

FROST: A RUIN NOVELLA – PRE-RELEASE SNEAK PEEK

by Harry Manners

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Steel grey Manhattan avenues fizzed by in a blur of concrete, greed, and drizzle. It was rush hour, bumper to bumper, and the air was alive with honking; thick with sewer overspill, reconstituted hotdogs, and the gamey tang of sweat. A chaos of bustling commuters, taxi drivers, subway trains and business types, each wrapped in their own lives and worries.

None of them know it's all about to come crashing down, thought Milton Harper, eyeing Fifth Avenue through his limousine's tinted windows. *All these little critters scurrying around like it's all a given, like it'll go on forever. It's a wonder they haven't been squashed already.*

“What’s the hold up?” he snapped, eyeing the driver. That somebody as important as him could be held up by these fucking ants, with their mortgages and screaming kids, iPhones and Netflix accounts; none of that could insulate them from what was coming.

And he was close, now. So close. In minutes they would arrive and he could set to work.

“Sorry, sir. We’re slap in the middle of it, here.” The driver cursed. Somehow his Queens accent made it easy on the ear. “Some asshole trucker just flew off Twenty-Sixth Street and blocked the intersection.” He cleared his throat when Harper eyed him sharply through the mirror, and sat up straighter. “I mean, sorry Mr Harper. We’ll be en-route momentarily.”

You sound ridiculous. I hope you know that. You and your dumb accent will never be anything more than scum off the bottom of my boot.

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Harper looked out through the windshield. No bones about it: there was said asshole, blocking up all of Fifth. Overlaying the normal colours his eyes picked up, Harper also watched undulating ribbons of light surrounding each person, myriad colours reflecting each thought and emotion.

Those farther up the street were surrounded by black halos. Not anger—that had always had a hint of purple and red to Milton’s second eye—but a feckless flavour of glum frustration. The driver wasn’t lying. But that wasn’t Milton’s problem.

He smiled, a practised, perfect charm sliding onto his cheeks. In his long years, precious few had ever been able to stand against it. “Let’s be clear. I’m due to be at my drop-off point in seven minutes. You’re going to make sure I make it on time.”

“Of course, Mr Harper.”

The guy was a professional, cool and collected as a picnic-day cucumber, but Harper could see right through the neat little partition between them, see the flaming effluvium emanating from his black cap and pressed suit. He’d been dim enough when he had first picked Harper up from the airport, but now there were slivers of iridescent red and orange licking up off his shoulders.

Underneath, the poor sap was afraid.

And why shouldn’t he be? Harper thought, allowing a trickle of pleasure to drip down behind his eyes. *The poor son of a bitch doesn’t stand any more of a chance than any of them. Sure, he’s been promised he’ll be fine, but he knows. He’s just like the rest. They sense what’s coming, feel the end creeping up on them, but they don’t seem to be able to do shit about it. This will be a kindness, putting them out of their misery.*

“I know a few shortcuts. We’ll be able to make up the time as soon as we get out of this jam.”

“A few shortcuts? What kind of bullshit excuse is that? Remember the number of zeros on that pay cheque we cut you. How about you start *earning* a few of them?”

“We’re boxed in, I—”

Harper didn’t hear the rest, sensing movement in the rear-view mirror. Dozens of cars retreated in single file towards the rain-sodden haze hanging over Downtown. Shoppers darted between fenders, and tourists gawped wherever they stood at passing curiosities.

Weaving between it all, sliding forth with feline agility, was a sleek pair of black motorcycles. They bore two leather-clad riders apiece, dressed in full leathers, bent horizontally to cut out drag. They moved like salmon swimming upstream, pulling through gaps that would make a motocross rider wince.

Looks like somebody’s going to stand up for this hell-hole, after all.

All the way from the safe house in London without a hitch, and now he was going to be interrupted on the home stretch. He wasn’t going to be stopped now. They had been planning this too long.

Harper launched from his seat and pressed flush against the partition, hot breath fogging up the tinted glass. The rage came on so fast his top lip peeled away from his teeth for just a moment, and he saw the look of panic on the driver’s face—

He saw them. Saw the fangs.

—a childish, amorphous, base fear. These backwater-worlders always threw a damn hissy fit when Harper showed a sliver of his true self.

“This is what’s going to happen,” he uttered, enunciating each word with venom, his tongue snaking out and tasting the air. “You’re going to get me out of here. You’re going to drop me off at the target coordinates and then you’re going to drive upstate along the route we’ve given you. You’re going to dump the car at the exact spot we specified. Then you’re going to take the Greyhound out west to the rendezvous point. We picked you for your

specialist skills, because you know how to move unseen. But fuck this up, and you're going to find doors closed at the end of the line. Then you're up shit creek with the rest of these losers," he hissed, jerking his thumb out the window at the crowded sidewalk.

