

THE DEVIL'S ENGINE

# HELLWALKERS



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*To Beki, my awesome wife.*

*If I had to walk through hell with anyone, it would be you.*

*Not that I'm saying our marriage is like hell or anything—*

*it's amazing, and I love you and our girls so much.*

*Honestly, it's not like hell at all, that's just the name of the book.*

*I was trying to be clever.*

*Can I start over?*



PART I

WILD DREAMS  
TORMENT ME





# WELCOME TO HELL

*Open your eyes.*

The easiest thing in the world, and the hardest.

Hardest because Marlow knew he wasn't *in* the world anymore. He was somewhere else, somewhere far worse.

*Open your eyes.*

He didn't even feel like he had eyes to open. He couldn't sense anything, not the beating of his heart, not the weight of his flesh, not the pressure of his eyelids. There was literally nothing left of him, just a lost soul adrift in the ash that had once been his body.

*Open your eyes.*

He didn't want to, because if he opened them then he would know for sure where he was. There would be no going back. He would be able to see exactly where this journey had led him. With his eyes closed, though, there was no hiding from where it had all begun.

He could see himself now, just a kid back on Staten Island, a kid with no memories of childhood, kicked out of school for being an asshole, for burning all his bridges. Yeah, Marlow Green: big, bad hellraiser.

He saw the day he'd left school, stumbling into an underground parking lot, stumbling into a war. Hell had come to Staten Island that day, and somehow—despite his cowardice,



despite the fact he'd always put himself first—he'd done his part to send it back.

*Open your eyes.*

That first battle had opened his eyes—opened them to a world that he never could have imagined, a world where demons were real, where hell was real. He'd been recruited into one of the armies fighting this war, the Fist. He'd become a soldier—a true Hellraiser—alongside Herc, Truck, Night, and the enigmatic leader, Sheppel Ostheim. Not to mention Pan, a Hellraiser for four years, ever since Herc had rescued her from juvie for killing a guy who'd attacked her. Through them he'd learned about a weapon, something ancient and something evil.

The Devil's Engine.

Make a deal with the Engine and you could have anything you wanted—money, fame, and power beyond your wildest dreams. The Fist had been using this machine to turn its army into superheroes, giving them powers like invisibility, strength, speed, even invulnerability. And all it asked in return was your soul. Because once your contract was up, the demons came for you.

They came to drag you to hell.

Marlow had thought the risk was worth it, because it wasn't like your contract couldn't be cracked. The lawyers for the Fist—quantum mathematicians armed with the world's best technology—could undo the Hellraisers' deals with the Engine, they could free you up to fight another day. And the cost of not fighting the war . . . That was unthinkable. Because on the other side of this battle was a group called the Circle, armed with an Engine of their own, and all they wanted was to open the gates of hell and flood the streets with blood.

Not good.

*Open your eyes.*

He hadn't opened his eyes, though. He'd been blind to the



truth. The Fist had destroyed half of New York trying to get hold of the Circle's Engine, trying to end the war once and for all. But at the last minute they'd been betrayed—betrayed by the person Marlow had trusted most, his best friend, Charlie. Charlie had been working for the Circle all along, for their commander in chief, Mammon. He'd found a way inside the Fist's Engine, and he'd opened the door to their enemies. Mammon had obliterated most of the Fist in one blood-soaked swoop, and he had control of both Engines. As far as Marlow had known, as far as any of them had known, it was only a matter of time before Mammon united the Engines and opened the gateway to hell.

There had still been hope, though. One last chance to find the Engines, to win the war. And they did it. Together, he and Herc and Pan and the others had found the physical location of the Engine—inside the world's largest graveyard, beneath the streets of Paris. They'd found it, they'd entered it, and they'd been about to destroy it.

Except Mammon was already there, Mammon and Charlie and their army.

And they were already destroying it.

*Open your eyes.*

It had been too late to open them, too late to see what was really going on. Ostheim had always said that they were fighting to save the world, that Mammon was the bad guy. But Ostheim had been lying. *He* was the true force of evil, and they'd been doing his bidding. He'd followed them to the Engine, finally revealing his true form—a demonic creature of immense power. And right there, Ostheim had killed Mammon and taken control of the Engine.

And now the barrier between this world and the realm of the demons was about to crumble.

*Open your eyes.*



There had been no time to think, no time to see. They'd been so desperate to fix their mistakes, to undo the harm they'd caused, that they'd done exactly what Ostheim had wanted them to do. Mammon's dying gift to them had been a name: Meridiana, his sister. They'd fled the Engine and found her in Venice, a crazy woman stuck in a loop of time who had managed to build an Engine of her own. She'd offered to make them one final contract for powers to use in the fight against Ostheim—an unbreakable contract for a single soul—but Marlow and Pan had fallen into the Engine together, and made a deal side by side.

Armed with the ability to travel through space and time, they had found their way back to the Engine, to an instant in time where Mammon couldn't find them—an instant in time where they could pull the bastard machine to pieces. Meridiana had told them to find the heart of the Engine and destroy it. But their contract was corrupted, it was already unraveling, the demons were on their way.

It was over.

*Open your eyes.*

Why, though? Why would he do that? Why would he want to see? The demons had taken Pan first, had pulled her to pieces and dragged her soul into the molten earth. Then they'd come for him.

They'd shredded him.

Devoured him.

His soul had been ripped out of his body, pulled through the void, up and up and up and into the darkness.

Into *this* darkness. Endless, unfathomable.

This was hell, he knew—an eternity of nothing.

And he couldn't even scream.



“Marlow?”

The word was a whisper, right into his ear. He tried to turn his head, reached out for it with arms he didn't have. He wanted to laugh, wanted to cry, wanted to speak, but he could do nothing but listen, willing the voice to speak again. An eternity seemed to pass before it did.

