

Salvation Awaits

By David Tenneson

My hell has two doors. Over one door “Damnation Abounds” is etched deeply in to the ancient stone, and over the other door “Salvation Awaits”. I don’t exactly know how long I’ve been here; I have lost all sense of time. I remember nothing before entering that blinding light. My first memory of this place is being shown the summation of my life and given the choice for immediate or delayed judgement. Considering the naked truth of the things that I’ve done, I chose the route of atonement so that I might gain favor.

I have since come to understand the true burden of choice. My existence is a cycle which ebbs and flows based on my choice to delay judgement until I have made amends for all of my transgressions. When I atone, in a room filled only with my misery and the two doors on either side, my body is repeatedly broken then healed just enough so that the agony is never quite relieved. I cannot lose consciousness and my throat never becomes so hoarse that I cannot cry out my pain. I have been broken in so many ways. Still, every atonement is unique. This is my hell, in this room, and it has two doors. Through blood and sweat and agony I read the same words over and over. *Damnation Abounds. Salvation Awaits.*

When I can hold onto the pain no longer, I cry mercy. Each time I have done this I have been granted immediate, blessed reprieve from torment. My atonement ceases. My body is healed. Only then does my true agony begin. For whatever amount of time I suffered, my body gains an equal amount of time in sweet relief. My mind is haunted, however, by the knowledge that my atonement, if I choose to continue, will be a little better or a little worse in the next cycle depending on how long I was able to hold out in the previous. There have been times when, upon the beginning of the next atonement, I discover the terrifying truth that the eternity I was most recently able to endure lasted merely a few moments; thus my future self pays the price for my past weaknesses. Other times, though, after a respite which seems like no time at all, I am rewarded with an atonement which, while not pleasant, is at least not as unbearable as the horror still fresh in my mind from the last cycle; thus I am rewarded for my endurance.

So it goes, moment after moment, as I know that my future depends entirely on my choice to hold out just a little longer. Through the tearing of flesh and breaking of bones that I inflict on myself for myself. Just a little longer. Screaming through clenched teeth, the ones that remain anyway. I cannot, must not, focus on the pain that both drips and rushes out of different sections of me. Just a little longer. The sudden loss of my eyes is both a blessing and a curse. The cuts are exact and without hesitation. When my vision is restored I can see the coming danger to my body and anticipate the wound, effectively doubling my torment. Just a little

longer. Please, just a little longer. Inevitably, I cry for that mercy and must choose my fate. *Damnation Abounds. Salvation Awaits.*

Most often, following the sudden ending to my pain, I crawl to one side of the room and through the wide door of continuation. There, I pass the time I have given myself in a cavernous space satisfying every whim this place affords. Anything I desire can and has been fulfilled. I have passed my free time occupied by every lustful, gluttonous, or otherwise nefarious act I can conceive. My cup runneth over. Sometimes I can even lose myself enough to believe I deserve to enjoy every moment of pleasure my pain has purchased. After all, I don't even know by what standard I am to be judged, so who is to say that I haven't already redeemed myself.

Inevitably, when time expires, I am pulled from my reverie of self-indulgence and dragged back into that room. Sometimes the pain is too much and as much as I want to hold out, I just can't. The next time will be worse, but maybe then I'll be stronger. I deserve this.

I have also, from time to time, passed humbly under the promise of salvation at the other side of the room, and enter a dimly lit confined space. Standing resolutely in the center of this room is the sole source of light, a well which emanates a soft blue glow. I have spent entire respite periods sitting on the edge of that well, imagining dropping down the long stone tunnel just large enough for my body and plunging into the depths below. I want that so badly, to end my self-sacrifice, to find what's next. Yet I cannot push off from that ledge. More than once I have been caught staring down into that blue abyss when the call came and not once have I had the courage to fall.

In the beginning I was told that my choice was simple. Upon judgement I would be granted either my eternal bliss or my eternal damnation. Choosing delayed judgement, I was given a glimpse of just how bad that damnation would be as an unbroken, unceasing period of atonement. During each respite I know that I can choose the path of judgement, relying on whatever good will I have purchased with my atonement to see me into that promised paradise. What causes me pause is knowing that, if I am still found wanting, my eternity will reflect the most recent torture from which I have just begged mercy. And so, each time I atone I am reminded that if I can just hold on a little longer, then the next time – and perhaps my eternity – will be a little less unbearable. I have yearned for the pleasures of respite and I have yearned for the willpower to continue my atonement, but most of all I have yearned for the capability to make that final decision and resign myself to the fate I have made, once and for all.

Today, here, right now, I have a decision to make. I'm not quite sure how long my last session lasted, so I should probably hurry. The skin on my feet, made whole again and tingling, is bathed in that soft blue light springing from somewhere beyond the bottom of the well below me. I imagine the depths below as an icy water in which I can finally drown. If peace isn't what I have made for myself, well then really that last atonement wasn't so bad, relatively speaking. I

should hurry now. Just push off and go. Go. Just let go. Please just have mercy and let go. My salvation awaits, and I am terrified.

I wait for a splash that never comes. It seems there is no physical barrier separating the darkness from the light. As I sink, I see that the light from below is projected onto the darkness above me like a home movie of my life projected onto a screen. Turning from the summation of my life before this place playing out above me, I stare into that blinding light below and get the overwhelming sense that I have been here before.

My hell has two doors. Over one door "Damnation Abounds" is etched deeply in to the ancient stone, and over the other door "Salvation Awaits". I don't exactly know how long I've been here; I have lost all sense of time.