"My family," the man stuttered.

Harper glanced out the window, picked out the riders zipping back and forth, powering their way through the congestion without a hint of trouble.

Another faint lurch tugged at Milton's ancient chest.

Time to move, Harper. They're beat hands down, but don't fuck with destiny—the Web doesn't pick favourites.

He turned back to the driver. "If you've been smart, they'll already be on their way." Harper watched the red flashes coming off the man's shoulder ease up some, and smiled. "Good, you are smart."

The driver's cool was gone, but his eyes hardened. "They passed through Cleveland an hour ago."

"Good." Harper resumed his seat, brushing imaginary flecks of dust off his Saville Row jacket. These creatures might be the scum of the Web, but they had good taste. "They'll be fine. That means you get to focus on the job. Now, get me out of here."

The engine roared a moment later, and the limousine leapt up onto the kerb. Harper watched the look of dawning horror on the faces in the crowd, and he grinned as they bounced along the sidewalk around the traffic. For a moment his eyes lingered on the divider between him and the driver, now sporting a set of punctures in the leather, where his hands had been. Claw marks.

I must keep my temper, he thought. At least a little while longer. It wouldn't do to scupper things now.

No, it wouldn't do at all. He and the master had put decades of work into setting all the dominos in order, and finally it was time to kick-start the shitstorm, and tear All Where a new one.

“That’s better,” he called as they bounced past the intersection at Twenty-Sixth Street, and careened back onto the asphalt amidst a hail of honking horns and screaming pedestrians pouring out of Madison Square Park. “Don’t stop for anything, or I’ll eat your little girl with eggs over-easy when this is done.”

The tiniest groan escaped the driver, now hunched full over the wheel, and the engine growled louder still as they careened to and fro, cutting a swathe through the lumbering midday traffic. He looked a little green.

Poor darling.

Harper drew his tongue over his teeth at the sight of all that delicious terror shooting off the driver’s skin in magnolia florets. Not long now, and billions would be aglow with it—right before they all vanished into the ether.

I can’t wait to drink it all in. It’s going to be one hell of a feast.

He sat back and hummed *Blue Danube* as they swerved and jounced along, scraping paint and chipping bumpers as they clipped passing Yellow Cabs and Priuses. He tittered as a handbag ricocheted off his window. He didn’t look for the owner; it was more fun to imagine what might have happened to her.

All the while he kept an eye on the motorcycles behind them. They hadn’t had a problem getting around the intersection, and they were gaining fast.

No matter how much power you get or who you work for, you get the same flies buzzing around your head.

His cell phone trilled in his jacket, and he pulled it out with a frown of distaste. He had to hand it to these people, they really knew how to bastardise their every creation.

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Transmitting microwaves through the air, microchips, and telecoms networks. All that money and research, software and circuitry, just to communicate with somebody a few thousand miles away. If only they knew the kinds of distances over which he could communicate with a single thought, back in his own domain—where he could turn some poor sap’s mind into a pile of goo without leaving his chair.

Every one of them, backwards, blind to everything going on around them.

He stabbed at the touchscreen, careful not to press too hard—he’d gone through half a dozen of the damn things already, cutting clean through them whenever he tried to tap out an email—and put it to his ear.

The last call, right on schedule.

“Are we ready?” he said.

The voice on the other end was gruff and toneless. “We’re set.”

“How many vaults are sealed?”

“Fourteen.”

“The other seven?”

“Waiting on arrivals.”

“I trust they’re all stocked and manned? The full outfit?”

“All set.”

Somebody’s been reading too much Lee Child, Harper thought, rolling his eyes. I’m sick of this monosyllabic bad-guy talk. Where do we get these people, anyway? There must be an evil henchman agency, somewhere.

“Do me a favour and make your next sentence more than three words long,” he sighed, rolling with the limo as they swept in a spectacular arc around a gaggle of people crossing the corner of Forty-Fifth. “Who are we waiting for, and what’s the ETA on the stragglers?”

“Hong Kong, Dubai, New Delhi, St Petersburg, Strasburg and London. There’s been some trouble with tails, but the last of them have been rerouted. They’ll be on-site inside three hours.”

Harper sat bolt upright. “What?” he roared, wincing as his grip crushed the cell phone’s shell. The connection crackled, but held, just. He took a deep, steadying breath, aware that his manicured nails were stuck fast in a heap of transistors. He took another look out the rear window, watching the motorcycles closing in behind. “That’s unacceptable. We have less than two. I can’t wait. You’re sure they’re being tailed?”

“No question. Two convoys were taken out before we could redirect the others.”

“For the love of... Fine. Now listen to me. You get those arrivals underground before I call you back, or once everything gets real fucking quiet, I’m going to hunt you down and suck your eyes out through your nose.”

