Credits

Writing: Jeremiah L. Schwennen, Jamie Cole
Layout: Angus McNicholl, Carsten Damm
Artwork: Angus McNicholl
Additional Input: Dr. Anthony Contento, Tyson Hood, Kevin Moore, Natasha Hingtgen, Sarah Schweitzer
Playtesters: Jeremy Bonefas, Scott Cole, Patrick Myers, Mikko Göpfert
Editing: Carsten Damm
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War crimes.

They’re just words when you think about it. They put a gun in your hand and kick you out the door, out to some godforsaken jungle or overgrown sandbox, then act surprised when you come back with blood on your hands. That’s when they start throwing words at you. War crimes. Sociopath. Court martial. Words. Lots and lots of goddamn useless words.

But you’re cool and you’re calm, and all five-foot-seven of this chick just doesn’t seem to add up to “crazed killer,” not by most people’s standards of reckoning at least, so by all accounts you’ll probably pull through. They don’t execute people like you, anyway. This isn’t Texas. Get some spin doctors on your side, stumping for your inalienable rights. Get a celebrity lawyer. Get a bunch of moms out there for a candlelight vigil or whatever the hell it is they do.

That is, if the military doesn’t erase you from existence first.

You don’t really care about any of it. Half of you is still half a world away, reveling in the taste of the blood spattered across your face, the warm gun in your hand, and the screams in the air. The other half is staring blankly but politely at the dingy white-washed walls of your cell, waiting.

Are you waiting for a trial? Are you waiting for an opportunity to crack the skull of the first guard to make a mistake around you, to bolt for freedom and the chance to do it all again?

Or were you really just waiting all this time for the heavy feeling of hands around your neck, and the breath that won’t come? You don’t panic, not the way most people would. That moment when the world shifts from light to shadow, when the grip on your neck stops and the breeze in the air stills, you square your shoulders and feel the urge to nod.
This is it. This is what you’ve been waiting for, somehow, though you couldn’t have known, could you? Maybe it was coded into your genes, into the muscle memories formed as you reveled in the deaths of so many others.

Maybe you just weren’t meant for that other life in the first place.

Hell, Jensen thought, wasn’t quite what she expected it to be. Then again, she’d never particularly bought into the “fire and brimstone” crap they’d tried to push on her as a child. Wherever she was, whatever sort of afterlife she’d earned, she wasn’t in lockdown anymore and that was a good start.

The holding facility they’d thrown her in had been a nondescript bunker of cement and steel, a bolt-hole out in the middle of nowhere and probably kept off any maps of the area. The higher-ups were trying desperately to whitewash the whole thing, to pretend as if she’d never served overseas, as if nothing had happened out there in the desert.

They couldn’t simply let her go free, however.

And now she was free. Jensen rose from the packed dirt of the small, enclosed exercise yard, rolling her shoulders, testing her muscles. Everything seemed to be in working order—everything felt better, stronger, than it had since she’d been thrown in this rat hole and left to atrophy. She still wore the plain fatigues she’d been in, though she was at a loss to explain the sudden appearance of a sword at her hip; nonetheless, the weight of the dark, practical-looking blade was reassuring. She hadn’t held a weapon since they’d shipped her Stateside.

The facility was different. Day had turned to night in the space of a breath. The sickly yellow lights that always came on at various points around the building at night now emitted a pale blue glow instead, illuminating a yard empty of anyone save herself. Deep shadows yawned at the edges of the light. A heavy silence had fallen, broken only by the small sounds of her movements. Not even so much as a cricket chirped in the dark.

If I were in the habit of being afraid, she thought, this might be unnerving.

Her killer was nowhere to be seen. Jensen crossed the dirt yard to the heavy metal door leading inside and found it unlocked. The sound of her boots on the cement floors echoed loudly as she made her way through the building, methodically stalking each corridor in turn. Every cell in the place was empty. No guards. Nobody at all.
So far, Hell was shaping up to be a whole lot of No Fun.

She finally heard something as she approached the main entrance. Footsteps outside. Soft—either a woman or a smallish man, unconcerned with concealment. Jensen drew the blade from her belt in one easy motion (it was really just a big combat knife if you thought about it) and dropped into a crouch. The prey wasn’t much, from the sound of it, but she’d take what she could get for now.

The door creaked as she pushed it open, drawing a soft, frustrated snarl from her lips.

“I know you’re there,” came a voice—male, tenor, slight Southern accent. “You might as well come out.”

*Sloppy. Can’t afford to get careless now, not here. Straighten up.* Jensen drew herself up to her full height and pushed through the double doors, sword still in hand, expression neutral.

The man had his back to her and appeared at first glance to be unarmed. *Short. Small frame.* The ill-fitting blue jeans and faded black t-shirt immediately set him apart from the endless uniforms and fatigues she was used to. *Civilian, not that it matters.* Jensen could sense weakness the way a shark could smell blood in the water, and this one reeked of it.

And then she noticed the long streak in the sky directly above the man. For the first time in a very long time she paused, surprise registering on a face that was poorly accustomed to it.

Energy bled in twisting blue and violet ribbons from what looked for all the world like a tear in the fabric of the sky itself. As Jensen watched, the man in front of her lifted his hands toward the streak, toward the energy, and as he did so the colors began to change—first green, then yellow, then red, all intermingling in a show of pulsing light that would put the famed northern lights to shame. He was manipulating the tear, somehow.

*It can’t be impossible if you’re watching it happen, can it?*

Gradually, over the course of perhaps only a handful of minutes, the color variations subsided and the tear in the sky returned to its previous blue/violet coloration. The man in jeans lowered his hands and turned to her, revealing a pair of dark sunglasses over his eyes.

*Impractical. Affectation or handicap?*
Go for the eyes.

“I apologize for that,” he said. “Now that I’ve got business out of the way, I’m sure you have questions.”

“What are you doing here?” Jensen demanded.

He seemed taken aback at the question for a moment. “If you’re referrin’ to your little prison here,” he began, gesturing toward the facility behind her, “I’m here for the Break.” He nodded up toward the sky. “I have certain powers that allow me to harness a portion of the energy of these phenomena.”

“And if you’re referrin’ to my presence in the Dark itself,” he added with a sly smile, “I’m afraid it’s because I wasn’t a very wholesome person while I was among the living. A condition I’m bettin’ we share, am I right?”

He didn’t wait for an answer before continuing. “Most everyone here calls me Emerson.”

“Everyone who?”

A laugh. “This is only a tiny portion of the Dark. There’s a whole little world out there—” He waved a hand vaguely in the direction opposite the prison. “—and many others like us.”

“Will you be missed?”

“I- What?”

Jensen had all the information she needed. Instinctively she raised the hand free of the sword and focused on it, watching as tiny motes of energy began to swirl around her fist. Energy sparked into plasma and motes coalesced into flame, and when she turned back to Emerson her grin took on a ghastly tone as it was lit by the ball of red fire engulfing her left hand.

How she had done it she couldn’t say, but the effect upon Emerson was immediate. Fear showed plain even behind the dark glasses. He took a step back and raised his hands defensively. The fingers elongated, curving into wicked-looking claws.

So he wasn’t completely defenseless. Good.

Maybe this’ll be fun after all.
We danced in the starlight, as rain fell from cloudless skies. The moon, had it still existed, would have illuminated the beauty in her eyes. How can there be evil in eyes of such radiance?

- Caliphon of the Palms, Obsidian Merchant