

Three
Colt in Secret Mountain Wilderness, AZ

The emerald ball of fire rolled away from the arch. It left the trees untouched but not *Soqomhonaw*. Spirit Bear lumbered from the dying flames. From majestic to nightmare, *Soqomhonaw* was unrecognizable, no longer creamy white. Colt's totem was bigger, black and smoldering from a dark re forging. Fire rippled across Spirit Bear's charred fur. The forests in *Soqomhonaw's* eyes were lost, replaced by a reddish and hateful glare.

The beast snarled, revealing green teeth, then roared in fury. The stench and the many legends about demonbears ignited Colt's fear, helping him run faster. The monster rekindled memories of the ancient stories where demons possessed the living to enact vengeance. Somehow, *Soqomhonaw* had been replaced or possessed. Colt didn't think it would settle for Skittles as a tribute. It wanted blood—his blood.

His familiar world had been knocked dangerously off balance into the realm of legends. There was only one thing to do. Pretend this was a video game, and he was stuck in it.

He prayed as he fled, staggering and stumbling down the rocky trail. He managed to reach flat ground without falling on his face, raced to Flint's bike and hopped on.

The demonbear crashed through the trees and rumbled onto the trail like a smoldering boulder, blocking the way to Sterling Pass. Colt whipped the bike around to roll back down the Vultee Arch Trail. He tried to use momentum to jump-start his bike. The engine must be frightened, too, because it sputtered, coughed and smoked. "Come on! Come on!"

He felt the demonbear's belligerent roar pummel his back, pushing him faster. The trail steepened, and the bike rolled faster and bounded over a rock. This wasn't as much fun as the electronic game, *Ride For Your Life*. Colt tried repeatedly, futilely, to kick start his bike. Where was the retry or

quit button?

“Pull over!” the deputy yelled as he stepped into Colt’s path. The law man gripped the gun in both hands and leveled it at Colt. “W-what?” the cop stammered, staring past him. Colt knew what the man saw as the demonbear breathed down his neck.

“Trick or treat! Run!” Colt yelled crazily. He thought the deputy was going to shoot. The Suzuki finally responded to his desperate attempts and fired up. It blared a starting whine, then it was overwhelmed by the demonbear’s bellow. The deputy had common sense to run.

Colt stood, gassed it, and hung on for the ride of his life. The bike careened down hill, going death-defying fast. Even over the roar of the motor, he heard the demonbear’s angry huffing, calling to mind a locomotive chugging faster and louder. When the monster felt two steps behind him, Colt swerved the bike between trees, bounding over roots and ripping through branches and leaves to fly into the dry creek bed. The sand softened his landing. The trees and loose soil briefly delayed the demonbear, letting Colt stretch his lead.

Where the slope fell more steeply, the demonbear gained ground by running across the stones and leaping downhill. It bounded with the brutal grace of a juggernaut, rumbling closer. Colt performed radical jumps that he had only done in games or when he was being brave and stupid on Flint’s old, Shock Trooper mountain bike. Right now, it took being brave and stupid to avoid the demonbear. It swiped, and he swerved around a bunch of prickly pear that it crushed. The bike dropped to a stone shelf, then he ducked under a stunted juniper. The tree’s branches scraped across his brain bucket and slapped at the demonbear.

“Yip yip yee!” Colt celebrated, hanging onto the bike while it fell away again. Oh yes, he wanted to live! If he could make it down two more steep hills he would reach the road.

That close was still too far away, he soon realized. He made it down the second to last hill before the demonbear’s reek assaulted his senses. Its heat scorched his back. Colt launched off an angled slab of rock, flying out, away and down. The demonbear lunged. Its claws easily slashed through the hard plastic armor near his left shoulder. The sharp agony threw Colt off balance. He had the silly thought Flint would kill him if he destroyed the

bike.

The landing in the parking lot went wrong, bouncing him off the seat. He managed to hang onto the handlebars, fingers protesting, while dragging his boots. With a desperate strength, he clawed and kicked his way back into the saddle then hunkered low and twisted the throttle to full out. 350 horses bolted away. Colt left the furious demonbear eating his dust.

