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Mixed Brigade

Science Fiction Adventure

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The sky was clear but the light from the local dwarf star didn't exactly shed much light. We were stumbling along in what on Earth would have been the light of a full moon. It's hard to believe that any plants could make a go of such a dim place, but the terrain was packed with flora. Fuji was humming ... again. Claude hiked is way up to him at the double time.

"Fuji," Claude slapped the smaller man on the back, "If you keep that up, I'm going to have to shoot you for giving away our approach to the enemy."

"Sorry, but wouldn't our talking in English give our approach away as well?" The little man smiled.

Claude cocked his weapon.

"Right, I'll stop humming then," he replied.

"You do that," Claude spat, "You do that."

Right then, Fuji fell into a hole and ended up standing in a puddle of water up to his waist. It was inevitable I suppose. Where there are plants, there is water. Fuji cursed, well I think it was a curse, I'm not up on my Japanese. I just figured that if it was me, that's what I'd be doing right about now. Joe held out his hand.

"Fuji, pay attention. Did I ask you to find water?"

"No sarge, just using a little initiative," Fuji explained as the taller American pulled him out of the muck. Joe was probably the only one who could have pulled him out by himself. These spacesuits are damn heavy and none of us had his helmet on. The air was breathable, and the helmet didn't give you much of a view to spot the enemy, so we weren't wearing ours. However, in this case, if the water had gone up to his neck, the suit would have filled instantly. He most likely would disappear below the water before anyone could have reached him. "Well," Joe explained, "roll up your flaps, quit the musical rendition and try using a little less initiative."

"Yes, boss-son."

Everybody continued to slog on. It didn't help that it was EG1P. That's slang for Earth Gravity one point something. I think these suits were designed for moonwalks, so besides being bulky, unless you were on the moon, they weighed a ton. At least these were camo. The first set the company was issued were NASA white. In the moonlight, it made you an easy target. Thank God the planet hadn't evolved insects yet. I can't imagine that it would be like having a mosquito down your pant legs in one of these rigs.

Intelligence reports had noted an alien presence on this leaf covered rock, so Earth Central sent 80,000 of its finest to find out what they were up to and stop them. We came ashore at a place nicknamed Point M, smack dab in the middle a small island. But we hadn't seen or heard anything. They sent us over to a flat plain that was bisected by a river. Now if we had put on our helmets, we could have walked across the bottom, but if you got stuck in the mud, you stayed there until you ran out of air. So here we were, waiting for the engineers. As usual, they were lost. Until they arrived, our unit was told to hold our position and await further orders.

"Hey Joe, we got no air cover, no armor support. What are we supposed to do if we find the aliens?" Oskar asked pointedly.

“Kill them,” Joe responded chewing on a cigar, “That’s the standard protocol for these kinds of things, don’t you think?”

Ivan and Claude Started setting up the Devil’s piano. This was a microwave plasma generator, effectively our heavy weapon. It wasn’t a phaser, mind you, it was more like a cross between a nasty heavy machine gun and a 35mm anti-tank gun. It fired bursts of plasma which contained intense microwaves. It looked like tiny spurts of light which did insignificant damage against hard targets until it hit something filled with water. Then it caused the water to boil so fast it literally exploded. Of course, if the aliens were silicon-based, we were screwed.

“Here we go again,” Claude mused, “I’m going to spend this entire war out here and I’ll never have fired a shot,” The corporal complained.

“What do you mean?” Ivan asked, but mostly the question was an empty gesture. The Russian was too busy trying to lift the heavy projector onto the firing tripod to bother listening to the Frenchman.

“You’re the one who gets to fire the damn thing,” he spit, “I just get to keep the thing plugged in.”

“Privilege of rank, corporal,” Ivan snickered.

The rest of us spent our time digging trenches. 300 years of military technology advancement and still all the officers can think of to have us do is to build trenches. Not really much of an improvement from the 1860s. Everything was going swimmingly until Jerry deliberately tripped Ivan. The Russian was up off the ground in seconds and returned the German’s compliment with a right cross to the chin. In seconds, the entire group had reverted to a status a caveman could have understood. In the blink of an eye, our Lieutenant, a gentleman by the name of Tom, taxied up and started throwing combatants to the side.

“That will be enough,” he shouted. “Let me make myself clear. Any more of this and you will find yourself on a transport back for a skinning so intense you won’t believe it. Now if you have any more complaints, see the chaplain, do you get my meaning?”

“Yes, sir,” the crew shouted back. It was an automated response to authority. No one really believed it, they just said it.

“I want you and you,” Tom pointed out both Jerry and Ivan, “to perform a reconnaissance of the other side.”

“Sir,” Jerry protested, “We have orders not to go into deep water.”

Joe looked at him and rolled the cigar in his mouth. He never lit the silly thing, after all, it could kill you. No, he just chewed on the end ceaselessly. “Well, why don’t you take your weapon and apply the beam to the bottom of some of those trees over there and direct them towards the other side. Then you can help each other crawl over it. And you had better do it before I launch you over to the other side with the toe of my boot.”

Vito snickered. “You too,” Joe declared. “Signal if you see anything, clear?”

