

I wrote this short story when I was applying for a writer position at Bungie. It ultimately didn't work out, but I really like the story. It takes place during Destiny 2.

"The Yellow Pike"

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"You didn't see anything of the sort," Stella grunted.

Her armored kneepad thunked on the crown of the boulder, and she sighed. Her back ached. Sweat slicked the vinyl padding beneath her armor, made everything squidgy. She dreamed of the refresher pod in her Apex – it wasn't exactly roomy, but damn if the water pressure wasn't the tops. Better than her old Arcadia, which dribbled lukewarm water with the force of an old man pissing.

"I did see it, Stella, I did," Pepik squeaked in his oddly high-pitched Slavic accent. "You weren't even there. What do you know of it?"

Pepik joined her on the boulder and leaned on his scout rifle.

"What do I know?" Stella asked. "I know I've spent the last two months patrolling every inch of this haunted-ass forest and haven't seen anything like a bright yellow Pike."

"It was a Vandal," Pepik said. "Going right off down the highway."

"They usually leave the patrols to the dregs," Stella said. She stood up. "Shit work for the grunts. Sound familiar?"

"Maybe he was like, Fallen royalty or something," Pepik said.

"A Vandal?"

"It was a bright. Yellow. Pike."

"Mmm-hmm," Stella grunted, and hopped off the boulder.

The long-shattered asphalt of the highway crunched beneath the composite of her heavy boots. Pepik rebuttoned his long coat and joined her with a light hop. He checked his rifle's mag and the breach, like he did every five minutes. Stella didn't even think he was aware of doing it. Hard to read expressions through the blank, curved face of his helmet.

"Laugh it up," Pepik said, and Stella heard the grin in his voice over the crackle of her comm. "You're still out here looking."

Stella set off down the road.

"I'm out here to prove you wrong."

"Can't prove a negative, Stella."

"Then I'm out here to watch you fail."

"Nuh-uh."

"How about I'm out here so you don't get eaten by local wildlife?"

Pepik laughed. "That I believe."

More dregs. More trees. More spooky, grasping branches. The quarter-dome arc in the distance, the bones of the Traveler long since cast off, made her neck tickle.

It wasn't right. Like finding the severed leg of a close friend out in the wilderness.

A Fallen Captain gave them both a piece of hell on a broken cliff side. When he finally went down, courtesy of a well-timed shield-toss, Stella helped Pepik out of the dirt and brushed his shoulders playfully.

"Do you aim better from the ground?" Stella asked.

"Who doesn't? Stable firing platform. Small silhouette. Tactically superior in every way."

"What about when he was kicking you in the head?"

“Distraction,” Pepik said. “Gave you a window to punch his head. All part of the plan.”

“I hope the second half of your plan was to find a new helmet,” Stella said, rapping her knuckles on the cracking dent in the plasteel of his dome.

“Me too. I can smell them now. And the Fallen don’t smell like fresh cut grass, my friend.”

Stella shuddered. “I hadn’t even thought of that.”

“Yeah, well, keep that in mind next time you complain about your hair being sweaty.”

“It was just the Siege helm,” Stella said. “That thing was only made in child sizes.”

“Or you just have great big head.”

“Or I just have great big head.”

The woods grew closer, a black tangle of bones. They’d defeated a pair of dregs on pikes, and when Stella had suggested stealing those and painting them yellow, Pepik had this to say:

“No. I want the yellow one. The one I saw.”

“We’ll make these yellow.”

“No. I want you to see it.”

“Why?”

Pepik rubbed the outside of his helmet, then cocked his head to the side, as if realizing how foolish the gesture appeared. His hand dropped to his side.

“I just want you to know what I saw.”

Stella sighed and leaned her elbow against one of the pikes.

“I believe you, Pepik. You don’t have to – “

“I do have to.”

“I’m just busting your balls, Pep, you know I – “

“No. We find the pike. You’ll see.”

