

The Imp, the Shade, and Cerberus
By Thomas James
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The dead cried out, some with remembrance of former lives lost, others with fear for the retribution to come. Ignoring the wailing specters, the imp Deil trudged through the warped corridors and caverns of the Underworld, wringing his clawed hands all the while. Head down, tail and wings dragging, Deil presented himself before the dark lord, Hades. Cringing and stuttering, the imp gave his report.

Sitting upon his shadowed throne, Hades stared down at his lesser minion. The displeasure written upon the dark lord's face would make even the most stalwart heart quake. Shifting its weight from foot to foot, its barbed tail leaving tiny scorch marks where it struck the obsidian floor, the pitiful imp withered under the master's probing gaze, awaiting judgment. The silence stretched on, growing oppressive, as if a weight were crushing the tiny imp. Finally, the master spoke.

"Tell me once more," commanded Hades, "and Deil, this time leave out the sniveling."

Deil swallowed past the lump in his throat, thankful that it yet remained intact. Drawing in a sulfurous breath, the imp spoke. "While making my rounds, I happened by the Infernal Gates and rather than the normal sounds of Cerberus harrowing the Shades, all was s-still. Drawing closer, I discovered the Mephistopheles chains lying in the dust and the hellhound gone."

"And how, pray tell, did my Gate Guardian slip his unbreakable bonds?"

"I-I m-may have f-forgotten to reset the c-chains after exercising Cerberus last eve."

Before Hades could respond, the imp interrupted. "Th-There is another matter, m-master."

"Go on," Hades ordered, his voice deceptively smooth.

"I-It also a-appears that a S-Shade has escaped, my lord," said the imp, its voice drifting off into silence.

Deil's eyes roamed about the cavernous hall, afraid to look at his lord, unconsciously shifting through the various light spectrums. In the gamma spectrum, the imp caught a glimpse of the *felos-de-se*, the elite guard of the Underworld. Unbelievably, Deil's fear raised another notch.

The lord of the Underworld leaned forward until his smoldering, scarlet, eyes were in line with the imp's dull, yellow orbs. Hades reached out and grasped Deil around the throat. With mounting anger, the ruler of the Underworld squeezed tightly, increasing the pressure as he spoke, "You will find my hellhound."

"You will find the renegade Shade."

"You will return them both."

Releasing the imp, Hades held out his hand and a flaming ebony orb appeared in his palm. The flames subsided, leaving a square of parchment in the dark lord's unmarred hand. "Take the Hell-Writ and be gone from my sight."

Retrieving the parchment and securing it in the pouch at his waist, Deil hastily made to exit the throne room, with the voice of his master ringing in his ears. "And Deil, do not fail. The vilest pits of Tartarus will seem a haven after I am done with you."

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After serving as the Infernal Gate guardian for several millennia, Cerberus the three-headed hellhound ran free. Six pairs of eyes stared into the nighttime sky wondering at the points of light. *Wraith lights* thought one head. *Soul fires* thought another. The third head remained ambivalent.

A mixture of sensations confounded the hellhound: sights, sounds, and smells. A solitary odor stood out above all others: mortal. Cerberus had only ventured onto the mortal plane once, but the encounters with mortal kind left the hellhound resentful. The hackles at the back of his thick neck rose, as the hellhound recalled two such encounters: The Greek brute Heracles, that had battered Cerberus into unconsciousness in order to present the hellhound to Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns and the sneaky Orpheus, whose soft, sweet lullaby caused the hellhound to sleep, thus allowing the Thracian singer to enter the Underworld. To Cerberus, mortals were evil, devious creatures not to be trusted.

A large bright orb appeared in the night sky, unlike anything Cerberus had seen in the Underworld, yet the hellhound felt an instinctual need to howl. The first head rose and produced a low mournful baying, followed by the second and then the third. The eerily harmonious crying filled the night. For several miles around, mortal men whimpered in their sleep. As the echoes died out, Cerberus loped along a wooded trail.

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The Shade arrived on the surface world shortly before dawn, basking in its newfound freedom. Over a century had passed since it had last walked the earth. Disturbing not a single blade of grass, the Shade glided forward. A soft breeze blew through the trees, igniting the Shade's faded memories. It could recall sitting under such trees, enjoying the pleasures of sight, sound, and touch. The pleasing memories quickly turned to anger. While incorporeal, these sensations were beyond the Shade's ability to experience. If it would experience these feelings once more, it must find a living host. Only with the usurpation of a mortal shell would the Shade be truly free of the Underworld and return to its former glory. Coming upon a small lake, the runaway Shade stepped upon the water, leaving ringlets of frost in its wake.

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Cerberus continued along the path, eyes and ears alert, pausing occasionally to sniff at a tree. Trees here confused the hellhound. They were not stunted or twisted and retained their foliage. Of course, after Cerberus marked his territory, the trees resembled those of the Underworld. Days later, park rangers would wonder about the sudden spoilage.

