

## **OF MICE AND MARINES**

John Yunker

### **CHARACTERS (1F/2M/F)**

- MS. KOVACH (F)
- SERGEANT BRILES (M/F)
- LIEUTENANT COTTON (M/F)

**TIME:** Present.

**SETTING:** A coastal sand dune within Camp Pendleton military base, just north of San Diego, California.

**SCENE 1**

*(There is an evening sun, sounds of seagulls and waves against the shore. The SERGEANT enters slowly, eyes on the ground, followed by the LIEUTENANT. The SERGEANT stops.)*

SERGEANT

This is the spot, sir.

LIEUTENANT

I don't see anything.

SERGEANT

I read online that they're mostly nocturnal. It's probably under the sand somewhere.

LIEUTENANT

If this all goes south, Sergeant, you'll be joining it.

SERGEANT

Yes, sir.

LIEUTENANT

We do not want word of this to escalate, you understand?

SERGEANT

I do, sir.

LIEUTENANT

What the hell were you doing over here?

SERGEANT

I've been running, sir, at dawn. Clears my head. The other morning I looked down and there it was.

LIEUTENANT

And your first instinct was to take its picture?

SERGEANT

I was curious.

LIEUTENANT

Sergeant, there's no shame in cashing in a few weeks of leave. You've earned it.

SERGEANT

Sir, I'm ready to go back.

LIEUTENANT

And join what unit? You're all that's left of them Sergeant.

SERGEANT

I'm no good here, sir.

LIEUTENANT

That's becoming increasingly obvious. *(pause)* How the hell did she get this photo?

SERGEANT

Sir, I only sent the photo to the San Diego Zoo. I thought they could identify it.

LIEUTENANT

Be careful what you wish for, Sergeant.

SERGEANT

How was I to know it was endangered?

LIEUTENANT

That's your mistake. Just about every damn thing around here is endangered. The birds, seals, snakes, lizards. Your military career.

*(MS. KOVACH enters, in a rush)*

MS. KOVACH

I'm sorry I'm late. I got all turned around on this base and there was this horrendous accident on the freeway. I was sitting in traffic thinking to myself: Why send Marines into combat when California drivers are just as lethal? You must be Sergeant Briles.

SERGEANT

Ms. Kovach. This is my commanding officer, Lieutenant Cotton, First Marine Division.

*(They shake hands.)*

MS. KOVACH

Mr. Cotton. Sir. Thank you for meeting with me.

LIEUTENANT

I have 20 (*glances at watch*) — make that 10 — minutes.

MS. KOVACH

The photo. I've had several colleagues at the zoo examine at it, and we can confirm that it is indeed a Pacific Pocket Mouse. This is an extremely rare species of mouse, endemic to the Southern California coast.

LIEUTENANT

So now we have to worry about diseases.

MS. KOVACH

Umm, not epidemic. *Endemic*. They exist nowhere else in the world.

LIEUTENANT

But they could carry diseases?

MS. KOVACH

No. I mean, not to my knowledge. The fact is, we know very little about this mouse. There are fewer than 200 left alive. On the planet. Which is why you need to *protect* this nest, Lieutenant.

LIEUTENANT

Ms. Kovach, Camp Pendleton has, by its very existence, protected 18 miles of Southern California coastline from commercial development. We protect more than a thousand species of rare plants and wildlife.

MS. KOVACH

And that's impressive. Truly. All I'm asking is for you to add one more species to your list.

LIEUTENANT

One more species? This is a military installation. Not Noah's Ark.

MS. KOVACH

You could at least install netting to keep your men off the sand dunes.

LIEUTENANT

Netting won't stop an AAV.

(*AMANDA looks confused*)

SERGEANT

Amphibious assault vehicle.

LIEUTENANT

Tomorrow morning there will be more than a thousand Marines and assorted heavy assault vehicles conducting an amphibious landing. Right where we're standing. Now we could, as you suggest, put up some netting. Maybe even post a KEEP OFF sign, though I suspect the Sergeant's men will use it for target practice.

MS. KOVACH

Can't you use a different beach?

LIEUTENANT

A different beach? How about Alpha Bravo? We shut that beach down five years ago thanks to a few hundred snowy plover nests. La Mesa beach is closed during seal pupping season. And the Santa Margarita River channel is completely off limits, and I don't even know what the hell we're protecting there. Now explain to me how I'm supposed to train Marines to land on beaches when, thanks to you and your colleagues, we have no more beaches?

MS. KOVACH

You're telling me you can't find one other landing spot across 18 miles of coastline?

SERGEANT

I'm telling you that I'm done playing musical beaches. This has been our primary amphibious training ground for years, and I see no reason to change over a damn rat.

MS. KOVACH

It's a mouse. And with all due respect Lieutenant, extinction is a very good reason.

SERGEANT

Perhaps we could relocate the mouse. Off base. Where he'd be safe. Wouldn't that work?

MS. KOVACH

I suppose.

LIEUTENANT

Good. Can you do it today?

MS. KOVACH

Today? It could take weeks. First you have to locate the nest, or nests. Then you have to carefully identify and capture them.

LIEUTENANT

Then I'm afraid you're too late. Besides, that rodent could be long gone by now.

MS. KOVACH

There it is.

LIEUTENANT

What?

MS. KOVACH

By your foot.

LIEUTENANT

*(jumps)*

Whoa!

*(Then, composing himself)*

Are we done here? Very good then. Sergeant Briles will escort you to your car.

MS. KOVACH

Wait! I'm not finished.

LIEUTENANT

There's nothing more to discuss.

