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SPACE & TIME

FANTASY • HORROR • SCIENCE FICTION

THE INFERNAL

By

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The Infernal

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I rode southwest until Mother Sun reached her zenith, then pulled on the reins, halting my horse. I needed time to rest, to heal, and the brutal Texas heat prevented both.

The gulch snaked for miles; the river that had carved it long gone dry. Steep rock walls felt close, protective. Dismounting, I stumbled, my boots kicking up puffs of dirt as they thumped onto the parched earth. Blood dripped from my gloved hand.

A flicker of shadow caught my eye. I dove, hit the ground, rolled. A massive wolf landed where I had stood moments before. It whirled, teeth flashing. I snatched the gun from my holster. Blood slicked my hand, throwing off my aim, and the bullet missed. The wolf lunged. I sidestepped, fired. The beast roared as blood erupted from its shoulder. Another round slammed into its chest but didn't slow it. Jaws clamped down on my arm, sharp teeth bit deep. Pain, followed by a searing white burn.

I buckled as a wave of dizziness hit me. The Infernal creature must have sensed my weakness. It gathered on its massive hindquarters and prepared for a final, brutal assault.

Before it could strike, Mohrna reared and brought her hooves down on the wolf's back. Bones snapped. The beast fell, its jaws loosening. I buried a round into its forehead, between its yellow-rimmed eyes. Then another. Just to be sure.

I stared at the dead wolf, one of several traps set by Bellicose Flay to prevent pursuit. Hopefully, it was also the last one.

Pain lanced up my arm. Fresh blood seeped into the parched ground. Beside me, Mohrna nickered and pawed at the dirt. I grabbed her bridle for support.

"Thank you." I dug a sugar cube from my pocket and fed it to her. She also bore the scars of our most recent battle—a narrow gouge along her left flank, bite marks on legs.

I removed a rag, a water pouch, and the healing herbs from my saddle bag, cleaned her wounds, then sent her to stand watch.

A large boulder stood a few yards away. Over the years, wind and water had carved its base into a wide, jutting shelf of rock, and beneath it, life-giving shade. Exhausted, I crawled into the darkness, pressed my back against the rough stone, and sipped water from the pouch.

Sucking down the cooler air, I removed my broad-brimmed hat, checked the iron at my hips and the blade strapped to my leg. My arm throbbed in time with my heart. Not good. Blood had soaked through the thin cotton of my shirt. I rolled up the sleeve. The flesh around the wound looked puffy, the edges raw and red. Either an infection or poison. I tore a strip from my shirt, poured a little water over the cut, packed it with the poultice, and bound it as best I could, praying to Father Moon it wouldn't get worse.

Resting my head against the rock, I closed my eyes and took a mental inventory of my provisions. Wolves were the least of my troubles—I hadn't planned on using this much water so early in the hunt. But Mohrna's wounds needed tending, as did my arm. If I hoped to return to Virginia, I'd better conserve what little water remained.

I clenched my jaw against the pain. Damn Sherman, and damn Bellicose Flay! William Tecumseh Sherman for this insane charge, and Bellicose Flay for being a threat I couldn't ignore.

Only weeks ago, after years of pretending I didn't exist, General Sherman had hired me to find and kill a Confederate officer.



"Bellicose Flay murdered my son, your nephew," Sherman had said. "He cursed him—"

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"Wait." I raised a hand. "Cursed? How's that even possible?"

"Because Bellicose Flay isn't a man," Sherman said flatly. "He's a daemon."

Humidity made the command tent where we met almost unbearable. Despite the heat, a chill ran up my spine.

Now I understood his summons.

Not trusting my voice, I motioned for him to continue.

Sherman nodded. "The bastard cursed Willie as payback for my besting him at Vicksburg, for forcing him into a retreat his soldiers didn't expect or want. In an act of pure savagery, he butchered his own men just to escape. My boy died a week later. The doctors don't know why, but I do. It was Flay!" The general had shouted the last word, a father's cry of pain and anguish. Soldiers gathered outside the tent grew still, a few peered inside and quickly looked away. Embarrassed, Sherman took a moment to compose himself, then continued. "But this is about more than Willie. I've another reason for wanting Flay dead." He gestured to a soil-stained map of the United States pinned to the table between us. The Union states far outnumbered the Confederate states, yet my brother-in-law still looked troubled. "Robert Lee sent Flay and four other officers to Texas to meet up with... with something, some regiment. The Confederate officers we took prisoner were too frightened to speak of this unknown company." Sherman paused. "Robert isn't stupid. Flay murdered his own men to escape me, yet Lee is still trusting him with another mission. He must think it'll turn the war around, and I cannot allow that. I can't let a murdering fiend like Bellicose Flay defeat us. We'd lose a lot more than a war. With your history, your love of trickery, you should understand the danger better than most." He tossed a purse full of coins at me. "Find Flay and bring me his head."