“Marlow?”

Not a whisper this time but a voice, Pan's voice.

And she sounded pissed.

“Marlow,” she said again. “You idiot.”

*Pan?* he tried to say.

“Marlow, just open your eyes,” said Pan. “You're not going to believe this.”

*Open your eyes.*

The easiest thing in the world, the hardest thing in the world.

*Just open your eyes, Marlow,* he told himself.

And he did.



## BORN AGAIN

This being hell, Marlow expected to see fire.

But when he opened his eyes, there was only snow.

It fell all around him, a blizzard of white against the dark, so furious that he had to screw his eyes shut again. He tried to lift a hand to his face but there was still that gaping absence where his body had once been.

"Open your eyes," said Pan, her voice grainy, like an old gramophone recording.

He did as she said and saw the snow again—only it wasn't snow, it was something else, something almost like static.

*What's going on?* he wanted to ask, but his lips were numb. Everything was numb. *Pan? I'm scared.*

He *was* scared. Not the adrenaline bomb of combat, not the cold-sweat shakes of a nightmare. This fear was so much older, and so much worse.

"Can you see me?" said Pan.

The snow was clearing, sunlight starting to burn through it. Marlow could just about make out shapes there, a person. The relief of it, of not being blind, of not being helpless in the dark, was almost as bright as the light. He lifted a hand again and was surprised this time to feel it respond.

*What's going on?* he tried to say, but what came out of his disobedient mouth was more, *Atooingon*. He tried to move his arm,



tried to control it, grabbing hold of a fistful of what could have been dirt. He managed to blink, and again, each time the world swimming further into focus. There was a person there, sitting to his side, just a silhouette against the sky. He reached for her, and when the person slapped his hand away—hard—he pursed his lips and spat out a word.

“Pan.”

He blinked again and suddenly the world was crystal clear. It was Pan, but she was different, somehow. He couldn’t work out what it was because the sky behind her was so bright, shrouding her face with shadow.

“Marlow,” she said, chewing on the word.

He looked down the length of his body. Most of his body, that was, because right now he ended at the knees.

He swore, a depth charge of panic exploding inside him. He tried to sit up but couldn’t lift his head more than a couple of inches off the floor before his stomach muscles gave out. His mind was full of the demons who had torn him to bloody ribbons and he was lost in the memory of their fury, all teeth and claws and heat. They’d taken his feet, and what else? He groaned, staring at his legs—only to see that they were longer now, down to his shins.

They were growing.

“What the . . .”

Pan laughed, a sound as strange as birdsong. He peered down at his ankles as they materialized from nothing—or maybe not quite from nothing. He could see tiny threads being drawn from the ground around him, as thin as silk, white and red and earth-colored. They were being pulled into his flesh, knitted together into meat and bone.

“What’s going on, Pan?” he asked. The words were still mangled, like he had a mouthful of caramel, but they were louder now. He coughed, testing the power of his lungs and sensing

no sign of his asthma. His legs had sprouted two feet, and they in turn were dividing into toes. He wiggled them and they responded, even as the last few threads spiraled around one another to form his nails.

His stomach cramped and he rolled onto his side, waiting for the agony to pulse its way out of him. Down here he could see that the ground wasn't made of gravel at all, it was bits and pieces of what could only be broken bone, fractured skull, powdered flesh. Ribbons of skin and muscle seemed to hold it all together. He could make out the gaping hole of an eye socket, hundreds of scattered teeth. He blew at a dusting of ash and saw a tube, made of glass and filled with a liquid that was almost black—a spatter of silver spots swimming in it. There was something else there, too, pieces of dark metal woven into the organic. They were moving, ever so subtly, the machinations of an Engine.

They were there in him, too, delicate traces of gunmetal gray and copper in his flesh. He held up his arm and they glinted in the light. Even now tiny filaments of metal and flesh were settling into whorls and shapes, like tribal tattoos. There was a sudden urge to dig in his nails and tear them out but he clamped his teeth together and forced himself to breathe. He traced his fingers along his forearm, feeling the tickle. Then he patted his hands down the length of his body to make sure everything was where it was supposed to be.

It was, and it was right there in the open for anyone to see. Because he was stark naked.

“Oh,” he said, slapping his hands to his crotch. His stomach muscles fluttered, threatening to cramp again. “Sorry.”

Pan shrugged, circling him. When she caught the light he suddenly saw what it was about her that seemed different. Her body was too thin, hunched over like an arthritic old lady's. She was wearing a faded summer dress, something that might



once have had flowers on it, but the skin on her legs looked too loose, as if she were wearing leg warmers. The sun shone through them, revealing crooked bones. She circled him, stalking like a vulture, making guttural noises in her throat as if trying to dislodge a string of meat.

"Pan," Marlow said. He put his knuckles to his mouth, chewing on skin that tasted like machine oil. "What's going on?"

"You really need me to tell you?" she said in that not-quite-right voice, staring over his shoulder. Her mouth curled into a tight smile, her eyes as big as moons as she said, "Look."

He did. They were halfway up a mountain of dead things, forged of bones packed so tightly together that they were as hard as concrete. Scraps of flesh and hair were caught between them, like an abattoir floor. More of those tubes and mechanical parts were embedded in the decay, and the ground beneath him seemed to thrum. Above him a lightning rod of black metal jutted up from the top of the mountain, piercing a sky that was too bright and too dark at the same time.

In front of him, too close for comfort, was a sheer cliff edge. Over it, stretching as far as he could see, was a landscape of ruin and decay. There were other mountains out there, towering cairns that might have been made up of human remains like the one he was sitting on, those antennae pointing skyward. They had to be a thousand yards tall, maybe twice that, maybe ten times that. It was impossible to tell because the air was thick with dust, great clouds of it kicked into storms by a soft, warm wind. It had already formed a coating on his new flesh, and he ran a finger along it, seeing that it wasn't dust at all but ash. He spat, waving it away from his face, squinting at the buildings that crowded between the hills. They might have been skyscrapers at one point, but that point had to have been centuries ago because they were little more than skeletons now.

