

RED FRIDAY

BY JEFFREY BEATY

“Don’t even *think* about cutting in front of me, bitch.”

Carlos could only watch as fear filled the teen girl’s eyes. The girl had only wanted to get through the crowded aisle. She backed away from the foul-mouthed woman who, it seemed, had staked a claim to an area near a pallet of shrink-wrapped toys. When the time arrived for the shrink-wrap to come off, it was clear the woman intended to be the first to pounce.

Never get between a hunter and it’s prey, Carlos thought.

He looked away from the depressing scene with a frown and saw his co-worker Kevin walking up. A light sheen of sweat glistened on his shaved scalp as he shook his head in disgust. Clearly he too had seen this small but typical example of MegaMart Thanksgiving Theater.

“Hey, Carlos.” Kevin said as he fidgeted with his vest. They had all been issued bright yellow crossing-guard vests for tonight’s “festivities” and Kevin’s was far too small. It made him look a little like a burly gorilla in an organ-grinder-monkey’s suit. “Happy Black Friday... I mean Black *Thursday*. You think I would be used to seeing crap like that on Thanksgiving evenings instead of day-after mornings by now.”

“Yeah, nothing but the usual MegaMart ‘peace and good will to all’. Reminds me of a Stephen King quote,” Carlos said. Kevin raised an eyebrow. He was a fellow book and movie geek, and Carlos knew from many conversations that he was a big fan of Stephen King. “This inhuman place makes human monsters.”

Carlos expected the lame joke to draw at most an ironic, social chuckle. But Kevin's laugh was clearly heartfelt, a kind of thanksgiving. "*The Shining*, right? Now here's a movie quote for you. 'Shop Smart. Shop S-Mart.'"

Carlos smirked as he shot back, "Klaatu barada nikto."

Kevin looked out at the crowd. "This day always reminds me of *Army of Darkness*. You know that scene from the theatrical release where he fights Deadites in the department store?"

Carlos had to admit the vulture of a woman circling the toy pallet kind of looked like a Deadite. "Yeah, I see what you mean," he said. "I guess if the undead *did* come to MegaMart, *our* slogan could be, 'Save Money, Die Better'."

The woman's dull eyes turned to the two men briefly as they giggled like school boys, then snapped away to stare down another perceived poacher.

Smothering his giggles, Carlos continued a little quieter, "Did you know those magic words -- that 'klaatu barada nikto' line -- was actually a reference to *another* movie?"

"No. What movie?" Kevin asked.

"They came from the original 'The Day the Earth Stood Still' from the 50s. The alien visitor has the heroine memorize the words. He tells her that if anything happens to him, she must say the words to his giant robot to keep it from destroying Earth in retaliation."

"Cool! If only I had some magic words to make this night be over already." Kevin sighed. "Well, guess I better get back to my station."

Carlos' companionable, "Talk to you later, man," was proved untrue a few moments later. As Kevin began to walk off, a loud commotion rose from somewhere in the labyrinth of shelves, loud enough to drown out the white noise of the crowd's babble.

What actually caused the eBRAIN syndrome still remains a matter of controversy. Some say it was a computer virus gone wrong, installed by industrial espionage. Some say it was supernatural, or aliens, or God’s wrath. But the evidence seems to indicate the root of the matter lies with the company itself, E.A.T or Extra.Advanced.Tech. The release of the latest version of their highly successful Broadband-Radio Adaptive-Intelligence Neurocomputer or B.R.A.I.N. was slated to be a technological second coming.

The initial idea seems to have been two-fold. On the official release day, hidden code in the popular mobile computer, communication and entertainment device became active. This code would first, plant a desire directly in users’ brains to make them love their eBRAIN, to make them desire the latest and greatest eBRAIN. Second, the media interfaces of both the new eBRAIN2 and the older eBRAIN1 would transmit subliminal visual and audio messages to any networked audio/visual equipment in range. These messages would plant strong desires in those exposed and not already jacked into an eBRAIN to get their *own* eBRAIN.

Something clearly did not go as planned. However it happened, the end result was that all over the world, those exposed essentially became zombies. Zombies who wanted one thing and would do *anything* to get or keep it. These real-life zombies didn’t want to “eat brains”, they wanted E.A.T. B.R.A.I.N.’s, or eBRAINS. And they would roll over anyone or anything that got in their way.

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The screams from the far-side of the store came from the vicinity of Electronics, but clearly the commotion was spreading fast. So blood-curdling were those first cries that Carlos’ immediate reaction was to hide. He felt a little ashamed when he saw Kevin already half way down the aisle and moving quickly *towards* the uproar.

