# BY ALEXANDER GORDON SMITH

ESCAPE FROM FURNACE

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Solitary
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Execution

The Night Children: An Escape from Furnace Story

The Fury

THE DEVIL'S ENGINE

Hellraisers

THE DEVIL'S ENGINE

BLLRASERS

DEVIL'S ENGINE

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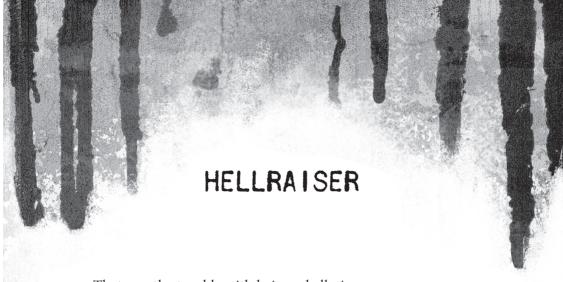
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# PART I NEW WORLD





That was the trouble with being a hellraiser.

Sometimes you got burned.

Marlow Green knew this better than anyone. How many times had he heard it? From his teachers, when he got kicked out of his class. From the principals, when he got kicked out of schools. From his mom, over and over. You set fire to the world and you run, Marly. And he did. Not literally—hellraiser, yes; arsonist, definitely not—but he lit up the world around him, started wildfires that burned through bridges, that sent his friends and his family packing, that spat and roared into his future, destroying it before he could even get there. Then, when it got too hot, he turned and bolted.

One of these days you're gonna start a fire that can't be put out, his mom had told him. One you can't ever run fast enough to escape. And he'd always wondered when that would be, always wondered what he'd have to do to ignite an inferno of that magnitude.

Turned out the answer to the first question was now. And the second? Yeah, that would be carving a certain part of the male anatomy into the paintwork of his principal's car.

They came for him during class. They didn't knock, just barged in through the door like they were raiding a meth lab instead of math. Half the kids were dozing off, staring out the dirty windows at the blazing June sunshine that drenched Staten Island. The sight of three school cops and the principal flooding into the room like a dark, cold current made everyone jump.

"Green!" growled the principal, Mr. Caputo, a scarecrow of a man drowning in his cheap suit. He pointed a blade-like finger at Marlow. "That's him."

Oh, crap.

The biggest of the three cops pushed his way through the desks. Everyone called him Yogi because he was always confiscating kids' lunches, then scarfing them. That and the fact he was a major fat-ass. His eyes were two raisins drowning in the doughy flesh of his face and he smiled wickedly at Marlow with sausage lips.

"Got you."

Marlow blew out a long sigh and sat back in his chair, feeling the heat on his cheeks. He chewed the skin of his knuckles the way he always did when he was stressed. His windpipe was already starting to crackle, like static, and he wondered whether he should use his inhaler now before things heated up. He decided against it, not wanting to look weak in front of the class.

Another cop swept between the desks with an expression like murder. The third cop stayed by the door, her holster open, hand on the butt of her pistol.

"For the love of . . ." Charlie Alvarez sat at the desk next to him, running a hand through his mess of dark hair and popping gum. "Dude, what did you do now?"

"Me?" Marlow smiled at his best friend—his *only* friend—coughing to clear his throat. "Absolutely nothing. I'm being framed."

Yogi stepped in front of the window, blocking the sun and

making the room feel ten degrees colder. He reached out and grabbed a fistful of Marlow's shirt with his free hand.

"Get your flabby hands off him, Yogi," yelled Charlie. "He didn't do nothing."

"This isn't your business, Alvarez," Caputo said, turning to Marlow and doing his best to stab him to death with his eyes. "Too far, Mr. Green," he spat, flecks of spittle spraying like gems against the sun.

"I'm sorry?" Marlow replied, as innocently as he could.

"You've gone too far. There's no way back from this."

"I'm not sure what you think I did," Marlow said, feeling his windpipe tighten and cursing his asthma for making him so weak. He snatched in a breath. "I'm just sitting in class, minding my own—"

"Get him up," Caputo said. "Take him outside."

Yogi obeyed, hauling Marlow out of his chair so hard that it toppled over behind him. Charlie was out of his just as quick, squaring up to the cop even though he was half his size.

"That's assault," he said. "You got no right."

"I said drop it, Alvarez," the principal replied. "This shi— This *idiot* isn't worth ruining your life for."

"Yeah, kid," said Yogi. "Sit down."

"Or what? You gonna eat me?"

The whole class laughed at that, somebody lobbing a crunched-up ball of paper at the cop's big, bald head. Yogi glanced at the other two cops but they just shrugged. Marlow laughed. He didn't blame them. Charlie was tiny, but he was scary as all hell when his blood was up.

"I'm glad you find this so amusing," the principal said. "But I can assure you, you won't be laughing for long. Move."

Yogi yanked his shirt and he started walking, coughing hard to release the pressure in his windpipe. Somebody in the class was clapping, and by the time he'd reached the door there was a full-on round of applause going on, complete with cheers and whistles. He turned and bowed to his audience before being bundled out of the room so abruptly he lost his footing. Yogi and the other two cops hoisted him up and it was like Marlow was penned in a prison of black cloth. Somehow the wiry principal managed to squeeze between them.

"You have no idea how much trouble you're in, Green," he squawked.

"I still don't know what I'm supposed to have done."

"So it wasn't you who scratched the hell out of my car?"

"Your car?" Marlow shook his head, trying to hold back the grin that wanted to explode across his face. "I didn't even know you had a car."

"Green Prius, out in the lot."

"You just admitted to driving a *Prius*?" came Charlie's voice, although Marlow couldn't see him past the circle of cops.

"The one that now has . . . has something scratched into the hood. Something obscene." He showed Marlow a snapshot on his cell phone.

"It looks like a rocket ship to me," said Marlow. "And it definitely wasn't my doing."

"Really?" The man leaned toward him, his fists clenched so hard that his knuckles were white. "So the fact that it says 'by M. Green' underneath is a lie, then?"

The laugh punched up from Marlow's throat so hard he couldn't hold it back. The truth was he'd done it that very morning, with his keys, while waiting for Charlie to turn up. It wasn't like Caputo didn't deserve it, he'd been on Marlow's case ever since he arrived at Victor G. Rosemount High School.

The principal looked ready to start swinging punches, but instead he turned on his heels and walked briskly down the corridor.

"Bring him to my office, we have paperwork to fill out."

