

Miles to Go Before I Sleep

by Flint and Feather

Hellboy stood up from his seat in an ill-fitting office chair, to give his knotted back and shoulders a needed stretch. Waiting out completion of required follow-up in the BPRD's biohazard detection lab was an added unwelcome delay to his homecoming – and his longed-for bed. Not once had his personal radiation monitor alarmed during his mission, but a number of factors could have affected its reliability. When the technician on overnight call pulled up outside the dedicated separate annex to meet him, Hellboy had turned over his monitor and followed him inside.

“This shouldn't take too long, sir.”

“Sir?” Hellboy repeated. “You make me feel old, kid.”

He shook off his duster and examined the state of his clothing under the office lighting. Between the reinforced shoulder seams and sleeve cuffs, the tan canvas fabric was slashed to ribbons, and overall, it was a burnt and tattered mess. On his back, one durable coat after another always eventually and inevitably bit the dust. His spandex shirt and leather pants were only a little better off, and holding together for the time being. But in a protected pocket, he found his trusty butane lighter and the remainder of a previously enjoyed cigar. As useless as it was, he put the coat back on and lit up to smoke.

And again, he thought about *her*. She must have known of the day he was set to go away, but he hadn't heard even a second-hand message from her. Nothing. He had no right to expect that anyway, he reminded himself. It wasn't like Liz Sherman belonged to him. He sighed and took a hard draw on the cigar.

“How about it, algorithm guy?” he asked Ward. “I'm half asleep, and so are you. Am I cleared?”

“Your results for contamination and pathogens are negative, sir.” The tech scribbled his signature and brought him a copy of the release.

“So this gives me a pass for everything but alien seeds, pollens and fleas,” Hellboy deadpanned.

“Sir, do you want to disinfect before you leave? I can dispose of your damaged clothes.”

“I'm not leaving here in a paper dress.” He feigned a glower at the young man. “I'll do it in the HQ. It's going on two-thirty. You, get on home.”

“Then, I will. Thanks for the overtime, sir.”

Going out into the cool night, he heaved his dishevelled weary bulk into his company van. Only three more doors to clear on the last leg home.

Alone in her quarters, Liz gave up trying to concentrate on her book. She marked the page and set it aside. She felt foolish for expending this much mental energy on her annoyance with Hellboy. His latest mission away wasn't any of her responsibility, but he hadn't even bothered to make contact with her before he'd headed out. Then within the three days after, he had sent home one injured agent. And followed up with the rest of his team getting back safe – but without him. The involved men had reported the events of the mission and its conclusion; as much as they knew of it. Hellboy, they said, was expected to return the day after, but he had left them in the dark for why he had chosen to stay behind.

She'd filed a standing request with the internal comms unit to notify her when something was heard from Hellboy, no matter what the day or hour. And when finally that call came to alert her that he had arrived on the HQ grounds at 1:30 in the morning, it was difficult to assume a good mood. She hurried to dress and get to the place where she'd be sure to meet him.

The wide open drafty hangar and garage complex presented no way to stave off the boredom of waiting during these wee hours, and she had forgotten to bring music along. Intermittent ventilation fans hummed in the overhead ducts, and when they cut off, the silence dragged.

She warmed her hands inside the sleeves of her pullover sweater, and shifted to lean against a support beam within sight of the innermost land vehicle entrance. More than an hour later, she watched the double wide segmented door rise up its tracks, until a matte black van appeared and proceeded inside on a straight course. She stepped out into view before it could turn off into the farther reaches to park.

He rolled the vehicle to a stop by her position, shut down the engine and opened the door. The cigar butt was first to hit the concrete floor, and the instant his left boot touched down, she came forward to confront him. Her flustered, sharp exclamation made his eyes snap to attention.

“Gawd, Red!”

But any more of her pent up outpourings were waylaid by the clicks heard from a nearby office door. Lights switched on inside the Transport manager's domain, and the door was yanked inward with force. Big Spud Andersen appeared, hailing in his loud, good-natured way.

“Yo, Red!”

“Spudwrench!” Hellboy returned.

“Whaddaya mean by messing up my garage in the dead of night?!”

Red chuckled and walked over to meet his friend.

Liz allowed that two grown men should be permitted to shout their nonsensical banter back and forth where no one would be disturbed – but Spud being here during his weekend off, puzzled her. She started a bit at the next heightened force of his voice. Somewhat drunk, probably.

“Get in here! Now!” Then his volume dropped to normal and his tone sweetened as he added, “Elizabeth, you too.”

Hellboy approached nearer the doorway, but didn't enter.

