

Eye Teeth by Jay Lake

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Turning on to S.E. Belmont Street, I ran into Shark.

Literally.

He was a Ukrainian kid originally, but that was even before I met him. After a few too many swims in the retro vat, some wicked surgery and a whole lot of transposons Mother Nature never intended, he was ... well ... something else.

Shark wasn't much over one meter forty but he had to mass two hundred kilos. His head was bullet-shaped and it melted into his shoulders without benefit of neck or throat. I'd heard he had carbon fiber mesh woven into his muscles for scaffolding—true or not, he had arms bigger around than *my* fat head. Legs to match.

The weirdest thing, what got him on virteo every now and then on some extreme mod program, was his skin. Shark was armored head to toe with a mosaic of enamel fragments growing straight out of his epidermis. He was covered in human teeth, basically, on every part of his body except his jaws. There he had pointy freaking shark teeth, about four rows' worth.

And I do mean *everywhere* on that tooth skin thing, if you know what I mean.

The only thing human besides his general shape was his eyes. They were a pale, watery blue, like you expect on a librarian or a tax accountant. Which was weird because even a natural guy like me pops custom Eyes every chance I get—I was wearing gray market StarEyes that day, supposed to help pick up chicks and charm the world—while Shark's peepers were original equipment.

Of course, he got groupies, which was more than anyone else I knew. They didn't last long, but they partied hearty until E.R. time.

Still and all, I wouldn't want to get up every morning and scour my happy ass from stem to stern with a toothbrush. The guy must buy Colgate by the case lot. I could only imagine what his hemorrhoids were like.

He was also perfectly capable of ripping my arms off by way of friendly greeting. Shark demonstrated this character trait by peeling back the hood of my Skoda Hybrid.

I hit the emergency flashers and fumbled open the gull wing door. "Hey, cut that shit out!"

Shark sort of patted the hood back down. The sheet metal looked like tinfoil after the baked potato has gone to its reward. “I lookin’k for ch’ou.”

He didn’t talk so good either. But that had been true years ago too, back when he still had lips.

“You finding’k ch’me,” I said, ignoring the honking horns behind me. Shark would take care of them if they didn’t quiet down quick. “What d’you want, Shark? I ain’t done nothing to nobody.”

Not true, strictly speaking, but I certainly hadn’t done anything that should interest the sort of people who kept Shark in toothpaste money.

“Ch’ou got what belong’k to Big Ch’akov. He got respec’k for ch’ou, so ch’ou got til midnight to bring’k it in. Mary’s on Broadway.”

That was a long speech for Shark.

“Shark, I wouldn’t know Big Yakov if he bit my ankle. He wouldn’t know me either. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Don’ ch’ou play dum’k.” Shark gave my hood a punch that slammed the Skoda’s front end to the pavement, then waddled off.

“Okay, I won’t,” I said as I got back in. Miracle of miracles, the damned car still ran.

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The Natural Ink on Belmont, just past 33rd, is a pretty good place to meet girls wearing tie-dyed tank tops, cut-off shorts and no underwear of any kind. On the down side they usually haven’t shaved or bathed in a while and are waiting for their dope-dealing boyfriends. It’s a place to start. Besides, getting a carrot-gazpacho smoothie dumped on my lap would be a change of pace. It’s all part of Oregon’s natural beauty.

My StarEyes glittered at the counter girl as I ordered a bowl of vegan chili and a big pot of chamomile tea. Once I had my food, I sat down at a little table decouped with pages out of old luxury car brochures and issues of *Architectural Digest* and wondered what the hell was I going to do about Shark and Big Yakov.

Despite my misgivings and his close resemblance to a natural disaster in progress, Shark I could handle. Sort of. He and I had been in junior high together for a while, before his phenotype got too weird for the school board. Plus that bit about ripping the arms off two Cambodian guys who had been giving him shit for three or four years.

Back then he'd been nubby and weird. I was pretty sure he remembered I was halfway nice to him while everyone else was beating the crap out of him. Ever since, we'd moved in different circles.