MS. KOVACH

I could file a lawsuit, Lieutenant.

LIEUTENANT

Be my guest. We have lawyers too. And like all Marines, they love a good fight. The sergeant will escort you to your car.

*(LIEUTENANT exits)*

MS. KOVACH

I can walk myself.

SERGEANT

You parked on a firing range.

MS. KOVACH

Oh. Can I stay here a few minutes longer?

SERGEANT

I don't think that's a good—

MS. KOVACH

At least let me say goodbye, Sergeant.

*(SERGEANT gives MS. KOVACH  
room. She kneels, searching.)*

If only I could find him again. I'd take him with me. They're such beautiful creatures. But so elusive. For nearly two decades scientists believed they were extinct. Yet they were here all along. We declare extinction when we're ready to give up; that doesn't mean the animal has.

*(Looks up, toward the sea.*

*SERGEANT follows her eyes.)*

Millions of years of evolution and it all comes down to this small stretch of coastline. I can almost imagine things the way they were, not just a hundred, two hundred years ago. Eons. To that moment when the first mammals pulled themselves ashore.

SERGEANT

The first amphibious landing.

MS. KOVACH

And it's been all downhill from there.

SERGEANT

Why mice?

MS. KOVACH

Excuse me?

SERGEANT

Why protect this animal? Out of all animals?

MS. KOVACH

Somebody has to. Sure, I could have picked one of the supermodels of endangered species—the red wolf, African penguin, killer whale. But I've always been partial to underdogs, or, in this case, undermice. Maybe it's because I identify with them. They're solitary creatures. And, until we humans came along, they had a great eye for real estate – they all live within two miles of the ocean.

SERGEANT

I shouldn't have shared that photo.

MS. KOVACH

I'm glad you did.

SERGEANT

The thing is, right now, my job is about as unstable as this sand dune.

MS. KOVACH

Answer me this Sergeant. Why did you take that photo?

SERGEANT

I wish to God I hadn't.

MS. KOVACH

That's not an answer.

SERGEANT

I don't know. Like I told the Lieutenant, I was curious. This beach. It's a perpetual war zone. Ordinance, tanks, troops. AAVs plowing through like rush hour on the freeway. I never imagined anything could survive here.

MS. KOVACH

Every species needs a defender.

SERGEANT

No. This ain't my fight. I'm supposed to be on the other side of that ocean, saving lives. Human lives. But people like you don't get that. You treat these animals like, like they're one of us. But they're only mice.

MS. KOVACH

Only is a dangerous word, Sergeant. How many animals – humans and otherwise—have died as a result of that word?

SERGEANT

I just meant we can't save everyone. We have to prioritize.

MS. KOVACH

Point me to my car, Sergeant. I'll take my chances with the bullets.

SERGEANT

If you file a lawsuit, I could lose my job.

MS. KOVACH

You can't save everyone, Sergeant. We have to prioritize.



*(MS. KOVACH exits. The SERGEANT watches then turns his attention to the sand.)*

SERGEANT

There you are. You happy now? See what a mess you've made of my life?

*(Sits on the sand as light fades to night)*

Yeah, I know. You didn't take the damn picture. I took the damn picture. So now what? Improvise? Adapt? Overcome? The Marine way.

*(Light is fading fast)*

How do you do it? Stay alive with all this fighting going on above you? You don't look scarred — skittish, maybe, but you're a mouse. I guess you don't worry about not sleeping at night, being nocturnal and all. Maybe I should be nocturnal as well.

*(Leans back onto the sand as the light fades to dark)*

You do have an eye for real estate. It's not fair. You find a sliver of sand free of homes, parking lots, people, and then we come through with our tanks and boots and bombs. But you do not give up. You keep on fighting. You improvise, you adapt, you over...

*(We hear the sound of waves. Then the sun begins to rise. The SERGEANT is asleep.)*

LIEUTENANT (OFF)

Sergeant? Sergeant?

*(LIEUTENANT enters; sees the SERGEANT)*

Sergeant!

*(SERGEANT jumps to attention, salutes.)*

SERGEANT

Sir. Yes!

LIEUTENANT

Where the hell have you been?

SERGEANT

Sir, I've been, I've been—running.

LIEUTENANT

You haven't heard, have you?

SERGEANT

Heard?

LIEUTENANT

Car accident last night. On the freeway. I guess she was right about those California drivers.

SERGEANT

Sir?

LIEUTENANT

Ms. Kovach. Dead. Or, in her words, extinct.

SERGEANT

*(Lost in himself)*

Extinct?

LIEUTENANT

Which means no lawsuit. Which means your ass is in the clear, and we're all set to kick off Dawn Blitz. Select your team's objective, Sergeant: Land or defend? Sergeant?

SERGEANT

Defend.

LIEUTENANT

No photographs this time.

SERGEANT

Yes, sir.

*(The LIEUTENANT exits. The SERGEANT addresses the troops.)*

SERGEANT

Marines. Gather 'round. Listen up. We are going to fortify our positions back in those hills and wait until the AAVs pass over this coastal line.

*(The sun brightens.)*

Wait. Change in plans. We're going to improvise. We will not retreat. Instead, I want a perimeter established around this beachhead, right here. Nobody — no Humvees, no AAVs — nothing gets through this line.

*(Steps forward.)*

Take your positions. We will defend this sand dune. Protect it at all costs. Improvise. Adapt. Overcome.

*(Sounds of explosions growing  
louder. He stands in front of the  
mouse den and he glances back.)*

Don't worry. It's loud I know. But I'll get you through this. We'll get through this.

END OF PLAY