

Endless Paradise

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PROLOGUE

I forgot who I am.

Elegant rays of light shined so beautifully through the cracks from high above. I had rolled down the ragged red and black ravine. *Where did I fall from?*

My mouth frothed. Groggy saliva drooled from its corners. I convulsed, grabbed at the dusty air. Gas! My spine began to bend. I threw myself to the ground, clawing at the sandy dirt, cutting myself on all its jagged rocks. Phlegm as red and clouded as my vision. Curd and gray fog familiar to the darkest reaches of the unknown, stagnant ocean. The sun in the faint distance began to recede beyond the highest reaches of the upper crevice.

My spine cracked open where my soul expelled through it, giving way to fracture past my lower ribs. I fell further to the ground, hunched over in agony and unable to stand up proud. In the bright red fires of the night, I saw their shadows race and dash against the rock walls. The great beasts began to rise up while I cowered. Silhouettes puppeteered across dark curtains. My skeleton contorted into a shell, chained to the ground.

Yet I was not dead. Red husks hunched over me, their shadows growing over and around my limp body as they approached. They dragged their heavy veins of eyes across the ground. Hideous screeching. They remained completely fixated on the dusty sandstone with the posture of whipped dogs.

With all of my willpower I tried to roll over on my back to turn away from these monstrosities, only to find myself cemented into the hellish bedrock. Tagging along

behind the hunchbacks, the crawlers galloped on all fours, and shivered and shrieked while prancing across the horrid meadow. In their macabre ritual, they ran into the walls of this hellish mountain prison clawing furiously for a while before running off scared, as if possessed by mad dogs. They stampeded over my surroundings in great numbers, huddled together the herd of sheep spooked by a stormy night.

One curious animal approached me. A loud shriek from the background. The brute bent over as flexible as an amateur contortionist towards the sound: another creature of the night, a howling, starved beast, with its ribs caved in and its jaw bloodied and shrunken. The flexible attacker ignored me to fight this wolf, like two children tugging a toy back and forth. Ferocious as two starving dogs grasping a bone dripping in marrow. The bender chewed into the wolf's face, giving a new texture to its scars. The wolf furiously sliced open his throat, which let loose chunks of malformed face and skin under a torrent of blood.

The furious charge of rocks and clattering and shattering ground scattered the chasm's creatures away. Interrupted in the giants' display. A bright red host of demonic warriors charged into the valley. They drew their sharpened swords and spears, tinted in blood. Their weapons sang to me a horrific and terrifying song strummed from the blades' edges. Their bodies filling themselves with chaotic energy. Electrifying, pulsating lightning.

They picked me up forcibly from the ground and hauled me on their mounts: ferocious wolves, and giant bears roaring as beasts of mythological war. The beasts

themselves were flanked by *jötnar*, sentient and ghastly giants. Their bodies hardened into misshapen rock formations; massive primordial artists drunk on centuries old mead sculpted their faces just as bitter. They wore sheets of torn linen made from enough fabric to stretch across a textile factory floor. Horribly clubbed feet. Each *jötunn* wielded a horrific war club, dragging across the ground or slung over their backs like dead deer. While entering the forest beyond this dark canyon, one club accidentally smashed a few barren trees wide open across their trunks. The warrior trundled along, adjusting a bony red skull cap and wielding the same club of black steel. I fainted away from my troubles.

In my half-awake struggle to live, she sang a lyrical song. Echoing in the unconscious darkness, her ancient narrative hymn:

*A woman in heaven challenges your soul,
and demons nevermore beautiful.
Not even angels' promises, disguised
remains of unconditional divine
love. Is it they who end the covenant,
or when we offered first terms high above:
human fate fallen, better than enslaved?
Romance her first unconditional love,
more God's creatorship than demure angels.
Enchanting she is more of Lucifer,
not whence she sprouted from the clay divine.
Seductive the apple only and unmatched,
defined in Eden's dull void.*

Deep in the chaotic waste of overgrown vines and blood-red soil, I awoke on the back of a docile horse. The fair maiden who rode me along soothed my troubles with her satanic melody.

Gaunt and petite. Her skin luscious and pale, and her hair golden brown. One half covered in the shadow of her bright locks, shining gold from the star's muted rays. I stared at her.