My heart sank. If Flay were a daemon, I knew the sacrifices the Confederacy would've made to secure the fiend's help. And, yes, I also knew the dangers. Were Flay to succeed, the Union would fall, the country forever subjugated by evil. He had to be stopped.

While killing a daemon was damn near impossible, other remedies existed—banishments and bindings and such—any of which might prove too powerful for my skills, my *trickery*.

I drew in a calming breath. Despite the challenges, I also found the opening for which I'd waited many long years.

"It'll take more than money. If I do this, if I risk my life to avenge Willie, I want to be accepted back as a member of this family. No more shunning, no more exile. You and my sister set aside my trickery and accept me as one of your own." I stood, considered offering him my hand, but knew he'd never take it. Instead, I simply said, "Do we have a deal?"

General Sherman grunted. "I've already spoken to Eleanor. Do this, kill Bellicose Flay, and we'll name our next goddamned child after you."



And so, I'd ridden. At the start, Flay's trail had been obvious. From a gunfight just south of Little Rock to the slaughter of a Cherokee tribe in Oklahoma, he rode west with his fellow Confederate officers, men people now called the Four Horsemen.

But then they'd crossed into Texas, and tracking became difficult. Sometimes the trail disappeared, mid-stride, as if their horses had stepped off the edge of the world. Hours would pass before I'd regained it, often miles from where I'd lost it.

Trickery. That was fine. I had tricks of my own.

But where had Flay gone, when he and his Horsemen had vanished? Only one place, if Flay were indeed a daemon; somewhere I'd traveled before and didn't want to enter again. Nightmares roamed those lands. I'd seen them and come to know fear in ways I'd never expected.

Then came the wolf attack. Eight of them, nine if you count the one that had tracked us here. Uncommon in this part of Texas, their large size and cunning intelligence told me what I needed to know.

Flay had crossed the Boundary. He'd entered the Infernal and sent back the wolves to attack anyone who followed him.

After a few minutes, I slept and dreamed of monstrosities.



Later, after the brutal heat had faded, I dampened a pale kerchief with the sweat beading my forehead and slid it down my shirt collar. The ache in my arm hadn't worsened; it hadn't lessened

either. What saloon rounders called a “push.”

I stared out at the landscape, heat radiating from the parched earth in blurry waves, then snugged my hat onto my head and left the comfort of the overhang.

I put two fingers to my lips and whistled. Seconds later, Mohrna trotted into view. Where she'd found refuge, I couldn't guess. Horses are grand creatures and far smarter than the masters they serve.

I resumed my trek, hips swaying with Mohrna's easy gait.



Mother Sun fled into the west. Soon Father Moon's scowling face would rise in the east, chasing his love, forever frustrated by her elusiveness.

Once the temperature fell to a tolerable level, I halted and made a small campfire. I filled a tin pot and placed it near the flames. A pouch and a half of water remained. Enough for maybe three days, four if I drank sparingly. Barely enough when shared with Mohrna.

My arm hadn't improved. The flesh had swelled, the skin tight against my shirtsleeve, and it felt warm to the touch. I tried flexing my fingers. Pain shot from wrist to shoulder.

While waiting for the water to boil, I set out the tea herbs. Sweet Flag and Catmint. Powdered Morning Glory seeds. Wild lettuce. I had food, not a lot but more than I had of water, and I preferred to keep it for the journey back. Besides, a little hunger would keep me focused.

Flay had left me no choice. I'd lost his trail, and no manner of trickery had helped me find it. To follow him, I had to do as he did. I had to go where he'd gone. The thought left me shaking with fear.

Removing the pot from the fire, I added the herbs, let the tea steep for several minutes, filtered it into a metal cup, then scattered the leaves at the points of the compass. Father Moon would be pleased.

After pouring some of the tea into a tin flask, I drank the rest. Bitter fluid washed down my throat. The day's tension eased from my shoulders. My fingers tingled. The cold grip of terror retreated, leaving only a light touch of fear.

