

excerpt from...

MEEVO

by

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Part 1

Eric

Eric adjusted his night-vision glasses and settled down onto his haunches. There was no sound other than the faint rustle of pine needles and branches in the light winter breeze. There was almost no light under the cloudy sky. He knew he was alone. The nearest help was an hour away by foot.

He surveyed the area around him, nothing. Nothing moved, nothing to see except trees and bushes. A rabbit or mouse, something moving, would be a relief.

“Eric.” Faint but clear, nearby.

Eric felt his flesh crawl. Only his Commander, Alan Pratt, knew he was here.

“Eric.” Again. Faint, not insistent, but clear.

Silently, Eric surveyed his area again. There was nothing. Gently, he reached up and set his glasses to infra-red. Still nothing. A cold trickle of sweat ran down his back; his grip on the rifle began to be painful—too tight.

“Eric.” Patient. Calm.

“What? Who are you?” Eric tried to respond in kind but couldn’t keep the tension out of his voice.

“I have your friends. Perhaps you should take them home.” Stated in a matter-of-fact tone without urgency or rancour.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Eric knew he was beginning to sound like a person in panic.

Only the sougning of the lightest of winds through the pine needles—Eric was alone. He knew without doubt that there was nobody there. He stood up and looked around. The IR lenses showed shapes through the bushes. No particular outline that he could recognise, and they were very faint, but shapes they were. Checking and re-checking he moved softly

towards the glimmering patch of warmth.

At last he reached it. Still unable to determine the identity of the patch, he switched to night-vision and spun away—desperately trying not to throw up into his visor. This would be the worst time to contaminate his suit.

He keyed the transmit switch on his chest pad. “Six-Two Alpha, Six-Two Alpha. Six-Two Foxtrot, over.”

He wished with all his heart he could rip the helmet off and wipe his brow or take a drink from the bottle; sipping from the drink tube was all that was possible. There were no sedatives in the Type Twenty-Seven suit, either, not like the newer self-medicating Forty series.

“Six-Two Foxtrot, Six-Two Alpha. Radio Silence mandatory. Maintain.”

“Sod bloody radio silence. I’m compromised and I’ve got a pile of dead bodies—Jim, Harry, Arthur, Sergeant Edwards, Corporal Thomas, in front of me. Get us out of here.”

Twenty minutes later the beat of rotors rose to a crescendo over his head and a platform came down. Two men helped load the bodies onto the platform and supported them while it rose up into the chopper above. Several minutes later the rotors beat away into the distance leaving Eric standing, bewildered, on his own in the trees.

“What’s going on? Why didn’t they take me with them?” He asked several times but heard only the hiss of static over the earpieces. He needed a toilet. Now. “Not in the suit,” he told himself. “Dear God, not in the suit. Please don’t let me contaminate the suit.”

“Take it off.” The voice was calm and implacable.

“I’ll die.” Eric wailed, feeling his credibility as a man slip away.

“Perhaps I could kill you anyway.” It was a statement of fact, neither a threat nor a promise.

Eric felt for the helmet latches and unclipped them. Reaching inside, he pushed the glasses and the lenses up into the dome of the helmet and swung the microphone to one side. The air seemed clear but then it would, he thought. He unbuckled the pack and the chest pad, let them slip to the ground and began undoing the ‘Triplex’ zip system thinking all along that he was never going to get it off in time and it didn’t matter because he was approaching death very rapidly anyway.

He was right. He never made it. He knew he was going to stink of urine for a long time, even after his heart had stopped. ‘Some glamorous corpse I’ll make,’ he considered, ‘nobody

will want to bury me for the smell of piss on me.'

He threw his suit, helmet and pack up against a tree and waited to die.

"Where have they taken your colleagues?"

"Why do you care? Why should I answer? Why did you kill them?" Eric felt he was never going to get an answer so he may as well ask the questions.

"You have assumed that I killed them?" A slight rising inflection at the end of the sentence suggested that a question had been asked of Eric.

"Who else? There are only two of us here. I didn't kill them. So?"

"You understood that there was only you here. Then there were two. Might there yet not be three?"

"Another invisible person like you? I think not. Unlikely." Eric sighed, awaiting death.

"Unlikely. Yes. Not impossible. So. I am invisible." No question—just a thoughtful comment to nobody in particular.

"Who are you?" Eric supposed that he knew the answer.

"Possibly the question is 'where am I', don't you think?" Still quiet. Still patient.

"OK. *Where* are you? Is this a game? Are you playing with me before you kill me?"

"Why should I kill you? Do you want to die?"

"You are not answering my questions. You seem to know about me. Why don't you tell me about yourself?" Eric felt himself getting angry.

"When there is nothing that you can do—do nothing. Don't get angry or frustrated, it only muddies your thinking. Relax."

"How can I relax when I am about to die and don't know anything about it—why?"