That could only mean one thing. Marlow chewed his lip, feeling his heart drop into his sneakers. Yep, raise enough hell and you got burned—he knew that better than anyone. This was his third school in eight months, after all.

They climbed the short flight of steps that led to reception, crossing the foyer, past the security gate with its metal detectors. It had been the same in every other school, the long walk. Like he was being marched to his execution down the green mile.

The only difference this time was the police escort.

"Green," said the principal over his shoulder. "I don't know why you're so determined to ruin your life before it has a chance to begin. You're fifteen years old and about three short steps away from incarceration. You do understand why you're here, don't you? At this facility?"

Yeah, he did. Victor G. was the last stop on the road to Loserville. It was the place you went when you'd been chucked out of every other remedial high school in the city, when you'd incinerated every other option. Marlow felt the familiar pressure in his chest, the storm there starting to rage. He coughed up some phlegm, swallowing hard, then clawing in a breath.

"You're a coward, Green. You run away from every shred of responsibility in your life, you burn every bridge. Cowards are not welcome here. If VGR doesn't want you, nowhere else does. And you can be damned sure that VGR *does not want you.*"

Marlow's blood was boiling too fiercely for him to find a reply. Yogi was holding his shirt so tight that it had become a noose around his neck, making it even harder for him to breathe. Charlie trotted along beside them, looking genuinely concerned now.

"You okay, dude?" he said. "You're going blue."

"I'm fine," he wheezed. But that was a lie. He was about as far from fine as it was possible to get. He sucked in some air through the straw of his windpipe, knowing that as soon as he got into the principal's office it would be over. He'd be given his marching papers, told to scram. Then it would be home to his mom, confession time again.

"Get back to class, Alvarez, unless you want to go down as an accessory," the principal said. "There will be criminal charges, this time, Green. You hear me?"

Marlow tugged at his collar. Where the hell was all the oxygen? He eyed the main doors, the glorious sunshine beyond, twenty feet down the hallway, and all he wanted to do was run. Get the hell out of here. Escape while he still could. Charlie had backed off but caught his eye and shook his head. He knew him way too well.

They reached the door to the office and the principal pushed it open, disappearing into the darkness. Yogi shoved Marlow in after him. The room beyond was small, barely enough space for a desk and a couple of filing cabinets. It was dark, too, the window boarded over from where somebody had lobbed a brick through it a couple of weeks ago. It was too cramped in here, not enough air. The panic was like a punch to the lungs, paralyzing them. Marlow took a breath and nothing happened.

Don't seize, he ordered himself, the panic like an acetylene torch behind his eyes. *Please, not an attack.* He couldn't handle the terror, the ambulance, the rush to get the nebulizer, not on top of everything else.

"You do understand what this is?" the principal asked. "You do understand that you're finished here?"

Marlow ignored him, taking a step back toward the door. He reached down to his pocket, for the inhaler, and Yogi grabbed his hand.

"What you got in there, kid?" he asked.

Nothing, Marlow tried to say, producing a sound like a broken accordion. He tried to shake his hand free but Yogi's grip was a python's, made his bones feel like snapping. He could hear the cop talking, telling him to calm down, but his heartbeat was loud enough to bring down the walls of the office. He felt like he was being held underwater. Panic made him act before he even knew what he was doing, his hands darting out and slamming into Yogi's chest. The man was made of solid oak but he was unprepared, the push catching him off balance. He staggered back, letting go of Marlow, arms cartwheeling wildly. He crashed into the desk, sending papers flying.

Marlow didn't wait to see what happened next. He turned, shouldering past another of the cops, his lungs running on empty. He burst back out into the sun-filled hallway, skidding toward the metal detectors standing sentry just inside the doors. A quick look behind him let him know that they were in pursuit.

Charlie stood farther down the hallway, back toward the classroom. He waved his arms frantically, mouthing *Go!* Marlow nodded to him, then turned, bolting out one of the doors and across the parking lot. He dug the inhaler from his pocket as he went, squeezing off a few shots and feeling his lungs loosen up, the relief of being able to breathe again so good that he almost didn't hear the doors open behind him, the principal's voice screaming out: "You're expelled! Green, you hear me? Run all you want, there's no coming back!"

Marlow did just that, sprinting past the Prius with its brand-new decoration. He spun around as he went.

"Nice car, dick!"

And even though he was well and truly burned, even though he could hear his future being flushed, even though it was probably the worst comeback in the history of comebacks, he was grinning as he fled.

### SLAUGHTERHOUSE

"We're in trouble."

Pan didn't need anyone to tell her that. It was pretty damn clear that they were in trouble. Big trouble. They were barreling down the Cross Island Expressway at eighty miles an hour, the truck roaring like a jet plane. Most of the cars on the road had the good sense to swerve out of their way, but a couple had been shunted off the tarmac by the Ford F-650's custom grille guard. Pan hadn't looked back to see what happened to them. There were more important things at stake.

Her life, for one.

She checked her watch. There was no time on the display, just a line of bright red numbers. 00:00:32:21. There were way too many zeroes there for her liking. Thirty-two minutes, counting fast. Thirty-two minutes until they came for her. She checked her black Kevlar body suit, designed to withstand a close-range shot from a .44 Magnum. Not that it mattered. It wouldn't last five seconds against what was coming.

"Serious trouble," said the guy sitting next to her. His name was Forrest, although Pan didn't like to think of him as something with a name. It made it too difficult. You didn't name cattle when you sent them to the slaughterhouse. His skin was a nasty shade of gray, coated in sweat, and it wasn't surprising. He'd made his contract ten minutes before her so

he'd have ten minutes less on his countdown. He wiped his brow, then sat forward in his seat looking like he was going to puke. It was Forrest's first mission and the Lawyers were cutting it fine.

Way too fine.

"Hold it together, guys," said the other man in the back of the truck. Herc. He was mission commander but he'd commanded *jack* on this particular mission. The whole damn thing had gone wrong and if the Lawyers didn't hurry up, then all he or anyone else in the van was good for was a midmorning snack for hell's hungriest. He rubbed a hand through the grizzled stubble on his chin. "Take the next exit, we gotta get out of sight. And rack 'em up, we're gonna need 'em."

Herc pumped a shell into his combat shotgun and Forrest fumbled with his. They were the best defense they'd found against the demons. Kind of like saying a toothpick was the best defense against a rabid bear, she thought. Pan didn't have a gun. She reached down, felt the crossbow at her feet. Even that wouldn't do much good. Not unless the Lawyers found a way to end her contract. What the hell was taking them so long?