But the tea wouldn't be enough.

Whistling for Mohrna, I heaved onto her back, then removed several discs of Devil's Tongue from the pouch at my belt. I slipped the dried cacti between my teeth and chewed.

The tin flask went into the pouch with the cacti. I would need them to return home.

I dropped the reins and let my knees guide the horse. As the tea and cacti raced through me, words flowed from my lips. The chant drifted ahead, drawing me forward.

Mother Sun dipped below the horizon. The sky faded from turquoise to a bruised purple. Sinister shadows pooled in the desert's low places like black hate.

The wide, far-swept buttes and endless arroyos disappeared with the alkaline sting of desert air. The knuckled clump of Mohrna's steps echoed across the land.

I'd found the gap between perception and reality.

I'd found the Infernal.

The moon here shed a sickly light. Leafless trees twisted up through cracked earth, their scabrous branches groping for dark sky. Serrated scrub dotted the ground, and I steered Mohrna between them so they wouldn't slice the flesh above her hooves. A flock of birds, their wings thrice the length of their bodies with vicious, thorn-like beaks, flew overhead. Skites. Among the most dangerous creatures in the Infernal, they're able to smell blood for miles and are always ready to swoop in and attack when they did. Travelers learned to avoid them or died.

I picked up the reins and resumed chanting. The words swirled around me, buffeted by the dark energies of the Infernal. A sense of diablerie tugged at my innards and guided me. I put heels to Mohrna's flanks.

We traveled in Infernal time, which moved slow, fast, and everything in between.

I kept my eyes down, searching for signs of Flay.

Big mistake.

A thick body jumped me from behind a blade bush and knocked me from my horse. Pain shot through my shoulder as it struck the ground. I rolled a couple of times, then sprang to my feet, guns aimed.

A sine rutter had gotten me. It resembled a boar, only bigger and with more teeth. This one appeared

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diseased. White slime rimmed its yellow eyes, and green foam oozed from its snout. The rutter flipped back onto its feet and charged.

Blood sprayed into the air when my bullet struck its flank. The rutter squealed but thundered on. I dove to one side, fired again, missed. The beast spun and jumped, landing on my chest, forcing the breath from my lungs.

I wedged an arm under the rutter's neck. Its teeth snapped as I wrestled with it. I couldn't roll the Infernal creature off—it outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds. Worse, its flank had pinned my other arm to the ground. Grunting, the rutter bore down, its maw inches from my face, breath like a rotting corpse. My eyes watered and gorge rose from my stomach. I turned my head away.

The rutter suddenly squealed, shifting enough that I pushed and rolled clear. The rutter shrieked again, its cries muted by flapping wings.

Skites. Drawn by the rutter's blood. The rabid-mad beast lashed out but didn't stand a chance. The birds' slender beaks stabbed its bristly hide. The skites' caustic saliva would liquify the rutter's organs, which they would then suck out.

I backed away from the dying creature and its winged assailants. Mohrna nickered from several yards away, unwilling to approach. I didn't blame her. I ran, leapt onto her back, and we galloped away.



I rode through the night. Time and stress had washed the tea's effects from my body. No matter. I didn't need them until it was time to leave.

I had to find Flay and his Horsemen. Malevolence ruled the Infernal; its influence, like vapors rising from a poisonous bog, had an insidious effect on the body and soul. Stay too long and you found yourself changed.

The chant spilled from my lips. The diabolical pulling at my gut resumed.

I followed.



A pale sun rose, scouring the land with colorless light.

Not long after, teepees appeared on the horizon. I'd never encountered Indians in the Infernal. Their

shamans knew better than to take the risk.

It had to be Flay.

The surrounding terrain looked deserted, free of malice, but that was a lie. Dangers worse than rutters and skites roamed the Infernal. Flay would post sentries. A perfect job for his Horsemen.

Four humans and Bellicose Flay. They had slaughtered entire companies of armed men, and I was supposed to take them on myself. Terrible odds. I had to even them up if I wanted to survive.

I slid off Mohrna, then withdrew a wax figurine from one of my cloth sacks. Crudely sculpted to resemble a human, it fit into the palm of my hand. I took a strand of my hair and pressed it into the wax.

This trick required a different chant than the one which had brought me here. The words swirled around me like fireflies. The wax grew warm but didn't melt. I placed the figurine on the saddle and stepped back. The air around it shimmered, then the figurine grew, and clothes formed, until it resembled me.