He raced until the adrenaline rush waned, and he sensed he might make a mistake. He became uncomfortably aware of the jagged pain in his left shoulder, his battered feet, and cramping legs. He stopped in the middle of the road, putting the bike in neutral, and gave reverent thanks to *Massau*, and thereby, Great Spirit, *Taiowa*. How else could he have survived the demonbear? Looking back, he was amazed by how far he had come. He saw no sign of the monster or anything moving through the dust cloud of his passing.

He couldn't feel his fingers until he unclenched them. By the sharp pains in back of his left shoulder, he assumed it was mauled. It was out of his reach, but it was definitely bleeding. He needed medical attention. Colt turned on the high beam to light the way and shifted into first gear to cruise along warily.

Who could he tell that might understand? How else could he explain the wound? Would they believe he fell? Geode-head, Cliff, wouldn't believe the truth. No way. Their mother should, if she accepted half the books in her store. But no, she would analyze it and believe he made it up to get her attention. He couldn't talk to Pa, because he would be hallucinating while drying out, or so Flint had told him. Pa had his own demons to fight.

What about Flint? His eldest brother might believe him, once he got over Colt taking off without permission on one of his bikes. Flint always cautioned him to carry salt to deal with evil spirits. Now that Colt thought of it, there was a shaker of it under the bike seat. He paused to check it. The container was half full of salt, and he superstitiously pocketed it.

He rode through an eerie, hold-your-breath hush. It felt as if every animal, bird and bug were hiding or long gone.

When he neared the sign to Devils Bridge, Colt's skin bristled and bumped. The autumn twilight grew suddenly hotter. The pain in the back of his shoulder spiked like he had just been stabbed with hot needles. Turning

around, he found all was clear, but when he faced forward again, he confronted the demonbear.

The monster loomed tall and bellowed its fiery challenge.

Colt spun the bike around and pushed it to the max. The demonbear was already sprinting before his bike, rear wheeling spitting dust, bolted ahead. Too slow, Colt knew. The monster gathered itself to lunge and strike. Colt was sure he would be slaughtered this time, and he didn't have any bonus lives.

He veered right into the parking lot for Devils Bridge and onto the foot trail. It had been hard-packed by thousands of yearly visitors, making a decent route, except that it ended abruptly at the steep cliffs of Capitol Butte.

That was minutes in the future, if he were so lucky. He was trying to stay alive right now. He hunkered low and raced as fast as he dared, the seconds stretching into minutes. He realized he was running a losing race. The demonbear relentlessly chased him, slowing on the downhills, then picking up ground on the uphills, its legs better suited for ascending. Each time the beast neared, the gagging stench caused Colt's eyes to water, making it hard to see. This stinks, he almost laughed insanely. Just a video game. Not. He was so dead. What was flesh and bone, even gas-powered horses, compared to that of a spirit now demon-possessed?

The trail continued upward from now on, and the demonbear would have him in the next minute. He thought about spinning around and charging downhill, but the demonbear seemed ready for him to fail and fall into its claws as it stalked him up a steep slope of loose rock. Flint's bike started to slide along with Colt's hopes. He beseeched *Massau* for a blessing as his ride tipped backward, going over.

As he tried to bail, granules of salt spilled out of his pocket and into the monster's eyes. It flailed blindly, so its blow swatted his bike. Colt was flung upward with it. They landed sideways in a manzanita bush on a long sandstone shelf next to the trail. Devils Bridge stretched out to his left where the trail curved around to a huge slab of stone stretching over a ravine where it dead ended.

Colt struggled out of the bush, dragging his idling bike. The ground shuddered as the demonbear neared. Colt jumped on his ride. Where could he go?

Prey of the Spirit Bear

William Hill

The demonbear's swat sent Flint's bike sideways. Colt attempted to spring off, but he struck his knee on the handlebars. Both boy and bike skidded into the chasm under Devils Bridge.

Snow fell along with Colt and his bike as neither could fly. Colt had lost the ride of his life. He prayed dying didn't hurt.