"Offer you a refreshment or three?" Spud took a slow step back, adopting a grimace of comic horror at the demon's appearance. "You look jumped by lightning!"

"I know it." Red smirked, ripped a dangling strip off his split right sleeve and jammed it into the waistband of his pants. "I'll be heading straight to the lockers and sacking out. Rain check, huh?"

"Hit the showers, then. Garbage those rags." Spud turned to disappear into his side lounge, calling back, "Here, lemme save you a trip." He leaned out and pitched a black shapeless object in a high arc toward his visitor. It tumbled and unrolled in mid-air before Red caught it, gave it a quick look and slung it over his shoulder.

"That, it will," he agreed.

"Brand new clean." Spud barked a laugh, then grinned wide. "Get on home!"

Seeing Hellboy grin back, Liz smiled too, and waved goodnight. As Red turned to walk back to the van, she slipped the new article from his shoulder and held it up to view.

"He gave you his big, tall sweatpants." She refolded the garment, then frowned. "I've never seen Spud behave that way."

"Yeah, well..." was all that Red muttered under his breath as he bent to pick up the discarded cigar end. He'd known for awhile that sometimes Spud spent nights in his comfortably outfitted office whenever he was in the doghouse with his wife.

That fun interruption being handled, Red wanted only to see his way out of the garage.

"Now, how about this?" Liz broached, rewinding. "You're nearly two days late! Couldn't you have transmitted even one hint that you were still alive?"

At last, she had him still and facing her, and she stood staring up at a thin long cut that slanted across his brow from the base of one horn stub. And more injury might still be hidden beneath his unfortunate shredded coat.

He turned aside, then swung back to her. "What's so different about *this* time?" He raised a silencing swift hand before she could answer. "No, wait – before I left, where were *you*?"

Liz was no stranger to how the twists and turns surrounding their work could foil any intention, but hearing him say that, made her arch tone give way to the merely practical.

"You look all right. Mostly."

He angled a brief nod. "I have to park the van at refit. Ride along?"

Liz didn't take the cue to move. Her attitude softened markedly as she asked, "Was it rough?"

He stared with mild consternation, seeing her gaze intensify.

"Nobody we know, died – so no, not so rough."

She then made a rush at him, clutched him around the arms, and dashed herself against his chest.

"Hey..." He exhaled a startled breath, and his blur of weariness shook alert to the notion that

she could block him for as long as she liked – except for the fact that he might nod off right there. While she clung to him with a slight trembling, he brought up cautious hands to hold her.

“What couldn't you tell the others? What did you find?” Despite the roughness of his shirt, she didn't lift her face away.

“Something that was...never really alive...” His voice trailed off, and she respected that he wouldn't be up for long explanations, now. She tilted back her head and was met with his tolerant smile, his fingertips about to brush off the charred flakes sticking to her cheek. She closed her eyes until he had finished, then side glanced at the van.

“Let's go, then.”

During their overdue walk out of the garage, she didn't ply him with more questions or offer to let him in on any plan – but once they'd arrived at the men's locker room limits, she handed him the sweatpants and simply walked away without a word.

So, that was it. Time to quit thinking. From his locker, he snatched a can of beer and downed the warm froth to the last drop. He unhitched his gun belt, cleared all the contents of his pockets and laid them out on a bench. By reason of laziness or convenience, he wore the rest of his clothing into a specially sealed booth, where he soaked himself under jets of stinging disinfectant. Second stage – he stripped and dropped the remnants to the tiled floor, ready to switch to sprays of fresh water. He broke the tie binding his hair, shook it loose and under the hot shower, soaped up all over to get clean of chemicals and all traces of fight and fire. He set his stone hand high up the shower wall, leaned into it and decided to hang out long enough to clear one out of the chamber. Lather sliding down his tensed thighs carried away a little blood, and a lot of black sooty stain. He breathed out his relief while the water drained clear.

He twisted his trashed clothing in the crushing power of his hands to wring nearly dry, then again in frustration, harder still. Outside the booth, he raised the indicator flag on a metal bin, dumped the discards inside and slammed down the lid. A form on a clipboard needed entries of the date, some boxes to be ticked off, and his initials. Too impatient to dry off, he fitted his tail down one leg of the borrowed sweatpants before pulling them up over his hips. With his belt in one hand and the small stuff collected in a towel, he followed the corridors home.

When he entered the last hallway of exhibits sealed behind glass, he saw at its far end that his heavy steel door was standing partway ajar. A new consternation gripped him. He hadn't seen any of his cats escaped on the way up. He walked into his quarters and stopped to make a wall to wall scope. Weird. He hadn't left his place picked up this way.

