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Editor's Note: A Thin Line

There's a thin line between love and hate, between friends and enemies, between helping someone and hurting them. And there's an even thinner line between lust and a trip to the emergency room, between leaving a man behind and laying down cover fire while he makes his escape, between poetic license and an ill-conceived run-on sentence. And the one between wanting a hamburger and punching your buddy in the face? You need a microscope.

So, to honor that thin, poorly painted, hard-to-see line – the one that runs haphazard through your psyche, crosses a busy interstate and then doubles back on itself and jumps off a cliff, leaving you simultaneously sad, furious, horny and tired – we bring you issue seventeen of Jersey Devil Press.

First up is the based-on-a-true-story “The Monster at Baggage Carousel #3,” by Matthew Bey. Next it's Carol Deminski's tender “The Fortune Teller,” followed by Ken Ledford's “Space Creature Versus Earth Creature.” Then we move onto the action-adventure part of our program with “Courting Aleksandra,” by Mark J. Reagan, and “Out of Sight, Out of Time,” by Timothy Miller.

Five magnificent stories presenting a grab bag of emotions, all guaranteed to be less straightforward than you'd think.

– Eirik Gumeny

The Monster at Baggage Carousel #3

by Matthew Bey

When Hudson Principes returned from Minnesota, he was surprised to discover that his girlfriend had turned into a monster. He recognized it the moment it walked into the airport baggage claim. Most of the face and some of the breasts retained a striking resemblance to Elle, but the rest of it had mutated monstrously. It had to duck and drop onto its forelimbs to get through the motion-sensitive sliding doors. Hudson noted that each of its limbs terminated in two pairs of opposable claws like the feet of a chameleon.

It shuffled into the airport and rose to its full twelve-foot height, slashing a pair of tourists with its spined elbows. The protruding eyes, olive green like Elle's, rotated independently, searching for him.

Hudson raised his hand. "Over here." He shouldered his single item of checked baggage, a waterproof camping backpack.

The monster lumbered toward him. Red and black scales, shiny like jewels, covered its body. It parted pale, thin lips, and a ribbon of tongue darted out, tasting the air for traces of his scent.

"How was your flight?" it rumbled.

"Not bad. Did you have trouble parking?"

The last part was a tacit allusion to how, despite an hour delay due to a faulty engine revolution gauge, the monster had arrived even later than Hudson's baggage.

"No. I just circled around." It kept one protruding eye on Hudson while the other scanned the baggage claim and the defenseless passengers of flight 1479. "Is there a restroom around here?"

"Ah." Hudson dropped his backpack. "I think there's one on the upper level. By the security gates."

“Thanks. I’ll be right back.”

It leapt onto a concrete column and scuttled up to the second level. There was a short scream as it bit the head off a federally-funded passenger screener.

Hudson sat on his backpack and put his hands on his chin. He remembered the last night he spent with Elle before he left for Minnesota. It had been only a week ago, but she had changed a lot. They had eaten at the Golden Corral, a sentimental treat. She had been upset by the non-functioning ice cream machine, but mollified by the candy corn on the dessert table. Then they went to see the latest Harry Potter movie. The over-air-conditioned theater prompted them to curl up in their seats and intertwine their arms for warmth.

The floor tile splintered as the monster dropped the full twenty feet from the level above. Fresh blood stained Elle’s lips.

“You ready to go?”

The monster had parked a couple rows inside the airport parking ramp. Somehow it managed to fold into the driver seat of Elle’s four-door Honda Civic. The black and yellow banded horns that arched from its forehead scratched diamond-tipped gouges into the windshield.

“How do I get out of here?” the monster asked rhetorically, swerving erratically through the parking lot aisles. Like Elle, the monster was easily befuddled by simple traffic decisions.

“So how was your trip?”

“Not so bad. Got to spend time with family. The fourth of July was fun.”

Hudson could have kicked himself for summarizing such a good conversation opener. Now the monster drove on in silence. It handed the parking ticket to the gate attendant, paying as little attention to the woman in the booth as it did to Hudson. Elle had the same distracted air through much of their relationship, which had made substantive connection difficult. Now that Elle was a monster, Hudson recognized this as the behavior of a predator

circling a waterhole; the languorous wait for easy prey to show itself.

“So. You’ve been gone a week,” the monster said after a time. “I’ve changed.”

Have you ever, Hudson thought to himself. He kept his mouth shut. After a previous relationship had devolved into shouting matches and fights, he had vowed never to utter a negative word to Elle. He had thought that if nothing bad went in, then nothing bad could come out. So the whole monster thing had him off balance.

“Hudson, I didn’t want to tell you this over the phone. But I don’t have feelings for you. I don’t think we should see each other anymore.”

They drove in silence. Hudson’s mouth worked as he tried to think of the perfect thing to say that would reverse everything, that would change the monster back into someone who smiled at him.

The monster shifted in its seat, bony spurs slicing vinyl.

“That’s why I’m going to hunt you down, gouge out your eyes, and eat you alive.”

“But I fell for you.”

“I’ve talked this through, and I’ve come to my decision. There’s a lot going on in my life right now, and I just can’t do a serious relationship.”

Hudson’s brow furrowed with suspicion.

“Waitaminute. You’ve been getting into the transmogrification alkaloids while I’ve been away, haven’t you?”

Both eyes swiveled onto him, burning with a reptilian hatred. The monster hissed, “This isn’t about the transmogrification alkaloids. This is about us.”

“I’m just saying –”

“I know what you’re saying. I came to this decision on my own. I don’t want to leave you with any hope. It wouldn’t be very respectful to lead you on. So I’m going to kill you in one week.”

The monster braked gently in front of Hudson's house. Hudson climbed out and dropped his backpack on the sidewalk. Leaning down to the window, he addressed the monster's hulking mass, saying, "Will you stay for a little while?"

"No. You should settle in. And, you know, arrange your affairs."

Hudson watched the Honda Civic's tail lights recede before going inside.

Hudson barely slept at all the first night. He lay awake, staring at the ceiling, his mind filled with fear, anticipation, and memories of his life with Elle. He recalled the day they had spent hiking in the city greenbelt. It was a shockingly beautiful canyon, forested and serene. They hiked until they got too hot, and then they cooled in the turquoise waters of the creek and played in its tumbling rapids. The limestone creek bed was as clean as a Los Angeles swimming pool. When they got hungry they ate a picnic lunch of crackers, goat cheese, and mangos. Back at Hudson's house, they drank about a quart of water each and fell into his bed, spontaneously falling asleep in each other's arms.

The conversation in the car festered in Hudson's mind. Every reply he should have made during that drive back from the airport occurred to him with an insomniac's clarity. Sometime after five in the morning he began to write an email filled with all the suspicions, fears, analogies, and obliquely related anecdotes that he had thought during the night. He accused the monster of turning its co-workers against him, getting bad advice from Elle's mother, suffering bi-polar disorder, displaying inhumanly contemptuous hostility, deleting that very email without reading it, only appreciating boorish boyfriends, and having stupid musical taste. His confessions had an abusive familiarity, like a pervert unbuttoning his fly on the bus.

He emailed the letter to the monster, not because he wanted it to know how he felt, but because Hudson had no one else that would accept his confession. He felt fundamentally alone, his investment of intimacy had gone worthless overnight.

It took two days for the monster to reply, a delay that seemed more disdainful than mere words. He imagined the monster reading his email in its lair, cruelly baffled by his admissions of hurt.

