

[Back To Index](#)

This story was written just for fun and is not an attempt to make money or infringe on any copyrights or trademarks. Only the original ideas contained within the works on this nonprofit web site are the property of their authors, and please do not copy or link these stories to any other website or archive or print without permission of the author.

Orpheus Dissenting

by [Martie Benedict O'Brien](#)

It was a cold day in Hell. The Devil was looking for his anorak. He was rummaging through the contents of a seldom-used foot locker when he heard the unmistakable sound of a new Arrival; one of Hell's Bells, the particularly clamorous one which hung over the main entrance, was peeling with annoying regularity. Cursing under his breath, Satan slammed the foot locker shut. No anorak. He shivered. The Bell sounded jarringly. Wasn't anyone going to answer the goddamn door? He aimed a cloven kick at the locker and flung open one of the numerous trapdoors set, for his occasional amusement, in the floor of his personal chamber. He peered into its Stygian depths, looking for anything with some insulation value. "Sweater?" he muttered. "Tunic? Fur Stole? Flak jacket?" The bell continued to clang.

"All right, all right!" he shouted. He dropped the lid on the oubliette and, fuming angrily, headed for the anteroom, snagging a threadbare muffler from its hook in a shadowy alcove. He gave it a brusque twirl about his throat. Whoever was at the door was certainly going to be one sorry sonofabitch! Rubbing his upper arms for warmth, the Devil clattered down the cobbled corridor. He was rather looking forward to the unpleasantness he intended to lavish on his new tenant. What with the peculiar climatic conditions and his unrewarding search for a suitable wrap, His Satanic Majesty's mood could only charitably be described as grim.

The Devil rounded the final turn filling his lungs with enough sulphurous air to facilitate a great howl of malevolent fury . . . and stopped cold, literally, upon the threshold. The being who stood on the chilly tiles of the anteroom floor was alive. The great breath hissed slowly out between the Devil's clenched teeth. Visibly. That was bad enough, but THIS! A living being in Hell? Such a thing had never happened before, not in all his aeons of stewardship. It was a situation

completely beyond his experience. Not a wraith, not a spirit, soul, wisp or essence, but a living being.

"Where in Hell am I?" demanded the newcomer.

Satan was about to reply, "The Foyer, actually," but he felt himself on such unfamiliar ground that he feared any reply might be fraught with hazards. He settled for a non-committal, "What can we do for you?"

The newcomer looked him up and down, frowning. And frowning, Satan noted, not with anxiety or perplexity, as might have been expected of someone finding himself in the presence of the Prince of Hell, but with what appeared to be impatience. "You can tell me where I am, for starters, pal," the stranger said.

The Devil, who had confronted with cheerful relish, the groveling, cringing shade of many a being who whined that it didn't BELONG here, was, for the moment, at a complete loss as to the order of decorum when it came to conducting discourse with the living; he had never done it before. "Who are you?" he ventured at last.

The newcomer planted hands on hips and put his chin out. The frown deepened. "Who are YOU?" he demanded

"You're at my front door; suppose you go first."

The newcomer sighed and shrugged. "Solo's the name," he said, "and I got no idea at all how I came to be at your front door. Last I remember, I was gettin' a faceful of carbonite. Then I'm here." He looked around dubiously. "Can't say I think much of your interior decorator, but I guess it beats endin' up as a coffee table." He turned his attention once more to the Devil. "Now," he said "you know who I am. So, are you gonna keep on bein' coy, or do I get an introduction?"

I," intoned the Devil, drawing himself up to his full, majestic height and spreading his vast wings from wall to wall, "am the Lord of Darkness."

To his annoyance, the being before him snorted with derision and looked briefly at the ceiling. "Listen, I just got a royal screwing over by one Dark Lord already and, frankly, Pal, you don't impress me much."

The wings folded quickly back into place with a dusty rustle. "Did I say I was trying to impress you?" asked Satan. He raised one eyebrow imperiously. "I was merely stretching."

Solo laughed shortly. "Sure. Whatever you say, Lord of Darkness. Now, how about answering my first question: where am I?"

As this was a wholly original experience for Satan, he had no idea what sort of metaphysical scales might be tipping, even as they spoke, their imbalance precipitated by the presence of one of the living in Hell. Surely the peculiar chill permeating the Realm of Despair was evidence that something was already much amiss. Would cosmic equilibrium be further compromised by said being's knowing that he was in Hell? Could things get any worse? The mantle of enforced civility which he had assumed in order to deal with the enigma of the living was beginning to chafe his haughty shoulders. Abruptly, he squared them and thrust out his chin, unconsciously mimicking his uninvited guest's attitude of arrogant challenge. Enough tap-dancing, he decided. Sometimes one had to keep one's own counsel and let the coals scatter where they might. He hadn't become Overseer of the Damned by being timid. Mind made up, he assailed the living being with a piercing, baleful glare that had withered many a presumptuous spirit and said in a most sepulchral tone, "You are in Hell."

Solo burst into a laugh heavily laced with sarcasm. "Right. I'm in Hell. That must be why I can see my breath and my nipples are as hard as chrysofires. Hell. That's a good one." He laughed again.

Ignoring a cautioning voice that bid him temper the overweening pride which had served him poorly on more than one occasion in the past, Satan rapidly reached the end of his emotional tether. How dare this ... this ... MORTAL scoff and deride in his very face! The Devil retrieved his original furious breath and bellowed, "This is HELL, HELL, HELL, HELL, HELL, HELL!" each time stamping a glistening hoof against the floor until sparks hopped and skittered upon the abused cobbles.