No guns this time. The sound would alert Flay. Instead, I drew my knife, a long-bladed Bowie with a carved wood handle and a heavy nickel cross-guard. A gift from my father, back when he still acknowledged me as kin.

With a word, I sent Mohrna trotting ahead.

Large boulders and blade-bushes littered the ground. I kept low, skirted a clump of leafless trees, and hurried to keep up.

Before long a man stepped around a craggy boulder. He kept the stone between him and Mohrna. His hand drifted to his gun.

I raced toward him, the sound of Mohrna's hoofbeats masking my approach. He didn't know his life was forfeit until I yanked his head back and drew my blade across his throat.

Blood sprayed from the wound, splashing the boulder. His hands flew to his throat as he turned.

I gasped. This man had traveled the Infernal longer than I, and the change had begun. His eyes blazed with orange and red.

Disgusted, I released him and he fell, his life spilling into the sand.

Mohrna fidgeted a dozen paces away, her head bobbing impatiently. I pulled a sugar cube from my pocket and fed it to her. She nickered in gratitude.

I looked at the camp. No noise. No movement. My illusion wouldn't last much longer.

“Run,” I told Mohrna. “Bring one back.”

While she galloped away, I sprinted for an outcropping of boulders. One resembled a giant fist thrust defiantly toward the sky. I scaled it, knife in hand, and waited.

Before long, I heard hoof beats and peered over the knuckle of rock.

Mohrna raced toward me, white foam blowing from her mouth, her eyes wide and rolling. The illusory me rode with eerie stillness on her back.

Two creatures chased her. Both had been men once, Confederate soldiers, but the Infernal had mutated them.

One sprinted on all fours, his back bent, spikes like porcupine quills jutting up from his spine. The other sat astride his partner, body nestled between two widely spaced spikes, a gun in his hand. A large fissure split the rider's face in twain, the wound oddly dark. As he drew nearer, I realized flies feasted upon his exposed flesh. I swallowed back the bile rising in my throat.

The Horsemen gained. I gave a shrill whistle and Mohrna veered toward me, her powerful legs driving into the dirt.

The charging Horseman turned to follow as the rider lifted his gun. He was going to fire. I'd lose my hard-fought advantage of surprise.

My eyes lit on the *doppelgänger*—the Horseman's real target. With a quick chant, I dismissed the spell and Mohrna became riderless.

The gun-toting Horseman howled in surprise and anger, while the other continued his pursuit.

When they reached the outcropping, I jumped, colliding with the riding Horseman and knocking him to the ground. We tumbled and rolled. I slashed with my knife, cutting into the Horseman's wrist, the one holding the gun, and the weapon fell from his hand. I reversed the grip on my knife and drove the blade up through his chin until the cross-guard hit bone. He flailed, scattering the cloud of black flies. I twisted the blade, and he fell still.

I rolled off him and stood. A dozen yards away, Mohrna had engaged the remaining Horseman. Her hooves struck his arms, his shoulders, his back. One blow snapped a spike in half. Then Mohrna reared, brought her hooves high, and slammed them into his forehead, caving in his skull.

The horse danced away, almost prancing. I leapt onto her back and we sped away before the skites



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could show.

Three down, and no one had yet fired a shot.

I pulled on Mohrna's reins until she angled her path around the camp and went in search of the fourth Horseman.

We stalked the Infernal's broken landscape until I found him in a shallow arroyo running about a mile beyond the camp. He hid behind a growth of bushes, peering out from between the broad, flat leaves, his back to me.

I dismounted. Mohrna nudged me with her muzzle and scratched the ground with a hoof.

"I know." I patted her neck. "Help me finish this, then I'll take care of Flay. Alone."

She bobbed her head in agreement.

"After this, we'll be done. No more hunting, no more danger. I promise."

Mohrna gave a nicker like a snort. I almost laughed.

"Fine, we'll talk about it later. For now, I want you to circle wide, beyond the sight of the Horseman, until you're across from him. Then start your approach. Limp or something. Make him think you're hurt." The Horseman wouldn't expect to see a normal horse in the Infernal. His confusion might give me enough time. "Can you do that for me?"

She had a look of understanding in her eyes.

"Good girl." I fed her three sugar cubes. "On your way. Let's finish this and go home."

