

With a tub of popcorn clutched in one hand and a jumbo cup of juice in the other, his ticket stub clamped between thumb and tub, Deacon elbowed and shoved his way through the milling masses, oblivious to the curses and threats thrown his way. Murmuring brief but insincere apologies, he continued to barge his way into the auditorium, not caring whom he clattered into en route. By the time he fought his way through the main doors, up the stairway, and around the galleried landing to entrance BB3, he felt like he'd been trampled by a herd of rampaging Wildebeest.

Punch-drunk but still standing, Deacon paused inside the threshold, popcorn and juice clamped to his chest to save them being knocked to the floor, and took stock of his surroundings, trying to figure out where his seat lay. Never having been inside Dante's Inferno before, he'd not anticipated the place being so huge. Or so RED. Or smelly, come to that.

An overpowering stench of sulphur permeated the air. Coupled with the monotone colour scheme, he felt like he was about to enter the very bowels of Hell, but he knew that wasn't so. Aside from the fact Dante's Inferno was situated on the limbo level between Heaven and Hell, the chimes hadn't rung for him on his death. He now had the dubious honour of being a neutral, and all that it entailed. All the same, Dante's place had the distinct aroma and look of how he imagined Hell to be.

Feeble, red-tinged light from the chandeliers did little in the way of illumination, but there was enough for Deacon to make out row upon row of scarlet seats stretching

down toward the crimson stage, and the thousands of black-cloaked figures making their way to their places.

Stuck to the red-painted walls like boils on a bum, were egg-shaped holes, their haphazard placement in strict breach of all known architectural practices. Each hole had a balcony, each balcony some red seating, and into those seats poured more of the darkly garbed figures.

Deacon sniffed in disdain. It was nowhere near as homely as Michelangelo's pad.

"Move it, Bud," a voice growled from behind, a split second before Deacon was knocked unceremoniously out of the way. "Some of us ain't got the time to stand and gawk, so get a move on."

Startled into action, Deacon joined the flow making their way down the steeply inclining steps, trying to read the numbers as he went. Eventually he found his row. Picked out in gold lettering against the red end panel of the seat to his right, he read, 'BCD, numbers 1145 to 1175', He glanced to his ticket and smiled. Row BCD, number 1162.

Unmindful of the toes he trod on or the ankles he kicked, he made his way along to his seat. Once enthroned on the padded red cushions, he sighed in relief and settled the tub of popcorn into his lap. Beside him, a hooded figure turned to peer in his direction and chuckled.

"Where in Hell's name did you get them?" the figure asked, nodding to the drink and tub of popcorn.

"I picked up a stash on my last trip." Deacon held out the tub. "Want some?"

The figure shook his head, the cowl of his cloak rustling at the movement. “What’s the point?” he asked.

Deacon shrugged. “Nostalgia?”

Deep, rumbling laughter emitted from the black hood. “Nostalgia? You must be new. What’s your name?”

“Deacon,” Deacon replied, holding out a hand.

“Likewise,” said the figure, ignoring Deacon’s proffered appendage.

The lights dimmed and the deep, sepulchral drone of the audience quieted as two black-garbed figures strode onto the small stage far below. From Deacon’s lofty viewpoint, they looked like skinny black stick insects.

Once they reached the centre of the stage, the hooded figures stopped to peer up at the rows of seated figures stretching up before them.

“Now we find out why we’ve been summoned,” the figure beside Deacon whispered, folding his arms across his chest and settling into his seat. “And I hope it’s worth our while. Remember the last time we were all gathered?”

Deacon shook his head.

“Before your time, huh?” A rumbling snort issued from the voluminous cowl that covered the figure’s face. “Quotas!” The word came out as a growl. “All of us *real* workers gathered here to discuss quotas, or the lack of meeting them, and who was gathering the quotas while we were here listening to *them* drivel on?”

Deacon shrugged.

“No one. That’s who. No one!”

“*DEACONS!*”

The word seemed to emanate from the very air itself, deep, resonant, sombre and demanding attention. There was instant quiet.

A tingling sensation went through Deacon's bones. He recognised the start of nervous tension and shoved a handful of popcorn into his mouth. The tinkle of each piece striking ribs sounded like marbles being bounced on glass. He quickly threw open his cloak to peer in dismay at the pile of popcorn pooled in his pelvic girdle.

Beside him, the figure quietly chuckled. "Whatever you do, don't take a drink."

"You are gathered here today to discuss" – a pause, then – "quotas!"

