



VOICES FROM HADES

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SWEET OBLIVION

Most breeds of Demons didn't require food as sustenance—but the Buddhas, as the Damned workers had dubbed them, were ravenous beings. They had been designed that way, in the factory city of Tartarus where most of the Demons in this region of Hades were mass produced.

The Buddhas were vast, dinosaur-like travesties of humanity, nine feet tall and wider around. Patrick thought that they made sumo wrestlers look as if they might be the Buddhas' infant offspring. Their flagrantly naked bulks were an awful canary yellow in color. These elephantine entities had heads as small as a mortal baby's, however, with eyes crushed shut and sulky pouts. Their heads reminded Patrick of human fetuses who are born with acrania—absence of that section of the skull which contains the brain.

To be born without a brain, Patrick mused. Such blissful oblivion. He had never thought he would envy such a tragic fate, until he had awoken from death to find himself sentenced to eternal damnation.

He had been twenty-two when he died. He estimated he would have been forty-four by now. He had

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stopped berating himself, long ago, for not having been religious in life, not bowing before the Creator. Though he had never met any of his friends or loved ones in the infinity of Hades, he doubted that any of them would pass the Creator's harsh criteria to make it through the pearly gates, the golden arches, or whatever the gateway to paradise looked like.

Patrick, Eleanor, and Wally worked close together, wading through the knee-deep (occasionally, waist-deep) bog in which they seeded, grew and harvested the food for the Buddhas. Eleanor had been in Hades the longest; she had died in 1870, when she was twenty-eight. She and Patrick had taken Wally under their wings. Although he had been much older than they, physically, when he died—sixty-seven—he had only been in Hades for a single month. He huffed and panted as he slogged through the marshy plants, cutting free the fleshy globes the Buddhas craved with his curved knife and storing them in the waterproofed leather bag he wore slung onto his back. He paused often to wheeze, to hold his chest with one blistered hand, to squint up at the blazing sky—a ceiling of churning lava. The three of them wore straw hats like Vietnamese farmers laboring in a rice paddy, to protect their flesh from being burned by that intense glow. Of course, they were immortal; their skin would have regenerated even if it had been immersed in lava. This was why Patrick often teased Wally when he saw him clutching at his heart.

“You’re not going to die, Wally, don’t worry.”

“I should be so lucky,” Wally grumbled, wiping his knife’s blade clean of sap against his pants leg. “I should be so lucky to *really* die.”

“Then we wouldn’t have your charming company,” Eleanor teased him in her good-natured British accent, flicking some water at his face. “Would we, my love?”

“*He’s* your love,” Wally jerked his knife toward Patrick, “not me.”

“You *are* too young for me, Wally,” Eleanor admitted.

All three of them turned their heads abruptly, and fearfully, when they heard the bellowing roar of one of the Buddhas roll across the swampy farmland. All three were relieved to see that one titanic yellow guard was lumbering slowly, terribly in another direction, perhaps to berate some other knot of workers, instead of coming their way. Wally wagged his head. “They invented this fruit just to give us something to do. Something hard and awful to do. And they invented *them* just to eat the fruit.” By “they,” he meant the Creator.

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Patrick lifted another of the bright red, rubbery globes out of the water and slipped it into his own heavy sack. "Come on, Wally." He shooed a blood-drinking insect (or miniature Demon, depending on how you looked at it) that had jabbed him in the back of the neck...then patted the older man on the shoulder. "It will drive you mad to dwell on the whys and wherefores."

They had sloshed their way to an outcropping of rock like an island jutting out of the flat landscape. They could climb up on it and rest for a few minutes, on its far side where they wouldn't be spotted, but not for too long or they'd be missed. It would give them a chance to dry off a little in the heat of the molten sky, and to pluck leeches off each other. They'd throw the leeches back into the mire instead of killing them, just in case those creatures could be considered Demons, too.

It was Patrick who climbed onto the outcropping first, gratefully slinging his sack off his shoulder as he did so. It was Patrick, then, who first spotted the cat.

The cat clearly had heard them coming; it was wary but not surprised. It was tensed, ready to hiss, ready to claw, ready to leap away. But leap away where? Into the water? Most cats hated water. How had it ever gotten to this isolated rock in the first place?