As for Big Yakov, he ran lots of action in the northwest industrial district. Got his picture in the paper every time he endowed a park or came to the mayor's swearing in. Last time a cop tried to collar him, one of the desk sergeants had thrown the flatfoot punk off a bridge after Big Yakov made a few phone calls.

Law and order type, Big Yakov. I was a small time clerical worker. No more interesting to him than the rivets on the Steel Bridge. And I had no more influence over him than I did over Mount Hood.

I thought about messaging my friend Melli the cab dispatcher through the comm hack in my StarEyes, but I couldn't see how much help she'd be. She could always send me a cab.

“Hey.”

The woman in front of me was just my type. Or at least just Natural Ink's type. Frizzy blonde dreadlocks, one of those small faces like you see on daughters of old New England money, a purple macramé shirt that left nothing whatsoever to the imagination and a pair of faded European hiking shorts that had been patched a dozen times with denim and old bandanas. Big knobby-ass boots too, with rolled down socks the color of the red peppers in my chili.

To hell with Melli.

“Hey yourself,” I said. I looked at her with my StarEyes thinking happy sexy thoughts:

Pheromones, baby.

The rhythm of your pulse.

I look like Freedom Barrymore in Hawaii Helldive.

Damned things were supposed to guarantee seduction, but they blew chunks. What did I expect for fifteen cents on the dollar, gray market? At least I still had my CargoEyes for work.

“You're sitting on my jacket.”

So much for StarEyes. I pushed the chair back, stood up and looked. Nothing there.

“I don’t think so,” I said, but when I met her eyes again the gun in her hand interfered with my full attention. Some sort of sleek, black pistol I couldn’t identify, but then I’d never paid much attention to firearms before.

“We really have to talk,” she said in a breathy voice.

I stood up slowly as the pistol slipped back into the cargo pocket of her shorts. “I don’t think this relationship is working out so well.”

“You’ll love it.” She smiled. Perfect teeth, like little pearls. “Trust me.”

There were a lot of things about her I could love, for a few hours at least. That pistol was not one of them.

To add insult to injury, somehow even though I was the hostage I had to drive.

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I’m a non-union dock clerk. Guns don’t scare me much. I see drunk union apes with thirty-inch drop-forged wrenches going at it almost every day. One time Mike the Mouse chased me out of my little portable office by driving a forklift through the wall. I figured if nature girl was going to hurt me, she would have done it already.

All the same, I’m not in Shark’s line of work. I’d been looking for cheap sex, not cheap violence. Hell, I wasn’t even wearing the right Eyes for this.

My Skoda pulled up next to an old railroad car near the Ross Island cement plant, the one under the 99E viaduct. No one around, not even a delivery truck. The railroad car was a metal boxcar of the last century, dry docked on an old siding with a cement skirt around its base. Sort of the ultimate in mobile homes. I hadn’t remembered seeing it down here before, but that didn’t mean much.

My Portland hippie chick made me get out first. She came around the car behind me and set one hand on the small of my back. “The other side,” she said. “There’s a door.”

There was, facing a blank warehouse wall. It looked like the storm door off my grandma’s house when I was a kid. Someone had torched a rectangular cut in the side of the boxcar and welded this thing in. It was weird, like seeing a dorsal fin on a cat.

I tugged it open. The thing even *squeaked* like a screen door, with that faint scent of aluminum and vinyl. Behind it was a cheap office-type door. I pushed that

one open too.

There was a little office inside, paneled with cork and whiteboard, which in turn was covered with scribbled notes, sheets of paper, photo printouts, maps, and probably half the deep dark secrets of the past couple of decades for all I could tell. A metal desk straight out of an old private eye movie dominated one corner, while fluorescent lights flickered in a drop ceiling overhead. A hat rack in the corner held a couple of light rain jackets. The only modern thing in the room was the monomer-pane data display on the jumbled desk, sticking up like a sheet of glass with a zoning variance from the law of gravity.

It was mighty cool for a boxcar. The air moved slightly, underlain with a stale smell.

“How come it’s not hotter than July Fourth in here?” I asked.

Then the room lurched a little bit, my stomach dropped, and I thought, *uh-oh*.