“What you’re feeling is normal. I was firm with you because I didn’t want you to have any hope,” the monster wrote. “Your ex-girlfriend trained you well. You didn’t seem to have much of a personality.”

That’s the second time she told me not to have any hope, Hudson thought. She wouldn’t have stressed that unless there was some chance we could go back to the way things were.

Almost immediately, Hudson emailed the monster back, apologizing for everything he had said. The monster never replied.

Hudson slumped through work all week. He snapped at his co-workers at Captain Goosebush’s Alkaloid Synethetorium. He could go no more than twenty minutes without thinking about the monster or all the good times he had had with Elle.

He entertained the prospect of escape, of returning to his childhood home and starting a new life. He went so far as looking up a website for a real estate agent in northern Minnesota. The photos of wooded lots only depressed him. Even though the photos were ostensibly a sales tool, they looked unspeakably bleak and forlorn. The north woods wilderness had too short a growing season for all but the most anemic and tortured vegetation. The roads were unpaved, the cottages and hunting shacks constructed from ramshackle plywood. All the photos needed to complete the effect were turn-of-the-century immigrant couples; crabby and

gnarled at thirty, crippled by frostbite and Seasonal Affective Disorder. Was this supposed to be the home of his heart? This pathetic, empty wilderness? In the end he found he was too lazy to flee.

He spent more nights of sleepless worry. During this nocturnal fretting he had revelations into aspects of Elle's personality that had previously been a mystery to him. He had labored under an angelic vision of her, incapable of even the most modest ill thought. In his re-analysis, a pattern of quitting emerged. Elle had quit college and her job at the grocery store. She had quit her Pilates classes and her family. Whenever faced with difficulty or duress, she gave up, part of a lifetime retreat into a slothful primitivism. With nothing left to surrender, she had quit humanity itself. At the heart of this quitting lay a brutal apathy, tinged only on the farthest reaches with offhand rage. When the time came, the monster would kill Hudson out of lazy reflex.

Even with all his worrying, it came as a surprise when his week was up. The monster called him at work.

"Meet me at Goosebush's at four-thirty," the monster growled, then hung up.

Hudson sat at the window of the synethetorium, stirring an iced frappalkaloid, waiting for the monster to show. Among the tables a handful of customers lounged in feverish pursuit of alchemical culture. In a corner, beneath an amateurishly framed painting of a masculine nude, a pair of slacker dudes drank cerebralkaloids. They mumbled about the latest political documentary as their brains bubbled out their ears like bloody wads of chewing gum. Outside in the cheap plastic chairs that passed for sidewalk seating at Goosebush's, a girl from the local alternative high school giggled as her limbs liquefied from a syrupmog. Goosebush's Slovakian dishwasher would be grumbling about mopping up that mess.

Like Elle would have been, the monster was late. When it came into view, walking across the street toward Goosebush's, his

heart leapt. The monster walked just like Elle, loping with a spacey gait, the back arched languidly, the head despondently tilted to the side.

It's coming to see me, Hudson thought with a mixture of fear and pride.

The bell above the door jingled as the monster leaned its head inside.

"Let's go for a walk," it suggested.

It was a blisteringly hot day as they made a circuit of the neighborhood. Hudson held his iced frappalkaloid in the hand opposite the monster, so his free hand might ward off the monster in the event of a precipitous attack and buy him an extra moment of life.

"I don't think you're right for me," the monster began. "So I think it's best that you die."

"Before you do it, do you think that I could get one last kiss?" Hudson asked, taking a sip from the frappalkaloid.

"Yeah, sure." With distracted disinterest, the monster bent to Hudson's face, the forked tongue snaking across its pale lips.

Hudson spit frappalkaloid into its mouth. The monster recoiled, strong emotion coloring its face for the first time. Its mouth bubbled and frothed. It fell onto claws and spiked knees.

"I've been spending the week researching. Goosebush's synethetorium is relatively well-stocked with alkaloid reference manuals." Hudson stepped out of claw-reach. "What you're experiencing is the first stage of a transmogrification alkaloid antidote that I developed. How do you like the mocha flavor?"

The monster vomited purple viscera. Its back heaved and arched. The jeweled scales lost their luster and sloughed off like rotten banana skins.

Hudson grabbed the banded horns and snapped them from the monster's forehead. He tossed them to the ground with a sneer.

“It was probably a mistake to fall in love with you. We never had much in common. But there you go. What can I do about it now?”

Elle lay in the piles of shed monster flesh, clothed in blood and slime. It was definitely her, as beautiful as ever. She looked like an anime rendering of Winona Ryder. Her olive green eyes turned on Hudson and she gave him the sideways-crooked smile that had stolen his heart.

He dropped to his knees in the monster muck, resting her head in his hands.

“Do you think I would give up on you so easily? You are everything I have ever wanted.”

“Oh, Hudson.” Elle’s left hand brushed his cheek. “This had nothing to do with the transmutation alkaloids.”

With her right hand, Elle drove the curved monster horn up beneath Hudson’s ribs. His jaw dropped in surprise, air hissing from shattered lungs.

“This is about us.”

MATTHEW BEY's work has appeared in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Drabblecast, Pseudopod, Black Gate, Town Drunk, and many other publications. He is the editor of Space Squid and assistant editor at the Drabblecast. He is currently campaigning to win the least deserved Campbell Award in history.

The Fortune Teller

by Carol Deminski

The town of Seaside Beach was in decay. It was once a wholesome family destination with a Ferris wheel and salt water taffy stands. Now its worn boardwalk was lined with tattoo parlors and bars where leather-clad bikers and their women danced to loud music and drank beer into the early hours.

Florence sat re-reading *The Witches of Eastwick* at her cramped bistro table in her booth on the boardwalk. On the table she had a deck of oversized tarot cards, a piece of quartz, and an incense burner.

A young man approached the booth. His black hair was in a ponytail. He had green eyes framed by long lashes. He was tall and rail thin.

"I'd like a reading," he said. He sat in one of the chairs and his bony knees barely fit beneath the table.

She picked up her cards and began to shuffle.

"Tell me about yourself."

"My friends call me Luc. I work at the Crab Shack down the boardwalk."

"What kind of reading do you want?" she asked.

"Just tell me what you see," he said.

"Alright. Cut," she said.

His left hand hovered over the cards, then he cut them.

She turned the first one over. The Devil. Violence. She revealed the second card. The Magician. Sickness and pain.

She shifted in her seat; these were difficult cards to get in combination. She hoped the third would be better.

The Tower. One of the worst in the deck. Deception. Misery and ruin.

"Well? What do they mean?"

She detected his impatience. "You've had severe difficulties in your past, perhaps with family."

"I didn't get along with my father. I wound up on the street at a young age."

She nodded. "Yes, that makes sense." Rivulets of blood flashed through her mind.

"Violence has been a big part of your life."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "If someone gets in my way, they get hurt."

She pointed to the second card, the Magician.

"This tells me that you are a skillful negotiator."

"Many have said that," he said with a smile, revealing a mouthful of perfect white teeth.

"What did you say you did at the Crab Shack?"

"I didn't. But I won't be there much longer." His lip curled into a snarl. "Those people treat me like dirt."

She gestured to the last card.

"If you're thinking of changing jobs, this would be a good time."

She began to reshuffle the deck.

"Change jobs? Isn't there anything else?"

She shook her head. "That's all I see."