Mohrna set off, walking toward the horizon. If she didn't encounter any sine rutters or other denizens of the Infernal, she'd be in position soon. I made my way across the landscape until I had the Horseman between me and Mohrna.

The Horseman crouched, motionless. I glanced at the camp. Nothing stirring there either. No one approaching. Good.

Faint rustling drew my attention back to the Horseman. He'd cleared some branches to get a better look at what had drawn his attention.

Mohrna approached with a gimp in her right front hoof.

That's when I noticed the saddle. I'd forgotten to remove it. The Horseman would know there's a rider!

I drew my knife and hurried forward. The Horseman tensed.

Mohrna stumbled, then fell over and whinnied in pain.

The last Horseman shot to his feet. I launched myself at him. No stealth this time. My boots pounded the black dirt.

He spun, and I got my first look at him.

The Horseman's face had broadened, his muscular limbs had elongated, and fine red lines covered his skin like cracked eggshells. His eyes held no fiery madness, only stark, cold cruelty.

I aimed for his heart. The Horseman reacted with preternatural speed, knocking my blade away. It went flying as pain shot down my arm. I bit back a scream.

The Horseman lifted his gun. I tried to wrest it from him but he was too strong.

I'd run out of time.

Desperate, I bent over and bit his wrist. My teeth sank into his flesh. Hot blood seeped into my mouth. I shook my head, my teeth tearing at his skin. The Horseman cried out and the gun fell from his hand. I kicked it away. Before he could react, I snatched his other revolver from his holster and threw it. But the Horseman wasn't beaten. He hit me with a fist as hard as a plow blade. Lights danced behind my eyes as I reeled from the impact. The Horseman rushed forward, grabbed me, went for my revolver. We struggled, each fighting for possession of the weapon, but like the sine rutter, the Horseman was larger and stronger.

Then I remembered.

The sine rutter.

Blood dripped from the Horseman wrist, where my teeth had rent open his flesh. To be certain, I spit what blood remained in my mouth at his face.

Angered, the Horseman struck me again. I let the force knock me backwards. I hit the ground hard. My hat flew off my head, spilling out my long hair.

The Horseman's eyes widened.

"Woman!" He jumped back. "Witch!"

I heard the sounds of flight and pointed at his wrist. "You're bleeding. In the Infernal."

The Horseman's head shot up. Color drained from his face as the skites attacked him with a fury, their long beaks stabbing his gut, his back. One pierced his eye. Their caustic saliva flooded his body. His skin bubbled, then burst open, green-tinged blood seeping from the wounds.

Mohrna got to her feet. I hurried over to her and, taking the reins, led her away.

"That was quite a trick, falling down."

She nickered her agreement.

I laughed. "Wait for me. I need you to take us home. But if I—" Emotion clogged my throat. The tin flask and Devil's Tongue; our way home. Removing them from the pouch, I dumped the cacti onto the surface of a nearby rock, along with the rest of the sugar cubes, then set the uncorked flask near them. "If I don't come back, tip over the flask, soak the sugar cubes with the tea, then eat everything. It'll help you escape the Infernal."

Mohrna's ears flattened against her skull and she started to turn away, but I grabbed her harness and pulled her face close to mine.

"Listen to me. I can't beat Flay if I'm worried about you. I won't be able to concentrate. Promise me that if I don't return, you'll go home." My grip tightened. "Please, I'm frightened enough as it is."

Mohrna hesitated, then nudged me with her muzzle.

"Good girl." I released her and rummaged in my saddlebags for a certain cloth sack. One final trick.

Daemons were legion, but only one traveled with four human kings and commanded a battalion of fiends. A Duke of Hell. I prayed to Mother Sun and Father Moon that Flay was human, a magician like me, but I had to proceed assuming the worst.

Bag in hand, I made for the camp.

The stench hit me first, a fetor like rancid oils mixed with shit. Gagging, a kerchief pressed over my mouth and nose, I pushed on.

Indians used buffalo hides for their teepees. Flay's were grotesque parodies of that. From the reddish-yellow skins stretched across wood poles, human faces screamed without sound, their eyes black, empty voids. The Cree Indians he'd slaughtered in Oklahoma, the foulness came from them. He'd murdered them and made homes from their untanned hides.

I started for the largest teepee but didn't get far before the folds parted and a man stepped out.

Bellicose Flay stood half a head taller than me, with a handsome face and long reddish hair. He wore plain tan pants and a shirt open at the collar. No hat. No gloves. No guns.

