



Portfolio

Megan Griffiths

Dead Marshes

A low haze hung over the marshes, tendrils of fog rising from stagnant pools to lurk in hollows. Clumps of tough grasses and reeds sprouted from the mire in islands, their roots submerged in the dark waters. The tumult of life that filled the air in summer had retreated in the face of the oncoming winter, the water-dwelling creatures burying themselves deep into the sludge, leaving the water still and quiet.

Through the mists, a shadow emerged, pushing aside the coarse vegetation heedless of the blades that scratched at his skin. The leaves were soft. Plumes of hot breath billowed into the sky, thickening the damp shroud which obscured the landscape. The figure surged on, the treacherous ground shifting beneath his bare feet. Glancing over his shoulder, he stared wide eyed across the fen, gaze barely penetrating the cloud. The plastic band around his wrist caught on a low branch, scoring a crimson line across his skin before it snapped.

Slipping, the man fell into the icy waters, the splash resounding across the barren marshland. Ripples warped the surface of the pool, spreading from their source to lap against the reeds. He lay motionless, only his head above the surface, ears straining for any sound as he waited. The frigid water pierced the rough weave of his clothes, saturating the fabric. Play dead; he had done it before.

Yellow lights refracted through the fog, their harsh glow accompanied by low voices. The marsh-water roiled as careless feet surged through the shallows, leaving a trail of sediment churning in their wake. As the floating beacons drew closer the man filled his lungs and slid beneath the surface, recoiling from the stare of the searchlights.

Immersed within the cool water, all sounds were muted; the suck and squelch of mud; the muffled splashes of his pursuers; the betraying thud of his own heartbeat. Sharp pain lanced through his fingers, each tremor that shook him digging hot needles into his extremities. He was used to their touch.

The distorted murmurs from above seemed to fade, the little light that filtered through the water dimming as its source moved on. Fearing a trap, the figure remained frozen, his hands wound around the coiled stems that hung in the mere to hold himself down. His head pounded, starved of oxygen and his body convulsed. Choking as his lungs were filled with water, the man struggled to reach the surface, the glutinous mud reluctantly releasing him.

As his head broke the water, a bright flame flared into life, searing his eyes with its glare. Gloved hands ceased him, forcing him back under. The water writhed as the man fought to free himself, thrashing against his restraints.

It did not take long for the spasms to subside.

The Devil's day job

Behind a grand solid oak desk, spinning morosely on his office chair, sat The Devil. He didn't look quite how one might imagine the Prince of Darkness, Lord of Hell; no fire, no tail, not even a pair of horns to his name. Even his skin was not the traditional blood red, unless you counted the angry sun burn scorched across his shoulders. It was still visible despite the best efforts of a slim black suit.

Of course, he could look however he pleased, but recent years had taught him that the old clichés just didn't get the same reaction anymore. No-one walking into the cramped office in Croydon would have even considered that the recently elected young Tory MP in front of them might be His Satanic Majesty, Father of all Lies. Well, probably.

The polished plaque that hung precariously from the edge of the table read on one side his alias, 'Nicholas Hellton'. The other side stated his full title, printed in 4 pitch and unreadable to humans. The documents that crowded the desk were sorted into two main piles: constituency matters and paperwork from Hell. There was a rapidly growing third stack that covered both. Satan sighed and massaged his temples in an effort to dispel a growing headache, muttering under his breath.

"I love my job, I love my job," though once true, his words were hollow. The problem was that there was not much to do in his line of work anymore. Humans had become remarkably efficient at orchestrating their own destruction with as little help from below as some well-placed sticky notes. In the beginning he had worked in the field, but time passed and the paperwork stacked up. It had been a long time since he had done something big. However, making that call concerning PPI had been a real brainwave – it was up there with Health and Safety and the French.

The Devil was torn from his reverie as the phone rang, the sheaf of papers on which it rested spontaneously bursting into flames, a habit it had recently acquired. He snapped his fingers impatiently; extinguishing the fire before the smoke could set off the sprinkler system. Making a mental note to have one of the lesser demons take a look at it, he answered the call.

"Yes?"

"Your Satanic Majesty, Commander of the underworld, Lord of –"

"Yes, yes, you can skip that bit, what do you want?" The demon on the other end of line paused for a moment, not sure how to continue. He had only been in the job a week – a recent promotion from torture pit cleaner – and he was off script in uncharted territory.

"Well, um, there's a s-slight problem my Lord," He hesitated, an edge of fear in his voice, and then continued in one breath. "There has been another sudden influx of inmates and we're stretched to capacity, all the waiting pits are overflowing and we don't have the staff to cope." The line fell silent and Satan groaned inwardly, shaking his head.

For centuries, Hell had functioned perfectly and hordes of his finest demons spread corruption like a disease throughout civilization. The lure of promotions and bonuses had led to fierce competition between orders of demons and the disease became a pandemic which they could no longer control. Humanity had taken to sin like imps to boiling oil, and was orchestrating its own destruction. Much like British prisons, Hell was overcrowded.

More of the damned poured in every second and there wasn't enough eternal punishment to go round. With the workload increasing, many of his subjects had gone on strike for better pay and conditions, refusing to take no for an answer even after some public incinerations. The condition of the economy on Earth impacted heavily down below and

money was tight – Satan feared that if the state of things did not improve, his cosy office would lose its under floor heating. Realising that he had left the demon on the other end hanging, the Devil collected his thoughts,

“Tell Astaroth I’ll be there soon,” He said resignedly, then placed the old Victorian style hand piece calmly back on the hook. For a moment he sat, breathing deeply, his fists clenched, then with a cry of frustration, he spun to face the bookcase and took his anger out, cremating a full three rows. A tendril of smoke curled up to the ceiling. Water poured from the sprinkler system.

The Last Jump

Fifteen, fourteen... James counted the seconds; his timing here was vital. A millisecond out and he would be nothing but a smear on the landscape. Clouds were definitely not as light and fluffy as they looked from the ground when you were falling through them. Little more than droplets of water suspended high in the atmosphere, they were wet and cold, and unfortunately the one through which he was passing was not at all lonely. The damp shroud obscured his vision, and James felt panic beginning to rise, but forced himself to keep counting.

Twelve, eleven... Once through the cloud layer, the ground rose quickly, the vast tapestry of moonlit fields and the silver tracery of rivers accelerated towards him. *Ten, nine, the mission, focus...* From so high it was easy to overlook the craters and jagged scars torn into the earth, softened by the distance and the night. *Eight, seven...* His fingers itched to move as the world rushed upwards at an alarming rate, but he held back. *Not yet, if I go now they'll see. Six, five...* He had been told the first jump was the worst; more than half of all new recruits never got the chance to jump again. *Four, three...* His target was visible, the warm glow of a single oil lamp revealing the camp. *Two...* His sweaty palms gripped the cord.

One, Now. He yanked hard and felt a wrenching as the hand-stitched yards of dyed silk were released, billowing above him to catch the wind. His descent slowed rapidly, but the ground was already upon him. There was no time to think, so with his instructor's voice ringing inside his skull, James moved as he had been taught. Contact, bend knees, tuck, arms in, roll right, kneel, pack off, collect in, and run. Everything by the book, they said, and he would live. The jump was the hardest part, the rest would be easy.

His eyes fixed on the light, the soldier stepped forwards. Beneath his feet a quiet click shattered the silence. He glanced down. Time's up.