He leaned over the table.

"What the hell kind of reading is that?"

"I can only tell what I see," she added, "but perhaps you should meditate on it."

His eyes narrowed and became bloodshot. He got up and threw a crumpled twenty on the table.

"Respite post te, mortalem te esse memento, Madame," he said and stormed off.

After he left she couldn't shake off their encounter. She wanted to see the Crab Shack for herself and find out more about this mysterious stranger. She walked down the boardwalk and found a

ramshackle hut with a broken screen door. She stepped inside and called the waitress over.

"Is Luc here?" she asked.

"Who?" the waitress said, snapping her gum.

"Luc. Tall, thin, dark pony-tail?"

The woman shook her head.

"We've got Jesus," she pointed to the busboy, "and Joseph," she pointed to the grill man who was busy cooking. "I'm Maria and that's everybody."

"But he told me he worked here," Florence said.

The waitress played with a gold cross around her neck.

"You know how some men are, honey," she whispered.

"They'll say anything." Maria rested her hand on Florence's shoulder. "C'mon in. We've got an excellent special tonight."

Florence took a seat at the counter and noticed Maria's cross.

"Are you religious?"

"I go to church everyday, if that's what you mean."

"What does this mean?" Florence handed her a piece of paper. "The guy I mentioned said this to me."

Maria's smile disappeared.

"It's Latin. It means 'Look around you and remember you are mortal.'"

Florence's eyes widened.

"What?"

"That guy must be big trouble," Maria said. "I wouldn't keep looking for him if I were you."

Jesus came and pushed a plate of fish in front of Florence along with a basket overflowing with rolls. "You like. Pescado." He made an eating gesture.

Florence smiled at Jesus, saying, "Gracias."

The food smelled delicious. She took a bite. The flavors transported her to her childhood Friday night family dinners. Feelings of love flooded through her along with the memories. She

looked back down at her plate and realized she had finished every morsel.

Florence caught Maria's attention; the waitress sauntered over.

"What do I owe you?" Florence asked.

"It's on the house; do something good for someone else," Maria said.

Florence left the Crab Shack feeling content. It wasn't just the nourishment of the meal, but the experience had created a deeper satisfaction. She walked along the boardwalk and looked out at the Atlantic.

He startled her when he appeared in front of her.

"What are you doing here?" Florence asked.

"It could have been so easy for you," Luc said. "You could have told me something nice, something... different than the others."

Florence shook her head.

"You know you need to work this out with them. Why don't we go back to the Crab Shack? Talk to them; they'll listen."

"No, they won't," Lucifer said.

"You won't know unless you try. They invited me in and fed me, I think they would do the same for you."

"I don't know..." he mumbled.

"Do you want to change jobs?" she said.

He shrugged.

They walked towards the Crab Shack together in silence. Luc's eyes bespoke his desire and apprehension about reuniting with his family.

They approached the broken screen door; Florence opened it for him.

"Go on," she said, "they're waiting for you."

CAROL DEMINSKI was born and raised in New Jersey and currently resides in Jersey City, which is near Hoboken but much, much bigger. She published her first short story in the Summer 2010 issue of the Aroostook Review. She has never seen, and has definitely never dated, the Jersey Devil.

Space Creature Versus Earth Creature

by Kenyon Ledford

Filo dipped the saucer toward Earth's atmosphere. His partner in the expedition, Cymor, leaned back and patted his shiny ray gun. Filo noticed and shook his head.

"Don't be so eager, Cymor."

Cymor, short and handsome, with the head of a praying mantis and the eyes of an atomic goat, sneered.

"Don't be so timid, Filo. I can't wait to test this on a real Earthling."

Mild Filo, with his round head and wise expression, processed Cymor's response and noted the lack of fear – or was it lack of thought? He tilted the saucer back up.

"This is a fact-finding mission, not a colonization run. Beings like you are the reason Earthlings hate us. You perpetuate—"

"It isn't a colonization run *yet*, Filo. But if there's any trouble..." He stroked the short barrel of his weapon and purred.

Filo glanced sideways at his partner. He had pleaded, desperately, for any creature other than Cymor to accompany him on this mission. Who had they given him? Cymor. What he wouldn't give to be rid of this horrid being once and for all.

"You appear nervous, Filo."

Cymor turned to Filo. He couldn't help feeling unnerved by those atomic eyes.

"Perhaps," Cymor continued, "you would have been happier to have a different partner; say one that lacked courage the way you do. Or maybe you wished you could stay behind with the Queglies, sucking on orchtar."

"I've told you not to speak to me in that manner," Filo said. Then, with more power than he should have used, he wrenched the

saucer back toward the Earth's atmosphere again. The space regulators hadn't time to shut off and the saucer lurched sideways, throwing Cymor to the side. Filo noted it with pleasure, despite losing control of the saucer. It waffled and dipped. Filo had lost the chance to shoot into the atmospheric stream and now they sputtered toward earth at the mercy of its inner-space laws.

"You navigate like a Quegly!" Cymor bleated at Filo.

Filo toggled switches, trying to maintain control of the ship with one hand on the wheel.

"Maybe you would like to take control away from me, *Little Brain?*"

Cymor seethed at the hated nick-name. His eyes flared but he did nothing. An act of mutiny would be the final disciplinary write-up in his budding career.

The saucer stopped spinning and dropped like a Frisbee tossed off the moon upside down. It gained speed and the sides froze. Filo and Cymor's inner systems shut down. The Friction Engine over-heated and shattered the ice build-up around the saucer. With a high-pitched scream the vessel tore through the Earth's troposphere and crashed into a bed of pine needles.

Elijah Pitts turned his snaky, hooch-soaked eyes toward Billy Rae and smiled. Billy liked the smile even less than the fight in Elijah's eyes. Billy's soft cheeks were rosy from the cold and his friendly eyes watery from bootlegged whiskey. He wiped moisture from his sandy mustache and let his cradled rifle barrel dangle toward the snow.

"Now, 'Lijah, you know I didn't mean nothing, I was just saying --"

"You was just saying I can't shoot," Elijah hissed.

Billy's gaze moved from Elijah's eyes to the dead Fish and Game warden sprawled on his back in the snow. The man's dark green jacket was black with the blood that seeped into the snow around him. Like a dark cherry snow cone, Billy thought. The

warden's mud-caked 4x4 still idled on the trail by a pine tree, snowflakes dancing in the headlights.

"You saying I can't shoot is like saying I ain't a man."

Billy's eyes swept the forest and he lowered his voice.

"Now, 'Lije, you're just over-reacting. I –"

"Only women overreact. You calling me a woman now?"

"Dang it, Elijah, let's stop all this nonsense and figure out what to do." He waved his gun barrel toward the warden. "I mean, you know he's probably got a partner somewhere out here."

Elijah patted his rifle. "Yeah, well this is my partner. Now stop being such a chicken –"

A piercing whistle and a flash of bright, white light on the horizon startled the two men. Elijah clutched Billy's arm. The two of them stared at the night, big-eyed and open mouthed – like cavemen hearing thunder for the first time. The ground trembled, then stopped. Darkness returned to the night and snow began falling again. The only sound came from Billy and Elijah, who were breathing in little gasps. They didn't notice they were holding each other.

Billy pointed to a spot in the woods. Elijah followed with his eyes. A green glow shimmered in the distance through the trees.

"Let's go check it out," Elijah said.

"No!" Billy answered.