His beard hung down to his belt.

He looked too normal for having traveled in the Infernal. Still, I had to be sure. I jerked a gun from my holster and fired, hitting him with all six

rounds. The impact knocked Flay from his feet.

Not that it did any good. Moments later, he stood. No blood surfaced from the bullet holes in his clothes.

I said, "Barbatos." The bearded daemon, seventh Duke of Hell and commander of a battalion of fiends, the mysterious company feared by the Confederacy's own soldiers.

Flay grinned. His teeth were small and pointed inward like a rat's.

"My Horsemen?"

"Murderers. The world's better off without them."

"This isn't your world. It's mine, and I wanted them alive."

"You should've trained them better."

"You have courage, and more than a little skill." He sniffed the air. "You stink of assassin. Who sent you?"

"You butchered his men when you fled Vicksburg. Do you think he'd let that go unpunished?"

"Lee?" Flay shook his head. "He wouldn't betray his pact."

My skin prickled into gooseflesh. The Confederacy had made a deal with the Devil. The bastards had sacrificed their country just to win a war.

I opened my bag and withdrew a narrow, twisted branch of holly wrapped with a vine of pale moonflowers, their white blooms still open and fresh. Mother Sun and Father Moon together as they never could be in my world.

Flay's eyes darted to the wand. His hands clenched. "You dare try to bind me? And here, in the Infernal?" He approached, and as he did, his true shape emerged. Bellicose Flay grew taller, his clothes ripped and fell away. His skin grayed and thickened. That once-handsome face elongated into the semblance of a rodent, with angry black eyes and lethal incisors. "I will take your soul, witch-woman!"

Trembling, I pointed the holly branch at him and chanted.

Power of Mother Sun arise,

Course across unseen skies.

Light of Father Moon shine,

Love unfettered, forever mine.

Bind this fiend, never to be free,

Imprisoned by Earth shall it be!

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Green shoots sprouted from the ground beneath Flay's cloven hooves. They entwined his ankles, his knees. He kicked to free himself. The shoots thickened into vines. They wrapped his thighs, spread to his arms and chest.

I continued chanting.

Flay shouted something in one of the blasphemous daemon tongues. An unseen force slammed into my chest, knocking the air from my lungs, interrupting my words.

The vines weakened, withered. Flay shredded them, freeing one arm, then the other.

Throbbing with pain, I fought to find my voice again. I could barely draw a breath, let alone resume my chant.

Vines snapped and fell away like paper.

Freed, the daemon sprang. He reached out and wrapped his hands around my throat. His claw-tipped fingers dug into my flesh. Pressure built in my head, behind my eyes. My tongue felt too thick for my mouth.

"My horde arrives." The daemon nodded to a cloud of dust on the horizon. It was massive, a storm of evil. "With them, I will raze your world until there is nothing left but despair."

I'd failed. Once his legions arrived, nothing would stop them from leaving the Infernal.

I thought of Eleanor, my sister, who once loved me, and of her soldier husband, who always feared me. I thought of dear, dead Willie. I thought of my country and its people. If I died, Flay and his fiends would destroy everything.

The daemonic legion neared. Their hideous forms writhed inside a swirl of dirt and malice.

I couldn't let this happen.

May the Sun and Moon forgive me.

With the last of my strength, I embraced Flay, pressing the wand against his back, where it sank into his vile flesh. My pain shattered into a thousand pieces, shards of preternatural glass piercing my body. I'd never felt such agony. My legs gave out. I clung harder to the daemon.

"NO!" Flay bellowed, too late.

Nurtured by a humanity that didn't exist in the Infernal and strengthened by my sacrifice, the vines blossomed and grew, entwining us both, spreading to engulf us.

And in them, we transformed.

Our flesh melded. Together our feet delved

deep into the ground, searching for water. Our arms stretched high to find the sun. Two became one—skin to bark, hair to leaves. Blood ran like sap from our torn and entangled flesh. We grew taller and taller.

Mohrna's panicked whinny cut through the air.

"Go," I whispered in a voice that sounded like leaves rustling. "You promised."

My body stiffened. Awareness receded.

Sherman would know of my success. Flay would never arrive with his battalions, the Union states would not fall.

And I'll finally have my heart's desire. I'll be one of the family, apart and eventually forgotten; a shield of love to guard their survival.

My leaves gasped for breath. The fiber of my heartbeat slowed. My power spread, flowing like roots through the Infernal's soil. Lush grasses sprouted here and there.

