

Solo
a short story by Keith Brooke

Recording.

The swirling wind throws fistfuls of sleet through the darkness. Yellow light spills out of the windows of the low, uniform buildings lined up along the track.

I hide behind a tree, keep my head steady as I pan left to right with the eyecam.

"On nights like this sensible people stay at home and, I confess, that's

where I'd like to be right now. But there's a story to break, events to report." I keep my voice low. I've learnt already that this establishment

is heavily guarded. And if the agency hadn't sacked me for reasons of economy I wouldn't be alone here now, I'd have backup.

I make a mental note to cut in some views I shot yesterday: a four storey

red-brick building with a line of spotlights suspended from its eaves, shining down so that the yard where military vehicles are neatly arranged

is lit without shadow. "Here in C Block," I voice over, "the military scientists have been working. It is C Block where they took what remained

of the landing craft and it is in C Block that they imprisoned its pilot.

Already, they will have bought the silence of the farmer who witnessed the

crash. And if the man could not be bought they will have silenced him by

other means for these are brutal people, ruled by their fear. Learning that your race is not unique only ever happens once."

Headlights appear suddenly, picking out the sleet like a swarm of fireflies. A jeep, crowded with braying, youthful soldiers. I press my body to the tree, willing them not to look in my direction. The jeep skids, straightens, heads off into the night.

I hunch low and run through the slush, keeping a course parallel with the

metalled road. I'm cold and wet but I must keep going. This is my big chance. In fact, the agency did me a favour: when I break this story

I'll have my pick of agencies, each one begging for my services.

I spot a fence and stop well short. It looks like an ordinary chain-link

fence, but after all the high tech gadgets I've seen in the last day or so

I know that won't be the case. There will be cameras at the very least, perhaps infrared beams, sensors in the ground.

"My first real test," I mutter, panning left to right. "Do I take the subtle approach - try to find some other way through and so avoid detection? Or should I be direct - just cut a hole and take them by surprise?"

I pull my light jacket more tightly shut, wishing I had been able to dress

more sensibly. Sometimes you don't stop to think. Sometimes you take whatever chance presents itself.

As I consider my options, I pan back along the slush-covered road, retracing the course I have taken. I stop with the eyecam picking out a square building, spotlights lined up along its eaves. I turn to the

fence

again. "I've decided," I say, stepping forward. "Sometimes you have to take a gamble. I'm going to cut a hole, but I'm going to have to be fast."

I take a piece of wire between forefinger and thumb, squeeze. The metal pops and I move down to the next link, steadily cutting my way through, cutting my way out.

No sudden spotlights, no blaring sirens, but I know my corruption of the establishment's defences will have been detected. When the hole is big enough I step through. I look around once, then start to run, relying on the biohydraulics grown into my neck to steady the view of the eyecam. I have little idea of what to expect, now that I am free of the army and their scientists. I came to this place in the back of a military truck: no windows, no chance to keep track of the route taken from the remote hill site where they picked me up. Being unfamiliar with that archaic mode of transport, I could not even guess at the distance covered, only that the journey started in mid-afternoon and ended in darkness. It's hard running in all this slush and mud. At the foot of the slope I come to another metalled road. I choose to run on its firm surface, trading cover for distance.

Headlights again. Coming towards me. I plunge into the hedge, gasp in pain as its pointed twigs and thorns rake my face. The car goes past. In the distance, I can hear voices, petrochemical engines spluttering into poisonous life. I force my way through the hedge. The road will not be safe any longer. Even as I do this I hear another vehicle approaching: coming, this time, from the military base. I peer out. It looks like the jeep I saw earlier: four boyish soldiers, one driving, the others clutching onto their weaponry. They must have sobered up quite abruptly if they are the same soldiers. I run on the field side of the hedge, mud sucking at my feet. The panicked military response will make excellent copy, but first I must ensure that my escape is successful. And then I must find some way off this miserable planet.

Not long after the jeep went by the helicopters joined the search. Great, clumsy things, their engines booming persistently. Whenever one approached, with its lights sweeping the ground before it, I ducked into cover. Did they think I would stand in the open waving? I'm in a town now. Neat little houses, streets lit by powerful lamps on posts. These people use energy as if it was free. Perhaps it is.

Perhaps

they really are stupid.