The figure beside Deacon groaned. "I knew it! We all had to work double shifts the last time just to catch up with lost souls, never mind increase our productivity to their preposterous levels."

"It has come to our attention," the voice continued, although which of the two figures spoke, Deacon could not tell, "that due to overt acts of kindness by certain of your number, the realm of Hell is suffering through lack of personnel, while the realm of Heaven is overcrowded beyond belief. Satan is having a devil of a job keeping his furnaces lit, so, between them, the overlords of each realm have come to an agreement in order to rectify this imbalance. From now on, there are to be no acts of kindness to borderline cases. All who have erred in life belong to Hell in death. No exceptions. Understood?"

Low murmurs fluttered on the air.

"Therefore, all quotas to hell have been increased."

Low groans rumbled around the auditorium.

"By ten percent!"

The groans were louder.

“Any who disagree with the new targets are welcome to discuss them with the instigator. I am sure He will be only too eager to hear of your disapproval.”

Quietness descended.

“As He-who-is-to-be-obeyed does not wish to be seen as completely without heart, He has decreed that the first ten Deacons to reach these new targets will be elevated to Archdeacon status.”

Archdeacon status? The prospect of rapid promotion planted itself in Deacon's mind. It was what he had dreamed of since he'd arrived. Power, respect and, above all else, a chance to meet Him. The head honcho! The pale guy with the scythe. Although Deacons were supposed to be impartial in the matter of which realm souls were sent to, here was Deacon's chance to fast-track, to manipulate the figures. And he fully intended to take it.

After a brief pause, the words ‘Go forth and gather!’ thundered through the air.

Deacon rose with the rest of his colleagues to make his way to the exit, his mind filled with visions of grandeur.

“Well, that was quicker than I expected,” the figure in front of Deacon commented. “As we've some time to kill, fancy a game of bones?”

Being decapitated by an unseen sword-wielding assassin could be described as the lowest point in Grolff's short life. But as his spirit stared down at the headless figure lying in the rain-soaked gutter, he realised it wasn't.

For some reason, his spirit refused to leave the husk that had once passed for his earthly form; pointedly declining to go where he wanted it. No matter how hard he tried to float away, his spirit just bobbed and weaved on the breeze, refusing to go further than twenty paces from his former earthbound host.

Above him, high in the sky, shone the doorway leading to the world beyond – Drumalla: the ante-room of the gods, the land of plenty, where all his desires could be realised, where he couldn't damn well get to. And if he didn't hurry, the doorway would close, leaving him forever in limbo, and he'd be buggered if he was going to miss out on all that fun.

“Yo, fella! Yer gonna miss the doorway if yer don't hurry. Sun'll be up in a coupl'a hours.”

Grolff looked up and saw the ghostly form of an old man floating in the air to his right, slowly spiraling toward the doorway, his nightshirt billowing out around him.

“Tell me something I don't know,” Grolff snapped in reply. “Like how in Hell's name am I gonna get up there?”

The form of the old man drifted closer and peered at Grolff, then at the headless body, then at a nearby tree. His wrinkled face spilt into a grin, revealing broken, discoloured teeth. He laughed. “Use yer head, boy. Use yer head!”

Before Grolff had chance to curse him, the old man drifted off, his cackling laughter reverberating through the night.

Grolff watched in dismay as the old man reached the door, and winced as a brilliant shaft of light shot out when it opened. He shielded his eyes with a hand and squinted against the brightness – and gaped in astonishment.

Outlined in the doorway was a nubile young girl and, judging by her silhouette, she was naked! The lecherous laugh from the old man confirmed Grolff's suspicions.

The door closed, shutting off the bright shaft. Grolff snarled an oath and dived down to aim a kick at his corpse's midriff. His foot passed straight through the body, the momentum of the kick sending him pirouetting through the air.

He didn't go far before his ethereal tether snagged tight to leave him hovering above the ground, upside down, legs stuck in the ten-past-two position. Cursing, he quickly righted himself and glared at the headless body.

Headless body?

Grolff's jaw dropped in realisation. What was it the old man had said? Use yer head? That was it! He had to be complete to enter Drumalla. No wonder he couldn't leave the mortal plane. Without a head on the corpse, his spirit was tied to the earth until the two were reunited. And if that happened after dawn had broken and the door had closed, his spirit would be left in limbo – forever!

His gaze shot to the tree that the old man was peering into when he made his cryptic comment, searching for sign of the handsome, blond-fringed dome that belonged to his body. Excitement coursed through him as he spotted it, stuck in the branches about ten paces up. Driven by desperation, he darted over, intent on...