"I don't get it," Marlow said, climbing to his knees, then on to legs that felt too brittle to hold his weight. "Where are we?"

Pan coughed the dust from her lungs, shaking her head.

"Do you really want to know?" she said, that weird noise filling her throat again. There was a flutter of movement inside Marlow's stomach, something squirming down there.

*Something was wrong.*

He snorted a humorless laugh. *Everything* was wrong. He had died. He'd been ripped apart by demons. His soul—or whatever you could call this part of him—had been dragged to hell, where he'd grown a new body out of the remains of a million dead. It was insane. It was impossible. The thought of it was a rat trying to claw its way out of the overheating bucket of his brain and for a moment he was lost in a maelstrom of panic. The world rocked off its axis and he straightened his arms to try to keep his balance. Deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, like his mom had always shown him, the oxygen like water on the fire of his panic. He waited for the rattle, for the gunk to flood his lungs the way it always did after a panic attack, but whatever his new body was made of evidently didn't suffer from the same weakness as the old one.

*You may be in hell, Marlow, he told himself. But at least you can breathe.*

The right side of his face was burning and he turned to see Pan watching him, her head cocked, her eyes wide. There it was again, the tickle of movement right in the middle of him.

"What?" he said.

"You're laughing," she replied. "Why?"

He chewed his knuckle again, feeling his teeth grate against a shard of metal beneath the skin. He was glad of the pain—it meant that this body, however weird it was, was his.

"I'm not," he said. "It's just . . ."

"Just what?" Pan asked when he didn't continue. She took a



lurching step toward him, her loose skin fluttering, one eye drooping. "Don't you like it here?"

"Like it?" Marlow asked. Pan took another step in his direction and he'd staggered back before he even knew it. He was conscious of the fact that he wasn't wearing a scrap of clothing, felt as vulnerable here as a newborn baby. The loose ground beneath him crumbled and he glanced down, the cliff edge too close. "What are you talking about, Pan? Why would I like it?"

When he looked up again she was even closer, close enough to touch, and she lifted a hand and rested it on his elbow. Whatever his new heart was made of, it was hammering at his ribs like an old engine—and Marlow wanted to put his foot down, get the hell out of here, because there was still something wrong with her, not something there but something *missing*.

"Pan?" he said when she didn't answer. He tried to step to the side only for her to step with him, her grip on his arm tightening. Her uneven eyes were huge and unblinking and he could see himself in their wetness, he could see a version of him that was not really him.

"This place, it isn't what you think. It's not as bad as we thought it would be." She smiled, her teeth small and neat and dirty. "I can make you like it, Marlow. I can make you happy here."

She leaned in, still grinning, and the sudden smell of her made him reel. It was sweet, almost too sweet—like rotten fruit. And there was something else just behind it, something that could have been sulfur.

"Pan," he pleaded. She leaned in closer and he arced his back, feeling the drop behind him, feeling like it was yawning open. His foot slid again, old bone exploding into powder beneath his heel then falling into the abyss.

"Everything else was a lie, Marlow," she said, her breath

impossibly hot on his face. "All of that other stuff, it never really mattered. There is only here, and only now, and only us."

Her mouth opened wide, too wide, a split appearing down the middle of her nose and in her chin like somebody was peeling her open with an invisible scalpel. There were more teeth there, lining the two halves of her face, needle sharp. He thought he caught a glimpse of metal, tiny components whirring like gears.

"Pan?" he yelled, and she cocked her head again, her eyes burning holes in him.

"Marlow," she said, her voice distorted by her broken face. She laughed, and it was like a mourning cry, like a dozen sobs all echoing from her throat. When she spoke next she spoke with more than one voice. "Why do you keep calling me Pan?"



## HERE WE GO AGAIN

Pan pushed herself up, her foot skidding in the loose ash. Marlow was fifty yards away with the *thing* that looked like her, and it had just pounced on him. By the look of things, it was eating his face. She gripped the club in her fist—a two-foot-long femur bone with a heavy joint at the end—and ran.

Up ahead, Marlow was in serious trouble. The *other* her had opened up its head like a snake and was trying to swallow him whole. It was making gagging noises that she could hear even over the pounding of her feet, and beneath them an endless, muffled, awful scream from inside. Marlow was throwing wild punches at its body but the doppelgänger didn't even seem to feel them.

Twenty yards and Pan swung the bone up over her head. The creature must have heard her coming because it tried to turn and she caught a glimpse of her own head, split in two. She almost hesitated, some part of her unwilling to fight something so familiar, so impossible. *That's my face*, she thought, and the anger boiled inside her, driving her forward. She swung the club as she moved, arcing it down toward the creature's back.

It hit like a demolition ball, a crack that echoed off the mountainside and out over the cliff. The other her folded awkwardly, collapsing, pulling Marlow down with it. His head was

completely inside its gaping mouth and he obviously couldn't breathe in there because he was kicking like a drowning man.

"Hang on!" she yelled at him, lifting the club again. She never got the chance to swing, because suddenly the doppelgänger was moving, its arms and legs working like a spider's as it scuttled backward. Its tissue-thin skin was tearing, revealing something black beneath, as hard as a beetle's carapace. Black and metallic.

It moved fast, Marlow dragged behind it. It was still trying to swallow him, its whole body writhing with peristalsis as it forced him down. And all the time it kept those eyes—the same eyes she'd seen in the mirror every single day of her life—on her.

She bolted after it, chasing it up the slope. Even with Marlow gripped in its jaws it was too fast for her, cutting crablike to the side. Another few seconds and it would lose her in the contours of the mountainside. She dug deep, her lungs like bucking mules inside her chest.