The three nodded their understanding, although with a fair bit of reluctance.

Ivan and Jerry scrambled to get to their feet. As I mentioned, working in these suits was a task in itself, but on muddy ground, it was next to impossible. But they made it, just barely outrunning the sergeant's boot. They found a tree tall enough and they set about cutting it down. It landed with a crash on the far side of the river ... and then broke in half. The two portions were carried downstream by the swift current. Their second attempt was more successful. It involved lowering the tree via ropes and not letting it simply land on the other side. It took another hour or so before the tree branches were removed, allowing the two to cross.

Ivan, Vito, and Jerry crossed over the makeshift bridge like they were riding a mare, inching their way across while straddling the tree with their legs. At one point, Ivan lost his balance and almost fell off the trunk. But at the last minute, Vito grabbed his suit collar and forcefully righted his companion back into the tree. They finally made it across and Ivan turned back to Joe with a sly look on his face, "Charlie's the one with the antennas growing out of their foreheads, right?"

"No," explained Vito, "they're the ones with all the eyes popping out of their heads like roses. Come on let's go."

"The ones in the camo spacesuits are on our side," Joe yelled across the river, "Try to remember that." The three laughed and then half sprinted into the woods on the opposite bank.

"All right," Tom commanded in a deep contralto voice, "everyone back to work. There are trenches to be built."

"You really shouldn't send those two off together," Joe explained to the Lieutenant, "Best to keep them as far apart as possible. They're liable to shot each other, even if Vito gets in the way."

"Well then," Tom responded with a wry smile, "that'll solve our problem for us then, wouldn't it?"

But as it turns out, to everyone's surprise, intelligence was right. It wasn't long before Ivan and Jerry ran smack into the coming onslaught of the alien armada. Laser blasts filled the sky. They seemed to be coming from everywhere across the river. Where the three had taken their time crossing to the far side, they now leaped on the tree and ran across it like it was a standard pedestrian bridge complete with railings. Several times fire just missed their heads as they stumbled back across.

"How many of them did you see?" Joe demanded, shifting his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Fucking all of them," Jerry blithely announced.

"You think it's an advance party?" Joe asked the lieutenant.

Tom looked out at the intense level of firing, "No, it's something else." He turned and yelled at the rest of the troop, "Everybody get in your holes." In seconds people were running and leaping into trenches like they weren't wearing those heavy suits at all. Everyone stood, weapons pointing across the river.

"Fire!"

I have no idea who yelled the order, but the sky was soon littered with flashes of light and the pandemonium of explosions. In this kind of din, you wouldn't expect to be able to hear anyone's voice, but I heard Joe as clear a bell. He was walking down the trench line with the coolness of a football coach

at a homecoming game. “All I want to see is a pile of spent energy cells on this side and a pile of alien bodies on the other side.”

Fire and blasts were going everywhere, but I still hadn’t seen one target. I was just fired at the trees on the opposite bank, hoping I’d hit something. Half the time, I was wondering what everyone else was firing at. As I was thinking on this point Joe jumped into our trench and strode over to Chen, chewing on his damn cigar.

“Chen,” he shouted, “Aim your shots. Aim your shots.”

“Aim at what?” The Chinaman complained, “I can’t see a fucking thing.”

“Well,” Joe pulled the cigar out of his mouth. When he did this, you knew he was getting serious. He looked at Chen with those steely eyes of his, “Well, find something to shoot at.” Part of me didn’t want to see what we were shooting at. What if they were too terrible to look at? I imagined myself frozen in fear at some nameless horror. Yet the other half of me was even more terrified we were laying down deadly fire on one of our own units. Stupid morons probably got lost. In the end, I opted to see the enemy. Right about then was when the shelling started.

The blasts were everywhere. I looked over at Joe, “Where the hell is *our* artillery support?”

“With our luck,” the big American responded, “this is probably it.”

I smiled. I think it was the last thing he saw. A hole opened up in his forehead from energy weapons fire. There was an explosion of blood. I saw the whole thing in slow motion as if the rain of blood was a slow arch of some silly painter’s crimson acrylic. I could even make out the small drops which preceded the main flow, like a lazy splash of water on a summer’s day. Then it hit my face, and everything went back to full, frightening speed. I went back to returning fire, but I spend more time fumbling with the mechanism than getting off shots.

I turned around, half expecting to see the sergeant calmly telling me to take my time and pick my targets, just as he’d done hundreds of times on the practice range. But when I turned around, he was slumped in a sitting position, his skin already turning a pale white. I returned to my firing. I think I said quite a few derogatory slurs about aliens at this time, but my memory is a bit of a blur. The next thing I remember was hearing a large thud behind me.

I turned, half expecting to see a grizzly alien ready to stab me with a bayonet. But all I saw was Chen laying in the sergeant’s lap. At least I think it was Chen. It was hard to tell with his head missing. I returned to firing, but I wasn’t doing a respectable job. All I could think about was being alone, sharing a trench on a godforsaken planet with two corpses and asking myself how long would it take until there were three.