Pepik stalked past the two Fallen assault bikes, crunching more ancient highway beneath him. He checked the mag and the breach of his rifle, just like clockwork.

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” Stella shouted down the road at him.

“Everyone think I’m crazy,” Pepik said without turning around.

His shoulders didn’t slump, or if they did the armor concealed it. But she could sense the dejection. In his voice, maybe, or just the casual familiarity of long association.

“Fine. I don’t believe you,” Stella said, then, her voice almost cracking.

“I know,” Pepik said. “That’s why I show you.”

Stella drew the Sunshot from the small of her back and waved it in the air.

“If I find the yellow pike first I’m keeping it.”

“Over my resurrected body,” Pepik said.

Pepik’s Ghost, black-and-yellow striped, chirped at that. “Guardians do not leave bodies when risen. The Traveler’s light – “

“Shut it,” Pepik said.

The Ghost shut it.

They gave Firebase Hades a wide berth – the City may see them as self-less superheroes, but Stella knew the truth: Guardians were soldiers. They did what they were told. Guardians are guns – they only shoot what you point them at. And no one had pointed her at Firebase Hades. Not yet.

The Cabal weren’t like the Fallen, thin wretches, put them down with a few shells. The Hive were bad, sure, but fighting Hive happened in the bones – your body aching to survive against the

horror. Cabal were different, at least for her. They were bigger, for one. Stella was used to knocking people around, but the Cabal knocked back. She'd been surrounded a few times by their Centurions, and every time it felt like drowning.

"I can smell the beach," Pepik said.

They crested a hill, and sure enough, there it was. Gray water under gray sky. Stella wondered if this had been a vacation spot, once. She had memories, from before, but they were thin. Worn out. Video with no audio, no subtitles. Maybe not even the same language.

"Do you remember anything from . . . ?" Stella trailed off.

"Drips," Pepik said. "Drabs. I had a brother."

Stella waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. His posture stiffened, and he walked like his legs were sore.

"You?" Pepik asked.

A husband. Dirty-blond hair and a dark beard. She remembered his smile. A daughter. Maggie. Meryl? Some days she was sure it was Melissa but . . . not always.

"Don't remember," Stella said.

Stella had heard Dead Orbit's pitch. "Get the hell out," to put it succinctly. It made a kind of sense. Earth might have been the cradle, but snakes had slithered between the bars. Coiled under the mattress, beneath the pillow, wound around the discarded teddy bear and pulsed beneath the blankets.

The stars expanded forever. No reason to stick around the local group. But sometimes, near the Cosmodrone, she felt something. The angle of a building, the light bouncing off a mountain. It made her stomach hurt, and she didn't know why.

"This place straight up sucks," Pepik said.

Stella grunted something like an affirmative, her eyes on her boots, her mind far outside the confines of her helmet.

“Oh! Oh!” Glee, from Pepik. Breathless, child-like glee.

Eyes up, Guardian. Her Ghost hadn’t said it. Didn’t really need to anymore.

She flashed her Sunshot and spread out from Pepik, putting some distance –

“No no,” Pepik said. “The pike!”

Stella followed his gaze, his pointing finger to . . . a pile of rocks. The waves lapped at the dead shore behind them.

“What now?”

“Are you serious! It went behind those rocks!”

Stella sighed. Loudly. Into her comm.

Pepik broke into a sprint, and Stella made sure he heard her second sigh before she raced after him. He pounded across the pavement, then the weedy grass, then the hard-packed dirt. He vaulted onto the rocks, poked his head up high, and glanced around them.

“What? How? It was right here!”

Stella hopped up to the rocks. She wanted to laugh, but the tone of Pepik’s voice killed the urge.

“I just – oh shit.”

Pepik fell into a hole.

“Pepik!”

No sound. Then, a scrape. Then a thud. Then the high-pitched shatter of shields breaking.

“Balls.”