*Come on, come on.*

The thing zigged one way, expecting her to follow, but she broke right, catching it as it changed direction. She swung wildly, the knuckled tip of the thigh bone catching its arm and causing it to collapse. One of Marlow's shoulders was lost in the cavern of its mouth, its throat bulging obscenely as it worked him down. He wasn't moving anymore.

"Marlow!"

She lifted the bone again and brought it down on the doppelgänger's back, the noise like she'd struck a fire hydrant. She heard its squeal even past the blockage and she hit it again, her arm muscles burning with the effort. It was choking now, panicking.

"Die!" she screamed at it, hitting it again, and again. "Just die, you mother—"

It retched, regurgitating Marlow from its throat.



He slid free—a lump of wet meat—and the thing scuttled away, its metal parts glinting. It took one last look at her, its mouth a grotesque open sack, its tongue hanging out like old rope. Then it pushed its face into the ground and tunneled like a digging dog, vanishing.

Somehow Pan found the strength to move, crawling to Marlow's side and placing a hand on his neck. His skin was streaked with layers of dark metal, *Engine* metal, but there was no sign of gears, no moving parts. She pressed her fingers there, searching for a pulse.

*Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.*

"Come on," she said, using her other hand to pound his chest.

*Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.*

"Come on!" she yelled. "You're not leaving me here alone again!"

*Nothing. Nothing. Thump.*

He sat up, a spray of black fluid erupting from his mouth. His hands grabbed her, fingers gouging her skin, and for a second she thought she'd been tricked, that this wasn't really Marlow at all but another doppelgänger.

His eyes, though. His eyes were copper pennies, glinting, but so full of terror that there could be no doubt. Those eyes were human.

"Hey, hey," she said, both hands clutching his shoulders. "Hey, Marlow, it's me."

She didn't exactly blame him for not believing her.

"It's me," she said again.

Marlow was hauling in breaths like he was having an asthma attack, shuffling backward. If he wasn't careful, he was going to end up retreating off the cliff.

"It's me," she said again. "Pan. Your name is Marlow Green,

uh, I met you on Staten Island, you lived with your mom, your brother's name was Danny."

Marlow slowed. His face was slick with gunk, his hair plastered to his scalp. Flecks of iron glinted darkly, his irises burning machine-bright. He gulped, then shook his head.

"I don't believe you," he said. "That . . . that whatever the hell it was, it knew stuff, too."

"It didn't know you snore like a warthog," she said. "It didn't know that you were jealous of a Frenchman called Taupe. It didn't know that the first time you tried to kiss me I kneed you in the family jewels. Hard."

He lifted a hand to his mouth, biting his knuckle like he hadn't eaten in a week. But she could see the way his body relaxed, she could hear the gentling of his breaths.

"Technically *you* kissed *me*," he said eventually, his voice shaking.

He managed a smile, and for an instant she thought about kicking him off the cliff herself. Instead, she did something that took her by surprise, something she didn't even know was happening until she'd thrown herself to her knees and wrapped her hands around him. He fought her for all of a second, then she felt his arms around her, squeezing, and suddenly her body was betraying her again. She buried her head into his neck, into the disgusting sulfur stench of him, and she began to cry.

"I didn't think you were coming," she said, or tried to say. The sobs were too powerful. "I thought I was going to be . . . I thought—"

"Hey," he said, and she realized that he was crying too. "Hey, Pan, it's okay."

She wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, bound to each other in hell. It could have been a minute, it could have been forever. It was Marlow that started to pull free, and she wasn't sure if she could let him go.

"Sorry," he said. "It's just that you're kneeling on my leg and it's really painful."

She was, she saw, her knee planted in his shin. She rolled away, pushing herself to her feet just to prove that she was still capable of standing. Marlow held out his hand and she hauled him up, both of them smudging tears from their faces. She tried not to notice the fact that he was naked.

"Better?" she asked when she could find her voice again. He spluttered a laugh.

"Oh, yeah, sure," he said. "Never been better, Pan."

"What happened back there," she said. "You did it, right? You destroyed the Engine."

"In the ten seconds after they took you?" he replied. "Even I'm not that good, Pan."

She frowned.

"What are you talking about? Ten seconds?"

"The demons came for you, Pan," Marlow said. "They tore you to pieces."

"Yeah," Pan said, "but that was, like, a day ago."

She had no way of knowing for sure, of course, because this place—wherever it was—seemed to flick from day to night in a heartbeat. But it had certainly felt like a day.

"What?" Marlow said, shaking his head. "No, Pan, it was just now. Minutes."

Pan blew out a long breath, staring over the edge of the cliff. It didn't make sense, but then nothing that had happened in the last few weeks—few years—made any sense. Marlow took a step toward her but she held out her hand to stop him.

"I thought you might have destroyed it," she said. "I thought that's why . . . I thought maybe it's why you . . ."

She couldn't bring herself to say it and the unspoken words hung in the air before her. *I thought that's why you hadn't come.*



Because she'd spent the last day thinking she was alone here. Thinking that she would be alone for the rest of time.

"Herc and Charlie are still there," Marlow said. "They might be able to end it."

"Without contracts?" Pan said, shaking her head. "You and I made the deal to travel between, to stop time. Without us I think they'd have been pulled back into the present, into the Engine. They'd have ended up right in his lap."

*Ostheim*. If that was true, then he'd have murdered them without a second thought. Marlow wiped his eyes again, staring out to the distant horizon.

"A day," he said. "You see anything?"