Elijah's fingers dug into Billy's arm again.

"Come on, don't be yellow."

"Well, I am," Billy said. "You always calling me chicken this and chicken that... Well, you're right. *You* go check it out."

"I ain't going over there by myself, you think I'm crazy?" Then Elijah smiled. "Okay. I'll go check it out. You stay here with *him*."

He nodded toward the body accumulating snow flakes.

Billy looked at the warden. Unseeing eyes staring up at the falling snow. Mouth open, the tongue even catching a few snowflakes.

Without a word Billy's feet began crunching twigs and snow, moving toward the disturbance. Elijah followed.

The shimmering green had faded. Elijah and Billy paused by a boulder and pondered what they were looking at. About fifty yards away, framed between two stout, towering pines, a fantastic disc stuck out of a pile of pine needles.

"Flying saucer," Elijah said.

Billy absently stroked the stock of his rifle. "Looks like."

The saucer lay in the clearing below a ridge of saplings. It was the color of a bullet, with a large strip of darkened windows around the sides. A red light blinked on and off from the half sticking out from the needles. Elijah's knuckles were turning white around his rifle.

From underneath the saucer legs unfolded. It rose off the ground without so little as a squeak. Pine needles slid from it with a soft hiss. It was elegant and brilliant, and the moonlight gave it a showroom appearance. The saucer looked like a sleek, silver tarantula awaiting breakfast. A ramp dropped through the bottom and flopped onto the snow and needles.

Elijah raised his rifle. A diminutive figure with a round head walked unsteadily down the stairs, followed by another smaller creature with eyes like smoldering coals. Elijah instinctively moved his barrel in the direction of the second Martian... or whatever it was.

"For crying out loud, don't shoot," Billy said.

"Shut up, I'm just being ready. Like you ought to be."

After a moment, Billy raised his own rifle halfway.

The men watched the two figures walk out onto the snow. Elijah softly swore.

"Martians. Just like in the pictures."

"They're armed," Billy said.

"Yeah? So are –" Elijah suddenly burst out laughing. "Look at their weapons!"

Filo was startled by the Earthling's laughter, but he had the presence to turn to Cymor.

"Steady, Cy."

Filo raised his weapon in a lazy, uninterested manner. It was a long blade, glowing green. Cymor pointed his weapon at the Earthling who had laughed. It was white plastic with red flames painted on the large, round barrel. A light, transparent green plastic muzzle was on the end. Across the side was painted *Zap Master!*

The Earthlings caught sight of it and laughed.

Filo spoke. "Greetings, Earthlings. Please step forward and give us your weapons."

Billy grinned. "Or what?"

"Yeah," Elijah added. "What planet are you from, Wal Mart? What are you going to do? Cut us in half with your Star Wars lightsaber?"

Billy added, "Or shoot us with your plastic ray gun?"

At this, Cymor inspected his weapon closely.

"Martians," Elijah chuckled, "and they've got toy guns!"

Filo lowered his weapon and said, "Incorrect. We come from Planet Whammo. Now --"

Billy and Elijah burst out laughing.

"Whammo! Please," Elijah cackled. "No more!"

"Enough mocking!" cried Cymor. He raised his ray gun.

Elijah's laughter became a menacing chuckle.

"Want to see a real weapon, spaceman?" He aimed his Browning high powered rifle at Filo.

"Die, Earth Creature!" bellowed Cymor. He pointed his gun at Elijah and, with a victorious smirk, squeezed the trigger.

All sound in the night froze except for Cymor's *Zap Master!* The green muzzle on the barrel lit up, making a whirring noise. The body of the blaster glowed red. The muzzle spun around, and loud sounds of crackling electricity and high-pitched squeaks emanated from inside it.

Elijah just stood there shaking his head.

Cymor watched the two Earthlings grinning at him and his weapon. He looked closely at the barrel, then at the laughing men, then back at his weapon. He cocked his head and furrowed his slick eyebrows, then pointed the weapon at Filo and pulled the trigger. With a flash of radiation and the sound of an exploding gas truck, Filo became a sizzling lump.

Elijah and Billy sobered immediately.

“Holy –” Billy began.

Cymor took aim again at Elijah.

“Shoot him, 'Lije!” Billy said.

With a crooked grin, Elijah brought up the barrel of his rifle and fired at Cymor. The rifle kicked, but just a vague *pop* sounded.

Cymor laughed and pointed at Elijah.

“Where did you get that, Earthling?” he roared. “The Museum of Nothingness?”

Elijah looked with a puzzled expression at his rifle.

“What in the... ?”

He tilted the gun, inadvertently pointing it at Billy, and pulled the trigger. With a bang, a slug tore into Billy's chest, knocking him backward. He lay sprawled in the snow, staring at the sky with a confused look on his dead face.

Cymor looked at Filo's remains. Elijah glanced down at Billy. Then, Elijah and Cymor cried out in unison: “You killed my best friend!”

Cymor fired again at Elijah to no effect. He kept the trigger depressed as a steady sound of zapping and whirring continued. Bright, colorful lights flashed, dancing brilliantly on the white snow beneath him.

Elijah gritted his teeth and answered by jacking round after round at Cymor. The two stood face to face firing until Elijah's rifle was empty. Cymor's weapon ran down with a slow whine and lazy *zaap*. The Earth creature, breathing hard, face flushed,

stared at the space creature, who just stared back. Sirens sounded nearby.

Elijah's eyes searched the forest. He saw headlights winding their way through the night.

"Say, uh, that thing still fly?" he asked Cymor.

"Of course, *friend*. Step inside."

Elijah quickly walked to the ramp and climbed into the ship, followed by Cymor. Elijah watched the blue and red lights of the approaching police cars through the darkened window. In minutes they would stumble upon the scene. He smiled.

"See you later, suckers."

Cymor caressed the control panel with his long, long fingers. He stroked the navigation wheel. He couldn't suppress a smirk. Not only would his disciplinary record be wiped clean, he was looking at a promotion. They had been ambushed by Earthlings who had killed brave Filo, and he, Cymor, killed one and took Filo's murderer prisoner.

Cymor hit the engine ignition switch, but nothing happened.

Elijah's smile froze. "Everything okay, buddy?"

Outside the ship an amplified voice sounded.

"You're surrounded. Come out with your hands up and we won't fire."

Cymor tried the ignition switch again and the saucer roared to life. He smiled a delicious smile at Elijah.

"Yes, buddy. Everything is okay."

The saucer rose, teetered, then rocketed into the sky.

KENYON LEDFORD tripped out for Mars in the fourth grade, but the cardboard box space ship was not so very strong. He crashed back to Earth and ruptured his ego. Now he spends his days pawing, limp-wristed, at the sky. Visit him online at www.writingeverton.com.

Courting Aleksandra

by Mark J. Reagan

“Let’s just be enemies.”

They were the four words that every man hates to hear from the woman he loves.

“Yeah, yeah, I guess we can be friends.” I am so damn lame. Friends? No. Screw that. I have enough—

“Not friends.”

“Huh?”

“Enemies.”

“Huh?”

Aleksandra leaned back, spread her arms over the backs of the chairs next to her and glowered at me, her brow furrowed beneath a straight edge of red hair.

“Enemies,” she repeated, her Russian accent giving the word a seductive quality that chilled me.

“Enemies? What? Why?”

“Because I hate you.”