I was wrong. There was no cheesy knockout gas or some such stupid crap. The office was an elevator, dropping downward.

After about forty-five seconds a tone sounded.

“Out,” she said. She wasn’t bothering to hide the gun any more.

The door seemed to be the only choice, so out I went.

The office had come down an i-beam shaft like a big old freight elevator, which was basically what it was. In front of me was a tunnel perhaps fifteen or twenty meters to the far well extending to darkness in either direction. An array of desks, cabinets, twen-cen cube walls and so forth spread out from the elevator like a stain from a spilled box of offices. Bare long-life bulbs dangled from the ceiling high above.

Two more women and a man waited for me. They were all dressed in puffy boots, bag-suits, loose breath masks and goggles around their necks. Ordinary office clothes, nothing to make them stand out, unlike my lovely captor.

“Mr. Daley Lorenz,” said one of the women, a short brunette with a pinched face. She reached out a hand. “Welcome.”

“No thanks,” I said. “Can I go home now?” I knew a few dockworkers I could sic on these people. Hell, Shark might even do it, once I got past the Big Yakov problem. Whatever that was. Doubtless my captors knew about it too.

I hoped someone would tell me soon.

“Adele, did you brief him?” she asked, looking over my shoulder.

“He’s a prick,” said Adele. “Didn’t stop staring at my breasts the whole time.”

“Hey!” I said.

The brunette shook her head. “I am sorry, Mr. Lorenz, for the theatrics and for the lack of information. Time is short. You have a rendezvous with Mr. Yakov tonight, am I not correct?”

“I have no idea what this is about.” I stepped over to the nearest desk chair, sat down, put my feet on the desk, right over the papers. “I don’t know what Big Yakov wants, I don’t know what you want, and I don’t really care. I just want to get out of your way.”

“You wish me to believe that you are a simple dupe in these proceedings, Mr. Lorenz?”

“Yes! That’s me. Dupe, simple dupe.” I leaned over, rummaged around on the desk until I came up with a half-full bottle of water. “Happy to stay that way, too. Why don’t *you* meet Big Yakov tonight and work it out amongst yourselves?”

“We are on...” She glanced at her companions. “Opposite sides of certain questions from Mr. Yakov.”

I chugged water, then wiped my lips with a satisfied gasp. “I’m on no side of Mr. Yakov, nor you.”

“Your Eyes, Mr. Lorenz. The StarEyes you recently acquired *sub rosa*.”

Oops. “What about them?”

“There was a mistake. They were—”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “I’ve seen this movie. They were stolen, there was a mix-up, the fence sold me the wrong set, you want them back, blah blah blah. And let me guess, Big Yakov wants them too.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Fine. You can have them back. Have Adele run me home, I’ll swap them for my CargoEyes, we’re done. Hell, I don’t even need a refund.”

“It’s too late for that.”

Double oops. “Too late for what?”

“By now they’ve ... adapted to you.”

“Adapted how?”

“You are their host. They will work for no one else.”

That wasn’t how it was supposed to be with Eyes. Interchangeable parts, hotswap technology. Blah blah blah. “Look, they don’t work for *me*.”

“Oh, yes they do,” she said. She turned to the other woman to her left, a thin Chinese gal. “Doff your clothing, Mei-Wan. All of it.”

Mei-Wan stepped out of her bag-suit and puffy boots to reveal tight, lacy bra and panty set in cobalt blue. Well, this was getting interesting. Or so I thought, as the bra and panties came off.

Until Mei-Wan unfastened the skin of her neck. Then it just got nasty. There were a lot of little whipping tentacles inside Mei-Wan, and a lot of them had tiny eyeballs, and a lot of *them* were looking at me.

Now was a real good time to panic. After a couple of minutes, Adele’s gun to my temple brought me back from an extended hissy fit.

“Most people would have seen an attractive young woman Mr. Lorenz, rubbing her skin. You saw an attractive young woman removing her skin.”

“The Eyes.” *Never again*, I promised myself. “Is it ... she ... it ... real?”

“Ah, ah, that would be telling.”