"Sure," she snapped back. "I read the guidebook. Checked out some sights, bought a snow globe with a demon in it." She took a shuddering breath as she looked out over the landscape of ruin. "Look, I appeared here, same way you did: the ground, I don't know, *making* me." She clenched her fists. The thought of it, of those little threads that had woven her from the dirt, from the black liquid inside those glass tubes, made her want to scream the world away. "I didn't do much. *Couldn't* do much. It was all too . . . I don't know. Then it got dark. I spent the night here, and the next day I started exploring. Didn't go far, I kept coming back, just in case . . ."

"In case what?" Marlow asked.

"In case you, somebody, *anybody*, showed up," she said. "Far as I can tell, this place is, I don't know, it's a city, long dead."

"A city?" asked Marlow. "So we're on Earth? Did you see any landmarks, anything we can use?"

She squinted at him through the dust. Then she turned to the horizon, to a distant smudge of darkness that polluted the sky like an oil slick.

"I saw . . . *something*."

A noise broke the silence of the hillside, a rattle of gravel and

bone. Pan flinched, scanning the rocky terrain, expecting to see another her or another Marlow walk toward them, smiling. She searched the ground, found the femur, and hefted it up.

"We should go," she said quietly. "This place, it's not nice. Not even close."

"You have any idea what this place even is?" he asked as she started walking, her bare feet crunching through bones, through skulls, tatters of skin caught between her toes. How many dead were here? How many corpses did it take to make a mountain? She thought of the creatures that squirmed down there, wearing stolen faces, ready to open their mouths and swallow her whole.

"Hell," she said. "How could it be anything but hell?"

## PUT SOME DAMN CLOTHES ON

“Look, I don’t want to lower the tone or anything, Marlow, but you do realize you’re naked?”

Marlow ignored the question, staring at Pan, studying her properly for the first time. Like the imposter that had tried to eat him, she was made up of layers of flesh and metal, her skin streaked and striated like she’d been chipped from the wall of a copper mine. Her face was her face, but marbled by a diagonal streak of dark metal that stretched down her cheek and over her chin. In one hand she still held that leg bone, swinging it with every step. She was wearing a white tee and jeans that looked like they were held together by a hope and a prayer.

It was a good look.

He half thought about covering himself up but the honest truth was that it didn’t seem to matter anymore. He was in hell. He was doomed to an eternity of suffering. Clothes didn’t exactly seem like a priority. All the same, he angled himself away from Pan, asking, “So, where’d you get the T-shirt and jeans?”

She looked down at herself, brushing a cloud of dust from the shirt.

“Found them,” she said. “Just lying there. There’s stuff all over. Must have belonged—”

She cut herself off and Marlow finished the sentence in his head.



*To the dead.*

"Look, just put this on, yeah?" she said, tugging something free from the dirt and lobbing it at him. He snatched it, hard enough to release a halo of dust, shaking it out to reveal a section of gray cloth. It was filthy, and greasy to the touch, but he wrapped it around his middle like a beach towel just so that Pan would stop staring awkwardly at the horizon.

"Thanks," he said. "Where were you at Christmas? It's what I always wanted, a loincloth from a dead man."

He looked at the corpse Pan had pulled it from, nothing left of it but a knotted section of spine and half a pelvic bone. He rubbed his throat, grimacing. It hurt to move, hurt to swallow, hurt to breathe. He'd almost been one of the dead too, swallowed into that awful, airless, crushing dark. One of the *deader than dead*, really, because he wasn't sure how that really worked when you were in hell. He glanced at Pan, still wary. He had no idea if it was actually her but this one *seemed* right. And what choice did he have? Anything was better than the thought of being here alone.

She started walking again and Marlow followed. Every other step his bare foot would plunge ankle-deep into the bone dust, shards embedding themselves in his skin. He stood on those glass tubes, too, releasing goutts of black fluid that was as dark as ink. Pan was leading them along the edge of the cliff and now the path they were on—if you could call it a path, because it was just another section of crushed bone—sloped eagerly downward. He wasn't sure how long they'd been walking. Time was slow here, treacle thick. It felt a hundred degrees hotter. Marlow wiped his brow but it was bone-dry up there.

"I know," said Pan. "No sweat. Weird, right?"

"It'll save money on antiperspirant."

Pan stopped, planting her hands on her hips.

"Marlow, you seem pretty chill about this whole 'going to hell' thing."

He blew a laugh from his nose, but there wasn't much humor in it. Pan was right. He should have been rolling on the floor screaming away the last of his sanity. But the truth was his brain was doing a remarkable job of taking it in its stride. This was weird, yes. But he'd seen weirder. He'd seen *worse*.

"Hey," he said with a shrug. "This is bad, but it's gotta be better than the old 'hood back on Shaolin, right?"

Her frown deepened.

"You're nuts," she said.

"You don't have to be crazy to work here," he said with an insane giggle, "but it helps. Besides, you're not exactly losing it."

"I . . ." she started, then shook the words away. He didn't push it. He didn't need to. Pan had arrived here alone, nobody to talk her through the horror, nobody to hold her. He couldn't imagine what she must have gone through when she first opened her eyes. That was it, he realized, the reason he felt so calm: that no matter where they were, no matter what would happen next, Pan was here. She wiped a hand over her face, her whole body shaking. Then she looked up at the sky. It was bright, even though the sun was hidden behind the clouds of ash.

"It's going to get dark soon, I think," said Pan. "We shouldn't be outside."

"You got somewhere to go?" he asked.

She stuck out the femur bone, pointing at the city below. They were low enough now for Marlow to make out the streets, or what was left of them. Most were hidden by sweeping dunes of dark ash and buried in shadow from the ruined towers. Bands of black dissected the view, huge snakelike constructions that might have been pipes or conduits, stretching as far as he could see, converging on the horizon, ending beneath a distant, darker cloud. There was a hum in the air, he suddenly noticed, one that

seemed to make his entire skull vibrate. He stuck a finger in his ear, wiggling, but the noise was coming from all around him.