She pursed her lips, licked them like she was about to devour one of the peppermint white chocolate mochas she enjoyed several times a day. It was a look of which I had dreamed of being the target.

Now, not so much.

“No,” she said with a curt shake of her head, “hate is not a strong enough word. Hate may be strong enough for an ass like you to use... Disdain? I disdain you? No, that’s not right either. Perhaps despise. I’ll think on this later.”

She snapped her fingers and her bodyguards aimed pistols at my forehead.

Maybe... “Can we just be friends?” I said.

She laughed at me, like a pig snorting mud, and I laughed, too. I always laughed when she made that sound. So did her bodyguards. She covered her mouth and tried to stop laughing, which made everyone laugh more. It only made her more attractive to me; a woman who can laugh at herself is one to be valued.

She waved her hand for everyone to stop laughing, to realize the severity of the situation.

"That's enough now," she said. "Look, Georgie—"

"Turner," I said.

"Turner? You look like a Georgie to me."

"You've known me for years!"

"Has it been that long?"

She looked to the bodyguard with a handlebar mustache on her right. The bodyguard shrugged.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "You know, I liked you until you kissed me. It was so sudden, it shocked me. And then all those messages and..." She reached out and touched my hands. "You understand."

"I guess..."

"You do," she said and leaned back again. "The kiss wouldn't have been so bad, but you came off afterward as so pathetic and miserable. You took initiative and then curled into a fetus. I don't like that. My men must have spines like steel, not syrup. There's a time to be supplicating and a time to not. And after kissing me? That's not one of those times. You apologized for it."

"Oh."

"That's all you can say?"

"I'm not sure what to say with guns pointed at me."

She sighed, a puff of breath disturbing the hair above her eyes. A friend once told me that all redheads were evil, and Aleksandra was not the exception. It made me want her more.

“Here,” she said, “let’s have some fun.” She held out a hand to the guard with the platinum blonde hair, asking for a pistol. “I’ll give you a head start. Thirty seconds, and I’ll chase you down myself.”

Was she serious? There’s no way she could run me down in a black cocktail dress and stiletto heels... but at the same time, we were in her walled-off compound. I was surrounded, but I still had my gun on me. Why did she let me keep my gun? She knew I had it. Did she want me to shoot back at her? Maybe she did—I didn’t want to think about it. She’s sick, that’s all there is to it. After killing for a woman for two years, a guy thinks he’s capable of judging her to be sane.

“Thirty seconds?” I said.

“Give or take. I might change my mind.”

I’m grinning. Shouldn’t I feel crushed by the whole situation?

“I always wanted a woman to chase me.”

I stood, knowing that I would shoot her if I had to, without hesitation. Even though I loved her. Or maybe I didn’t. I don’t know! Damn.

She snorted.

“When do we start?” I said.

She flipped over her wrist, looked at her watch.

“Now.”

I ran. But not far. I ducked behind a suit of armor in the hallway and hid. At fifteen seconds, she came running down the hall, barefoot. I kicked her legs as she ran by, tripping her, gun tumbling from her hand, a laugh from her throat. She started to stand, but I threw her up to her feet and pressed my gun to her temple. I whipped around, holding her in front of me. The bodyguards following her stopped. I ducked down to avoid having them blow my head off; Aleksandra was a full foot shorter than me.

"I'll shoot her!" I said. The bodyguards didn't fire, but didn't flinch either. Good men.

"Now *this* is more like it!" she said. "Go on, shoot me." I tangoed backward down the hallway with her.

"Not until I'm out of here."

"Even if you do, I'll still find you."

"Maybe."

"Definitely."

I made my way toward the garage, gaining a following of men with guns trained on us.

"Follow us and she's dead," I said, and she shrugged. I pushed us into a red corvette, made her drive, gun still against her head. And we drove out. A mile outside the gates, in the forest, she stopped the car.

"Keep driving," I said.

"Go on," she answered. "Shoot me."

"What?"

"Don't be such a bitch. Shoot. Me. You said you would."

"Um, no. You can get out."

"You're giving me permission to get out? If you want me to get out, tell me to get out. Either tell me to get out, or shoot me."

I didn't shoot.

"You know what? This whole damn situation is pancakes," she said and reached between her thighs, up her dress, retrieved a snub-nosed revolver and spun it on one finger with the grace of a gunslinger toward my head and oh my god I shot her.

Hole in her forehead, hole in the window, both dripping blood.

"Oh shit shit shit I'm sorry!"

"There you go again," she said and sat up right. Her finger circled the rim of the hole in her skull, and she smiled at the blood-coated tip. "Stop apologizing for every little thing and —"

I shot her again.

"—be a real man."

A third time. A fourth.

"Go get 'em!" she said.

The fifth, sixth and seventh shots pierced her, she laughed her pig snort, bullets in her brain, her neck, her chest, and I laughed right with her, laughter fused with crying. She laid against the door, brought her legs up over the stick and crossed them over my lap.

"Right here, tiger," she said and traced an X over her heart. My hand was shaking so bad that I missed the eighth shot. "I'm waiting."

Number nine went right through the X's center.

She rubbed the bullet hole, tussled her hair.

I leaped out of the car, started to charge away, and I heard her feet on the road behind me. Aleksandra clamped down on my shoulders and spun me around and I unloaded the rest of the clip into her. She fell back and squirmed on the asphalt. Why wouldn't she stop laughing? She should be dead! This—

I jumped into the car, threw it into gear, tires screeching, and I hit her, front end crumpling. I hit her again. Backed over her, my head hitting the roof. I collapsed, my forehead against the steering wheel, lungs pumping to try and calm down for one second, and she opened the passenger door and got in, stained with blood, with dirt, her dress torn, hair in desperate need of her stylist. I planted my eyes in my hands rather than look at her.

She patted me on the shoulder. A pity pat.

"Nice try," she said. "How are you holding up?"

"You. Dead. You should be."

"Nah, I'm all right. Here." She handed me a bloody handkerchief from her cleavage, and I wiped my tears and blew my nose. "Not so bad, is it?"

"No..."

"I admire your gusto when you get down to it. Georgie, you're a really nice guy, but—"

"I... I thought you liked me, Turner, not Georg—"

"Look, I'm a big flirt. It's my nature, I enjoy it. Did it come across as me leading you on?"

I nodded and blew my nose again.

"Then I apologize."

"You don't despise me?"

"I did, but this was good."

"Do we have a chance?"

Pig snort. "No. I just got out of this three year relationship and..."

"You did?"

"Yeah."

"You... you could've said something before I kissed you."

She lifted my face from the steering wheel, forced me to look at her. The bullet holes were almost healed.

"I keep my business to myself. And I was conflicted. You're cute, but I thought we were just having a good time."

I wiped my eyes again. "At least you're forward, I guess."

"Sometimes," she said and patted my cheek. "So yeah, why don't we just be friends?"

I crossed my arms, turned away. "But I don't wanna be friends."

"I admit it," she said, "a relationship with you would no doubt be interesting. You kill for me, but you can turn into a softy like this? It's intriguing, but that's not what I want for me right now. There's someone out there for you, tiger. So after all this, think we can be friends? You can keep your job."

"I guess..."

"I can't let you go. No one would really believe you, but I'd rather not have rumors spread around right now. And you're useful."

"L... I'll try."

"That's all I'm asking," she said. "Better than the alternative, right?"

It really was. Thinking about it, I don't think I had ever been more relieved to just be friends with a woman. She couldn't die... or something. Not a bad friend to have, really.