A couple of aisles away, a massive shelving unit toppled down with a crash that made Carlos spin and almost bolt. Turning back, he saw Kevin at the end of the aisle turn towards the sounds. The big man paused, in shock from what he was seeing. The next moment terrified shoppers were streaming past him. And the next...

Kevin looked overweight, but it was all muscle. He spread his arms to slow or stop the stampede before someone got hurt. A young teenage couple barreled down the aisle, a crazed look in their eyes. Instead of trying to get past him in panic, they both tackled him, giggling with glee. Kevin just managed to stay on his feet. He swung the young man clawing at him into a pallet of dolls that cried out in pre-recorded demands for their mothers. Before he could do the same to the girl hanging from his shoulder, Kevin's eyes went wide as she tore his carotid artery from his neck with her teeth.

Carlos' paralysis broke and he ran. An elderly woman burst from a side aisle, swinging her cane at his head. He ducked and did not slow as the old woman saw the foul-mouthed lady and her pallet of toys. Somewhere in the zombie-like mind of the old woman the idea formed that the lady before her was guarding that pallet. Since the only thing worth having was an eBRAIN... Carlos heard the old woman's cracked voice muttering, "Mine, mine, mine," over and over. It reminded him of a scene from a popular animated children's movie. It had been humorous in that setting. It wasn't so funny now. Especially once the sound of the woman's cane striking bones began to punctuate each cackled word. Carlos did not look back.

"Klaatu barada nikto. Klaatu barada nikto." Unnoticed, the words escaped him in gasps as he ran. "Klaatu..." A boy, barely in his teens, appeared over the top of the tall wall of shelves to his right and grinned down at Carlos from his perch. "...barada nikto." An inhuman barking laugh, almost the cry of a hyena, came from the boy's throat as he crouched. He pounced, landing several feet behind Carlos. The boy chortled again, then sprinted after the fleeing man.

A display of BB guns stood in the middle of the wide aisle. Carlos grabbed a plastic container of BBs as he ran by, then threw it as hard as he could to the ground behind him. The thin walls of the container shattered and BBs flew everywhere. The sound of BBs rolling out was followed almost immediately by the crash of the boy as he slipped on them. Just ahead Carlos saw the doors to the store's back room. As he burst through the doors, Carlos spared a glance behind to see the boy sobbing and pounding the floor with his fists. The temper tantrum was interrupted when another flood of rioting shoppers poured into view farther down the aisle. The boy's eyes turned feral as he sprang toward this latest distraction.

Where to go? Carlos legs took him towards “the cage” out of sheer habit. The Claims cage was his office on normal days. Secretly Carlos called Claims the *Island of Misfit Toys*. He'd never admit it, but he sometimes thought of himself as one of the broken or defective bits of detritus he dealt with all day. Claims was where damaged products and customer returns were taken to be processed by Carlos and his co-worker in order to properly dispose of, or “reclaim”, some of the store’s investment in that merchandise. Shelves ran along the outside of the cage lined with bins full of damaged products, waiting for the end of all the Black Friday craziness.

The cage itself was a high chain link fence that enclosed a narrow corridor of the back room full of filing cabinets, shelves of old paperwork, a desk, computer, and any expensive merchandise waiting to be processed and shipped out. It also served as the store’s attic, where tools and rarely used items were stored. Carlos ran up to the cage door and fought to get his keys from his pants pocket. He kept glancing around the back room in fear as he struggled with the cage lock. A short distance away from Claims his eye fell on a ladder bolted to one brick wall that climbed to a hatch in the roof about 25 feet up. Carlos knew the hatch would be locked with a padlock to which only management had the key. An idea began to form in Carlos’ panicked brain, and he whimpered as he finally got the door to the cage open and bolted inside.

Carlos scrambled to the back of the narrow cage and ripped a large tool box from a shelf. It’s weight nearly ripped his arm out as it plummeted to the floor spilling some of its contents. He rummaged through it and began to fear the item he was looking for had not been returned by whoever had used it last. Finally he found the large bolt cutters and managed to get them untangled from the other tools. He turned back, grabbed his coat hanging from a hook on one shelf, turned towards the cage door... And gasped.

Two of his fellow employees were coming around the corner. Carlos had no way of knowing that the two had been in the back break room when the eBRAIN signal had suddenly interrupted the traditional Thanksgiving football game on the room’s big screen TV. He had no way of knowing how a room full of friends and co-workers, who had worked together in some cases for years, had suddenly turned from their lukewarm catered Thanksgiving dinner to begin tearing at each other in search of their own share of the Black Friday cornucopia of junk. He had no way of knowing this other than that “shop or die” look in their eyes. The

blood splattered across the face of the man in the lead may also have tipped him off.