On this planet, it was hard to tell when night fell, except it seemed to go from a full moon to a new moon in an instant. In any case, the firing stopped, as if someone had slammed down the clapper at the end of a movie scene. I sat down heavily and started cleaning off Chen’s blood from my weapon. All this time firing it and I hadn’t even noticed it was there.

I looked up and recognized Tom, looking down at me from the lip of the trench. It was then when I realized I had my weapon pointed directly at him. He calmly pushed down the barrel of the weapon and stared at me with those piercing eyes. "I need you to hold this position, am I clear?"

"Yes sir," I mumbled.

"I'll try to get you some more men, but we're a little short-handed at the moment. Do you think you can hold on?"

"I'll do my best sir," I tried to sound more confident than I was, but Tom saw right through me. Yet all he said to me was, "That's a good lad." Then he disappeared. Probably off to some other section of the trench. I fell asleep shortly after we went away.

When I awoke, Joe and Chen were gone. Only a pool of blood remained to mark where they had been. Damn gravediggers must have dropped by while I was asleep. Fucking bastards, they had time and enough men to remove the bodies, but do you think they could get me some replacements? Of course not. Fucking bastards.

Dawn came up like moon rise and the firing started all over again. I could hear the Devil's piano blasting away; the loud noise was comforting ... until it stopped.

"Get your weapon back in action," Tom yelled.

"Working on it sir," Ivan replied.

"I need your gun," the lieutenant screamed, "We need your gun back in action. Get it sorted out. Get it sorted out now!"

I heard Fuji cursing at the aliens in Japanese. At least I think it was Japanese, it could have been Korean for all I know. He was working his way into a lather, to the point where I thought his lungs would burst. There was one repeated phrase over and over again. Then halfway through the phrase ... silence. In the silence, Ivan got the Devil's piano working again ... which drowned out almost everything else.

The fire was so intense, it lit up the sky. The sad part was, it was all white bolts of light, no colors. I fired back at the source of the shots, "Hey meatheads, why don't you use a red focusing crystal or something, so we can tell who is shooting who, aye?"

"Maybe the aliens have a suggestion box," Vito shouted back, "You can send in a request for a change to alien tactical operations."

The fight went on like a group of photographers talking images of runway models. I recalled the ancient model cameras you see in the vids. You know, the ones with the bulbs which melt after they light up. I imagined a pile of those on the battlefield. At least in this case, maybe the other side might run out of ammo.

One thing I'll say about this world, it rotates four times faster than Erath. Meaning there is a sunset every six hours. It was hard to think of it as sunset since daylight wasn't much of a day in any case. Just as we were getting close to another one of those less than colorful sunsets, the Devil's piano stopped again. I waited for it to start up again, but nothing seemed to happen. I jumped out of my trench and into the heavy weapon's position. I drew all sorts of fire from the other side. They got my suit about four times,

but the little buggers missed me. Ivan and Jerry were sitting next to the weapon as if they were ready to fire. But they were both dead. Tom was laying across the top of the gun unmoving, his suit smoking from the heat of the gun.

“Hey, Vito,” I hollered, “You want to give me a hand here?” There was no response. “Claude? Oskar?” I yelled out. But the response was the same. The bastards were sleeping on the job again.

Fortunately, Charlie stopped firing just as the sun went down. So, I lifted my head to get a better view, to see what those goldbricks were up to. Trouble was, the sun wasn’t quite down yet, and I took one above the left eye.

When I woke up, I was surprised to find myself alive. Blood was pouring down my face and I couldn’t see out of my left eye. I would see our trenches, in fact, I had no idea where I was, I must have been wandering around for some time, half dazed. Finally, I found a trench hole and I moved toward it, but what I saw made me drop and roll over behind a tree. Straightening up, I took another look to confirm what I thought I saw.

These were our trenches all right, after all, I had dug the damn thing myself. But the troops filling them were facing the wrong way. Some of them had white suits on, a few were red, and one was even orange. Everyone’s weapons seemed to be a different model. Then I noticed one of the suits had a ball-like hip and six legs.

Damn, we’ve been overrun by Charlie.

I took another look and got out my light intensifying scope. Jesus H. Christ. Some of them were missing heads. The one in the orange suit only had a skull. Fuck me. Charlie was using the dead bodies of our own men as shock troops. Hell, we might never have been shooting at Charlie at all! Graves registration wasn’t picking up the bodies, Charlie was. OK, time to beat a hasty retreat.

Something was controlling them, but the controls didn’t seem to work at night. No wonder they didn’t fire in the darkness. It was slow going as I had to drag my left leg. It wouldn’t bend at the knee for some reason. I slipped into one of the back trenches to keep out of sight. Making my way down the line I couldn’t recall which way HQ was. They had to be told what was going on. Just as I turned the corner, I saw a camo suit. Even from the back, the cigar told me it was Sarge. I was relieved.

“Boy am I glad to see you,” I blurted out. “You’ll never believe what I just saw ...” Only then I remembered, Joe was dead. I stood transfixed as the suit turned around. I couldn’t move. I guess Charlie did have some control after all. As I saw his face, I recognized the mug, the unlit cigar hanging limply from his mouth. Yep, it was him. Same hole in his head. I had seen him get it the other night.

He raised his weapon and ...