"Oh my!" Eleanor exclaimed. "Oh!"

"It's a cat," Wally observed, dragging his old, dripping bones onto the barren oasis. "An ugly one," he added. "So what?"

The cat had indeed seen better days. It looked like it might have become tangled in a tattered, filthy curtain. Or could that have been a burial shroud? Scraps of it were twined around its limbs and tail, a loop of it even obscuring one eye. And in one battered ear it wore three earrings. It had been someone's pet, obviously, at one time. Or something more important. But it looked a long way from having been anything to anyone, in its present condition.

"It's impossible," Patrick said to Wally, as tensed and unmoving as the cat.

"Why?"

Eleanor answered for him. "There are no cats in Hades. No animals can come here."

"What do you mean? These bloodsuckers...and mosquitoes..."

"There are *infernal* animals. But no animals from the mortal world can come here upon death, Wally. According to the Creator, animals don't have souls. They don't go to Heaven or Hell. They simply cease to be."

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“Sweet oblivion,” Patrick muttered.

“Then this is an infernal animal, then,” said Wally. “Like the leeches. Look at it. Looks infernal to me.”

The cat hissed at last. Patrick smiled. “It doesn’t like you, whatever it is, Wally.”

“There are no cats in Hades,” Eleanor insisted. “I’ve been here well over a century. I’ve covered a lot of ground in that time. I’ve never seen a cat, a dog, any earthly beast.”

“There.” Patrick pointed. “Look.”

Behind the cat, and lower on the opposite face of the rock, there was a deep crack or fissure. Its edges looked black, as though charred. Wally climbed over next to Patrick carefully, trying not to startle the cat. Even in the short time he had been in Hades, he knew this rock well enough to recognize that this fissure had not been there previously.

“He came from the crack,” Eleanor said. “He had to have. From some other part of Hell, do you think? Maybe animals do go to another realm, after all...”

“I had another thought,” said Patrick.

“What’s that?”

Wally said it before Patrick could. “Maybe it came from our world. The mortal world. You know?” He picked his way nearer to the cat, the fissure below it, less concerned about upsetting the animal now. “Maybe if he could find his way here, we could find our way out...”

The cat gave a warning yowl and hissed again, backing off just a little bit, its broken tail giving an angry flick. Seeing this, Patrick caught Wally by the arm to halt him.

“Shh, puss,” Eleanor cooed, extending a delicate white hand to the creature. “Shh. Don’t be afraid. We won’t hurt you.”

“It’s probably hungry.” From his sack, Patrick withdrew one of the buoy-like, bobbing red orbs they cut free of the stalks in the swampy water. He sliced into it with his tool, which always reminded him of a linoleum knife. A thick, crimson sap began to well out.

“Don’t feed it blood,” Eleanor admonished him.

“What else do I have to feed it? Maybe you could nurse him, eh?”

She swatted his arm.

“It’s seen a lot. It’s been to Hell and back,” Wally murmured, staring intensely at the animal as it stared back at him. “I’m telling you, it’s come from someplace far away. If it can come here, we can go there.”

“Think, Wally,” Patrick said, while he proffered the bleeding fruit to

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the cat. It didn't come near it. "If where it comes from is better, then why'd it want to come here?"

"Anyway," Eleanor added, "look at the crack. It isn't wide enough even for me."

"But we could widen it!" Wally blurted, beginning to sound desperate.

In the distance, the terrible foghorn bleat of one of the Buddhas sounded. The noise rumbled across the watery fields like thunder. The three prisoners of Hell exchanged quick glances. Patrick said, "They'll notice us gone, soon."

"We have to smuggle the cat back to our barracks with us," Eleanor stated. "We can't leave it here."

"Smuggle it how?"

"In one of our sacks, of course."

"If we get caught with it, now or later..."

"Never mind the *cat!*" Wally moaned, as if trying to reason with children. "We have to start widening that hole. Every day, a little more. We have to at least explore what's beyond! Can it be any worse?"

Eleanor turned toward the old man gravely. "There are sections of Hades that make this bog look like a resort beach, Wally. Yes. It can always get worse."

"I don't care what you say!" he persisted, and began scrambling over the rock again. "I'm going to see what this hole is about..."

"Wally!" Eleanor cried, trying to snatch hold of his tunic. "Don't scare the cat!"