Stella leaped into the glowing hole between the rocks and slowed herself down right before she slapped earth. She helped Pepik to his feet, brushed the dirt from his shoulders again, and got an eyeful of the cavern. Her helmet fed her data – depth, moisture levels, nitrogen/oxygen mix. No targets. Yet.

“What a lovely new home,” Stella said. “Could use a cryptarch if we’re gonna stay.”

Pepik mantled onto a rock shelf and kept climbing toward the only passage shooting off from their cave. Far above them, the fading gray daylight gave her no sense of hope or relief. As usual, for a Guardian, there was one way out of this: through.

Didn’t take them long to figure it out. Fallen supply cache, of course. Stella and Pepik moved through the perimeter guards, blasting shanks and dregs, the odd sniper. Stella made herself the biggest target she could, and Pepik flanked them. A well-practiced routine, with predictable results.

“You’d think they’d just run when they saw us coming,” Pepik said. ““Oh, I’m going to be the one who takes down the killer of Crota. Certainly my shattered body won’t be but more pavement on her road to Glory.””

Pepik leaped onto an overhanging shelf above, holding his scout rifle aloft in a mock show of victory as he spoke.

“Why thank you, Pep, I imagine – “

Something hit Pepik from behind, something big – a vehicle. It blasted him off the ledge, over her head, into a tangle of stalagmites and out of sight. The whirr of the pike’s engines cut off, and a Fallen Captain the size of a tool shed slid off the pike and onto his clawed feet. He loomed above, where Pepik had been, and leaned his hand affectionately on the curving yellow fender of his pike.

“Oh shit,” Stella whispered. Then, her mind kicked into gear. Pepik.

No time to contemplate, because the Captain leaped from the ledge, the familiar glow of a scorch cannon lighting Stella’s face in lurid orange.

She leaped away from the first blast, which tore a furrow in the ground. The second hit the wall behind her, and she felt more than saw the razor-sharp shrapnel of the cave wall carve through her shields. Her helmet cam's low-light tried to compensate for the sudden switch from "deep dark cave" to "sun exploding in your face," but it still dished up a second of blinding white.

A thump, her neck jolted, and she went over sideways. Her hand gripped the Sunshot, and without aiming she spun toward the hissing sound of the Captain and emptied the magazine. The familiar heat of the pistol in her hand brought her back. She leaped backwards and burned Light to throw her even further.

Okay, Stella, what do we have?

"The Fallen Captain appears to have a scorch cannon," her Ghost chirped in her ear.

"Thank you."

Some cover – boulders, supply crates. Pepik was either dead or unconscious – pained her to say, but she hoped for dead. His Ghost could bring him back from dead pretty quick. Unconscious meant she was alone. For who knows how long.

Why save the big stuff?

Stella drew the black-and-gold shotgun from her back and slung it into her hands. She breathed the suit's stale air and wondered what it was the Fallen smelled like. Filth? The burning-metal smell of raw space? Fresh cut grass?

The Captain lurched around a boulder, and she showed him how her shotgun worked. Two blasts, and he disappeared in a swoosh of blue light.

"Pussy," Stella growled.

She stalked after the tell-tale trail of light, around the boulder, behind a stalagmite. She started working towards where she'd seen Pepik fall, trying to keep her eyes around her at the same time.

“Hey Ghost, I don’t suppose you would tell me which boulder that Captain is behind?”

“I’m afraid Ghosts are not designed for tactical use. Though the original Iron Lords often – “

A sharp sound behind her, a clicking of claws on rocks. She spun, just in time to catch a scorch rocket to the chest. Blinding light, blinding pain. Heat melting through her chest plate, sucking the oxygen out of her suit. Her back hit the cave – another flash of light – and her ass hit the ground. She didn’t know where the shotgun went.

The small of her back. She leaned forward, gripped the Sunshot, and dragged it around –

The Fallen Captain stepped on her hand, pinning it to the ground. The Sunshot was pointed helpfully at a cave wall.

