
Three Hours as Prey

By Christopher D. Williams

A 'Stymph Sequence' Story

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Stephen Lefton pressed his back against the door he'd just thrown shut. Hands pressed to its cool surface. His skin wafting off heat. Heart slapping against his ribs. In the faint streams of moonlight he could make out the dim outline of desks in the long office floor ahead of him. Dingy flat blocks with toppled cubicle walls leaning at strange angles.

Nothing moved. Except him.

He put his head against the door. Aware of his still-hard breathing. He swallowed against it, trying to relax his lungs, trying to make any and all sounds stop emanating from his body.

Otherwise they might hear. Hear and come closer.

If he had eluded them, he should be safe. This building only had two doors on the first floor, and one was already blocked off with furniture. He wedged chairs against the other before running up to the third floor. Only offices here, all empty and dusty and long abandoned. All he had to do was stay quiet...

Then he heard it. Far off, down below. Heavy thunks, two, four. Objects falling? No. Objects moving.

The heat instantly left his blood. They got in.

How'd it get in? Forced the door? Found a ground-level window he missed? His mind raced for an instant. Nostrils sucking in air, fast, faster...

Wait. Stop. Reality clamped down. Didn't matter. Not safe anymore. Stay safe.

Stephen's eyes flew around the room. With only a bit of moonlight to see he could barely make out anything past thirty feet. The rest of the long open office space dissolved into black. Like some portal to a netherworld, out of which hungry things may slither. Like Stymphs.

He moved. Hand checking the doorknob. Locked. Good.

His gun clinked in its hip holster. Ran out of bullets when the Stymphs attacked their camp earlier. Ernie had more on him, but they'd had to split up. He took off south to get away from the pack. Probably holed up in an empty building in this otherwise-abandoned city right now. Just like him.

At least he hoped. Otherwise...

Stephen shook his head. Wiped a lean hand over his dusky face. His shirt stuck to his back. Stay here. Now. Now you're stuck in the top floor of an old office building with a Stymph downstairs and no weapon.

Wait. An overturned chair lay nestled in shadows off to his left. He darted toward it. The wood felt cold and dry under his hands. Solid wood. Sturdy. He pulled on a leg, but it stayed fast. Tried the other. That one moved. Slowly, working the chair leg up and down, he levered it off of the frame.

Now he had a club. Not a gun, but something, at least.

Something bumped against a wall down below. First floor. Maybe second. Something heavy.

Stephen surveyed his surroundings again. His eyes adjusted to the night blanket all around. The row of office cubicles extended further back—some with their walls still standing, others toppled into many-angled heaps. No bodies he could see. But he could see two windows, one on each side of him, broken out.

No glass sparkled below them. He knew why. This wasn't the first time Stymphs had entered here. Others had holed up on this floor, just like he had. When the Stymphs made their way up...

He could do the same. The thought made his head cock, staring at the window to his right. A cool, almost soothing breeze drifted over him from it. One simple jump and it's all over.

The muscles in his legs activated. One jump to freedom. No more running, no more feeling his heart trying to break his ribs & escape. He felt lighter all of a sudden. The cool breeze wafted over skin. Beckoning. So nice...

His hand fell upon the window frame. A tiny bit of glass poked into the flesh. Stephen caught his breath. He pulled his hand back. No blood. Not sharp enough to cut. What was he—

His eyes focused on the open window. Down below, three stories, he saw long, covering shadows. The deep of night. Waiting for him.

No. Had to get out of here. Head up north to the Base Ernie heard about. They had a new technology...Reawakening? Yes. Could bring you back from the dead. That was why they left Ventura. They had to see. If there really was a way to survive Stymphs now...

A loud thump sounded below his feet. Right below. Stephen skittered back like some giant spider, crouching down into a pile of toppled dust-fuzzy cubicle walls. Tiny sparkles floated in the moonbeams before him.

Closer. Much closer now.

He couldn't go any higher; this building only went up three floors. If it got in he was dead. Meat for its belly. Like some stupid fish snatched up by the bear. Chewed, torn open, pulled apart in blood and screams. They didn't appear to care whether you were alive or dead when feeding.

He'd seen it. The look on that one girl's face. The utter disbelief that the body could manifest such pain. The cruelty visited on her while still living...for another moment anyway.

Stephen shivered. Trying to banish the thought. He wiped at his face again, fingers scratching on thick stubble. Stay alive. Had to stay alive. His eye went back to the door he'd wedged in. It had two windows showing dim chunks of the hall beyond.

He cocked his head. Two windows. A Stymph could break those in if it tried. But, maybe he could use that...