“Did they fit all right?” Her voice came from somewhere back of his room.

“Liz? Please...no games.” He barely heard his own whisper.

“What's wrong?” she asked. Louder, but not nearer.

“My tail's a little kinked offside.” He felt idiotic as soon as he'd spoken the complaint, but here she was, coming at a brisk pace toward him from behind his uneven wall of stacked television sets.

“No more hurts, tonight,” she announced. “Not even the small ones.” Her tone, her mood and

meaning, were impossible to get straight in his head. Not so funny, how he felt dumbed down enough not to try.

“What - are you leaving, now?” He tossed his towel cache and belt onto a nearby couch, and turned back to the door.

Liz regarded him with an appraising frown. “Close it. You should hang out at home for the rest of the day.”

“Yeah. I've had it.” He figured the path of least resistance was a straight line to his bed. Again he stopped, seeing that it had been made up ready. “You? Thanks.” He hoped she'd read some enthusiasm in him, but all energy was going pretty flat.

She knelt on the bed's tailgate and crawled up to the head of the mattress to turn down the covers, coaxing three of his cats off to sleep elsewhere.

“Get comfortable, and don't be shy.”

That bed had never looked so inviting. Heavy duty springs beneath the truck's box compacted as he dropped to the mattress like a sack of iron. Once beneath the covers, he gladly got rid of the tail-constricting pants. He dragged two pillows to stack under his head, and turned onto his right side to lay the weight of his stone arm out in front. Bending over him, Liz smoothed the blankets, and saw the corner of his mouth lift in a pleased twitch.

“Red, I have no reason to go anywhere else. I don't want you to talk, or move, or anything. I want to stay.” She'd put out her statement. Just that, sounding nothing but matter of fact.

“I won't be much company,” he mumbled back. “Good. Stay.”

He heard the soft thuds of her shoes being tossed to the floor, before she claimed a place behind him on the vacant third of the bed. Not interfering with his chosen way to sprawl, she eased up against his back beneath the covers, adjusting the position of her legs to leave space for his tail. Settled in, she nestled her cheek behind his shoulder. Nice. She began to pet back his damp hair, hooking it behind his ear. He held his breath when she surprised him with a trail of warm kisses on the back of his neck.

“I didn't give up hope,” she said, sounding a little choked. “I just wanted you back.”

He had nothing left for this loaded conversation; not for any conversation. But she deserved to know that he'd heard something very special. He answered with a brief, soulful sigh. Maybe she wouldn't cry. *“Liz, don't cry. You, running all hot and cool ever since I... Crap! – did I think that out loud?”*

She was changing the friendship between them by the minute – staying reclined behind him, dressed in her daytime clothes against his naked back, with her face pressed to his shoulder blade. She drew her fingertips along his left arm, pausing to hold and feel the hard muscled handfuls of his biceps and forearm, and wandered her way down, caressing to the ends of his fingers.

“Sleep,” she whispered. “Let me show myself how to realize what this is, that you really *are* here.”

What was *that* supposed to mean? It sounded all positive, but too confusing to make sense

of. Here he was, finally with *her*, and in no shape to do a good job of anything. He'd come home with no expectations but to crash. His craving for sleep had dropped just a notch down the scale, at the feel of her lips on his skin. And her considerate expectation of him was just one thing – to lie there and let her. The best welcome home, he thought, and he saw no problem to come of her intentions. The unicorn in the room. He didn't want her to feel regrets about anything. If he came out wrong in this, she'd never be the same.

His eyes needed to close. His breathing turned full and slow, while he quietly thrilled to Liz letting her appetites run free on him. Her smooth bare arm slipped around his waist and hugged, fitting herself closer into the small of his back. Her hand gave some special admiration to the build of his firm pectorals, and as her fingers traced down the central indentation of his abs, he drifted to imagining the expressions of her mouth and eyes. For a long while, she studied the ridges in his torso with caressing touches. Curious. Affectionate.

“Down, boy,” he warned, when that covered part of him automatically reacted like it should.

The woman he had needed for so long, returned to a tender stroking along his side, and kisses on his back. Breathing a sigh, she put another reacharound on his chest, holding tight, tighter. And he knew it was real – as much for him as for herself. The honesty of Liz missing him, of her being afraid for him, had all broken through. He so wanted to turn around to hold her, but she made him feel right to wait.

And she made him feel sure of one more damned thing. As much as he wanted to go on loving her touch this way, he knew he'd soon be screwed by sleeping through it.