"Ostheim," she said into the radio attached to her armored suit. There was a permanent open link between her and her employer, Sheppel Ostheim. "You guys any closer? We don't exactly have a lot of time here."

There was a hiss of static, followed by a voice with a trace of a German accent.

"They're going as fast as they can, Pan. This is a tricky nut to crack. Just stay alive, they'll get there."

Pan spat out a bitter laugh.

"Stay alive? You finally developed a sense of humor, Shep? Any chance of backup?"

"Nightingale and Truck are inside the Engine, everyone else is airborne. Until then you're on your own."

Great.

Everyone jolted in their seats as the truck made contact with something else. The sour stench of fear filled her nostrils, making her want to gag. She and Herc had done this before but Forrest had only heard stories—the way the world is torn open, the way they swarm out from behind the paper-thin shell of reality. He had a hand over his mouth, his eyes wide and white, the brightest thing in the truck. She didn't offer him any words of comfort. What would be the point? Chances were that in less than half an hour the only evidence he'd ever existed would be his entry in the *Book of Dead Engineers*.

Right next to her own.

"Hang on!" yelled the driver, wrestling with the wheel. The truck lurched off the expressway, thumping into the side of the road hard enough to jolt them all off their seats. Pan was pushed back by an invisible hand as they accelerated, her stomach trying to punch its way out past her spine, the world flashing by outside the tinted windows too fast to see. It didn't matter how fast they were going. They couldn't outrun them. They couldn't escape, they couldn't hide. The only thing that mattered was getting into cover, where nobody could see what happened next.

"Get off the street," Ostheim said, reading her mind. "By my calculation . . ." He swore. "Twenty minutes, Pan, and counting, fast. Get out of sight."

The world cannot know. It's the only thing that counts, it's more important than your own life. Ostheim had drilled that into her on day one. And every day since.

So why the hell were they heading right into the heart of Staten Island?

"Out of sight, goddammit!" Here yelled, grabbing the seat as they smashed into the back of an SUV, sending it spinning out toward the side of the road.

Too late, Pan thought as the driver steered them around a wide bend, so fast that the world outside was just a blur. The screeching tires threw up smoke, and for a second the driver almost lost it. There was a wet retching sound as Forrest puked over his trousers but Pan ignored it. There was something else in the air alongside the smell of vomit. A thick, heavy, sulfurous scent that she knew all too well.

Their smell. The stench of hell.

"Twenty minutes, Pan," Ostheim repeated, like she hadn't heard him the first time.

Twenty minutes. Twenty minutes between her, Forrest, and an eternity of agony. Twenty minutes before they dragged her kicking and screaming down to hell.

"Those Lawyers better shift their asses," she yelled at Ostheim, cursing herself—for the hundredth time at least—for ever accepting his offer.

The Engine.

The goddamned Devil's Engine.

She'd always known it would be the death of her.

### **BREATHLESS**

Marlow had jogged a block and a half before he dared to slow down. Crossing the street, he tripped into the alley that ran down the back of the expressway, crashing against a fence. He took another couple of puffs of his inhaler for good measure, feeling the last of the blockage shift from his windpipe. His lungs still ached, though, like he'd breathed in a lungful of pepper spray and run a marathon, not a few hundred yards.

He spat out a wad of phlegm and wiped the sweat from his brow. Only here, in the sudden quiet—just the distant rumble of the city and the eerie wail of a siren—did the events of the last few minutes sink in.

What the hell were you thinking?

He was screwed. Not only had he been expelled from the last school that would take him, he'd also committed vandalism and assault—on a *cop*. There was probably an APB out on him by now; the siren he could hear would be a squad car blazing up the street. This was Mariners Harbor, they'd shoot him on sight.

His palms stung from where he'd pushed Yogi, and he rubbed them on his pants, trying to work out a plan. The best thing would be to turn around, head back to the school with his tail between his legs, offer to pay for the paintwork to be redone or something. He could get down on his hands and

knees, kowtow his way back to his math class like nothing had ever happened.

Yeah, right.

There was more chance of him sprouting wings and flying into Harvard. He wiped the sweat from his face, sweat that was less to do with running and more to do with the terror of not being able to breathe. He'd been lucky this time. His asthma was a constant threat, always doing its best to kill him.

When he'd been a kid, lying in his bed, writhing back and forth and going blue while his mom called for the ambulance, he'd seen it as a monster, something that wrapped invisible fingers around his throat, whose tongue wormed its way into his windpipe, sealing it tight. Even though he was fifteen now he still carried that beast around with him, it was always on his back, waiting to attack. When it was bad, *really* bad, it was a battle to the death. The inhaler lost its power. Even the nebulizer he had at home didn't work. It had been close today. A couple more minutes, maybe, and the principal would have been calling 911 and giving him mouth to mouth.

Maybe that would have been better. You couldn't exactly expel somebody who was dying on your office floor.

Marlow shook his head. What was he going to tell his mom? *Please, Marlow,* he heard her say, as clear as if she were standing next to him. There had been enough Bacardi on her breath that day to make his eyes sting. *Please, just this once, be good.* I can't stand it, I can't stand the trouble. I need you to do this for me, stay in school.

And he had been, he'd been doing okay. It was just that douche bag principal, riding him every day. This was all Caputo's fault. Maybe he should go back and teach the man a proper—

Footsteps, hard and fast, rising up from the end of the alleyway. Marlow pushed himself off the wall, fists clenched.

Please, not the school cop. He'd half turned, not sure if his lungs could stand another sprint, when Charlie's face appeared. When he saw Marlow he flinched. Then he broke into a sweaty grin, skidding to a halt with his hands on his knees. Marlow swore.

"Jesus, Charlie, where'd you come from?"

"They were all so busy chasing after you, I couldn't resist slipping out behind them."

Then they were both laughing, sniggering nervously, just in case somehow the cops could hear them half a mile away. "Man, you should have seen it back there, it was utter chaos. I can't believe you punched Yogi!"

"I didn't punch him," Marlow said. "His fat ass just fell over. What happened?"

"It sounded like all hell had broken loose in there, I had to go look. Yogi was on the desk and the desk was on the *floor*, the whole thing had snapped in two. He was rolling around like a turtle, funniest thing I ever saw. Then they were after you." Charlie had to stop to catch his breath he was laughing so hard. "Best part is, Yogi came out the office so hard he nearly knocked me over, ran straight into one of his guys and ended up flat on his face. And he was rolling around all over again. Took the other cops and Caputo to pick him up. Man, I almost died laughing."