"Right," I said.

She held out her pinky. "Pinky swear on it?"

"You won't kill me?"

"Nah, not for this, Geor—Turner."

I entwined my pinky with hers and shook.

"Great," she said. "Now drive us back and clean up your mess."

"No."

She yanked down on my earlobe and twisted.

"Ow!"

"This *is* the time to be supplicating. *Drive.*"

"Yes, ma'am."

I rubbed my ear and turned the car around.

MARK J. REAGAN is a bad cook, can sprint fifty feet before running out of breath, be blown over by strong gusts of wind and lives in Denver. Other than writing, he enjoys things like Salsa dancing, studying interpersonal communication and pretending to be more grandiloquent than he actually is.

Out of Sight, Out of Time

by Timothy Miller

Rooter's was a dark hole of a bar located miles from the nearest town. It was the kind of place whose patrons owned Buck knives and referred to anyone with a full set of teeth as a "city fella." It wasn't very busy tonight. There was only a rusted jeep and a couple of Harleys in the gravel parking lot.

Collin parked his pickup next to a jeep. Killing the engine, he rested his chin on the steering wheel and asked himself again why he'd come.

"Because someone left five hundred bucks and a map to this place in your mailbox," he answered aloud.

There had been a note too, promising another five hundred if he showed up here tonight. Of course, the money wasn't the real reason he'd come, not all of it anyway. The truth was that he was bored. Bored with a second rate job playing security guard, bored with the dating scene, bored with daytime television and going out to the clubs. He was twenty-three years old, single, gainfully employed, and bored to death.

Why wouldn't he follow a mysterious map to a rundown and potentially dangerous bar in the backend of nowhere? It was the first interesting thing to him happen in a long time.

Slipping on his jacket, he got out of the pickup and headed for the entrance.

"Mr. Blacksong," said a deep voice. "I'm glad you accepted my invitation."

Collin whirled, his gaze searching the parking lot. "Who's there?"

A man stepped out from behind the jeep.

"You may call me Jericho, Mr. Blacksong. Sorry if I startled you."

Collin took a step back. He could have sworn the lot was empty a moment ago, and someone like Jericho should have been impossible to miss. The man was a giant. Dressed in a long grey trench coat, he was seven feet tall and had the shoulders of a sideshow strongman. His eyes were dark under a heavy brow. The rest of his facial features remained largely hidden beneath a bushy black beard. In one massive hand, he gripped a green duffle bag.

Jericho raised a bushy eyebrow.

"You are Mr. Blacksong, I presume?"

"What... Oh, yeah. That's me." Collin swallowed down on the sudden dryness of his throat. "Sorry. You kinda caught me by surprise."

Jericho smiled, displaying a yellow wall of oversized teeth.

"Don't mention it, Collin. May I call you Collin? I prefer to be on a first name basis when I can."

"Call me whatever you want," Collin replied. "You want to go inside? We could have a beer and then maybe you could tell me why I'm out here."

"I'm afraid we don't have time."

Taking a white envelope from his pocket, Jericho tossed it over. Collin caught the envelope on the fly.

"What's this?"

"The five hundred dollars promised you. In return, I would like five minutes of your time."

Collin opened the envelope. Inside were ten fifty-dollar bills, more than he made in a week.

"I'm listening."

"How much do you know about the company you work for, or about what goes on in the building you guard?"

Collin shrugged. "Trimax is a German sporting goods and clothing manufacturer. They make hunting clothes, and tents – stuff like that."

"Indeed," Jericho said. "They also hold a multibillion dollar research and development contract with the military to create the

ultimate camouflage material, completely undetectable by infrared, sonar, or even the human eye."

"Multibillion, huh?" Collin scowled. "And those cheapskates are still paying me minimum wage."

"How tragic for you," Jericho said dryly. "I brought you here because Trimax has recently stolen sensitive optical technology from an organization I represent. I mean to retrieve the stolen technology, and will pay handsomely for your assistance."

He opened the duffle, revealing several bundles of hundred dollar bills.

"Holy mackerel. Is that real?"

"As real as death," Jericho said, closing the bag. "One hundred thousand dollars. Yours, if you agree to the job."

Collin frowned. "You don't want me to whack anybody, do you?"

Jericho's laughter was so deep it sounded as if it were coming from the bottom of a well.

"Hardly. I simply need access to the Trimax lab. To that end, you will disengage the security fencing tomorrow night."

"That's it?" Collin stared hard at the duffle as he considered the offer. One hundred thousand bucks. "You promise no one will get hurt?"

Jericho handed him the money. "Trust me."

The scar-faced man wiped the blood from his knuckles with a small towel, and then tucked it under his belt next to his holstered pistol. Stepping past a table stacked with Collin's wallet and security badge, he reached over and flipped on the light switch by the door. The lights flickered.

Strapped to a metal chair in the center of the room, Collin arched his back and screamed as electricity travelled from a dismantled wall socket, down a pair of wires to the chair.

"That's enough, Joe," said the room's only other occupant, a grey-haired man with a thin face and a white lab coat. "We need him to be able to talk."

"Whatever you say, Dr. Jordan," replied the scar-faced man. He flipped the switch off. Collin stopped screaming and slumped against his restraints.

Dr. Jordan ran a finger across Collin's bruised brow, and then flicked away the sweat.

"This can end, Mr. Blacksong. Just tell us how long have you been working for them. What do they know about the project?"

Collin spit blood from his mouth and shook his head.

"I told you everything," he rasped. "I only met this Jericho guy last night. He paid me to turn off the security fencing so he could get a look at the Trimax labs."

"Which you did," Dr. Jordan inserted.

"Right," Collin said. "That's when a bunch of you guys came running out of the Trimax building with guns pointed at my head. That's it. I don't know anything about any project."

"Perhaps he's telling the truth, Joe," Dr. Jordan said. "He has all the makings of an expendable resource, gullible – and not very inquisitive."

Collin would have taken offense, but he was in too much pain.

"Why do you think we hired him?" Joe touched his chin thoughtfully. "We did give him a pretty good beating, but let's be sure."

"Sure?"

"Yeah." Joe pulled a small set of bolt cutters from his back pocket. "Nothing gets a man talking like losing a couple of fingers."

Collin's heart skipped a beat. He'd been afraid he was going to prison when they caught him messing with the fence. That fear soon turned to terror when they brought him to this cell, beat him to a pulp, doused him with water, and turned up the juice. Now they wanted to cut off his fingers?

Sudden rage, pure unadulterated fury, swelled inside him like a rising tide.

Joe knelt down and grasped Collin's right hand, pushing the cutters over his thumb.

"Wait," Collin said. "I have something to say."

Joe smiled evilly. "See what I mean, doc. What do you got for me, tough guy?"

"Just this." Collin's foot shot up, catching Joe under the chin and knocking him back from the chair. The bolt cutters flew free, clattering into the corner of the room.

His chin already beginning to swell, Joe leapt to his feet and slugged Collin twice in the mouth.

"Easy, Joe," Dr. Jordan warned. "If you break his jaw, he can't talk."

"Yeah," Collin said. "Easy, Joe. This place doesn't even give me dental."

"You think you're pretty funny, don't you?" Joe said. Shaking the blood from his hand, he walked to the corner and picked up the bolt cutters. "Let's see who's laughing when your new nickname is Stumpy."

Just then, someone knocked on the door.