Stella growled up at the Captain. His alien, mantis-like face contorted into something like a smirk. She’d died before. She hated it every time. Not the pain, and the horror, and the baked-in survival instinct that no amount of resurrections could cure blaring like an air raid siren in a closet. She could deal with that.

It was the idea that she’d lost. That this thing had beat her, and it would know it. It would know it had seen her best and laughed in her face and shredded her body. That he’d tell his people about it, his fellow warriors, his own twisted fireteam. He’d sing songs about the brave Titan he’d burned alive.

Stella gritted her teeth and slammed her free fist into the Captain’s leg. Bone crunched, the Captain shrieked in ugly pain, but he still aimed the flaming mouth of the scorch cannon right into her face and triggered the –

WHIRRRRRRRRR.

“Stella!”

Stella threw herself down as far as she could, head on the ground, twisting away from the Fallen Captain just as Pepik, riding a yellow pike, slammed into him. There wasn't much cave to travel, but Pepik hit the boost anyway.

The two of them crashed right into the cave wall going the speed of heat. They exploded in an earth-shaking fireball.

Shrapnel banged around the enclosed area, and the terrible noise tripped the safeguards on her audio array. Close, suffocating silence demanded her attention, chased all thoughts away but one – breathe, breathe, breathe.

Stella tore off her helmet despite the protestations of her Ghost and sucked hard oxygen. It tasted like mildew and fire and the sweetest freedom. She gulped it greedily until her heart rate slowed and she could think again.

She collected her shotgun, her Sunshot, and waited on a nearby supply crate while Pepik's Ghost reconstituted his body from pure Light.

When it was over, Pepik marched over to her, picked her helmet off the rock next to her, and stuffed it in her hands.

"When I was up on the ledge I saw an exit," he said.

"Okay."

Stella put her helmet back on and triggered the hard seals. The taste of wet mould went away, replaced with dry O2. She waited on the crate for a while, watching the flaming hulk of the once-yellow pike burn.

The beach roared on their right as they made their slow, not-particularly-motivated trip back up the coast. The Fallen kept their distance, chittering off to the north, doing whatever Fallen did when there weren't Guardians around to die to.

Pepik hadn't said a word since the cave, but he didn't seem particularly sad. She heard him whistle hollowly over the comm, which wasn't out of the ordinary. Like most of his tics, he didn't seem aware of it.

"Sorry about your pike," Stella said, finally. The words had been growing stale in her mouth and she had to spit them out.

"Hmm? Oh," Pepik said, by way of explanation, and waved his hand dismissively.

"Hmm? Hmm?" Stella stopped, and slugged Pepik in the shoulder. "We just spent four hours combing hell and damnation for that dumbass yellow pike. Everyone at the Farm called you a lunatic, or worse. You yelled at me about it, and the both of us nearly died because of it. No, you did die. And for what, man? For HMMMM? For OH?!"

Pepik turned and seemed to read her expression, even through the reflective visor. He cocked his head to the side, checked the mag on his rifle, and peeked into the breach.

"Why'd you crash the bike?" Stella demanded. "You should've just let me die. I'd be back."

Pepik shouldered his scout rifle and peered out toward the beach.

"You could've taken it back to the Farm, rubbed it in their faces. Hell, Cayde-6 would have eaten crow in front of everybody! You would've proved you're not – "

Stella stopped talking. Dropped her eyes to the ground.

"I had a nice walk, with a good friend," Pepik said. He swept his hand, indicating the countryside around them. "What more is there?"

Pepik tapped his scout rifle against her gun, nodded, and strolled east, his eyes turning toward the rolling sea.

Stella, rooted in place, stared after him. After a long moment had passed, she held her palm out and summoned her Ghost in a roiling flash of blue-white Light.

"Ghost," she asked.

“Yes, Guardian?”

“What do you make of that?”

Her Ghost swiveled his optic toward the departing figure, and then back to Stella’s face.

“That is Pepik, Warlock. Race: human. A member of your fireteam.”

Stella smirked and set off after Pepik.

“Thanks, Ghost.”

The End