Then he saw the movement. Darkness shifting. Through the window, on the far hallway wall. His ears strained. Slow, deep breathing sounded faintly. It was here.

Stephen's muscles seized. His legs protested concealment. Get up, they screamed with their tension. Run to the window. Jump. End this. End the torment. So easy...

He clenched his jaw against the compulsion. Both his hands shuddered in front of him. The club weighted one down, bobbing through a sliver of moonlight. Pathetic weapon.

The shadows lengthened in the hall. Silent. Fluid. Stephen's stomach clenched.

It slid into view. He could see the top of its long low back, skin dark and tight along the spine, slithering just above the window's bottom. Visible through its movement and the glint of black searching eyes. He could see two—one on the side of the long skull, the other on top. Searching. The third searched as well. For him.

He imagined the fangs now. Three long, curved tusks in its mouth. Slick with saliva. Spreading and closing. Eager to tear into flesh. His flesh.

Stephen took in a shaky breath. If he's going to survive this, to escape, there's only one thing he can do. The Stymph stood before the first window, on his left. Then there was the door, and past that, the second window. About twenty feet of difference between the windows. Door smack in the middle. It opened outward from this side.

He put both hands on the club. Pleading silently to the night shadows, to cover him for just a moment. Then he moved.

Crouched, sauntering as low as he could through long dark patches, he made for the far window. The Stymph's glistening black eyes had dipped below the first window frame. He heard noisy sniffing from under the door. His legs began to ache from the low crouch he stayed in. Don't make a sound. He clenched his throat and his cheeks. Sweat beaded on his neck.

He reached the second window. Nearly squatting below and to its left side. Off his left shoulder stood the locked door. Okay. Do it. Do it!

Stephen pulled the club back...and slammed it into the window glass above him.

The shattering sounded like a bomb going off. Bright searing noise exploded at him. Glittering splinters caught moonlight as they ballooned out into the hallway. Opening the window.

A rattling growl burst from the hallway beyond. The rush of heavy thunks came fast on the floor. It charged.

Stephen darted left. Not for the now-open window, but for the locked door. Fingers scrabbling, he flipped the lock and turned the knob. His mind shouted at him. Are you crazy? You're actually going OUT there? You know what it will do!

He pushed himself mentally and physically forward. Throwing open the door he broke into a dead run. Left. Back down the hall. Away from the damaged and distracting window.

He reached the open stairwell at the end. Only then did he look up, heart jackhammering against his ribs, breath nowhere to be found.

There. Behind the swung-open door. It stood on its back paws, head and chest obscured by the door. Must have stuck its head through the now-open window. Even the back half made him shudder. Muscle-lean legs with huge paws. Dark-skinned hide tufted here and there with fur scraps.

The glass didn't affect it. That hide could shrug off some bullets; a glass shard didn't stand a chance.

Stephen raced down the stairs as quietly as he could. His shoes made tiny squeaks that thundered in his ears. Faster. Get down faster. There's the second floor, if he just goes faster he can make the first--

Heavy pounding came in a rush above him. The Stymph. Running back toward the stairs. In pursuit.

Stephen jumped for the second floor doorway at his right. A rusted-over steel door flew aside as he burst into a long narrow hall flanked by numbered doors on both sides. Everywhere he saw shadows and murky black edges. He dove for one of the office doors at random, slapping it closed, casting about for something to barricade it. The small room was pitch black. He put his shoulder on the door and started swinging his leg side to side.

It bumped against something. Chair. He grabbed it and wedged its top under the doorknob. There. Safe. He staggered back. Ragged sound, over and over. Him breathing. Oh god, how much more of this?

Stephen crumpled against a wall. Dimly aware of a large standing object to his right. Probably a desk. Right now he just wanted to sit there. Body aching. Lungs burning. Need to rest. To sleep. Yes, sleep. A warm envelope seemed to surround his face at the very thought. Just close your eyes and drift into the blackness already here...

The entire doorway shuddered.

Stephen started, body jolted so hard he nearly stood again. The chair groaned when something hit the door again. The Stymph. Throwing its body against the door. It knew.

He was cornered.

The fear surged again, awakening exhausted muscles once more. Get up. Survive. Face tight, feeling some deep inner urge to cry or scream, Stephen scrambled about again. No club in hand. No gun at his side either. Where did they go? Doesn't matter. Find something!

His hands slid across the desk surface. Dust clouds tickled his nose. Papers crumbled under his fingertips. The door jolted again. He coughed and found he was panting.