Oh, shit. “Now what?”

“We deliver the Eyes to Big Yakov. As originally promised. You are simply the carrier.”

“For God’s sake, I could have delivered *myself* myself.”

The brunette smiled. “We desire the credit, Mr. Lorenz.”

As she walked off into the darkness, I turned to Adele. Her perky pink aureoles were certainly convincing under that macramé top. “You too?”

Her tongue flicked out, licked her nose and lower eyelashes and went back

way too fast for any normal girl. She just grinned before pulling up a chair to block to the door to the elevator-office.

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I spent the rest of the day and evening making up scurrilous limericks about my captors and wondering what the hell I was going to do. Not to mention who the hell these horrible tentacle people really were.

Big Yakov would cut the Eyes out of my head as soon as look at me. I knew his rep. Shark could pop them out for the fun of hearing me squeal. I was a human Eye box to these ... people.

And who were these *people*? Some ancient evil species from the cracks beneath the earth. Or the universe's lowest-budget alien invasion. I was losing my mind, pure and simple. The Eyes were taking me over. That's all there was to it.

I considered just popping the Eyes out, dropping them on the desk, and walking out of there blind. There were serious drawbacks to that plan. So instead I slammed my hand in a drawer twice, to see if I would wake up. That didn't help. I tried one of my limericks on Adele:

“There once was a snake named Adele

“Riding the express train to He

“She held up a guy

“Who did nothing but sigh

“And complain about how she did smell.”

She pointed the gun at me and told me to shut the hell up or they'd deliver the Eyes in a body bag.

Were they real? Were the Eyes a scam? How could I tell the difference?

All Eyes were visual preprocessors, by definition. They managed images before sending them to the brain's visual cortex. The military used SniperEyes, with enormously extended focal ranges and multiple grades of monatomic lasers to assess wind speed, air density and so forth. Firemen used SmokeEyes. Hell, I used CargoEyes at work, that let me read bar codes on containers and manifests without screwing around with a handheld.

So anyone could spoof an Eye, *if* they could hack into it. Normally Eyes were shielded, raw data flowing in from outside, processed neural signal flowing back. It

wasn't like they had an IP address.

But the Eye could be prehacked. Could be built with some kind of access channel.

Or some dope like me could open an auxiliary channel to my presence server via my bonefone, and *give* a hacker access.

Melli. My friend the taxi dispatcher. She knew everyone, everything that was going on. I set about subvocalizing a message for her, hoping like hell Adele was too bored to realize what I was doing. I used the crawler squirt via my StarEyes—low bandwidth text, more likelihood of getting out from down here underground.

:::MEL:::NEED SOMEONE ASAP 2 HACK MY EYES:::LIFE OR DEATH:::D:::

After a few minutes, her words came into my field of view.

:::SHARK GOT YR TONGUE?:::

So she didn't know everything.

:::I WISH:::CANT XPLAIN:::NEED 2 KNOW IF EYES ARE CLEAN:::

:::W8:::WILL DO:::L8R:::

Later? The direction my evening was headed in, I wasn't going to *have* a later.

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We went back up the office elevator around 11:30 that night. No word from Melli. No sign of Mei-Wan the snake woman since her little magic act with the skin. Just me, Adele, brunette and her boyfriend.

Or snakefriend.

Whatever.

At least there was no talk of using my Skoda. The snakefriend went off in the dark, returned a few minutes later with a safety orange Hummer H6—four axles of pure road-crumbling power on the rubber hoof. He got in to drive, Adele and I sat in the distant back seat, while brunette took a jump seat that could have hosted a family of starving Belgians. Adele's pistol came along for the ride too, out on her lap in her little right hand.

My message crawler jerked to life as the Hummer rumbled into the night.

:::DALEY:::WHERE U BEEN?:::BAD CARRIER:::MEL:::

So the snake people had started jamming me after my first round of messaging. I couldn't very well subvocalize now with Adele and her pistol sitting next to me. How was I going to do this?

"I need help knowing where we're going," I said to brunette.

:::EYE NEEDLE KELP:::

Shit. The parser wasn't going to cut me any slack.

