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Troubles of Ants

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Troubles of Ants

Lee watches an ant climb his combat boot. It pauses at the toe, looks up, and says to itself *not today*. It turns back, climbs off the boot, and wanders back to its hill. Lee watches the ant for a while and then turns his head skyward. Birds are flying by, so far away they look more like origami than flesh and feathers. He remembers that his sister's favorite birds are the ones native to this region. She started high school recently and checks with in with him less and less. The world is passing him by, it seems. These birds are too far away to be sure they're the ones she likes. The July sun casts shadows across his face. He hears rifles fire in the distance. Lee reaches for the radio as it crackles.

"Command, this is Charlie Six, inquiring about which unit just got hit. Over." Lee takes his finger off the radio, ears alert in case his unit is next.

"Charlie Six, this is Command. Stay off the radios."

"Understood. Charlie Six will stand by."

"Did I fucking stutter? Stay off the radio."

Lee turns to his superior, Tae, who shrugs. Lee doesn't understand yet, but he will. At worst, they will get chewed out for not keeping watch; at best, there might be a slight nod from an officer. When there isn't much in between punishment and incentive, the more experienced draftees find there isn't much to strive for.

"Sergeant Tae?"

"Yeah, Lee?"

"Do you think these would work if it came down to it?"

Tae, only half visible and standing guard by the mounted gun, turns to Lee slightly. "I doubt it will matter, Corporal Lee. Keep your eyes fixed ahead, and we go back to our fluffy cots tomorrow."

Private Lim, the youngest, just a few months into his service, snickers at *fluffy*.

“Do you have a problem, Lim?”

“No, Sergeant.”

Tae lights a cigarette.

Lee cringes as the smoke drifts towards him. He grabs a latch on the side of the tank, climbs on, and slides into the pilot seat. He drums a steady rhythm onto the worn wheel.

“It’s too hot for this shit, Sergeant.” Lim says, tilting his helmet back to scratch his forehead.

“Fix your helmet, kid.”

Lee casts his eyes over to the right, where the rest of the war machines are lined up in formation. The officers never explain the reasons for these tactics; it’s do this, do that. Wake up at this hour, park the tank here, clean your rifle this way. Yes, it’s different from what you were taught at boot camp. Keep watch over an armory that hasn’t been opened in half a century.

Lee glances around. Every breeze could reveal an enemy—but that isn’t quite true. Their rifles are loaded with blanks and if hit, the sensors on their combat vests will ring, signaling injury. It feels childish, like a game, paintball minus the paint. It is, after all, just another training exercise.

The radio crackles. Tae scrambles to the radio, trying to make sense of the static nonsense.

“This is Charlie Six. Say again, Command? We lost you.”

“Guerrilla en route to your position. Watch out.”

Suddenly alert, the three soldiers wield their rifles against the encroaching enemy. The discombobulated voice has conveyed nothing helpful. All they can do is scan the foliage for lurking enemies.

Then the shots come, a steady *putputput* of rifles. A cylinder falls on the hood of the tank, just out of Lee’s reach and starts to sputter smoke. Lee, Tae and Lim all killed, *technically*. It’s over in a second.

The guerilla rises out of the dirt and mountainside like a time-lapse video of flora come to life, dressed in fatigues and silhouetted in plants. He approaches the tank, shaking his head. He slings his rifle so that it hangs diagonal on his back.

“Sergeant Tae, I expected more from your unit.”

Tae snaps to attention, his right arm already forming a crisp forty-five-degree angle. He fumbles with his rifle, nearly tripping over a jutting rock to greet the captain. The short, stocky Captain Cho steps forward, inspecting the empty shell of the smoking cylinder on the hood of the tank. Lee squints rapidly to blink away his tears from the smoke, aware that the training exercise is still on, and in this scenario, his unit has been killed. He can’t wipe his eyes until the captain calls off the exercise. Lee is, after all, dead—and supposed to act like it.

It's all so damn silly. Lee is going nearly blind from all the war paint dripping into his eyes, every drop sharp and stinging. That, coupled with the tear gas sneaking its way into his lungs, hurts like hell.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Sergeant? Were you not on guard?"

Tae steps forward, stumbling his words.

"We were, Sir!"

The captain sucks his teeth, scanning the tank for faults. Finding none, he turns and walks away. The radio crackles and the training exercise is over. Tents are pitched, tanks are parked, and fires are lit. The afternoon sun folds into itself and fades out.

The barracks are not an architectural marvel. If it wasn't for the rifles and men in fatigues, they might pass for a jail, and a drab one at that. The sun is high in the sky and lights up a windless day. The clouds hang as still as each hour feels to Lee's mind. Some draftees sit around by the assembly area, others run laps on the field or crowd the singular pull up bar. Lee is high above the men, at the top of the foot of the mountain, with the never-ending expanse of mountain all around him, the monotony of the gray barracks to his back. To him, the men resemble ants on this Sunday morning, keeping themselves busy, never questioning, always efficient.

Snow starts to fall, soft like ash at first, but it quickly turns to blanketing waves. Lee knows the drill, and so do the men. Softly cursing their luck, they pick up brooms and start to sweep. Just in case war breaks out on this Sunday morning, all the roads need to be clear of snow.

The damn snow always falls on the weekend, Lee thinks. He knows there is no divine providence ruining the draftees' weekend. But it is more comforting to find fault in weather, than to acknowledge the fact that they lack control, even over their weekends.

War doesn't break out this Sunday, as it hasn't for five decades.