There was a smell, too. The familiar, gagging stench of sulfur.

"There," Pan said, pointing to a cluster of skeletal shapes. There was something red fluttering between the white, reminding him of the scraps of meat in the teeth of the creature that had tried to eat him.

"What?" he said, then, understanding, "Wait, you want me to *wear* it?"

"Marlow, that towel is going to come off any minute. You either put some clothes on or watch me gouge my own eyes out."

"Nice," he said, blushing as he hopped across the path and pulled the cloth free. It was a pair of shorts, covered in stains from substances he had no desire to identify. "Really?" he said, holding them up to Pan.

"Really."

He stepped into them, tightening the drawstring. Trapped beneath the same collection of old bones was another scrap of cloth, this one harder to retrieve. It came free with a tear and he held it up like a tattered sail—a T-shirt, the logo faded beyond recognition. He was just pulling it on when there was a rattle behind them, toward the top of the slope. Pieces of bone pattered down around his feet. Pan held up a hand, holding them both in silence for a full minute.

"Come on," she whispered, stepping past him and walking swiftly down the hill. He ran after her and they made their way without speaking, both of them casting nervous glances back up the vast, shadowed bulk of the mountain. There was no sign of anything living up there, but the slope was pocked with craters and hills. His skin was crawling, too, like there were eyeballs pressed right up against his flesh.



He didn't know how much longer it was when he skidded down the last section of the hill, skulls and bones skittering out across a cracked and broken street. Pan had been right, it was getting darker, the shadows growing longer. The generator hum in the air was louder now, like he had a bumblebee inside his head.

"You feeling that?" he asked Pan.

She nodded, grimacing. "Was the same last night," she said. "It gets weirder."

"Got any idea where to go?"

She nodded toward the nearest building. It was an immense concrete corpse, its crumbling flesh pierced by huge shards of steel all the way up to where its top floors were shielded by the smoke.

"That place looks . . . *wrong*," he said.

Something screamed, the noise distant but still somehow deafening. Marlow pressed himself up against Pan before he even knew what he was doing. She didn't move away, and he could feel her tremble. The shriek came again, closer this time, then again from another direction, and only then did Marlow recognize what he was hearing.

"Demons," he said, and Pan nodded.

"They come out in the night," she said quietly. "There were hundreds of them."

"Great," he muttered.

Three more screams, and the streets were darkening at an alarming rate. He didn't know much about this place, but it didn't take a genius to work out that if they got stranded outside then bad things were going to happen. The building was a hundred yards away, behind one of the snaking pipelines that crossed the city. The pipe was as tall and as thick as a car, a knotted cord of metal rings and tubes and fleshy parts that looked almost like muscle. Marlow put his hand on an exposed section

and the hum inside his head seemed to double in strength, pulsing. A supernova of darkness exploded in his vision, a darkness that coiled like snakes, that parted to reveal a figure there, as big as a mountain—one that watched him with a cluster of insect eyes.

It was like something was pulling him, or part of him at least—a magnet trying to tease out the shrapnel in his skin, in his muscles, in his organs. He snapped his hand free, staring at Pan. She had clamped her hand under her armpit, her body spasming like she'd had an electric shock.

"You see that?" she said.

"I *felt* it," he answered. "Is there another way around?"

A shriek answered him, coming from close behind. He searched the rubble, seeing nothing, turning back to see Pan lobbing the femur over the top of the pipe. She followed it, yelping as she dropped down the other side. He sucked in a lungful of air and climbed, ignoring the pain, ignoring the figure who thumped into his head. He jumped, landing on a pillow of ash. As soon as he let go of the conduit his skull stopped buzzing, but it felt like it had left a mark there, greasy fingerprints on his thoughts. He shook it away to see that he was at the base of a drift that covered the lower floors of the tower.

"Hurry," said Pan, already scaling the slope. He started after her, struggling with the effort.

It was almost dark by the time they scrabbled through the broken window and onto solid ground. Marlow leaned against the frame, seeing that they were in a large space that could once have been an open-plan office. It was completely empty.

"Where now?" he panted.

She didn't answer, but Marlow could see her shrug, her body an ink spill against the dark. He heard her shuffle closer, felt her press against him, and he fumbled through the night, found her hand. He squeezed, and she squeezed back.

"I'm glad," she whispered into his ear. "I'm glad you're here."

"Glad I got torn to pieces and sent to hell," he said. "Jeez, thanks, Pan."

Her other hand slapped him across the shoulder and he had to stifle a laugh, pinching his nose to hold it at bay. Even so, it still came out as a wet snort. It seemed crazy, that he was having to hold back laughter, but then how else were you supposed to fight? It was the only weapon he had here.

"I take it back," Pan said, letting go of his hand. He could still hear the fear in her voice but it was quieter now. It had lost some of its power. "I'm *not* glad."

A fresh round of screams had started up outside and he waited until they had died down before speaking again.

"What now?"

"Nothing," she said. "The dark, it's . . . it's like some kind of wild dream, Marlow. A nightmare. You can't see anything. But I don't think they can either. If we're quiet, they might not be able to find us."

"Sit still, be quiet," said Marlow. "That sounds like one of Herc's plans."

This time it was Pan who breathed a laugh, but it was short-lived. Marlow wondered where the old guy was now, whether he was still alive. Charlie, too, and Truck, abandoned in Venice. He half hoped they'd all show up here the way that he had—better to enter hell with an army by your side, right? But none of them had been under contract. If they had died, they'd have gone somewhere else, or nowhere at all.

Outside, a demon howled—the sound half pig squeal and half death rattle—too close.

"It won't be long," Pan said. "Night here isn't like back home. Just be quiet, just stay in the dark, and they won't find us."

And the words were still leaving her mouth when the sky began to burn.