"Shut up," Adele suggested.

:::D, RU DRUNK?:::ALEXI SAYS YR CARRIER IS STRANGE:::

"I'm *not drunk*," I said. "I'm worried."

:::KNOTTED RANK:::

"Shut *up*." This time she jammed the pistol into the soft skin of my lower jaw. I swear she bruised my tongue from the outside.

:::UR N TROUBLE ARNT U DALEY?:::

All right, Melli. I wasn't getting anything more out to her right now, though.

After a minute or two, as we rumbled across the New Morrison Bridge—New, New, New Morrison Bridge actually, but who counted that sort of thing anymore?—Melli came back on.

:::ALEXI SAYS YR EYES HAVE BN HACKED:::B CAREFUL:::

You're a freaking genius, Melli.

"Mr. Lorenz," said brunette, "I suggest you stop whatever it is you are doing before I change my mind about needing a live host for the Eyes."

"Yes, ma'am. Sometimes I can't *help* myself. I'll try to *help*."

:::HELP:::HELP:::

Adele jammed the gun into my jaw so hard she bruised my sinuses that time. So I shut up to finish out the ride and watch Melli's last message on my crawler.

Somehow she'd looped it.

:::TAXI COMING:::TAXI COMING:::TAXI COMING:::TAXI
COMING:::TAXI COMING:::TAXI COMING:::TAXI COMING:::

Great. A freaking taxi. I sure hoped that was good news. I'd had enough bad news for one day.

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The H6 idled into a warehouse, the overhead door rolling shut behind us. Given that we were ten miles or so from the airport the contents of the warehouse were a bit odd. There were huge tapered cylinders of jet engines on their rollaway stands, all piping and exhaust. Wings, tails, fuselages in various states of disassembly loomed in shadows surrounding a single pool of bright light where we had parked.

Me, I would have stopped near the door and avoided the light. These people were amateurs.

As if my captors were people.

Brunette shook her head at Adele then got out, leaving the two of us alone. A whole bunch of guys stepped from the shadows, guys in various stages of bulkiness. Big Yakov and Shark were at the head of the little army. At least I assumed it was Big Yakov. He didn't look much like his pictures in the paper.

If Shark had an opposite, Big Yakov was it. He wasn't even as tall as Shark, and his face was smooth like a baby's—no lines, almost slack. Puffy lips pursed around a lit cigar like it was a nipple or something. Just *owning* tobacco products was good for hard time downstate, let alone *smoking* them. His arms and legs were pudgy and bowed, something even the swanky twen-cen suit he was wearing couldn't cover up.

I would have sworn from the photos Big Yakov was a meter taller, but this little guy was smoking and leading Shark around. It had to be him.

Brunette and Big Yakov talked for a few minutes before she nodded at the H6. Adele opened the door, got out, and waved me out with the pistol.

:::GET READY:::

Word from Melli. Nice to hear from her before I died. Ready? For what?

"Mr. Lorenz," said Big Yakov. His voice was as squeaky as I might have guessed from his body. "Welcome."

Shark shifted a little. His toothed skin gleamed in the warehouse lights, the thousands of little crowns giving him a stippling of shadow. His blue eyes narrowed as Big Yakov looked me over.

That's right, Shark, I thought. Remember when I used to be nice to you. When you were a kid, Shark.

“Hello, Mr. Yakov sir,” I said. “Sorry about the mix up.”

“And have you seen the stars in your Eyes, Mr. Lorenz?”

Adele's pistol thumped into my kidneys. What the hell? All I'd seen so far was snakes. “Yes. They're beautiful.”

“Tell me. Where is Cassiopeia right now?”

Having a drink down at the White Horse? How the hell should I know?
“Who's Cass—”

The pistol thumped me again. Brunette glared at me. “Enough, Mr. Yakov. Here are your Eyes. I suggest you make the payment, try them on, and then we shall go.”

Big Yakov held out his pudgy little hand. “My StarEyes, Mr. Lorenz.”