Arriving at a small clearing, the hellhound caught the scent of a woodland creature, its small, fuzzy tail twitching, exciting Cerberus who gave chase, barking gleefully. The hellhound chased several odd creatures, one of which disappeared into a small burrow, where Cerberus patiently rooted for an hour. Unable to reach his quarry, the hellhound resumed his trek through the wooded area. Near a row of hedges, Cerberus paused in his frolicking. Voices sounded on the other side, mortal voices. Cautiously, the former gate-guardian pushed his three heads through the hedges, espying two mortal men. Cerberus paused as he watched the mortal men approach a darkened domicile. Although their language was foreign to Cerberus, he could smell their evil intent.

"Are you sure there ain't nobody home?" asked the first man, scratching the stubble on his chin.

"Stop worrying, and help me with this window," replied his partner.

As the first thief attempted to force the window, he paused and looked over his shoulder.

"What are you looking for?"

"I thought I heard something."

"You're starting to get on my nerv—" a low growl cut off his words. Both men turned, peering into the darkness. "Damn, they must have gotten a dog."

Cerberus pressed out of the darkness into the moonlight, his middle head leading the way. "Damn, would you look at the size of that bulldog's head—" The sentence hung in the air as two more heads came into view.

The stubble-faced man screamed out, "What the hell is that! Must be a mutant or somethin'." Both men backed slowly until they could go no further. The growling hellhound pressed in, preparing to rend the life from the untrustworthy mortals. Mystic strength coiled, ready to pounce, when a familiar scent wafted by Cerberus...Shade. Eons of training overrode any desire to harm the vile mortals. Directing a final growl at the mortals, the hellhound bounded off in pursuit of the fugitive Shade.

Breathing a sigh of relief, the would-be thieves turned to flee, only to find themselves bathed in light. "Freeze!" commanded an officer.

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Deil appeared on the surface world, slightly disoriented, never having set cloven hoof on the mortal plane. A brightly burning ball hung in the sky, frightening the imp and stinging his light sensitive eyes. Deil had heard stories of a burning orb but until now had never had the displeasure of seeing one.

As his sight adjusted to the brilliance, Deil sought out a likely path taken by Cerberus. The notion occurred to the imp that if he found the hellhound first, he could use the beast to track the Shade. Shifting his gaze to the infrared spectrum, Deil located the hellhound's fading paw prints. Following the wayward hellhound's obvious trail (desiccated trees, sere grasses, and a few dead, oddly bleached surface creatures); the imp came upon the secluded clearing that Cerberus had recently vacated. Voices drifted from the other side of the hedges. Using his innate powers of invisibility, Deil edged closer, listening in on the conversation.

"Can you believe it? Right here in our own neighborhood," said a rather corpulent woman, dressed in a bathrobe and hair curlers.

"It's just not safe anywhere these days," replied another, cigarette dangling from her lips.

"I heard that a stray dog interrupted the thieves," said an elderly man.

The first woman scoffed, her hair curlers shaking, "Way I hear it, they claimed it was some kind of monster."

Exhaling a cloud of smoke, the other woman said, "Whatever it was, it scared them somethin' awful. They wet themselves." All three laughed.

Deil had heard enough. Cerberus had revealed himself to mortals. Hades would be less than pleased. Sighing, the imp sped off after the hellhound, hoping to catch him before any innocents came to harm.

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The sun continued to rise, painting the sky with blushes of pink and gold. Unhindered by terrain, the Shade quickly made its way across the small wooded park. A bright flair of colors appeared though the trees, drawing the Shade onward. A lone female ran along a dirt trail, oblivious to the incorporeal Shade.

Anticipation ran through the Shade as it moved to intercept the running woman. Matching her pace, the Shade imposed its essence upon the unsuspecting woman. The woman stumbled to a halt, leaning on a tree for support. The Shade exulted in the feel of the rough bark beneath its stolen hands, the feel of the caressing breeze, the aroma of flowering plants, and most of all, the thudding of a beating heart.

The Shade's pleasure at its new surroundings was short-lived however, as Cerberus appeared on the trail. A menacing growl rumbled in the hellhound's throat. Slowly Cerberus stalked in, sensing the Shade within the mortal shell. The hellhound cared little for the mortal; Cerberus would allow no one to stop the retrieval of the Shade.

Deil came upon Cerberus as the hellhound accosted the mortal woman. Altering his eyesight, the imp witnessed the missing Shade attempting to force out the host's true essence. Deil knew that once removed, the true self would appear as a runaway Shade to the hellhound. Before Cerberus could attack the innocent mortal, Deil swept in and slapped the Hell-Writ against the host body. Ebony flames ensnared the woman, sending the fugitive Shaded shrieking to the Underworld. As the ethereal flames subsided, the woman fell unconscious to the earth, virtually unscathed.

Cerberus leaped upon the imp, dragging Deil to the ground, happy to see his retainer. After several swipes of his tongues, Cerberus sat back and allowed the imp to rise. Wiping the drool from his face, Deil leaped up and grasped the hellhound's collar. Relief in his voice, Deil remarked, "Let's go home."

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With Cerberus back at his post, Deil made his way to the great hall. Small even by imp standards, Deil felt even less

significant, standing before the colossal throne, wondering if his bones would join those of the eon's dead creatures that made up the Eternal Seat. Hades sat staring at his servant. After several moments of tense silence he spoke. "It seems you have been successful."

Deil felt somewhat relieved.

Hades continued, "However, it also appears that additional Shades have escaped." Deil swallowed hard, wondering if the Tartarus pits would be so bad.

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