"They come after you too?" Marlow asked.

Charlie shook his head. "Nah. Don't exactly look like a threat, do I?"

Understatement of the century. Charlie was a year older than Marlow but five foot three and stick thin. The phrase "can't punch his way out of a wet paper bag" was invented for him, although anyone who thought that would be wrong. Charlie was a pitbull. He wouldn't just tear his way out of a wet paper bag, he'd shred it, set fire to it, then stamp the ashes into

oblivion. Spending three-quarters of your life in foster care would do that to you.

"Besides, Caputo loves me. I'm one of his model students, turning my life around, getting back on track. They used me in the brochure, remember? You, though . . ." Charlie shook his head, sighing. "Pretty stupid thing to do, Marlow, even for you. What made you scratch *that* on the principal's car?"

"It was a rocket ship," Marlow muttered.

Charlie cracked a smile, but it slipped off his face after a second or two. "Seriously, dude, what are you going to do now?"

Marlow didn't answer, just turned and walked down the alley. Best thing to do to a question like that, turn your back on it.

Charlie scampered after him, his feet kicking up gravel. "Marlow, I'm not kidding, you got to start facing up to things."

"I am," Marlow said. "I hated that place anyway."

"So you're bolting again? You're running out of places to go. Gonna be prison or the army at this rate."

Not the army. No way. Marlow closed his eyes, thought of Danny. He barely even remembered his brother, but he saluted his yellowing, fading photo—full combat gear, bleached in desert sun—on the kitchen wall every single day. Had done ever since he was five years old and his brother hadn't come home. Once upon a time all he'd ever wanted was to be a marine like Danny. Maybe that way his mom would look at him the same way she did that photo, with love.

Then he thought of the empty coffin. The flag draped over it, folded by the honor guard and handed over to his mother at the funeral. *Cowards can't be soldiers*, his brain said, and he stared up at the sun to try to burn the words away.

"They're hiring up at the concrete plant," Charlie said, kicking a crushed can into a section of fence. "Not great but at least it'll keep you out of trouble." He snorted. "Though

trouble always seems to find you." He snorted. "Picking a fight with Yogi Bear."

"I've seen you do worse," Marlow said, looking at his friend. The first time he'd met Charlie the kid had been in a fight with two college jocks over in Tottenville. He'd been outnumbered and outgunned but he'd been giving as good as he got. They'd both ended up bolting, holding their bloodied noses. Charlie probably would have chased them halfway across the state if Marlow hadn't stepped in to hold him back. He'd almost got a black eye for his trouble.

"I'm the very definition of sweetness and light," Charlie said. "Where we going now?"

Marlow pulled his cell from his pocket and checked the time. It was nearly eleven. He half thought about calling his mom, telling her on the phone. It was better than seeing her face crumple, watching the tears fall. But he couldn't face her, not even on the phone. It wasn't the anger that worried him, he dealt with that all the time. No, it was the disappointment.

He needed some Dutch courage before he spoke to her.

"Gonna go celebrate my newfound freedom," he said, flashing a bitter smile at Charlie. "No more school, man. Just sunshine and partying. Wanna join me?"

"Getting hammered before lunch? That's your big plan?"

They exited the alleyway onto Park, a solid line of traffic bleating like robotic sheep and pumping out fumes. Marlow coughed, feeling the tickle again, the beast slipping its fingers around his throat. Man, he hated this city, hated the cars, hated the schools, hated the people.

"Marlow?" Charlie said, reaching out and grabbing his shirt. "You don't want to end up like your mom. Like my old man."

He shrugged loose, the anger burning up inside him like the sun.

"I'll be fine," he said, walking off so that Charlie wouldn't

see the fire reach his face. "Just go back, do your thing, live your life."

Push, push, push. It's all he seemed to do sometimes.

"Yeah, real fine," said Charlie. "Go have a morning cocktail, Marlow, run away like you always do."

There was the sound of scuffing heels as he made his way back into the alley, then his voice again.

"You know, Caputo is right about one thing. You're too scared to face up to anything. Do yourself a favor, Marlow, grow some *cojones*."

Then he was gone. Marlow stood there, wanting to chase after him but standing his ground.

Sometimes people don't push back. Sometimes you push them so hard they fall right out of your life.

"Who cares," he muttered to himself, "I'll be fine."

But it was starting to dawn on him that maybe he wouldn't.

### COLLATERAL DAMAGE

00:00:22:21.

Twenty-two minutes.

Pan checked her watch again, swore time was going twice as fast as it should be. She even tapped the watch face, like it was broken.

*You wish.* It was a custom model—waterproof, bombproof, bulletproof.

The only thing it wasn't was demonproof.

The truck lurched, ripping her back into the real world. They were off the expressway and smashing through traffic like a demolition derby. Too many people watching them with eyes like pickled eggs, too many CCTV cameras picking them up. Pan could hear sirens rising over the growl of the engine. That was bad.

Really bad.

The driver reached the end of the road and wrenched up the hand brake like he was trying to rip it off. The truck skidded to the left, vibrating hard enough to shake them all to pieces. For a second it lifted onto two wheels, the whole thing on the verge of toppling. Pan swore, clutching her seat to stop herself sliding into Forrest. The driver flicked the wheel and the truck leveled with a bump.

They had to get into hiding, fast. The consequences of

staying in plain sight were bad. Worse even than the thought of what would happen to her in twenty-two minutes.

She checked her watch.

Twenty-one.

She swore, leaning forward, scanning the road ahead. There was nothing but apartment blocks, rising on both sides like tombstones. The truck was doing seventy, bludgeoning its way past the traffic on the street.

Come on, come on, give us a break.

"They're going to crack it, right?" asked Forrest. The kid was covered in his own puke and shaking hard. He was the same age as her—seventeen—but right now he looked half that, a little boy who's suddenly found himself miles away from home with no idea how he got there. She didn't know much about him, other than his name. It was the way she liked it. In this business, people died. Simple as that. It was easier if they were strangers.

"You need to focus," she said. "Let the Lawyers worry about the contract."

"Seriously," Here growled at the driver, "if you don't get this hunk of junk into cover *right now* I'm gonna throw you out the door."

"Just remember, you're a soldier, a Hellraiser," Pan said to Forrest, "you can fight them, the demons. You traded for strength, right?"

He nodded.

"Then just punch the crap out of them."

It would be like fighting a tide. They'd keep coming. Nothing could stop them. But at least this way he'd have hope.