He had no idea, but he was certainly intent on doing something, anything to get his head back to the body before the sun rose.

Grolff came to a stop within inches of where the head nestled, and could get no nearer. Incensed, he let it show with one long scream of outrage.

Unaware of the hovering presence, a large black bird landed next to the head to inspect it, then hopped nearer for a closer look.

When the bird peered into the glazed eyes, Grolff's angst driven scream faded, replaced by a shriek of horror. "Not the eyes, yer corpse-eater. Not the eyes!"

The bird drew its head back, preparing for the penetrative thrust.

"NOOOOO!"

Presumably in response to the rather large stone that struck it, the bird gave a loud caw of surprise and dropped off the branch.

Unsettled by the sudden movement, so did the head.

Grolff watched it fall, and gasped in amazement when a pair of hands reached out to grab it moments before impact. He was gobsmacked. Even more so when his eyes met the cheery gaze of the man who'd caught it.

Dressed from head to toe in black, a smile creasing the pasty white face, it was the man Grolff had been drinking with at the Fighting Cocks before he'd left to meet his doom.

"Is this what you're after, my friend?"

Caught completely off-guard, Grolff did not think to question how the man could see him. "Er, yes," he heard himself answer, then floated down to stand beside him.

The man bounced the head in the palm of a hand, and smiled. "I thought it might be. Catch!"

Grolff tried, but the head passed through his fingers, then his body, to smack to the ground behind him. He turned and stared at the wobbling object in morbid fascination.

“Oops! Butterfingers!”

The sarcastic tone in the voice caused Grolff to spin around. His hands balled into fists.

The man laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. “Tut, tut. Violence does not become such a gentle soul, Grolff.”

Unmindful of whether it became him or not, Grolff swung. All his anger, his frustration and need channelled into that one punch. Inevitably, his fist passed straight through the figure, the force of the swing sending Grolff pirouetting through the air again.

During Grolff's aerial gymnastics, his black-garbed tormentor wandered over to the head. With a deft flick of his foot, the head rose a short way into the air. As it came down, the man knocked it up again and caught it on his knee. The clear blue eyes, glazed in death, seemed to stare at Grolff's spirit in a silent plea for help. But before Grolff could utter a word of protest at the abuse to his head, the man flicked it up and spun to catch it in the joint between his foot and shin. After balancing it there for a moment he flicked it high into the air, ducked and caught it in the crook of his neck. He stretched out his right arm, then stooped to allow the battered, makeshift ball to roll down and be deftly caught by an ear.

The man looked to Grolff and grinned. “Impressed?”

Grolff was. Although, had it not been his own head the man had been juggling with, he would have been more so. His eyes narrowed. “How come you can see me?”

The man shrugged, then looked to the brightening sky. “Is this really the time to be having such idle conversation?”

Somewhere in the distance a cockerel crowed.

If Grolff had had blood in his veins, it would have drained from his face. As it was, he merely stared at the man, eyes wide. “The door?” he whispered.

“Gone!” The man smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. It was the smile of a predator that had just caught its prey. “Looks like you’re stuck here, my friend.”

Grolff slumped in defeat, his dream of a happy afterlife shattered. He looked up in astonishment as he felt the weight of an arm around his shoulders. “You can touch me.”

The flesh started to melt from the man’s face, as if the bone beneath was absorbing it, his features turning fuzzy. He dipped his head to peer into Grolff’s eyes. “As your new employer, I have certain... er, concessions.” His voice had taken on a deeper, more mordant tone.

Why had Grolff not realised the man was so big? Already standing a foot above him, he appeared to be growing taller by the second. “Huh?”

The man laughed, then moved away to sit beside the corpse. Once seated, he began a one ball juggling act with Grolff’s head: Up, down. Up, down. Up, down. “Don’t you remember our little conversation just before you left the inn?”

Mesmerised by each rise and fall of the grisly object, Grolff dumbly shook his head.

The man chuckled. “Surely you must. You were complaining about the lack of jobs in the area and how you were looking out for one?”

Ah, yes. Grolff remembered now. He'd been fired earlier that day, for 'taking liberties' with his former employer's property - the man's wife, to be exact - and decided to drown his sorrows before moving on to find more work. It was a shame, really. He'd quite liked that job, and it wasn't his fault that the woman found him irresistible.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Hmm, what? Uh, yes. Of course I am. What was it you were you saying, again?”