"See who that is, Joe," Dr. Jordan said. "If it's that windbag, Keller, tell him we need more time."

Joe clicked the cutters as he moved to the door.

"Hold that thought, kid."

Collin bared his teeth at the man.

"When I get loose, I'm going to kill you and Dr. Torture over there. Then I'm going to find the grizzly bear that hired me for this job and put a handful of bullets in his cranium."

Joe laughed. "You're delusional if you think you're ever getting loose." He opened the latch, and the door swung outward. "And in about two minutes, you're going to be a few body parts less of a man."

An enormous hand reached in from the hall and closed around Joe's neck, lifting him from his feet.

"Sadly," said a deep, rumbling voice, "you don't have even that much time."

Gasping for air, Joe clawed at the fingers on his throat. The huge hand clenched and something gave with a crunching *snap!* Tossing Joe's limp body aside, a bearded giant in a grey trench coat stepped into the room.

"Good evening, Collin."

"Jericho?"

Dr. Jordan pulled a pistol from his coat and pointed it at the intruder.

"Freeze!"

Ignoring the command, Jericho moved over to Collin.

"It would seem I owe you an apology. Our plans have gone somewhat awry."

Collin looked down at the leather straps holding him to the chair.

"You think?"

Jericho smiled and reached for the restraints.

"Touch that and I'll kill you," Dr. Jordan threatened, thumbing back the pistol's hammer. "On your knees, Yeti. Do it, now!"

"Um... I appreciate the rescue, Jericho." Collin said. "But maybe you better do like Dr. Wacko says. He looks serious."

"I'm sure he is," Jericho said. "Brother, if you'd be so kind."

A disembodied and extremely hairy arm swept down from the air behind Dr. Jordan, striking his back. The doctor hit the wall head first, staining the concrete with a brilliant splash of red before sliding to the floor like a broken doll.

The air shimmered and a ten-foot tall biped covered in shaggy brown fur materialized to join the arm. Opening its jaws to reveal three-inch incisors, the monster gave voice to a throaty roar.

"That will be enough of that," Jericho said.

The monster's jaws snapped shut mid-bellow. Lowering its head sheepishly, it issued a guttural grumble under its breath.

Jericho rolled his eyes. "Don't be such a baby. You did very well, but we're in a hurry right now."

Collin's jaw dropped. "Is that... Is that Bigfoot?"

Jericho frowned.

"Please. How would you like to be called Littlefoot or Tinyhand?" Freeing Collin, he gently drew him from the chair. "His name is Byorn. But if you insist on lumping us all together, we prefer the term yeti."

"We?" Collin echoed, taking a wobbly step. "You're a friggin' Bigfoot, Jericho?"

"Yeti," Jericho corrected. "And yes. On my mother's side, anyway."

"How did that happen?"

Jericho shrugged. "Father liked hairy women, I suppose. However, this is hardly the venue to discuss genealogy."

Byorn looked toward the hall, and then issued a series of huffing grunts.

Jericho nodded. "I smell them, too. Go ahead."

Byorn faded from sight.

"How the heck did he do that?" Collin asked.

"I told you. Trimax stole invisibility technology from my associates, and by associates, I mean other yeti. Why do you think no one has managed to capture one of us yet?"

"You're telling me that all Bigfoots are invisible?"

"Yeti, Collin. And yes, we developed the shroud generations ago," Jericho said. "Now, there is a large force of men heading this way, and we still have to find the Trimax lab."

Moving to Dr. Jordan, he picked up his pistol and tossed it to Collin.

"Can you use one of those?"

Collin grimaced. The gun's handle was sticky with blood.

"You said no one would get hurt."

"Yes, but I think we can agree circumstances have changed somewhat since our original arrangement." Jericho spread his hands. "You may stay here if you wish. But given the treatment you've received, I wouldn't recommend it."

Collin glanced at the bolt cutters still clutched in Joe's stiffening fingers.

"Okay," he said, working the pistol's slide. "Let's rock."

Jericho smiled and headed for the door.

"Indeed."

Collin followed the giant out of the room and down the hall. High on the walls, red security bulbs flashed at them as they ran. The Trimax building was a maze. Doors lined the hallways, and the corridors branched continuously. There was no sign of Byorn, but twice they passed the shredded bodies of men bearing automatic rifles.

Collin made Jericho stop while he claimed one of the heavier weapons.

"Hurry," Jericho said. "There's a security team just a few turns behind us."

Sticking the pistol in his right front pocket, Collin shoved a spare clip for the rifle into his left.

"There are two guns here," he said. "You want one?"

Jericho waggled his sausage-sized digits.

"Can't fit one of these in the trigger guard. Let's move."

Collin hefted the rifle and the mad dash resumed. Ten minutes later, Jericho came to an abrupt halt ten feet from the next intersection.

Collin skidded to a stop.

"What is it?" he whispered. "Another security team?"

"Yes. And it's one we can't avoid, I'm afraid," Jericho replied quietly. "Around the next corner is the lab. It's fifty feet without cover. There is security inside the lab, Collin. They have guns."

"Are you sure?"

Jericho nodded. "Byorn says there are more than thirty."

"Byorn says?"

Byorn's shaggy head materialized in the air an inch from Collin's nose. He jerked back in surprise, banging the back of his head into the wall.

Byorn grinned hugely, and then his head disappeared.

Collin rubbed vigorously at the swelling lump on his skull.

"Well, I say screw the stupid project thingy," he hissed. "We should go back. Find another way out of here."

Jericho shook his head.

"Why do you think it took us this long to get here? They've locked down everything behind us. The only way out of this place is through the lab."

"Well, that's just peachy," Collin growled. "What the heck are Bigfoots doing running around a laboratory, anyway? Shouldn't you be hiding in the Alps, or maybe shooting a beef jerky commercial somewhere?"

A woofing grunt came from the air ahead.

"Byorn really likes those commercials," Jericho said.

"Seriously, Collin, we had to stop Trimax from replicating our technology. Our people are scattered and few. Invisibility is all that's kept us out of the zoos."

"I suppose you're right," Collin admitted. He sighed. "Oh well. At least I'm not bored anymore."

"What?"

"Nothing. What's the plan?"

"No plan. We charge," Jericho said simply. "Byorn will go in first. We'll follow."

"Sounds like suicide."

"Don't be a pessimist," Jericho said. "Byorn and I are pretty durable, and you seem to have an unnatural amount of luck." He opened his trench and removed a thick bundle wrapped in brown packaging paper. "Oh, and Byorn will be partially visible while he attacks. It will make him vulnerable."

"I'll try not to shoot him," Collin promised.

"Don't. It's liable to upset him."

"We don't want that," Collin said. "So when do we send in Byorn?"

Byorn's roar echoed through the hall. Someone screamed, and a rattling staccato of automatic weapon fire shattered the air. Collin ducked instinctively.

"I had to ask."

"Let's go," Jericho said. Bundle in hand, he ran toward the intersection, turning his head to give one last piece of advice.

"Whatever happens, don't stop running until you're out of the building!"

Rifle pressed tight to his shoulder, Collin rounded the corner running full out. Ahead of them, a pair of double doors of Trimax's lab hung from their hinges. Random bullets zipped through the smashed portal, pinging from the walls around them. While inside the lab, dozens of men in black security gear fired desperately at a half-visible monster raging among them.