She lifted her crossbow to check that it was ready to use. The weapon was over three hundred years old but it was still as good as new. The bolt in the chamber was iron, taken from the Engine itself. Not as intimidating as a shotgun, but it was

loaded with something far older and more powerful than buckshot.

The demons were coming to collect, sure. But that didn't mean she was going to pay up without a fight.

"You need me to . . . to speak to anyone?" Here asked. It was the last thing she wanted to hear. Here knew better than anyone that there was nobody for him to speak to. She ignored him, focusing on the road, on the endless barriers of buildings on either side. The truck was doing fifty now, slowed down by the thick stream of traffic clogging the street. The grille guard was doing its job but sooner or later it was going to run into something bigger than it and that would be that, they'd be stranded in the middle of America's most densely populated city.

"Pan? Your mom? I can find her. I can tell her—"

She reached out and slapped her gloved hand over his mouth. There was no need, because the glare she shot at him would have shut him up by itself.

"Herc, stop talking. I'm not planning on dying today." 00:00:19:23.

Her watch had other plans.

"What about you, kid?" Herc said to Forrest. The boy looked back, his wide eyes full of terror.

"You told me this wouldn't happen," he said, his quiet voice almost lost beneath the roar of the engine. "You said the Lawyers could crack it."

"They will," said Pan, trying to give him a reassuring look. She caught a glimpse of his watch. Less than ten minutes. She keyed the radio. "Ostheim, we could really do with some help right now."

"Not long, Pan, they've almost got it."

The truck thumped up onto the curb, somebody screaming as they dived out of its path. It rammed into a hydrant,

water blasting up into the sun and filling the street with rainbows. Rainbows that flickered with red and blue light.

Ah, crap.

"Cops!" yelled the driver. Sure enough the rear window was filled with light, a blue-and-white squad car blazing up behind them.

"Get the caltrops out!" Herc roared, and when nobody responded he plowed his way to the back of the truck. He grabbed a duffel bag and unzipped it, kicking open the rear doors and lobbing it out. The mechanism inside the bag activated, unleashing a string of razor wire and sending it spinning out across the asphalt. The cop car braked but not before it tore across the wire, all four tires exploding. Then it was on its side, rolling hard, bouncing into the parked cars along the edge of the road.

Pan turned back to the front, part of her wondering if the cops inside were still alive, part of her trying not to care. Two lives are nothing compared to what might happen if the world finds out about us, she forced herself to think. Collateral damage, just collateral damage. If she kept saying it, then it had to be true.

"We have to get off the road!" Herc said, his eyes almost popping out of his head. "We have to find—"

The wall of buildings on the left-hand side of the road split, plunging them back into the sun. Pan squinted, seeing a bigger building behind a screen of trees. There was a gate there, and beyond it the road swept down into the mouth of a tunnel. An underground parking lot. It was their only shot.

"There!" she said, pointing over the driver's shoulder. He panicked, turning the wheel too early, blasting a gatepost to brick dust as the truck slammed through. Then they were in the shade, swallowed whole by the tunnel.

Pan's ears popped, a change in pressure that had nothing to do with being underground. A spark ripped across the inside of the truck, so bright that it left its mark on her retinas, made her short hair stand on end. The sulfurous smell was stronger here, a haze of smoke already pooling around their feet. The truck skidded down the spiral ramp, scraping the concrete walls, spat out into the first level of the parking lot. The driver slammed on the brakes and they screeched to a halt.

The lights on the ceiling were flickering wildly, more sparks tearing the air around them. The whole building shook and groaned like a sinking ship. The demons were always powerful, but this time there were two souls on the table, and they were hungry. They would demolish half of New York trying to collect.

"Go go go!" she yelled.

Here kicked open the doors at the back of the truck and hopped down, his shotgun at the ready. Even though Pan had been in this situation countless times she still felt like screaming, fear turning her whole body hollow. She fought it, grabbing the chairs and literally hauling herself toward the doors.

The lights in the parking lot gave up, exploding into sparks and flooding the world with darkness.

"Tubes!" she shouted, ripping a light stick from her belt and lobbing it out the doors. It flickered on, burning fiercely, making the parking lot swim like it was at the bottom of an ocean of blood.

"You two," said Herc, pointing a finger inside the van and flashing them both a warning look, "stay here."

He turned, slotting spare shells into the shotgun and pumping one into the barrel. It was getting hot down here—really hot—the air shimmering like they were inside a furnace.

She glanced at her watch again, barely ten minutes left to live if the Lawyers didn't get their asses in gear. Ten minutes, then she was worse than dead.

Collateral damage.

"Listen to Herc," said Ostheim's voice in her ear, the signal broken up by the layers of concrete overhead. "Do not leave that vehicle."

"Yes, sir," she replied. Then she checked her crossbow, took a deep breath, and threw herself out of the doors into the nightmare of blood and fire.

## DROWNING SORROWS

Charlie was right. For someone who couldn't jog ten paces without reaching for his inhaler, Marlow did a hell of a lot of running.

Not sprinting, not jogging, not running a marathon. No, his kind of running was the other kind. He never ran toward anything, he ran away from *everything*.

It's what cowards do, said his head. He'd been five when Danny had died, so he couldn't remember what his brother's voice sounded like. He was pretty sure this was him, though, the big brother whose ghost lived in his mind.

"Shut up," he whispered to him. "You ran away as soon as you were old enough to enlist."

Needed to get the hell away from Mom, came the reply.

Marlow put his head down and engaged autopilot. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't care. As long as he kept moving he didn't have to think about anything. Didn't have to think about what he was going to tell his mom, didn't have to think about what he was going to do with his life. He crossed the street, the sunlight boring holes in his skull, blinding him. A truck tore past, close enough to touch, coconing him in exhaust fumes. Its horn bellowed, deep and loud, making his bones tremble.

What are you going to tell her? Danny asked.

He had no idea. It wasn't like she gave a happy crap what he did with his life—she spent all day in her rum-and-Coke bubble. All she ever talked about was how proud she was of Danny, how much she missed him, how Marlow could never fill his brother's army boots no matter how hard he tried—not that he was interested in trying.

No, better to run, better to keep your head down, your ears closed, your mouth shut. Run and find a good place to hide. His mom had found a home in a Bacardi bottle, Marlow was pretty sure he'd be comfortable there too.

He looked up, no idea where he was. There was a main road up ahead, though, and he marched toward it. He turned left, weaving between the crowds of kids skipping school and moms with strollers. An auto center, a nail parlor, a pizza joint, and there, so small he almost missed it, the faded green canopy of a corner bodega.