Shark stirred again. There was something here he didn't like, something beyond all the obvious stuff *I* didn't like. Such as me going home blind, if I ever went home at all. Brunette had said the Eyes wouldn't work for anyone else. She hadn't said I couldn't take them out. Common sense suggested that.

Unfortunately I didn't have a bargaining position. My pinkie touched my right Eye, as if I were ready to dig in and pop it loose. I put on my best nonunion-goobar-talking-to-angry-longshoreman smile. “All right, sir, but I'm going to have to trus—”

Then all hell broke loose.

A taxi smashed through the rollup door. It was one of the red zone duty cabs with armor and slit windows. There were several more behind the first cab, all sliding to a stop inside the warehouse. Big Yakov's footsoldiers had guns and tasers out like the pros that they were, ready for a little merry murder.

My buddies from the dock came out of those cabs like water from a bilge. The same union pricks who rattled my teeth every day of my working life were here to save me. And they were impressive. These boys started out big and got bigger.

They came equipped with pipes, chains, wrenches, zip guns, tasers. I even saw Mike the Mouse with a cutting torch in his hand, tanks strapped to his back.

“Jesus H. and the baker’s dozen,” I whispered.

Adele must have been impressed too, because she forgot to bruise more of my internal organs with the muzzle of her pistol.

For three or four seconds, everything was balanced. Like watching one of those buildings they blow up—the explosives crackle, some dust shoots out, all the concrete and steel thinks about it for a just a moment, and you’re wondering if maybe everything will just hang there unsupported for a while, before gravity body-checks the whole business.

The gravity of testosterone kicked in amid a roar of bullets, tasers and very angry men.

I dropped to the floor and tried to help out by tangling Adele’s ankles. Pistol or not, I’d have rather duked it out with her than one of Big Yakov’s trolls. She was already moving, though, her skin rippling like a cheap special effect.

Holy fright! For one minute I’d actually forgotten about the eyeball-tipped snakes inside these people.

Shark had Big Yakov over one shoulder and was making a dash through his friendlies to the shadows beyond. I sort of assumed he’d be back. Me, I was getting the hell away from the gunplay. The underside of the H6 looked good, so I scooted between the tires to find snakefriend there shooting out from under the back bumper.

I didn’t have anything to fight with. Instead I reached up, slipped my hand under his belt and gave him a magnum wedgie. He yelped and dropped his pistol. I dragged him back a little, away from the weapon, and we wrestled. Which isn’t easy to do under a car. Not even a big SUV.

I did manage to bang his head against the suspension a few times. That made him woozy. I snagged the pistol and slid out the other side.

A lot fewer bullets there, so I scuttled for the shadows. I tossed the gun as soon as I was safe—I didn’t know how to shoot it, I just hadn’t wanted snakefriend coming to his senses and shooting me.

The firing was dying down, replaced by shouting and screaming and promising meaty thumps. I had no more interest in returning to the fight than I did in performing major surgery on myself. Hanging back was just, well ... the right thing to do.

I looked around anyway. There was a tractor parked nearby, a little thing like one of those airport luggage tugs. It had a roll cage and a front attachment with a big rotary brush. Maybe something for cleaning pavement.

Okay, I thought.

I wrestled a metal fuselage skin segment onto the front of the roll cage, got in the driver's seat, and studied the controls. It had obviously been designed for operation by trained monkeys like my union buddies out on the warehouse floor.

Start the engine, a compressed hydrogen rig that was eerily quiet. Engage the auxiliary power. The brush was plenty noisy to make up for the engine. Put it in gear, roll out of the shadows peering around my shield and look for some trouble. "Party time!" I shouted, then whooped.

Snakefriend was in full tentacle mode now, duking it out with two of my boys just on my side of the H6. His back was to me. I rolled forward, rammed the brush into him as the boys stepped aside. I kept going until the brush was throwing off bits of orange H6 paint along with snakefriend goo.

"Good job, Dolty!" shouted Majid, one of the longshoremen. He was bleeding from cuts that looked as if they'd been laid down with a wire whip, but grinning like a fool at the same time. Then Majid and his buddy scuttled around the back of the car.

I reversed and drove around the front. The hiss of the brush on pavement sounded different now, lubricated with snakefriend.