# THE WALL

It burst up from the horizon, a wave of flame that could have been an oil fire. The inferno burned across the sky, so low that it engulfed the tops of the skyscrapers in whirling, spitting vortexes. The heat was unbearable, like sitting underneath a grill, and Pan covered her head with her hands, curling up beneath its spitting, crackling fury, beneath its unending thunder.

It wasn't the noise and the heat that worried her, though.

It was the *light*.

The world was bathed in it, brighter than the day. It seared its way through the broken windows of the high-rise like a searchlight. The city was picked out in shades of orange and red, echoes of the fire rippling across its surface. Above, the sky burned like the surface of the sun, choked with smoke. Molten energy burst from the chaos, dripping down to earth and forming glowing pools on the asphalt, revealing the shapes that moved there.

Demons. The city crawled with them. Twisted forms of bone and muscle, some with two legs, some with three or four or five or more. From here she couldn't make out their faces, thankfully, but she could see enough to know that they had no eyes, just those cement-mixer mouths lined with shark teeth. They seemed to be reveling in the raging sky, bounding wildly across



the scorched earth, screaming into the smoke. Whenever two demons crossed paths they would fight, pounding each other until one either collapsed or retreated. Pan could hear the thump and slap of their heavy paws even over the groaning skies.

"Did this happen last night?" Marlow asked. His face was a mask of light, the fire reflected in the metallic sheen of his eyes, in the ribs of metal that carved through his face. She shook her head.

No. This was something new.

He said something else, lost beneath the noise. But she got the drift.

*We need to move.*

She glanced through the window again, the demons teeming from the earth like ants—too many to even begin to count them. They had no eyes, but that didn't mean they couldn't hunt.

Marlow tugged at her and they crawled away from the window, into the interior of the building. Her muscles were cramping from the weight of the weapon she held, and she shifted it to her other hand. There was a concrete shaft up ahead for the elevator, and once she was clear she got to her feet and ran for it. To the side of the elevator was another door and she shouldered it open, seeing the stairwell. Light burned in from above, but the steps leading down were drenched in darkness, as if the night had crawled down there to hide.

"Down?" said Marlow, and she could hear the doubt in his voice.

She answered by leading the way, stepping cautiously onto the first step, her foot slipping on the layer of ash that covered it. Marlow walked by her side, closing the door gently behind him and plunging them into a muffled quiet. She held her breath, waiting for a scream, for any sign of life down there, and when there was only silence she carried on.

Now that her eyes had shaken off the afterglow of the outside she noticed that there was a little light in here, just a whisper on the walls and floor. When she turned the bend in the stairwell it was stronger, and she could make out the outline of the door that led into the floor below. Marlow pushed the bar but it was wedged tight, and he braced himself, shunting. She joined him, the door opening an inch, then two, ash pouring through the bottom of the widening crack. It had to be a foot thick on the other side, but together they managed to create a gap big enough to let them pass.

She let Marlow go first, her whole body tense, waiting for a shape to pounce from the shadows, to sink its teeth into him. But after a moment he beckoned her in.

"Seems safe," he said. "It's dark, anyway."

She pushed through the door into a space identical to the one above. The only difference was that this floor was beneath the dunes that had formed outside. Mounds of ash shielded all but the very tops of the windows, letting through fingers of firelight that reached maybe a dozen yards. They muted the screams, too. She took a step, her foot sinking into the soft ground.

"Pan," said Marlow.

"What?" she replied, working her way around the elevator shaft.

"What?" said Marlow.

She turned to him, just a smudge of shadow fringed by firelight.

"What?" she asked.

"Pan," he said again, and this time she froze, because the voice hadn't come from Marlow at all, but from another part of the room.

Somebody else was calling her name.

She half thought about running, but what was the point? If they stepped outside they were dead anyway. She gripped the

bone, swinging it lightly from side to side. If it was one of the doppelgängers, then at least she knew she could stave its head in.

"Who's there?" she said.

"We are." The voice was a whisper—no, it was a *hundred* whispers, so quietly spoken that it was like a pulse of alien noise. "We have been hiding. We have been waiting for you."

She glanced at Marlow, just to make sure he was still there. She could see the whites of his eyes hovering in the gloom, wide and frightened. She nodded, willing him to go first.

"Hey, it's your party," he said. "You're the one they're waiting for."

"We have been waiting for you both," the voice said, then it shaped his name from a legion of rasping whispers. "Marlow."

"Great," he muttered.

"It is safe here," it said. "We are hidden. He cannot find us."

Pan stared into the dark, trying to work out who was speaking. But nothing was there, just the open space of the office and then the far wall, everything filthy with dirt and ash and buried in darkness.

"You can hide here, too," the voice said. "Come, join us."

No stampeding feet, no growls, no screams. Whatever was over there, she was pretty sure it would have attacked them by now if it had any plans to. She stumbled forward, her feet sinking into the ash, kicking up great clouds of it that filled her mouth, her lungs.

"Pan," said Marlow. She ignored him, squinting into the shadows, still no sign of who was there. Another step away from the elevator shaft. She felt like a boat that had pushed itself away from shore, drifting into the moonless night.

"Who are you?" she asked again. "What is this place?"

This time there was laughter, soft and yet deafening, like the drum of rain on a tin roof.

"You know what this place is," it said when the laughter had passed.

Another step, and the far wall was visible now. There was something growing there, like ivy. Pan could just about discern the contours of it, etched in the light from outside. It seemed to be rustling gently, as if there were a wind. The air here was perfectly still, though, and a creeping sense of unease began to burrow out from the center of her.

"This place is your home now, too," it said. "But he doesn't have to have you. You can hide here with us. It is safe here. It will always be safe here."