Perfect.

He started to cross, pulling back when an ambulance barreled past, siren screaming. Another followed. They skidded right up ahead, disappearing behind the buildings. Now that he was tuned into it he could make out more sirens, the air swimming with them. Not that it was unusual, of course. This was New York City. It was the day you didn't hear any sirens that you knew you were totally screwed.

The traffic broke and he jogged across the street. The bodega looked more like a prison than a store—bars tight against the windows and half a dozen cameras aimed down at the sidewalk. There was a huddle of guys smoking cigarettes outside and they eyeballed him hard enough to make him stop, think about turning around. Then one of them laughed at something and they looked away, and Marlow stomped the last few paces and crashed through the door.

Inside it looked even more like a prison: a single chest-high shelf running to the back of the store, teeming with rows of dusty canned goods; beat-up refrigerators against the walls stocked with juice, soda, and beer; the aisles crammed with flimsy displays loaded with chips and other junk; up front, a small deli area, and behind the Plexiglas, a counter with lotto tickets, cigarettes, candy within an easy snatch of the cash register. It took his eyes a while to adjust to the gloom, the window bars keeping the sunlight out but trapping the heat and dust inside. It was like a sauna in here and he had to ease his inhaler out of his pocket, firing off a blast to stop his lungs from rattling.

He grabbed a forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor from one of the coolers. But he could feel somebody watching him, and he was suddenly aware of how he looked—stooped and pouting like a sulky child.

He straightened up to his full five ten, clearing his throat, jangling the coins in the pocket of his sweatpants the way he'd seen older guys do. He strode as confidently as he could to the front of the store, stopping at the newspaper rack to pick up a copy of the *Daily News*, figuring it would make him look older.

Gradually a face became visible behind the glass, a woman who had to have been around when they signed the Declaration of Independence. She was so small she could barely see over the counter, but she had fire in her eyes and right now she looked like she was trying to make Marlow spontaneously combust. He coughed nervously and put the bottle and the newspaper in the hatch. The old lady didn't move.

"Just these please," he said, sounding like a church mouse. He looked at the counter, at the wall, at the ceiling, at his shoes, then finally at the old lady. "Sure, kid," she said with a thick accent that he couldn't place. "Why don't I grab you some smokes and a lotto ticket, make it a party."

"Um . . ." Marlow felt every liquid ounce of blood rise to his face. "It's not for me, it's for my . . . wife. She asked me to pick it up on the way home from my . . . job."

He thought for a moment that the woman was going to choke to death from laughing. She wiped her eyes with a leathery hand.

"Oh, right, we wouldn't want to disappoint the *wife*," she said when she had recovered herself. "What's her name?"

Marlow reached into his head for a name and found nothing there. He stared at the front page of the paper, an article on Rio.

"B . . . Brazil," he stuttered. "Brazilia."

"Brazilia," she said, nodding. "She sounds beautiful. Where did you meet?"

"At . . ." Marlow struggled again. "Look, I'm in a hurry, it's been a bad day. Can I just pay for these and get going?"

The chime above the door rang out and the woman's head jerked up, her hand reaching under the counter. She probably had a bat or something under there, although Marlow had no idea what good it would do her, she was surely too small to lift it. She quickly relaxed and Marlow glanced over his shoulder to see a couple of women walk inside, chatting furiously in Spanish. Through the open door he could hear more police blazing past on the street, sirens shrieking.

"Trouble outside," said the woman, shaking her head. "Always trouble."

"Yeah," he said, tugging his wallet out of his sweats. It was black and red, and when he pulled apart the Velcro fastener he felt like he was ten years old. There was a twenty inside, and a bunch of ones. He took the twenty and slapped it down in the hatch. "This cover it?"

"Sure, kid, wanna pull your ID outta there while you're at it?"

Marlow looked at his wallet, then back up at her.

"It's . . . "

"In your other wallet?" she said, folding her arms across her chest. Marlow opened his mouth to answer but she cut him off again. "The dog ate it? It's in your *wife's* handbag? Aliens abducted it? You left it at—the office?"

"All of the above?" Marlow said with what he hoped was a charming smile. He thought the woman might have fallen for it, but the distant roar of an engine filled the room, a crunch of metal, squealing brakes. Was that a scream, muffled by the walls of the store? She looked over his shoulder, shaking her head.

"Better not be your trouble, kid," she said.

Marlow shook his head, standing aside as the two women walked to the counter and bought gum. He half thought about just turning and bolting with the bottle. It wasn't like the cashier would be able to catch him. His lungs had already taken a beating, though, and by the time he was even halfway to working up the courage the women had gone and he was alone with the clerk again. He pinched the top of his nose, an ache brewing in his skull.

"Look, it's been a real bad day. I wanna forget it."

"Kid, you're young, you're healthy, you wouldn't know a bad day if it bit you on the ass. No ID, no booze. I'll sell you that newspaper and a bag of Skittles and you can count yourself as lucky as the angels. Deal?"

He looked at the bottle, licking his lips as he imagined the peace that lay inside.

"Lady, please."

"Lady?" the woman. "You call me a lady?"

She leaned in toward the glass, and this close her wrinkled face seemed to take on a more masculine appearance.

Oh crap.

"Sorry, man, it's—"

"Go on!" the little guy yelled, banging a gnarled fist on the glass. "Get out of here before I—"

Something outside exploded, not so much a sound as a tremor that rocked through the store and into Marlow's bones, almost knocking him clean onto his ass. He gripped the counter hard, doing his best to clamp his jaws around a scream. The shock wave punched open the door, a roar like thunder pouring in from the outside world. One of the windows imploded in a spray of sun-drenched shrapnel. Behind the glass the cashier almost fell off his stool.

"Holy Jesus Christ," he grunted, propping one hand on the counter and reaching under it with the other. When he came up again it wasn't a bat he was holding, it was a shotgun, sawn off and double-barreled. He pointed it right at Marlow, finger on the trigger, everything shaking.

"Hey," Marlow said, hands over his head, his heart jackhammering against his ribs. His ears were ringing. There was a smell in the air, not smoke but something worse, something that smelled like old eggs and acid.

"You better tell me what the hell's going on," the bodega guy said, his eyeballs practically bursting out of their sockets. His greasy hair was defying gravity, stretching up toward the ceiling like it was trying to make a getaway. Marlow could feel something on his skin, some kind of electric charge. "I swear to god I'll cut you down right here and make your imaginary wife an imaginary widow." Another sound was filtering through the chaos, the *pop pop pop pop* gunshots.