Carlos grabbed the cage door and slammed it shut, trapping himself inside. But the padlock for the door was dangling with the keys still in it, on the *outside*. As the man with the blood on his face began to run towards the door, Carlos looked around in panic. A rats-nest tangle of yellow rope that someone had dug out for setting up Black Friday crowd control aisles lay on the ground by one shelf. Carlos grabbed it, found a free end and began to tie the inner door handle to a shelf, effectively locking it from the inside. He had only gotten the first knot tied when the crazed man hit the door. Their faces inches apart, Carlos stared into the man's fierce eyes.

A name tag hanging from the man's yellow vest said simply “Joe”. Carlos was pretty sure he worked in Automotive but they'd never really talked before. Now it seemed all that Joe could utter were animal grunts as he struggled to open the door. Carlos added several more knots to his crude lock and backed away. Though sweat poured from him, Carlos felt cold as he looked around the cluttered confines of the cage he was now trapped in. He shrugged on his coat, picked the bolt cutters back up, and hugged them close as Joe began to howl in frustration.

The second employee Carlos had seen coming around the corner was now digging through the bins on the shelves outside the cage. Her motions were erratic, violent, like an overly-excited child ripping the wrapping from a Christmas gift. Carlos recognized her petite form immediately, as he had always had a bit of a crush on her. One of the many things Carlos liked about Melanie was her contagious laugh. She was laughing now, but the sound was chilling.

Joe had finally noticed Melanie. He moved from the door towards the bins, causing Melanie to back away. Her face was angry yet wary -- the look of an animal chased from its kill by a larger predator. Joe looked at the cage and cocked his head. He then reached out, pulled a couple of bins from the shelves and flung them away. Melanie moved to inspect their spilled contents. Joe had not flung them aside as an offering. He wanted them out of his way. He stepped up onto the first shelf. It held his weight. He smiled and began to climb.

Carlos looked up, but he knew what he would see. The chain link wall of the cage did not reach to the back room's high ceiling. It would not be easy, but it was certainly possible if someone were determined enough to climb the shelves and chain link outside, come over the top of the fence, and climb back down the shelves on the inside. Joe looked *very* determined.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Carlos muttered, then screamed. “What do you want?” Neither answered.

Carlos moved towards the tangled mess of his crude rope lock. Joe was nearly to the top of the cage, his bloody hands hooked in the fence links while his feet kicked blindly trying to find a purchase. There was no way Carlos would get those knots loosened in time. As Joe got his arm hooked over the top of the fence and began to pull himself over, Carlos swore. He took the bolt cutters he'd been clutching and merely cut the rope with one snip. He lunged through the door, slammed it shut again, and locked the deadbolt as Joe jumped down to the floor inside the cage.

Carlos turned to run towards the ladder he had seen earlier and realized this would take him past Malanie. Still clutching his bolt cutters, Carlos tried to shuffle behind her as she searched the last of the bins. He hadn't gone more than a couple of steps when Melanie stood and spun to face him. Her face lit.

“Carlos.” She whispered it. God, he loved hearing her call his name. Her lips held a half smile. Her face was flush. She moved a step towards him and Carlos felt paralyzed again – a prey animal freezing before the predator in hopes that it would pass him by unnoticed. She whispered two syllables that made no sense to Carlos. Something about *brains*? The question caused him to realize that the look on Melanie's face was more feral than loving; that those hands reaching out were hooked into claws which, from the looks of them, had already drawn someone's blood.

As Melanie sprung, Carlos swung. The brutal weight of the bolt cutters took her across the temple and sent her sprawling into a pallet of freight. She lay unmoving in a nest of boxes, her hair covering her face. Blood trickled from behind her hair as he looked. The sound of his own sobs, and of Joe tearing the contents of the cage apart behind him finally woke Carlos to his situation. He ran towards the ladder to the roof and escape.

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Carlos shivered, perched in hiding near the front edge of MegaMart's flat roof. He sat in a near fetal position in order to get as much of himself snuggled into the depths of his bulky winter coat as possible. The sun was mere moments from clearing the horizon, and was already lighting the underside of the low clouds and the snow that fell lazily in the pre-dawn cold. Carlos watched as those flakes fell on the bodies strewn across the parking lot. He hadn't seen any of the... well, zombies... prowling the lot in hours. He could still hear the occasional sound of sirens from emergency vehicles somewhere out in town, but from the sound, things had petered off significantly. He should probably see if he could make his way home.

Ironically, it was probably getting close to the time Carlos' normal shift at MegaMart usually began.

Today's Friday. Carlos thought. The day after Thanksgiving. Black Friday. The day most retail business' fiscal budgets turned from the red, where they were losing money, into the black, where they were making it. Only *this* Friday, Carlos knew, that wasn't going to happen.

No, this is the dawn of Red Friday. Thinking of Melanie's prone form, Carlos shivered. *Blood Red Friday.*

THE END