

Souls of the Mire

The mire should have been empty. Only the howling of the wind should have been heard, rustling over moss and marsh. The only movement being the eve's early fog, swirling like wandering spirits. If only...

The water wrinkles and ripples, gently kissed by the frigid wind. The air is cold and biting, carrying a bitter smell. The corpse of a tree stands, life lost long ago, roots drowned by time. Its withered trunk is white as bone, bleached by the sun. Once, blackened figures had hung in the branches, but no longer. One by one, time had claimed them all. Slowly, the years crept on, blanketing them with the sweetest of spores and softest of soils. Underneath the earth, they lay restless, waiting to be awakened.

You rush across the bog, splashing through the swirls of stagnant water. Your breath freezes and hangs in the air, drifting off to join the fog. Your ragged breathing echoes around you. A thought pounds in your head, *I shouldn't be here*. It repeats like a tattoo, drumming through your skull. You stop, heart beating wildly, praying your pursuers have gone. Except now, you feel more trapped than ever before.

Suddenly, the noisome smell of the mire is overcome by something else. The foul stench of rotting flesh penetrates your nostrils. You gag and look frantically for the source. You stumble backwards, feet splashing wildly. You slam against something hard, knocking the air from your lungs. You look up to see skeletal branches jutting into the sky. Something rumbles beneath your feet, clawing to the surface.

You release a blood curdling scream, slender hands grabbing your feet. They writhe up your body, their silver skin shining in the moonlight. Erratically, the clawing hands pull up haggard bodies to be eyelevel with you. Their eyeless faces are shrouded by curtains of copper hair. The tenebrous sockets affix their gaze upon you, as if staring into your very soul.

They chatter and hiss at you, with mouths forever agape and throats constricted by cord. "*Join us,*" they rasp their leathery bodies shoving against you, pinning you to the tree. You thrash and cry out in vain. You know there is no one to save you. Your cries give way to heaving sobs, begging, pleading, bargaining. They ignore your cries and pleas as their bony fingers tie you to the bleached trunk. As they ignite the ground beneath you, your body betrays you and hangs limp.

You shake as the smoke rises to meet your nostrils. A cold hand reaches for your face. You flinch as it strokes your cheek, the flames gently licking your feet. Its head tilts, almost seeming to pity your direful situation. It hisses at you, vocal cords crackling, "*Welcome.*"

If only the mire had been empty. Daybreak would not have been met with plumes of smoke, perfumed by something sickly-sweet, billowing throughout the pink sky. And the fog would not have revealed a new figure swaying in the tree.