"It's nothing to do with me," Marlow said again, staring into the big, empty eyes of the shotgun. He wondered if bullet-proof glass worked both ways. "I swear, I have no idea. I just wanted a drink."

"Yeah? Some coincidence that. Go on, get outta here."

Marlow backed away. Another siren wailed past outside, louder now that the door was open. The dust was aggravating his asthma, shutting everything down again. He tried to cough open his windpipe, reaching down for his inhaler.

"Uh-uh," the man said. "Hands where I can see 'em until you're out the door."

Marlow backed off, arms stretched out to his sides. He'd made it four feet when another explosion rocked through the store, this one powerful enough to knock him to his knees. His vision flashed white, so bright that it felt like a physical force against his retinas. He used a shelf to pull himself up, lumps of ceiling smashing down around him like hail. The cashier opened his mouth, seemed like he was going to shout something at Marlow, but he never got the chance. The ceiling above him split in an avalanche of plaster and beams. One second he was there, the next he was buried.

Marlow waved the dust away, ignoring the pain in his lungs, running to the counter. There was a door to the side, knocked ajar by the blast but wedged tight with rubble. He shouldered it open. There was no sign of the clerk except for a hand and a leg beneath the debris. Marlow reached out, a jagged spark of electricity leaping from the man's flesh to his own, but he felt no sign of a pulse.

Oh god.

Marlow held the man's limp hand for a moment more,

trying to will him back to life. The remains of the ceiling groaned. At this rate the whole building was going to collapse, so he clambered onto the bar again, retreating only when he remembered the shotgun. He dived down, snatched it up, spying a box of shells behind the bar and tipping as many as he could into his pockets. If things were as bad as they sounded, then he was going to need all the firepower he could get.

Marlow took one last look at the dead clerk's hand. *That could have been me*. Then he sprinted across the empty room, slipping on the dust and rubble, once again running as fast as his sneakers would let him.

## DO YOUR WORST

The world was coming apart.

Literally.

Pan propelled herself away from the truck, knowing that if she stayed still she was finished. Not dead, but something infinitely worse. The air above her was sparking wildly, fingers of sulfurous white lightning ripping past close enough to burn her skin. The parking lot was a mess of fire and noise and smoke and there was something up there, in the darkness between the steel beams. Something that thrashed and squirmed.

"I told you to stay in the truck!" yelled Herc. He didn't wait for an answer, pulling the trigger on his combat shotgun. The ceiling exploded into concrete dust. Forrest was there too, his shotgun clenched in one white-knuckled hand but his bulging eyes fixed on his watch. She didn't have to see it to know that the display read 00:00:00:00. The demons were here. His time was up.

Pan hefted her crossbow, scanning the space around her, everything drenched in red, liquid light from the glow sticks. Other than the truck there were maybe half a dozen cars down here, two SUVs, a Corvette that had seen better days, a—

Halfway across the parking lot, she spotted a red Ford. Tongues of fire licked across the vehicle, fierce enough to shatter the windshield. One of the tires hissed, then popped, the car bouncing. But Pan was looking at the hood, the way it seemed to be peeling away from the rest of the car. A thin strip of metal curled up, followed by another, and another, then the bulk of a body, like a camouflaged spider, was finally revealing itself. It stretched, a living sculpture of red metal and engine parts, then ripped free from the rest of the car.

"There!" Pan said.

"Pan, wait!" yelled Herc behind her, his voice lost in the thunder of gunfire. She ignored him, sprinting toward the Ford. The creature pounced, landing on the floor with a crunch, its metal legs skittering. It stretched up to its full height, all four feet of it. The metal folded and refolded like it was paper, jaws opening and snapping shut, lined with scalpel-like teeth. It had no eyes. It didn't need them. It knew exactly where to find its prey.

"Protect Forrest!" she yelled at Herc, but he was already by the boy's side pumping another shell into his gun. The demon opened the bear trap of its mouth and shrieked, a noise that grated down her soul, making her want to curl into a ball and cry. Instead she ran, flicking the safety off the crossbow. The demon moved too, its clumsy legs finding their form, picking up speed, demolishing the distance between them. Twenty yards, fifteen, five. It leaped, the force of it punching holes into the concrete floor.

Pan pulled the trigger. The demon might have been made of steel but the bolt that flashed from the bow was forged out of the heart of the Engine itself. It slammed into the beast like a wrecking ball, stopping it dead. The creature crumpled to the ground, slashed at its own metal skin. It had time for one hellish scream before the bolt exploded like a grenade, sending both halves of the demon spinning across the car park.

"Move!" yelled the driver, running her way. Both halves of

the demon were wriggling, trying to reassemble themselves. The driver aimed his shotgun at the head end and fired, blasting it into metal splinters, filling the air with shrapnel. Its movements slowed, pieces of broken metal moving like jumping beans as they clung on to life. He fired twice more. Then, just like that, it was still.

"Got to—" he said, then his mouth opened in horror, unleashing a scream that almost deafened her. By the time Pan had worked out what was going on the driver was staggering back, his left foot missing. The floor where he had been standing had opened up like a mouth, barbs of concrete gnashing and grinding at the air, slick with his blood. The ground split as the new demon pulled itself free. Its body was a chunk of masonry, the white lines of the parking bay still etched over it. It tried to find its balance on five stunted concrete legs.

Pan stepped back, jamming the crossbow on the floor in order to reload it. The weapon was powerful but it was just about the most awkward thing Ostheim could have given her. She wound the handle, yelling as she did, "Somebody shoot it!"

The driver was on the floor now, jets of blood spraying from the stump of his leg, his eyes rolling back in their sockets. But Herc was there, jabbing the end of his shotgun against the bulk of the concrete demon and pulling the trigger. Pan threw up her hands, feeling shards of floor embed themselves in her face, the pain lost in the thunder of the adrenaline. She finished winding the bow, fumbling for a bolt and jamming it into the gutter. Herc pumped, fired again, and the demon was gone, just a concrete shell left behind.

"Hang in . . . re . . ." said Ostheim through her earpiece, his words faint and in pieces. "They've al . . . broken . . . contract. Five min—"

Five minutes. That was an eternity. She scanned the parking

lot. The metal demon and the concrete one were both gone, and a pile of rubble by the side of the truck made it clear that Herc had finished off another. But the air was still full of sulfur. She could almost see that paper-thin line between this world and theirs straining, the countless demons that teemed on the other side, all trying to break through. All trying to get to her.