I realised, back there in the mud and sleet, that there is no way I can get away from here. I need backup, but for the first time since I started

in this business I am solo.

They will recapture me, I know.

And perhaps it will be for the best. Even now I am broadcasting all that I

see. Unless it is being jammed, my signal is going out to orbit and from

there it will be relayed to every dataspread in the System. I don't know

why this race has never been contacted, inducted into the System, but my

scoop will break that embargo. By spreading my story and so forcing contact I am taking the only chance I have of getting home.

The citizens of this place look but they see very little indeed.

It must be early in the evening, because otherwise these people in the streets would be at home in their sleeping quarters.

I walk in the open, through crowds of hurrying pedestrians - pale-skinned,

thick tufts of hair on their heads and sometimes on their faces, all wrapped up against the elements. Occasionally one bumps into me, glares

at

me. When this happens I make a smile and perhaps only then they sense something different about me. They look hard, taking in my hairless features, my light jacket over thin, gangling limbs. Then they look

away,

lower their heads, join the flow again.

I stop by a wide window, which reveals a cavernous, brightly lit room. Some kind of public hall, I guess. Bright banners and signs hang from

the

ceiling and row upon row of television monitors stare out into the darkness. Some of these monitors show cars driving fast, spinning in

the

mud, crowds of people watching. Others show a person with long, ugly

hair

seated at a desk with a picture behind him. As I watch, the view cuts to

a

still picture: a staring man in a collarless shirt. The man is bald and

he

is trying to make himself smile, although it is something he has not

quite

mastered.

I turn away. So they dare to show my picture in public. The scientists, too, must be relying on the resemblance of our two races - I am sure

they

would not have broadcast an appeal for a missing alien. I expect they describe me as a criminal, perhaps a dangerous murderer.

I hope they do not shoot murderers in this town.

A brightly lit hall, built on three levels with a high, arched, glass ceiling. Lined up on either flank, and above me on galleries, are more of

the smaller, glass-fronted halls. Trees grow from walled beds and a fountain sprays high, the water falling back down into a perfectly circular pool. People rush by, many clutching plastic bags. Others sit

on

benches, watching the water or the rushing people. This might be some
kind of church, I decide. I pan slowly, recording it all.
A cathedral, perhaps.
It is good to be out of the cold wind and sleet, but now I notice that
one or two people are studying me more closely.
One of them catches my eye and I try to smile again. The person gasps,
then gathers up a child and hurries away.
Presumably they have seen my face on the monitors.
I find a bench. Its frame is chrome, its surface some kind of plastic.
I sit down and watch the fountain and the rushing people. I don't think
they will take long, somehow.

It was all very subdued. Soldiers in blue uniforms, then the familiar
soldiers in green.
They stood for a long time with their guns pointed at me as the crowds,
all around, dispersed. If they could understand my language I would
have told them not to worry, I would go with them in peace. But they could
not, so I let them point their silly guns and shout at anyone who came too
close.
One of the scientists arrived, eventually. At least, I had always
assumed he was a scientist, although he wears a uniform much like the others.
Now, the truck stops, its engine falls quiet. I step outside into the
slush. Spotlights glare down from above so that the only shadows are
those immediately below the neatly parked vehicles.
We go inside.
Instead of heading up the stairs to where they held me before, I am
shown into a small room, an office, perhaps. The men speak to me, but
naturally I do not comprehend their meaning.
The scientist points at a chair. I sit and look up, framing the man
with the eyecam.
The silence is awkward but there is little to do about that.
Eventually the door opens again. A man comes in. He is as ugly as all
the others, but he does not wear a uniform, so I assume he is important. He
is a thin man, with staring eyes. There is something about his manner that
catches my attention. Something different. I view him steadily, track
him as he walks across, leans with his buttocks on the edge of a desk.
Words are exchanged and the scientist and the guards leave the room.
This new man is either confident or foolish, or both.
"Your signal is being blocked," he says.
I had suspected as much, but the broadcast had been my only chance.
I stop myself, stare at the strange man. I had understood his words.
He smiles, but it is not really a smile, merely a well-rehearsed
expression. "I should have let them shoot you," he says. Then he opens
his arms wide, accepts me into his embrace. I should have realised I was

not

alone in this place. I start to cry, with all the pent-up fears and traumas of the past two days. There is so much I want to ask but, most

of

all, I wonder, How long have we been here?

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