Harper bit back a formless bellow as the limo screeched to a halt on the corner of Fifth and Forty-Sixth, and he was thrown forward off the leather seat. “What now?” he cried, slamming his free hand up against the divider.

If his answer isn’t perfect, I’ll open up his neck right here. I can drive myself, for all it goddamn matters.

But the driver wasn’t listening. He was staring off through the passenger-side window with his mouth hanging open like a groaning zombie. His eyes were alive with fear—not the distant respectful kind he’d shown Milton, but something deep and primal.

Harper turned to follow his gaze, grunting at the sight of the sparkling street-displays of the *Barnes & Noble* store beside them.

It was packed out downstairs, with people squeezing to get in the doors. A normal drizzly day for casual readers to get their fix of *Dean Koontz* or *George R. R. Martin*. But the

upstairs windows were clouded over entirely with a spreading milky haze, filling not just the air but crawling over the walls.

Ice, and mist. Moving outwards in a thrumming, roiling mess that didn't belong. Not in this world.

Harper groaned aloud.

Sons of bitches have found an Exit. Tails on seven convoys, two assholes at my back, and now I've got company.

Harper kicked the door open and leapt out, ignoring the cries of dozens of people across the street as they stopped to gawp at the freakery playing out over their heads. The ice spread fast, dripping down the side of the building like water, moving outward from the upstairs sci-fi section, where—

Damn it!

—something was glowing.

There wasn't time for subtlety now. The motorcycles' whining engines were almost on him. One hand still embedded in his cell phone, he tore the driver's door clean off its hinges and cast it aside, hauling the driver out and dragging him across the street. A thrumming noise blasted from the direction of the *B&N*, mixing with the crowd's manic cries. Harper pressed the cell phone hard to his ear, shouted, "*Get the others inside, now. It's game time!*" then crushed it into a ball of composite and glass, tossing it aside.

"What the hell is going on?" the driver gasped.

Behind them, an explosion of shattering glass and falling masonry rang out. Screams erupted from all around, and suddenly people were running. Amidst the chaos, Harper marched with the driver in tow, striding along with his lip curled and his jaw twitching.

He glanced over his shoulder at the motorcyclists, and hissed when he saw them a mere fifty feet away. As he watched, the rear riders hauled a pair of sawn-off shotguns into view, and took aim.

Harper threw the driver forward onto the floor and took a headlong dive behind a hotdog cart. The world blurred. He was still mid-air when the air ripped with the sound of thunder, and the cart detonated like a bomb, sending a few stinging splinters into his leg.

Rolling to his feet, he took the scrabbling driver by the hair and dragged him in his wake like a sack of potatoes, crouching behind a steel information stand. In his peripheral vision he noticed the top floor of *Barnes & Noble* had been torn open, the running crowd oblivious to the gunfire and the leather-clad pursuers.

Typical, Harper thought. *One hint of the real world, and they lose their freaking minds.*

“Get the hell off me!” the driver bawled, scrabbling at Milton’s fingers. In all the excitement, Harper’s manicured nails had stuck fast in the poor sap’s scalp. Blood ran down Harper’s wrist and into the driver’s eyes. “I said *get off me!*”

Harper jerked his hand away, distantly amused by the bleeding welts he left behind in the driver’s buzz-cut, and pulled him up to stand straight.

The motorcycles would be on them in moments. Harper cursed and took a peek around the corner, grunting when the metal panel exploded beside his head in a puff of shrapnel.

Okay,” he sighed. It seemed they were in for a chase.

This might take some work, after all. Better get rid of this idiot, for starters.

He turned to the driver. “Sorry, my good man, looks like this is the end.”

Clutching his bleeding scalp, the driver looked up at him. “Who the hell are those people?”

“Thorns,” Harper said, leaning over and plucking the driver’s Glock from its holster.

“Thorns in my side.”

The driver glanced at the pistol. “I thought you said this was the end.”

Harper smiled and patted the driver’s shoulder. “I meant for you.” He pressed the muzzle against the driver’s chest and squeezed the trigger—twice, just to make sure the bastards didn’t get any information out of him. “Shh, shh, that’s it,” he said, lowering him down, gritting his teeth against the urge to dive headfirst into the pulsing stream pouring out of the guy.

With a fizzing whine the first motorcycle shot onto the pavement, and Harper was firing before the riders could move an inch, sending the passenger flopping to the ground with a weighty crunch.

He grinned when the second bike kept coming, knowing his tapered fangs were showing, and threw his arm around in a bear swipe as the rider flashed by. Even through the thick leather, Milton’s fingers touched bone, his hand momentarily wrist-deep in hot intercostal muscle. Then the bike was hurtling towards the staring crowd, rolling end over end in a hail of aluminium and torn leather. Harper didn’t stop to watch the fun, ripping the door off the *Build-A-Bear* store, and ducking inside.