit corridors. We eventually enter a room, with an immense metal contraption at the center.

“Recognize this?” he asks. My eyes answer his question. “Watch.” He presses a button, then points to screen on the wall. The machine comes to life. Alternating pistons rise and fall, striking thick pads on the roof above rhythmically. The entire room shakes from the force of each strike. On the screen, I see video of the forest I first woke up in. Trees shake and sway, some fall.

“This, sir, is your beast. Now watch” the man says. He presses the button again, and the machine stops. He turns a few levers, then presses the button. On the screen, all of the fallen trees slowly lift back up into position. “It’s a beautiful thing, isn’t it? The falling trees are a nice touch, makes it feel authentic. Got you going real quick, at least.” He chuckled.

I stare at the man, finally understanding exactly what was going on. This had all been staged. The beast wasn't real. This man had been controlling me the entire time. The beast wasn't real, but my wounds are. Especially the wounds you can't see.

I lunge at the man, gripping him by the lapel and driving him up against a wall. Tears flood my eyes, threatening to spill over I manage to spit out, "Who made this place? Who did this to me?" But I know what he's about to say.

The fat man, with real fear in his eyes, raises his hands to mine in feeble resistance. He chokes on his words, but responds.

"You did."

...

[To be Continued...]