Then his fingers hit something cold. Cold and solid. He blinked. Metal. Only metal feels like that. He held it up close.

A steel tool of some kind. Heavy on one end with a rubber coating. The other tapered to a dull point. Kind of like a knife, just not sharp.

Stephen let out an awed gasp.

Wood cracked beside him. The doorway shuddered inward. He couldn't see, but he could hear. The chair had broken. Gray haze danced around an open edge in the door frame. Opened a few inches.

The Stymph's snout shoved its way through. Only the snout fit, just past the nostrils, before the door wedged it in. Its triple-fanged mouth biting at the air. Nostrils wrinkling and widening. Small huffing noises intruded into the room.

Stephen looked from the steel tool in his hand to the Stymph. So close. He felt electricity buzzing under his skin. Cornered. But he could fight. Make it hurt. Would it leave? No idea. Try though. Have to try.

His feet did not want to move. He dragged them. Body shivering with each step like he'd just plunged into ocean waters. Closer. The Stymph huffed. Gnashed its tooth-overloaded mouth. It smelled flesh. Food.

Stephen turned the steel tool so the dull point aimed downward in his right hand. Closer. His toe bumped against the chair. Still there, but it wouldn't hold long now.

Had to act. Do it. Now!

Stephen stabbed down.

The steel tool struck the Stymph's left nostril. It drove down into the flesh. Hit bone almost immediately. Inky blood spurting out toward Stephen. He shrank back at once, even though none hit him. The Stymph let out a throaty yelp.

He stabbed again. Hit higher up on the snout this time. Again. More yelping. The snout thrashed side to side. He missed. Hand swept down right next to the fangs. They yawned open and snapped shut an instant later.

Sharp tang of blood in the air. Glistening stains on the Stymph. It spat out a sort of barking noise. Stephen tried to stab again. Got the snout's edge. The dull point skated along the harder skin.

Then the snout pulled back. Disappearing into the darkness. Scraping footfalls shrank away.

It took a while before the thoughts bubbled into Stephen's brain. It went away. It wasn't there. Silence outside. It had gone. Gone! He let a long wheezing breath escape. Muscles lost tension so fast they started to ache in his sides. His body slid down, plopping on the floor, his back to the wall beside the door.

Sleep. Yes...a little while. His limbs grew heavier by the second. Just close your eyes. Was there something he should—eyes heavy. Stephen dropped fast into a leaden slumber, engulfed by buoyant, comfortable darkness...

A loud noise crashed against him. Stephen came awake with a start, body jerking once. His eyes felt sticky as he opened them. What was that? Couldn't see anything. Still dark. Legs hurt. Something cold in his hand. Face felt warm. Why—

Something pale in front of him. Stephen blinked several times. Hard to focus. No light coming in. All he could see was a pale space, like a cylinder, floating in the air. Wait. No, there were two of them. Next to one another. So tired. Couldn't see well.

The pale cylinders bobbed up and down.

His brain tickled. Breath sounding in his ears. Seemed too loud. Still exhausted? Face felt warm again. Warm air on it. From what?

He started to see in the darkness. A trickle of light came from his left. The doorway. It stood open. Wood pieces on the floor. Thin drizzles of illumination hit on a long horizontal body inside the doorway. Close to him.

And another.

Stephen's mouth felt swollen. His eyes began to work.

A Stymph stood in front of him. Inside the office. Hovering over his body, standing there like some monstrous watchdog. Fangs inches away from his face. He could see the blood spatter on its nostrils. But it wasn't alone. Another Stymph stood inside the room as well, off to the first one's left, fully inside. Both of them staring down at his seated form.

Cornering him.

Stephen felt himself begin to shiver. A sickened feeling welled up in his chest. Some tiny part of his mind screeched at him. Move. Run. Push. Fight. Scream. Anything!

But he couldn't anymore. His arms only shivered where they were, lying at his sides, useless now. His legs wouldn't move a hair. They splayed out between the two Stymphs. Eight tree-trunk legs dwarfing his exhausted two.

The Stymph's head loomed in front of his. So close its hot breath wafted over his face each time it snorted through torn nostrils. Stephen's mouth made a tiny, pathetic sound. Barely more than a kitten's mew. Tears began to dribble down his face.

Please, not like this.

The Stymph opened its huge jaws. Triple fangs spreading wide around a black chasm.

The last thing he heard was his own skull cracking.

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Hope you enjoyed “Three Hours as Prey!”

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Since you received this after signing up for “The Wrong Message,” my email newsletter, watch your inbox for the next issue!

(Just not like a hawk. Your eyes will hurt eventually.)