"Pan," Marlow said again, but she kept walking. She didn't think she could stop. The closer she got to the wall, the more movement she saw there, as if it were itching with spiders, thousands of them scuttling over and over and over one another. But they weren't spiders, because she could see something else in the faint glow from the windows—countless pale white circles.

It was only when she took one last step, the wall now a stone's throw away, that she realized they were eyes.

"Welcome," the voices said. "We are glad you are here."

It wasn't a wall of brick and plaster, of steel and stone. It was a wall of *flesh*. People hung from it like creepers, their bodies peeled open and woven together so that it was impossible to tell where one ended and another began. Internal organs drooped like heavy figs, ready to be plucked, glistening in the muted firelight. Limbs, withered into vines, twitched and swung with deranged excitement, fingers clasping feebly.

It was the faces, though, that made Pan's blood run river cold. There were a hundred of them, maybe twice that, most of them crushed beneath the vegetative weight of all those bodies. Cheeks bulged, cracked eye sockets leaked fluid, distended mouths hung open like shopping bags, some stuffed with arms

and legs and intestines and whatever else had grown there. The eyes stared at her, unblinking, rimmed by dust so thick it might have been mascara.

"We are glad that you are here," it—*they*—said again, the mouths moving as one, the bodies trembling as one, the eyes staring as one. A shudder ran through Pan, one that made her feel as if her own body would start to unravel, as if her skin would slough right off her bones.

"Please," she said, because it was the only word she had. *Please tell me who you are. Please let me go. Please don't let me be in hell anymore. Please just put me out of my misery, let me die and stay dead.* She didn't even know which thing she wanted more.

"What happened to you?" Marlow said, speaking for her in a voice made of dust.

Another laugh, the faces choking on it, the eyes opening so wide they looked ready to roll right out, to patter onto the floor.

"We were like you, once," they said. "We used the Engine."

"No," said Pan, taking a step away from them.

"Our fate is your fate is our fate is your fate is our fate," they said, the words rolling over each other. "The demons came for us, they brought us to hell, and now we hide here."

"They're Engineers," said Marlow.

"But why?" Pan said, ignoring him. "I mean . . . it doesn't make sense. What happened to you?"

"For the first years we roamed," said the faces in a voice made of a thousand breaths. "We tried to find a way out, the way that you will try to find a way out. But you cannot leave this place. There is nothing else but this. So instead we hid."

"From who?" Pan asked, and at this the faces fell into motion, shaking themselves as if they meant to rip free of the wall. They all began to gibber—not as one, this time, but individually, the sound threatening to drown her. The voices shook and shuddered themselves back into one:



"From him. From him. From him."

A scream, from outside, and hundreds of eyeballs slid wetly that way in their sockets.

"They must not hear us," they said, more quietly this time.

"Pan, let's go," said Marlow. But there was so much she didn't understand, so much she needed to know.

"You're Engineers," she said, thinking of the *Book of Dead Engineers* that had once sat in the Bullpen, back home, back in another world. How many names had been inscribed inside that book, in those countless pages? Thousands of them, all men and women and children who had made a deal with the Engine and lost everything in the process.

"This place is hell," the wall said. "It is our punishment. Our souls were sent here, but a soul cannot exist without flesh, so the mountains grow us, over and over again. You cannot die here, Pan. Whatever you do, however you try to end it, you will come back. This place is a prison of souls, and yours will lie here forever."

The groan climbed her throat and spilled between her lips. She was shaking her head, as if it might scare away the madness that was already frothing there.

"How long?" she found herself asking. "How long have you been here?"

At this the wall broke into chaos again, each face screaming out its own answer. The noise was like a tide but she could still hear them, she could still hear those individual cries—*eight hundred years, a millennium, a hundred millennia*—before the cacophony collapsed into itself again.

"There is no time here," they said. "There is only now, there is only forever."

And the laugh that spilled from those bloodless lips almost pushed her over the edge. An eternity here. It couldn't be real, it couldn't be happening, not to her.

*Please God please God please God please God.*

"He will not help you here," they said, reading her thoughts. "Only we can help you. Come."

A hundred withered arms began to twitch away from the wall, stretching out toward her like iron filings to a magnet, fingers trembling with the effort.

"Come, Pan. Come, Marlow. We will keep you safe. In time you will not know enough to suffer."

Woven into this forest of the damned, hanging there in the dark, in that web of cold flesh. Pan felt as though her mind might boil itself into nothing.

"Come," the faces said. "He will not find you here."

A hand snaked up from the ash beneath her, sapling thin, just two fingers attached to the gnarled palm. It pinched the skin of her leg and she staggered away, the fingernails peeling off like they were dead leaves. One of them stuck to her and she brushed it away.

"No," she said.

More limbs were breaking free, feeling for her. She stepped in something beneath the ash, felt a toothless jaw gnawing at her heel, two milky eyes watching her. She'd stamped down before she even knew it, feeling the crack of brittle bone.

"No," she kept on saying, like the word might be powerful enough to wipe it all away.

"Yes," said the faces. "The answer is always yes, eventually. Because the alternative is *him*."

Another hand around her leg and this time she couldn't hold it in anymore. The scream was a living thing, one that climbed up inside her and clawed its way from her mouth, unleashed with the full force of her terror. It filled the room, it seemed loud enough to shake the building, and even when it dried up its echo chased itself from wall to wall to wall, growing louder, louder, as if it meant to find its way back to her.

No, it wasn't her scream she was hearing, not anymore. A shriek tore in through the window, followed by a blade of fire-light. Something was up there, a knotted lump of tooth and claw that pushed its ugly muzzle inside and sniffed. As one, all of the heads on the wall snatched in a breath, then broke into fits of panic.

"Oh no," said Marlow as the demon started to claw at the ash, widening the gap and revealing that burning sky above. Another demon appeared in the next window, howling, and before Pan could take another breath they were swarming inside on a wave of fire.