Solo put up a warding arm against the blast of pestilential breath that rushed through his hair and plastered his shirt to his body. He went back one step for balance, then waited out the tirade. At last the sparks died and Satan ran out of wind. The unwonted guest shook his hair back into place and resumed his nonchalant stance. He said, amiably enough, "Okay, for the sake of argument, we'll say you're the Devil and I'm in Hell. Any ideas why? I'm not dead, obviously." He smiled wryly.

Satan was somewhat mollified by his visitor's altered tone, though the hint of irony continued to gall him. Not at all above a spiteful gesture, he replied maliciously, "Because, on the record, you ARE dead."

Solo cocked his head to one side and regarded his host assessingly. Tangentially he asked, "Tell me, why do they call you Old Horny?" He was still smiling.

The Devil glared at him through slitted eyes. "None of your goddamn business," he replied.

"No offense, just curious." Solo started to pace, hands behind his back. The Devil wondered if he were going to start whistling. "Now, I suppose carbon freeze could be mistaken for death," he mused. He glanced back over his shoulder at the waiting, watching Prince of Hell. "The little I remember, it was a lot like sensory deprivation, you know?"

Satan grunted noncommittally.

"Anyway, Somebody thinks I'm dead. But why do I wind up in Hell? I mean, I bend the law a little, but I'm no scourge of the galaxy or anything."

It was the Devil's turn to smile, an unpleasant little quirk of the Satanic lips that was anything but heartening. "Have you, perhaps," he asked with urbane detachment, "ever employed a phrase such as, oh, 'see you in Hell', anything like that?"

Solo snorted again. "Only about twice a week for the last 20 years, maybe."

"Well, there you have it -- obviously you have some appointments to keep down here. A bit of a problem for you, I'm afraid."

"Hah!" Solo stopped and raised a cautionary index finger. "But don't forget, I'm not dead. This is a balls-up, pal." He resumed his pacing. "And I got a notion that as long as I'm here YOU'RE the one with the problem. Forget to pay your heating bill, or something? Huh?"

The Devil snarled softly. Unfortunately, the smug bastard was right. "I could send you back," he suggested.

Solo did an about-face and, stalking directly up to the menacing personage, halted in his sombre shadow. He looked up from under lowering brows. "You don't even know how I got here," he declared. "How d'you think you're gonna send me back?" He threw up his arms in frustration. "If this is the way you people run the afterlife, I'm gonna stay alive as long as I can!" He turned his back on the Dark Lord, exasperated, then swung around again suddenly earnest. "Look, I really DO have to get back."

"To that frozen carbonation, or whatever you said?"

"Well, not that, but there's this girl, see ..."

Satan tapped an exquisitely-honed claw against his gleaming incisors. The situation, while extraordinary, was beginning to evolve into something more to his taste; there was a piquancy to his visitor's dilemma that tickled his obscure fancy. And, a thought had just occurred to him.

"If I understand correctly," he began, "you, shall we say, just 'popped' in here because Someone thought you were dead." The Devil looked into the middle distance over Solo's head, as if seeing puzzle pieces begin to come together. "But since you aren't really dead, when it comes time for you to reappear back on your own plane of existence ..." He frowned and glanced down. "Is this frozen carbonation condition reversible?"

"Carbon freeze? Sure! They just have to push the right buttons and I thaw out."

"And is there some likelihood that somebody, a friend, perhaps, will be doing this any time soon?"

"Gods, I hope so!"

"Well, then." Satan permitted himself a satisfied smile. "When that time arrives, obviously you'll just 'pop' right back where you belong. You'll have some sort of gushingly romantic reunion with your girl ... and I'll get my heat back. The mistake will be self-correcting, you see."

A flicker of interest crossed Solo's countenance. "You think that might work?" he asked, still skeptical but obviously intrigued.

"Of course it will work! It just took me a moment of contemplation to see it 'in the round' so to speak; a relatively elementary piece of metaphysical sleight-of-hand, actually."

"Yeah, but..." Solo began slowly. He looked up, "it might take my friends some time to, well, arrange for a rescue, you know how it is. Things were a little dicey the last I remember. It might be a long wait."

"Well, then, perhaps we could make the time pass more quickly if we amused ourselves," suggested Satan, now the impeccable host. He raised an eyebrow. "Do you, ah, enjoy games of chance, perhaps? Wagers? A spin of the wheel? Turn of the card?"

Solo, with a completely straight face, said, "I've played a few hands."

"How felicitous!" Mentally rubbing his hands, the Devil snapped his fingers and an ornately carved gaming table appeared, complete with two matching chairs; a green-shaded lamp hung suspended above it. Satan made a courtly gesture of invitation. "Your pleasure, Solo. We're short-handed for a rubber of Bridge, I fear. Gin, perhaps? Pickets and Pikes? Kash-tra-tel? Name your game!"

Solo smiled slightly, almost gently. "How about sabbac?" he said.

"A worthy choice." The Devil took a seat, unable to entirely disguise with unconcern a certain predatory relish. "And the stakes?" he inquired. " I hesitate to suggest, but, well, your SOUL is one possible commodity. On my side I would, of course, put up the usual -- endless wealth, women, sybaritic delights too numerous to mention." Satan's eyes gleamed eagerly.

"Nah, I don't think so." Solo cocked his head to one side, the gentle smile still pulling at the corners of his lips. He reached for the deck and riffled the cards expertly.

The Devil's eyes narrowed. "Cut for deal?" he suggested.

Solo split the deck, not even bothering to look at the preeminent card he had, to Satan's growing dismay, uncovered. "We'll think of something to play for," he assured the Lord of Hell; businesslike, Solo pulled himself close up to the table. "But the first hand," he grinned, "we play for the muffler."

end

[Back To Index](#)