Here was the main action. Most of Big Yakov's guys were down. Longshoremen were sitting on some of them. I didn't see little big man himself anywhere, but Shark was back in it, tangling with two of the snake people—had to be brunette and Adele. There wasn't anyone else.

They were all over him, crawling and twisting, but something about his tooth enamel defeated their grip. All they could do was chip away. Shark was snapping with his mouth teeth, spitting out purpley brown bits. It was a fight of attrition.

My boys were obviously happy to stand aside and let it happen. They weren't rooting for anyone in this fight, and probably figured on rumbling the winner. I should have felt the same way.

But this was *Shark*. He was a freak, but he was our freak. Or at least my freak. Not like those snake things.

I could still remember that scared little Ukrainian kid in school, whimpering through black eyes and a busted lip. I mean, I also remembered him yanking Billy

Preap's arm off at the shoulder and beating Billy over the head with it, but that was after three years of Billy slapping Shark on the back of neck every time they passed in the hall.

Everybody has a limit.

Brush at the ready, I moved in to clean some teeth. Adele and brunette never saw me coming. Shark did.

He just smiled.

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Turned out Melli had been driving the first cab. She'd stayed within the armored cockpit, waiting for the fight to finish one way or the other. Now we stood in the moonlight as the longshoremen loaded up their wounded and took care of business inside. The three snake people were history, but none of our guys were dead. A couple of Big Yakov's people had bought it.

There were going to be a lot of folks in the hospital on Pill Hill for a while.

Shark had stopped fighting as soon as I'd cleaned up the snake women, just stood there staring at the longshoremen. Nobody had felt terribly motivated to take him on.

"How'd you do it?" I asked Melli. "Those longshoremen don't like me any more than they like broccoli. They think I'm a punk."

"Yeah, but you're their punk." She smiled. "That's how Mike the Mouse put it. Plus Big Yakov's been smuggling aircraft parts out of the country. They're not getting any of that action. They were happy to show him the value of good union labor."

"What about the Eyes?" Nobody else had seen what I had seen, I knew that already. Majid had thought he was fighting a guy in a suit, a guy with real good training but no more. Same for brunette and Adele. I wasn't sure what Shark thought he'd seen, but everyone else saw me mow down two women who were giving Shark holy hell.

"Alexi's not sure, except that they've been well and truly hacked. What do you think?"

"I didn't see what anyone else saw." Except maybe Shark, but I wasn't willing to say that even to Melli. "I saw ... something terrible."

"You want to get rid of them? Alexi would love to have those Eyes."

I thought about that. Would I rather see snake people around me? Or just know they were there, and never be able to tell? Besides, I had decided that I believed brunette when she said the Eyes wouldn't work for anyone else.

"No," I said. "Not right now."

"Want a ride home?"

"No thanks. I'll take the Hummer."

When I went back inside the warehouse, Shark was still standing there, covered in Adele and brunette goop, watching the longshoreman trash the place and spatter kerosene around. The tractor's brush had scarred him up pretty good.

"Big Ch'akov no' happy," Shark said. "But I t'ink he forgive."

"Next time, have the dock boys smuggle it for you," I suggested. "You always get quality with union labor." Then, in an unaccustomed bloom of fellow feeling, "You want a ride somewhere?"

"Nyet. I walk." Shark looked at me for while, his watery eyes almost blank in the warehouse lights. "T'ank ch'ou."

I nodded at the floor, at the goop covering his enamel. "Did you ... see them?"

He didn't answer that. We stared each other down for a minute and then I got in the Hummer and backed out carefully, weaving around the cabs.

By the time I got over the New Morrison Bridge there was a column of smoke visible in the morning twilight over northwest Portland. I went by the railroad car, just to see, but it was gone. No big surprise there. Scuffing around on the siding where it had been, I couldn't find any sign of the elevator shaft, either.

I left the Hummer there with the keys in it and went home. My CargoEyes were there, but I thought I'd stick with the StarEyes for a while.

Maybe I'd see Cassiopeia one of these days. Besides, I had to keep an eye out for snakes.

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