"How much do you think your colleagues knew before they died? One moment they were creeping through the woods, the next moment—nothing. Gone. They asked no questions. They were told no lies."

"Where are you?" Eric breathed deeply and tried to slow his pulse down.

"Better. I am near you but you are looking in the wrong direction."

Eric reached for his goggles.

"They will do you no good. You will not recognise me."

"What? Who are you?"

"Perhaps, in the light of your own experiences, the first would be more apposite."

"You mean... but... you... what are you? Is that it?" Eric was puzzled.

"See? That wasn't so hard. I have no suit but I survive." The voice was a suggestion of a whisper, so close. Eric peered through the gloom and saw a pair of large, bright eyes looking back at him.

He stepped back in surprise and tripped over the pack. "You! You're an...an...animal!"

"You are not?" The eyes blinked slowly.

"Well. Well, yes. I suppose I am but not, well, how to say this?"

"You are sentient and I? I am not?" The voice seemed faintly amused.

"That sort of thing." Eric felt foolish. He had been terrified of a small furry animal with huge eyes.

"A snake is an animal, is it not? A rat?"

"Yes, quite so."

"They are not cute?" The soft voice insisted.

"No. Definitely not."

"Am I?" The voice almost purred.

"Well, yes. I suppose you are."

"Yet I am deadlier than the snake or rat. To you, anyway."

Eric felt himself go cold. "How so?"

"Do you hear my voice?"

"Yes."

"Are you certain of this, Human."

"Of course."

"You speak to me with your lips but how do you hear me?"

“My ears. I hear with my ears.”

“Close your ears.”

He reached up and put his fingers in his ears.

“Tighter.”

Eric pushed his fingers harder into his ears.

“Tighter.”

At last it dawned on him that he wasn't hearing the animal through his ears; the animal was telepathic.

“Ah! A revelation. Of course I do not speak your language—why should I? How arrogant of you to suppose that only humans are capable of communication or, even, speech. Why are you here?”

“I suspect that you know very well why I am here since you knew my name.”

“Humour me.”

“A criminal has escaped from maximum security. He is believed to be in this area.”

“Criminal?”

“Yes.”

“His crime?”

“Murder.”

“How?” An edge of curiosity in the small animal's voice.

“I don't know. My task was to bring him back to prison.”

“How?”

“What do you mean 'how'?”

“If you know nothing about him, how are you supposed to apprehend him? Is it not possible that he killed your colleagues and not me?”

“Perhaps I supposed that you were him when I first heard your voice.”

“But you could see nobody. Did you not think it strange that you could fail to see another human at such close proximity?”

“He is said to be a mutant. He was affected, or his parents—forebears, perhaps, were affected by the toxins in the Great War.” Eric groped in his memory for information.

“And only humans were affected? Only humans became mutants because of their, what was it? Ah, yes. ‘Four bears’.” There was a hint of a smile in the voice.

Eric recognised the change in the phrasing and ignored it. So the small animal has humour.

“Yes. Even animals have humour, Human.”

“Why am I now ‘human’ and not ‘Eric?’ Do you tire of this conversation? Are all animals here mutants?”

“Are all humans mutants? Are you, perhaps, a mutant?”

“I am not. I have to rely on technology.”

“As did your friends?”

“Yes.”

“Helped them very little, did it not?”

The small animal with the huge, luminous eyes, looked towards the eastern horizon. Eric could now make out some small details.

“Yes.” It said. “The sun rises. I must hide; my eyes are sensitive to sunlight. Will you carry me? In your pack?”

“What is the point? The sun will kill me once it activates the toxins in the atmosphere.”

“I, also, am a mammal. I live. So will you. The toxins have long since gone. The poison that is left is the propaganda that tells you that Earth is still deadly to you. Trust me.”

Eric left the suit and helmet on the ground, picked up the pack and rifle and started to walk west.

“Why do you walk away from the sun?”

“I am heading back to my base.”

“So that they can execute you?”

“Why would they do that?” Eric was astounded.

“You know the truth. They left you behind knowing that, eventually, you would have to

remove your helmet because your suit would run out of air. Then you would know. Now you are on the run. They will kill you for certain.”

“Why did they not take me with them?”

“I know nothing of these machines. Possibly it was full. Possibly they think that you killed your colleagues.”

“Me?” Eric was aghast. “Why would I kill them?”

“Perhaps you went mad with the silence and loneliness here. Perhaps your suit leaked and let in those toxins that you speak of and believe in. Possibly, possibly, possibly. You can find your own story to suit your needs. I need not fill in the gaps for you. You are human; you are the master species. I am only a small furry animal. Cute, as you say.”

“What is your name?”

“Ah, Human. The right question at last. I am Meevo.” He curled up and fell asleep in the side pocket of Eric’s pack.

“Which way do I go, then?” Eric was now in a worse position than he had previously thought.

“Not worse. Alive.” Eric heard faintly.

“True. True.” Eric agreed.

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