"To Hell with the cat!"

Patrick thought for sure the cat would start slicing at the old man's advancing hands, then. Instead, without even another hiss or yowl, the creature—oddly both bedraggled and regal—turned nimbly and scampered down the rock face toward that split in its surface. It darted into the fissure...disappeared inside.

Wally was after it on all fours, as if by imitating it he might gain access, too. His palm slipped on a slick portion of rock and he scraped his elbow badly, but it only slowed him a moment. He reached the crack before his two companions could stop him, and thrust his arm into the crevice.

"Arr!" he cried. He was up to his shoulder in the hole. Patrick saw him lying on his belly, saw the alarm or surprise on his weathered face, and thought: Something *has* him...

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A horrible dinosaur trumpet, not far away enough. Had one of the Buddha overseers heard Wally's cry...noticed their absence, finally?

"What is it?" Patrick whispered frantically, taking hold of Wally's shoulders. Eleanor grabbed onto the back of his shirt. They began to haul at him.

"The rock is closing!" Wally groaned.

He was right; they could hear it. The rock seemed to creak, to squeal, at the stresses which reformed it. As their flesh could be regenerated after injury (after all, their bodies were no longer truly flesh), so did the stone begin to reknit itself. The only trouble was, Wally's arm was still buried in its maw.

"Ohh...oww!" he moaned. His moan rose at the end, in the start of a wail.

Just as the rock jaws were gnashing shut, Patrick and Eleanor managed to pry their friend free. The split in the rock ground shut a moment later, making a sound like the brakes of an out of control eighteen-wheeler screeching. Sparks leapt into the air.

Wally cradled a badly bleeding arm, a lot of its skin torn from it like the leaves husked from a cob of corn. The bone showed in one place through the stripped meat. He was sobbing, and Eleanor pulled him against her, wrapped her arms around his chest, rocked him.

"Well, old man," Patrick panted, "now you really have a pain you can complain about."

"Patrick!" Eleanor chided him.

"It could be worse." Patrick patted the man's bare foot, still bloodlessly white and wrinkly from hours submerged in slimy water. "You could have lost your whole arm. It's happened to me. It isn't fun. Regrowing it is worse."

"You scared my pussy away, Wally," Eleanor scolded, but she kept rocking the sobbing man.

"Wally would scare anyone's pussy away," Patrick said, peeking up over the top of the rock. "I thought they'd heard us. But they haven't noticed, thank Heavens."

"Bugger the Heavens," Eleanor said.

"So, Wally," Patrick went on. "Did you feel anything on the other side?"

Whimpering now, as his damaged nerve endings began the process of repairing themselves, Wally opened his mauled hand—which had been clenched into a fist until this moment. In it, he clutched only a strip of the dirt-caked gauze or linen which the cat had been tangled up in.

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“The little thing just took a wrong turn,” Patrick said. “I hope he finds the right way, now.”

“I hope he sends us help,” Eleanor joked.

Patrick licked at the blood sluicing from the fruit he had offered to the cat. Why not drink blood? They were the undead, weren't they? “Maybe he was a soul, after all. Maybe he was a reincarnated person.”

“Shh,” Eleanor mocked. “Don't talk blasphemy. There is no reincarnation, remember?”

They helped Wally sit up. Recently, he had finally relented and begun drinking the juice of the blood fruit, and allowed Patrick to feed him some now. Already, his own blood was flowing less copiously.

While Wally sat on the rock to recover some more, the other two slipped back into the water to continue harvesting fruit. They passed him orbs to tuck into his own bag, as well. One of the patrolling behemoths noticed them at last, but it must have seen that the old man was injured, merely resting until he could regenerate, and it didn't come after them. Patrick and Eleanor made a good show of it, working double fast. Patrick purposely bumped his hip against hers at one point. She gave him a flirty smile in return.

Wally looked at the place where the crack had been. Just a jagged black line there, a scar like fossilized lightning, nothing more. He reached out his healing hand and laid it flat against the stone.

“Take care, kitty,” he said quietly, as if afraid to let his new friends hear the softness in his tone.

“So where do you think my puss has gone off to, my love?” Eleanor asked Patrick as they worked.

“With any luck,” he told her, “sweet oblivion.”