Swinging his massive arms, Byorn crushed men's skulls or ripped limbs from their sockets. Red gore stained the laboratory tables, and smoking bullet holes riddled computer screens and towers.

Collin and Jericho were almost to the room before someone spotted them and swung his stuttering rifle around.

Twin puffs of crimson erupted from Jericho's shoulder, and a line of fire seared Collin's cheek. Swearing under his breath, Collin returned fire. The rifle rattled against his shoulder, and their attacker fell with a line of holes stitched across his abdomen.

Once in the room, Jericho pointed to a door on the far wall.

"There's the exit," he shouted over the gunfire. "Run for it!"

As they sprinted toward the door, Collin spied Byorn's half-visible outline ripping into a security team on their left. Swinging his rifle, he peppered the men on the right side of the room, sending them ducking for cover.

One brave soul broke cover to cut them off .

Picking up a nearby table with one hand, Jericho threw it like a discus, knocking the man from his feet.

“Enough, Byorn,” he called. “We are leaving!”

Byorn sent a man flying, and turned toward them. That’s when a man fired a shotgun into his chest at pointblank range. Byorn fell with a pained howl, collapsing atop a table stacked with glass test tubes and microscopes.

Men rushed forward to circle the wounded yeti, and the one with the shotgun clacked a fresh round into the chamber.

“Byorn!” Jericho swerved away from the exit.

Collin skidded to a stop just a few feet from the door.

“Jericho, wait!”

The man with the shotgun looked up at the shout. His eyes went wide, and then Jericho’s ham-sized fist connected with his chest, catapulting him into the crowd.

Collin’s rifle clacked empty, and the men he’d been keeping pinned down on the right jumped up and opened fire. Whining ricochets blasted chips from the tile floor around him, and his ears buzzed from humming near-misses.

“Jericho!”

Bleeding from a dozen bullet wounds, Jericho didn’t answer as he pummeled the men around Byorn.

Collin looked from the door to Jericho. He should just leave. What did he owe a couple of Bigfoots, anyway? All they’d brought him was trouble.

Someone scored a double hit on Jericho’s knee, and the giant stumbled.

Collin swore, and ejected the spent clip from his rifle. A hot hammer struck his upper back, spinning him around. With shaky fingers, he fumbled the clip from his pocket and snapped it home.

“Jericho,” he shouted, lifting the rifle. “Get down!”

Jericho dived atop Byorn, and Collin sprayed the air above them on full auto. Men screamed as hot metal tore into their vitals.

Some ran for cover. Others returned fire. The first, Collin ignored. The second, he riddled with dark curses and fast metal.

The last man standing over the yeti fell with a hole in his eye.

His face a thunderhead, Collin whipped the shuddering gun toward the men still firing on him from the opposite side of the lab.

"What are you waiting for?" he shouted to Jericho. "Get your hairy butt off the floor before I run out of ammo!"

"We're coming," Jericho called. Tossing the paper-wrapped bundle toward the line of computer consoles, he hauled Byorn to his feet. And together, the yetis began a stumbling run toward Collin.

"Go. We're right behind you."

"Shut up and run," Collin spat.

His rifle ran empty a second time. Throwing it down, he yanked Joe's pistol from his pocket. A red-hot spike punched into his chest, knocking him back against the door. He tasted blood in his mouth, and his vision blurred. When it cleared, a red-faced man was running toward him with a flashing gun.

Collin's pistol barked twice, and the man fell back with blood streaming from his neck. Another man was behind the first, but Jericho's fist dropped him like a brick.

"About time," Collin hissed through gritted teeth.

"Move," Jericho said.

Collin moved aside, and Jericho kicked the door from its hinges. "Go," commanded the giant.

Clutching his wounded chest, Collin ducked out of the building. Jericho and Byorn were right behind him.

The exit led to the Trimax employee parking lot. It was nearly dawn, and a pinkish haze colored the east sky.

"We have to keep going," Jericho said.

Shouting came from the room behind them, and bullets began to kick gravel from the ground.

Collin pointed to a parking slot marked “security” fifty-feet away.

“There’s my pickup,” he said. “Let’s go.”

They ran for the truck as armed men emerged from the building behind them. Within moments, the windshields of parked cars began to burst beneath a withering hail of gunfire.

Ducking his head, Collin weaved between vehicles until he reached his pickup. Opening the driver door, he realized the cab was far too small for the yetis. “Get in back,” he said. Climbing behind the wheel, he keyed the ignition.

The pickup dipped low on its shocks.

“We’re in,” Jericho called.

Collin hit the gas, and the pickup shot out of the parking slot toward the gate. A chaotic line of sparks rattled off the fender as Trimax security targeted the truck, but they were too late. Tires squealing, the pickup blasted through the main gate and onto the road.

“We made it,” Collin whooped. He coughed wetly, but the pain in his chest and back couldn’t compare to his elation. He smiled as he eased up on the gas. “Jericho, we made it!”

The tiny window behind him slid open.

“Keep going,” Jericho said. “Don’t slow down!”

“Why? We’re way out of range by now.”

“Of the guns,” Jericho said grimly, “not the bomb.”

Collin frowned. “What bom—?”

The world exploded.

Collin lay in his bed and watched the sun through the window as it climbed the white slope of a nearby mountain. Another morning, the eleventh since he’d woken bruised and feverish in the mountain monastery. The monks cared for him with unfaltering devotion, dutifully changing his dressings and bringing him his

meals. His only complaint was that they refused to answer his questions, or even speak.

He inhaled deeply, ignoring the twinge in his back and chest as he savored the crisp mountain air. It smelled different today, almost musky.

The light blurred beside the window, and Collin smiled.

"Hello, Jericho. Where have you been?"

"Checking things at Trimax, mostly." Jericho materialized next to the bed. The half-yeti was wearing a new trench coat, and held a familiar duffle in his hand. "The bomb took out their mainframe as well as the lab. They won't be copying our invisibility process anytime soon."

"How's Byorn?"

Jericho shrugged. "Cranky from his wounds, but he'll recover. Thanks for asking." He lifted the duffle. "I brought you something."

"You went to my apartment to get the money?"

"Just ahead of the police," Jericho said. "You're one of the MIA they haven't been able to account for since the blast. Sorry I couldn't bring you to a local hospital. How are the monks treating you?"

"They're giving me the silent treatment, but otherwise pretty good."

Collin pushed himself into a sitting position. He glanced out at the new sun and felt guilt settle like an anchor in his stomach.

"So how many people died?"

Jericho cocked his head. "People?"

"In the explosion," Collin clarified bitterly. "How many people did the bomb kill?"

Jericho gave him a strange look, and suddenly began to laugh.

Collin scowled. "I don't see what's so funny about mass murder."

"I apologize, Collin," Jericho said, still chuckling. "I thought I'd told you already."

"Told me what?"

"Didn't you wonder why I came to you, a security guard, when I could have bribed someone working in the Trimax labs?" Jericho asked. "It's because no one working inside Trimax would have betrayed their own kind."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You didn't notice the greenish tinge to their blood?" Jericho rolled his eyes. "Trimax is a goblin operation, Collin. I came to you because you were the only human on the payroll."

Collin's jaw dropped.

"Goblins?"

"Who else? It's not as if trolls are smart enough to steal from a yeti," Jericho said. His expression turned serious. "Speaking of trolls, I have another job for you."

Collin groaned and pulled the covers over his head.

"Just a thought," Jericho said, and his booming laughter filled the monastery.

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