But where the hell was Forrest?

Herc swore, pointing up the ramp.

"Kid's doing a runner!" he roared. "Goddammit! Forrest!"

Stupid. Really stupid. You couldn't run from them. There was nowhere to hide. Pan opened her mouth to call the boy's name but it was too late. Something wrenched itself from the wall that formed the side of the ramp, a dog-like shape with concrete skin and a steel spine. Forrest never even saw it coming. It pounced onto his back, crushing the boy in a spray of blood and jelly. Even past the howl of the demon Pan heard him scream, a rasping, desperate, haggard cry that echoed off the walls.

Turn away, something in Pan's head told her. You don't want to see.

But she kept looking, seeing the floor beneath the dead boy grow soft, melting like licorice. The air began to shimmer, the way it does over a barbeque, and with a soft *pop* Forrest's clothes ignited. The whole ramp was growing red, dissolving in the heat, but the dead kid was still howling—even as his hair caught fire, even as his skin bubbled.

She didn't look away. She didn't blink. Not even when she felt Herc's hands on her, trying to pull her around. The demon's head snapped forward like a viper's and Forrest's head exploded, scraps of bone and brain skittering across the molten ground. But she could still hear those screams as the boy's twitching body started to sink into the ground.

He'd be screaming for the rest of time.

Forrest vanished slowly, as if he had fallen into a tar pit. Then the demon crumpled to the floor, like its batteries had run out. Through the smoke and the haze Pan watched the ground start to heal, cooling.

Not for long, though.

She looked at her watch. Less than a minute and she'd be pulled under too, the fast track to hell. She felt Herc's hands on her again, pulling her close.

"We'll do what we can, Pan," he said, his voice shaking like a leaf. "I . . . I'll try."

She shrugged him away. She didn't need his pity. She knew what she was getting into. You play the game, you take the pain. She checked her crossbow, choking on that gut-churning stench of sulfur seeping out between the cracks in reality. There was another smell too. She looked back at the Ford, seeing gasoline spurting from the ruptured tank, pooling around the tires.

She checked her watch.

Five, four, three, two, one . . .

It emitted a soft, chirping alarm. Somehow it didn't quite have the gravity she expected it to—an air-raid Klaxon would have been more appropriate. She lifted the crossbow, the whole thing shaking.

Here they come.

"The wall!" Herc yelled, and she followed the barrel of his gun to see a shape pull itself free from a pillar. This one was bigger, almost human shaped, exploding outward in a plume of dust. The whole parking lot groaned, cracks appearing in the ceiling, the weight of the building above threatening to crash down, bury them all alive.

Herc lifted his gun and fired, the demon pushing through a hail of buckshot. It swiped a huge fist before Herc could reload, sending him flying. Pan fought her panic, lifting the crossbow and firing. The creature twisted at the last second, the bolt burying itself in the wall behind. Pan swore, slamming down the crossbow and winding the handle.

It pounced, its fingers gouging trenches in her armor, knocking the air from her lungs and the crossbow from her fingers. Here appeared by her side, shoulder charging the demon, forcing it back. He raised his gun and fired, again, again, each blast punching the demon across the parking lot. Too late Pan noticed where they were heading.

"Herc, no!"

The demon slipped and fell into the puddle of gasoline from a car's ruptured fuel tank, Herc firing one last shot. The world went white, burning like a supernova, a silent explosion that lifted Pan up and hurled her backward. By the time she'd hit the floor the noise had caught up, a wave of rolling thunder that felt thick enough to drown in. She fought against the heat, against the boiling tide of smoke and vaporized blood, feeling like she was drowning.

"... zzzttt ... okay? ... ing hell, Pan!"

She tried to push herself up onto her elbows, her whole body made of pain. Everything was red, glowing, and she realized her eyes were closed. It seemed to take an age for her to remember how to open them. The car park was a lake of fire. Everything danced in the heat, nothing quite real. It was almost as if the fire were a living thing, lumbering toward her...

Oh no.

The burning demon was made up partly of a charred corpse, partly of something that might once have been a car seat. The whole thing was an inferno, but it wasn't slowing it down. These were demons, after all. Fire was like silk to them. It lurched through the wreckage, bounding right for her.

Pan grunted, ignoring the agony as she lifted herself up. Her leg wasn't working properly, and when she looked down she saw a shard of bone poking from her shin. She stumbled, crunching against a pillar. Where the hell was the crossbow? The demon was halfway across the lot when another parked car exploded, the force of it lifting the Corvette up and crunching it against the ceiling. Pan ducked behind the pillar, feeling the fist of the shock wave buffet past her.

She hobbled around, flanking the demon. There, a dozen yards away, her crossbow. She pushed herself away from the pillar, limping toward it, hearing the howl of the demon on her tail. She collapsed next to the weapon, swinging it around just as the creature was reaching for her. The wire twanged and the bolt buried itself in the creature's eyeless face. It had time to grunt, almost like it couldn't believe its luck, then it exploded into dust.

A shotgun blast behind her. Here calling out a word that might have been her name. Pan turned to see him limping her way, clouds of smoke billowing around him. His face was a mess, smeared with angry burns. She couldn't see what he was shooting at, the truck was in the way. At least *part* of the truck.

Part of the truck that unfolded into a demon the size of a grizzly; which opened its mouth and roared.

Pan swore, lifting the crossbow even though it wasn't loaded. One of the demon's long front legs curled around her chest. It squeezed and she heard a rib snap, a supernova of pain detonating inside her. The crossbow fell, clattering to the floor.

Here's gun roared again, the creature's head tinkling like a tuneless music box. Clouds of shot tore past her, stinging her skin. The demon didn't even seem to feel it, lifting another leg, angling its bladed foot in her direction. Its head was made up of part of the bumper and the license plate—SKI

UTAH!—serrated teeth still pushing themselves free of the metal. Even though it had no eyes it seemed to look at her, and she knew exactly what it was thinking.

Finally, after all these years, we can collect.

She almost felt the relief of it, until she remembered what would happen next.

"Pan!" Herc cried out, too far away, too slow. The creature squeezed again, her bones splintering. Pan closed her eyes, hoping it wouldn't be as bad as they told her, hoping that Ostheim had been wrong when he'd said she'd be begging for death if they ever caught her. She'd be begging for death for the rest of eternity.

"Go on, then," she spat, half words, half blood. "Do your worst."

And it did.