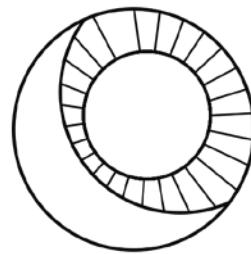
Small changes that could lead to bigger ones.

The daemon horde slowed, then halted. I flung verdant health through the ground toward them, transforming lifeless dirt into an earthy loam. Leaderless, confronted by an unexpected power, they turned and fled. Inside me, Flay howled in fury.

I have done it. As long as I endure, Bellicose Flay will never leave the Infernal, nor will his legions.

I have saved my family and my world.

I am a daughter of the Sun and Moon, and I will live forever.



Brian W. Matthews has published four novels and several short stories. He's a member of the Horror Writers Association and the International Thriller Writers. For the last two years, he has acted as a Trustee of the Horror Writers Association. He's written horror, fantasy, science fiction, comedy, and action stories. He lives in Michigan with his wife, who acts as his first reader.

Books are vanishing. We have all been told not to judge a book by the cover, and yet there are entire genres being lined up and executed without trial. PEN America, a literary advocacy group that keeps track of such things reports “From July 2021 to June 2022, PEN America’s Index of School Book Bans (<https://pen.org/banned-book-list-2021-2022/>) lists 2,532 instances of individual books being banned, affecting 1,648 unique book titles. The 1,648 titles are by 1,261 different authors, 290 illustrators, and 18 translators, impacting the literary, scholarly, and creative work of 1,553 people altogether.” (<https://pen.org/issue/book-bans/>)

The Missouri state legislature passed a law banning books that contained “explicit sexual material.” The definition of what is explicit seems to be decided by the whim of only a few. Last month, Missouri’s House passed a budget that would strip all state funding for public libraries — \$4.5 million in total. Libraries are being defunded. Librarians are under threat of going to jail for passing out books that have been shelf staples for decades, now considered pornography.

Libraries offer free access to information, resources, and services, making them essential institutions for fostering an informed and educated citizenry. By providing equal access to information, libraries help reduce social and economic disparities and support intellectual freedom. When that freedom is stripped away, I promise we will find ourselves in a nightmare.

We hope you enjoy this free download of “The Infernal” by Brian W. Matthews, illustrated by Alan F. Beck. The art has returned to our pages, but will the books return to the shelves?

--Angela Yuriko Smith,
Editor-in-Chief

Scattered around my neighborhood stand personal lending libraries, small wooden boxes shaped like houses with a glass door into which people place books to share. Popular with many people, especially children, I call them *story boxes*, or sometimes *dream boxes*. They hold a wealth of knowledge, imagination, and possibilities.

In the United States, certain segments of the population want to ban books, to restrict access to treasured works. They even want to jail librarians who don't conform to their authoritarian notion of what is "acceptable" in society. An attempt to ban books is an attempt to ban ideas. It didn't work for Nazi Germany in the 1930s. It won't work now.

When *Space & Time* publisher, Angela Yuriko Smith, approached me about making "The Infernal" a permanently and freely downloadable story, I jumped at the chance. I saw this as an opportunity to create a single-story, cyber-style lending library, with content both written and illustrated. A pushback against the current trend in book (idea) banning. Will this change the course of this country's attempt to limit and even punish the free expression of ideas? No, it won't. But it is a start, and every movement begins with an intentional act, an effort to make a difference.

I hope you enjoy this story. My thanks to Angela, and to Alan F. Beck, who provided the wonderful illustrations for "The Infernal."

--Brian W. Matthews,
Author

Importance of the Arts

The arts are all about connections. We as humans need to connect with our others and the arts are a means of doing that. Be it a painting, a story, a song or performance, it is the creator who is sharing the experience with the viewer. The creator of the art is sharing a moment of time in line, color, space, mood, words, thought, song etc. This experience is timeless and can reach back in history. A Beethoven symphony is the creative result from a hundred years ago. In a museum, while observing a Rembrandt painting, you are standing in the exact same spot he was standing while he painted and finished the painting hundreds of years ago. This is a shared experience and connection reaching out from the past. This timeless connection, grounds us and unites us together and enriches our humanity. The arts makes us think and wonder. It lets us travel to distant worlds and inside the mind and thoughts of our fellow humans. We need this.

--Alan F. Beck,
Artist/Illustrator