The dark-garbed man rose to his feet, holding Grolff's severed head by an ear, and stepped forward.

Grolff slowly backed away, keeping a safe distance between him and the approaching figure. Suddenly, he came to a stop. He'd reached the end of his vaporous leash.

“Now that I have your undivided attention, perhaps we can start again. Do you remember our conversation?”

Oddly, Grolff did. Was that bone starting to show through the man's face? And how come his eyes were so dark? Well, missing, really. Sort of not there, even if the sockets were.

“And do you remember me saying that I had a vacancy for someone of your capabilities, if suitable arrangements could be made?”

Grolff nodded again, none the wiser as to where this was heading, or how his sudden demise had anything to do with it.

“Well, they were!” The man clapped Grolff on the back. “Congratulations! You have just found a job, my friend!”

The flesh to the man's face disappeared altogether, revealing a bleached-white skull. A dim, purple glow flickered in each eye socket.

“Death!” Grolff whimpered.

A deep, echoing laugh filled the air. The sound was like two boulders trying to mate in a hollow cavern.

The figure raised a skeletal hand and wiped his eye sockets. “Death? Boy, you humans sure have a wicked sense of humour. Even He would be amused by that one, if He were here. Which He isn't. He only deals with the important ones.”

“Wh-who are you, then?”

Grolff flinched as a boney arm wrapped around his shoulders.

“Deacon, is what I am known as. Deacon 1524, to be precise. There are over three-thousand of us, you know?”

Grolff didn't, and didn't really care. He felt a nudge in his back. Deacon had started walking toward the corpse and was pushing him forward.

“Of course, I aim to be an Archdeacon before too long. Only another two thousand four hundred and fifty three to reach my quota and I'll be there. There are only fifteen hundred of them. They get to do the really cool jobs, and get to chat with Him every so often. We're lucky if we get to see Him once a century.”

There was a wistful tone about Deacon 1524's voice that gave Grolff the courage to ask a question, even if he didn't really want to know the answer. “Wh-what does a Deacon do?”

Deacon appeared surprised. He turned querying eye sockets to Grolff. “Do? I thought you would have surmised that by now. We gather and distribute souls to the

various realms of the afterlife.” He shook his head. “And you wouldn’t believe the shortage in Hell at the moment, or the trouble we have in recruiting the right personnel.”

“H-h-hell?” Immediately, visions of demons with whips flogging tortured souls filled his mind. He shuddered. They reminded him of his aunt. But had he really been that bad in life to deserve such a fate in death? He’d always been good to his mum, may the gods rest her soul, and he’d always worked for whatever he’d wanted. He’d never cheated anyone nor killed without cause.

The image of his previous employer’s wife came to the fore, and he realised where he had erred. His heart sank. But was that one dalliance bad enough to warrant an eternity in Hell?

Deacon grinned, and pushed Groloff toward the body. “Come now. Hades will be a nice place to... er, live.” He chuckled at his own joke as he stooped to lower the head to the corpse. “There, that’s better. Now you are free to leave. Unfortunately, not to Drumalla. But I’m sure you’ll enjoy it where you’re going.”

Deacon rose to his feet and moved away from the now complete body. “Come. Time to be off.” He looked to the lightning sky, and made a strange clucking noise. “Bugger! We’ll have to use the express.” Turning to Groloff, he snapped, “Get here, we don’t have time to mess around. Say your good-byes and then we can be on our way.”

“Who killed me?” Groloff asked, casting his body one last, sorrowful look.

Deacon paused in the act of fiddling with the strange looking contraption strapped to his wrist. It looked like a small sundial, only it had a miniature skull at its centre rather than a blade. “Your girlfriend’s husband, of course. After somehow finding out about your perfidy, he lay in wait for you at the inn – then lopped off your head.” Deacon

peered at Groloff and clicked his fingers to emphasise the point. “Just like that!” he chuckled. “I suppose you could say you were killed by a sexually transmitted disease.”

Still chuckling, Deacon shook his head and twisted the dial again. Satisfied with its position, he stabbed a bleached-white digit on the small skull, and Groloff's old world disappeared in a kaleidoscope of flashing colours.

Bells, loud, harsh and discordant, hammered into Groloff's senses as he spun through the vortex to the gods knew where. His ears began to hurt and he clamped his hands to his head. “Wh-wh-what's that noise?” he shrieked.

Seemingly unperturbed by the racket, Deacon answered, “The doorbell, of course. Welcome to Hell.”

Ends