She abruptly turned to reveal her face—the left half a fiery, bestial skeleton charred black forever, with ash burns seeping into the contours of her exposed skull. The right half a bright young woman's face, classically beautiful as it was composed. Her neck alabaster, her bosom marble, her hand ivory, and half of her fairness snow.

I gazed for a while into her eyes. The bright irises of those eyes cut the strings of my heart. On her right side an innocent blue-green eye: a glowing moon reflecting behind the midnight's freezing fog. On her left side, a drowned eye—fleshy, sunken, rotten—in an overwhelming dark ocean, rapidly spun inside the blackened socket as it judged me from multiple angles and peered into my drowning soul.

My body flailed around; its stomach curdled nauseously. My head lay on her cold thigh, thick but with the pallor of long death. Warm embarrassed blood flowed into my face, trapped by my constricting throat. A toxic yellow bitterness washed into my dry cough. Her scent of caramel and lavender mist. Her thigh kicked me in the face as she dismounted from the half dead horse. Shimmering the steed's armor and the crimson mane on one side cushioning the rounded, interlocked silver plates. A fire

burning under an ethereal broiler, her beastly ribs red-hot irons. The pale gymnast maneuvered herself into a graceful bout, landing with an almost imperceptible bending of her sharp knees. She fluttered in the air with eagles' precision. Her black laced boots pounded the ground's caked Martian dust.

"I am Hel, goddess of the Dying Halls. Welcome to my beautiful domain, the garden I have cultivated," the courteous guide introduced herself. The 'plants' of this realm surely did not lack for sustenance. Gritty and rusted, the cities of the plain rose out of the bedrock like weedy dandelions. The disturbed silt rode in the hot sandstorms and settled across the land, fertilizing with a somber and uniform dyed red. Deeper into the abyss a multitude of peoples paraded through the narrow crimson alleyways and around the horrid, jagged towers of cinnabar streaked with lustrous brimstone. Seas of blazing fire so bright I knew where I had landed. Fire circled upwards around the mountains, the towering fire fighting against heaven itself.

Lightning struck, from the clouds above that delivered no rain. The wind blew in multiple directions and spread fire above. Sharp blood ink colored the sky, as sharp as death. Razor blades, metal crystals, eviscerating truths. Jagged hail fell down in whole black fruit. Instead of sweet dewy nectar, bitter ashen fumes radiated from the melting hail. Fiery worms sprang upward from the cracked stone to drink the new rain. Five natural elements of this world: basalt, dust, smoke, fire, and void. Violent gusts of wind howled and simmered and roared and fell quiet. My whole body tremored with waves of burning anguish.

I slowly descended off the saddle of her skeletal horse. She walked her calm mare to a pool of burning sulfur, where the horse's tongue slurped up a volcanic hot spring in this chilly wonderland. "Do you like my pet, Dante?" She asked inquisitively, playing with the fluffy mane. Fur as red as overripe apples. I lost my words.

I guess it's cute, in a macabre way.

She held the horse's face in her hands. "Isn't that right, Avalon?" She smiled sinisterly. Curling, the leftmost remnants of her mouth crinkled like bones in a burning oven.

"Can you read my thoughts?"

"Close. Your face betrays your mind." Cold sweating blood ran through my face. "I promise never to take advantage." She bared her exceedingly sharp canines shaped like knives.

I am not convinced by your demonic smile.

"Sincerely."

"What do you want from me?"

She turned towards me. I cowered inside, trying not to flinch. "I have so much to show you." Her eye, a moon twinkling with pale light.

"Shall I be a witness to your punishments and crimes?"

"A witness, yes," she explained, "but not to me. As a guest you shall meet my people."

We rode gently along the side of the high descending cliff where I had fallen. Hel travelled along, not in a mood for exposition. I observed the valley beneath us. I did not wish to witness the horror far below these heights. A burning accident I could not divert my eyes. Brighter

than the crowded steep canyon I fell into full of wild hellish fauna. When we left that horrid forest of fiery rock, I gazed upon the canvas of the plain. Arranged into a pentagram, five smoking cities of sin and burning hate. In the great depression, the towers dripped their concrete like melted candle wax onto the dry basin. The wax hardened into a red seal, truly royal in its magnitude and its dark crimson hues. She stopped her mare again at the top of the cliff, and turned to speak as I witnessed it all in silence.

“Wake up, and watch the flames rise.”