Lee snaps awake, the alarm hitting his mind like a hammer or a pistol slamming into place. This isn't a natural transition; there's no soft alarm that gets progressively louder as he hits snooze over and over. It's a new sound he hasn't heard before. Is it a fault in the system? A speaker malfunctioning? It's early August; the next set of training exercises aren't scheduled for another week. They are men of routine, ants in an anthill, following the rising and setting of the sun, the gradual browning of leaves. All this occurs to Lee as he sheds his gray tracksuit and slides into his fatigues, the pieces coming together and blending into each other like a camouflage kaleidoscope. Lim zips off to retrieve their rifles from the armory.

As Lee zips up his combat vest and pats himself down for extra cartridges, he realizes this is a real situation.

“Move faster! We’re moving out!” Tae shouts.

With an efficiency that is ingrained past his muscle and deep into his bones, Lee neatly fills his pack. Two blankets, two uniforms, a flashlight, an extra pair of combat boots, toiletries. He snaps around. Lim has placed his rifle by his feet, ever the quick private. Lee runs to his post, scrambles up and down the tank, roping down the shovels, pickaxe, mortar rounds, checking the oil levels, and securing the extra fuel.

In a matter of minutes the mounted gun is set, and they are ready to move out. The engine roars life into the night, and the sirens blare. Tae steps aside for a forbidden smoke, and Lee inhales. He wishes he were brave enough to smoke too.

The radio crackles, almost quiet against the engine: “All companies of the 369th Field Artillery Battalion, this is Command. This is not a drill. I repeat we are at DEFCON two. Check in when you are ready to move out.”

One by one, all dozen units send in affirmative answers. All these men complain daily about being dragged here. They miss their girlfriends and their families; they want to be in school, but when it comes down to it, they are good at the jobs their country has assigned them. Tae is an excellent unit leader; Lim an efficient first gunner, and Lee pilots his machine as if it is an extension of his limbs.

War machines mar the tranquility of the Korean mountainside. Lee notes somewhere in his mind that DEFCON two meant there is only one threat level left—DEFCON one—or nuclear war.

The radio crackles with Captain Cho’s voice, hard-edged, as usual: “All units be advised, at oh-two-hundred, seismographs picked up a 6.5 earthquake off the east coast of North Korea, near a known underground testing facility. I repeat, this is not a drill. Be ready to move out. Stand by until further notice.”

Tae shrugs and lights another cigarette. If Tae is caught smoking in this situation, he will be court-martialed for breaking protocol and potentially revealing his position to the enemy. He’d get up to fourteen days in jail, which is fourteen more days in the army. A ridiculous punishment for an equally ridiculous crime, considering everybody knows that North Korean troops are nowhere near. Tae speaks and Lee snaps to attention; he is still second in command, after all.

“The North Koreans couldn’t test the missile during the day? Honestly rude, if you ask me.”

Lee and Lim chuckle. They are all thinking the same thing.

The next few hours are a blur of struggling to stay awake and alert. Lee imagines the rest of the Korean army, groggily scanning the northern sky-

line for a threat. Lee's body has calmed down from the adrenaline rush, and his sweat freezes under his fatigues in the early autumn morning. As dawn approaches, Lee looks at the men around him, all of them serving a country that demands two years of their lives, no questions asked, with no exceptions.

Lee looks at Lim. His chin is still soft; the army hasn't hardened him yet. Even Sergeant Tae is only tough because he needs to be. He's still a boy with only a tiny patch of peach fuzz that he attempts to tease into a beard, only to shave off once an officer reprimands him for not following regulations. Just a year older or younger than Lee, these boys are made into the same shape. They are no longer individuals.

"Hey, Sarge?" Lim asks.

Tae is leaning on his rifle and turns to Lim. He doesn't say anything.

"Do you think we're really going to war, Sergeant Tae?"

"I know as much you do, kid."

"This is Command. All units turn off your engines and maintain radio silence."

The night drags on. Without the underlying growl of the engines, the mountainside is eerily silent. The bush rustles. Lee spins around, aiming down his rifle to see a deer trot out of the edge of the trees. The deer continues toward Lee, aiming for a patch of grass by the tank tread. Tae sleeps inside the tank, his snores reverberating off the steel walls. Lee wonders if he is the only one aware of all this, the only soldier who sees their service more as war games than war and is frustrated by the enforced patriotism of the Korean army. Lee thinks about all the times his fellow draftees have complained about being dragged away from everything and everyone they care about.

When Sergeant Tae discharges in a few weeks, Lee will be in charge of the unit, the first line of armored defense in case of the Korean War: The Sequel. Lee reaches out for the deer, wishing with the tips of his fingers that it would approach him. He knows that North Korea has the capabilities to evaporate this deer, him, and anything south of the 38th Parallel into radioactive ash. But his sergeant is sleeping and so is the rest of Korea. The deer cares only about this patch of grass.

The radio crackles; the deer bounds off.

"Threat level down."

Lee stares at the radio. His unit is asleep, and he still has a year left of his draft sentence.

"We are back down to DEFCON four. Let's pack up and go home. Command out."

In the humidity of a Seoul summer, Tae, Lim, and Lee sit at a street side bar, slinging back *soju*. At first all their sentences begin, "Do you remember," but

eventually they move on to the future. On the bar's T.V. screen, silenced by the ruckus of the street, Trump and Kim Jong Un shake hands. With the shake of their meaty palms, the two presidents have signaled the end of a war. It has been nine months since Tae has discharged, two months for Lee, and Lim is in his last stretch. Tae has gone back to university; Lee will do the same soon.