

Leon's Inferno

When I got the letter, my first thought was that I might as well be dead. Why doesn't someone just come along and hit me over the head? Life is futile.

That was it for the day anyway. It was after 5:00 on a Friday and I noticed the office was empty; the group was over at Marty's and I really needed a drink. By the time I got there, everyone was fully into happy hour, and they all greeted me jovially as I approached the table. A good waitress always notices when someone new joins a group, and she was there by the time I sat down.

"Jameson's," I barked. "Straight up. Make it a double."

"So, Leon." Dick Metzler, founder and namesake of our little management-consulting firm leaned forward, a hint of amusement on his face. "Any interesting mail today?"

The waitress appeared, and I took half of my drink in a gulp before responding. "Yeah, we're not even on the bidder's list for this one. And the bastards didn't even call; they just sent a form letter." I downed the rest of the Irish whiskey and waved for another. The others nodded thoughtfully.

"Yeah, but they're our bastards," Dick said. "They still give us a lot of business, and that's what this game is all about."

"But we're just getting crumbs left over from the big boys," I retorted. "You know, cover-your-ass assignments to satisfy the regulatory commissions, or phony

management studies when they want to fire someone: the stuff McKinsey doesn't want to dirty their hands with." I took another gulp from my second drink. "I know Niagara-Mohawk better than any of those other firms, and we've always delivered top notch work for them. Being awarded the project to develop their strategic plan would have really put us on the map, and I worked my tail off to get it. But I just now find out that we're not even going to get up to bat."

"Who's on the bidder's list?" Dave was one of my Managers.

"McKinsey, Booze-Allen, Kearney, a couple of the Big-Four: the usual rogue's gallery." I finished my drink and gestured for a third. "And those guys will charge three times what we would and do half the job."

"Well, Leon, it's just not to be. The blue blood firms will always get the important assignments because if something goes wrong, top management can't be blamed for their selection of consultants." Dick Metzler leaned forward. "Niagara-Mohawk is a great client; they've given us a lot of business over the years, and they've been good to you. I'd be happy if we had more accounts like them."

All of the others at the table nodded agreement.

I stared into my empty glass. "I know you guys are right, but damn, there is no reason we can't do this kind of work." I ordered another.

I don't quite remember what we talked about after that, how long I stayed, or how many more drinks I had. I found myself in my new Beamer, pulling out of the lot onto Skokie Boulevard, accelerating towards I-94 and the short trip downtown to my apartment in the city. I put the top down and felt the cool wind whip across my face as I put the car through its gears. The engine responded smoothly with power, and I felt a

surge of exhilaration and confidence as I swerved around vehicles in front of me. Traffic seemed to be slow tonight for some reason. I looked above; it was a glorious night: scattered, puffy clouds were ringed with moonlight and an ocean of stars glittered in between.

My mind returned to Niagara-Mohawk. Maybe that letter wasn't the end of it; maybe I could redouble my efforts and convince them to at least allow me to bid. I had once met the Chairman at a conference; could I directly appeal to him? That might be chancy, as I would be going over the head of the Vice-President of Planning.

I was debating other possible options with myself when I came to the Big Rounder. This section of the road was under construction – they were resurfacing two lanes – and I saw the speed sign and the red barrels. My Beamer had superb handling and I always took this curve without braking, but now the boundary suddenly appeared in front of me. The barrels bounced off my hood before I could get the wheel turned and wood splinters from the temporary fence flashed over my head. Then I was airborne, the car twisted on its end, and I could only think 'How stupid is this?' as a rock strewn pasture, circled in my headlights, rushed up to meet me.

* * *

I awoke on my side, my face resting on hard-pack, oily dirt. I paused a few moments to get my bearings and let my eyes focus. It was dark, but not from night: more like from an overcast. The air was still and heavy. I wiped my face and sat up, testing my arms and legs. I must have been thrown in the crash and miraculously escaped any injury. I looked around for my car, but didn't see it. And then I noticed how I was dressed: not the suit I had been wearing that day, but a one piece, off-white jumpsuit. I

slowly stood and scanned the area looking for the bridge and highway. I was in a thick wood surrounded by scraggly, leafless trees armed with branches of narrow, sharp vines. Then I noticed there was no sound of traffic, no sirens from police and ambulances. I couldn't have been thrown that far from the highway. All I could hear was a muted moaning off in the distance.

“Ah, so you're finally up and about.”

He was standing beside the nearest tree, dressed in a flowing white robe. He was short and cherubic in appearance, sporting a forced smile of perfect teeth. His hair was cropped close to his skull, but going in all directions, as if he hadn't combed it after a shower. His facial features were unremarkable except for his eyes: they were slate gray and aware. My first thought was he had just escaped from an insane asylum.

I scanned my surroundings again and then turned to him. “Who are you and where am I?”

He chuckled and stepped forward. “My name is Virgil, and you are at the cusp to The Underworld.”

I stared at him a moment trying to decide if I should even bother responding to a lunatic. “Huh? Let me get this straight; you're saying I'm in Hell?”

His stopped and his smile widened. “We prefer the term Underworld, but to answer your question, no, you're not in Hell proper; it's off in that direction.” He gestured towards the moaning. “In fact, what you see and hear is just the Vestibule. The Underworld proper doesn't start until we cross the River of Acheron. This place is the Dark Wood of Error. So, if you're ready to go, we can start off.”

“Wait a minute. Who says I have to go anywhere? And just what is your function here, Virg?”

“I’m your personal consultant, Leon, and...”

“Oh, please,” I interrupted. “I’m a management consultant. Consultants don’t need consultants.”

Virgil’s smile faltered in doubt. “Sorry, we try to be contemporary. I guess Guide would be a more accurate term.”

I rubbed my forehead and eyes trying to think. “Hold on. Didn’t I read something about this in High School: a poem or something by some fourteenth century guy. Yeah, now I get it. I must be in a coma in the hospital and I’m dreaming all of this.”

Virgil’s smile was back in full force as he shook his head. “No, Leon. You are quite dead. The BMW is a finely engineered vehicle, but it’s not going to save you in a two-hundred foot drop going ninety miles an hour.”

He had me there. But this was crazy. I had to be in a coma. “What if I decide not to go along with you, Virg? Maybe I’d rather stay right here and wait until I wake up?”

“You do have a choice, Leon, and we have all of eternity. But if you want to find your way to the Light, we’ll have to make the journey at some point.”

At his mention of light, I noticed, in the opposite direction from the moaning, a graduated rise that ran to the horizon. Surrounding the land was a diffused glow, much like a sunrise, although I couldn’t discern any sun or even sky. “What’s in that direction, Virg?”

“That’s the Mount of Joy. Over there is The Light, however I must...”

“Okay, so I can go through the darkness of Hell or head directly towards the Light. Seems like a no-brainer to me, Virg. I’ll just be on my way and I don’t need a crazy man as a guide.” Even if I was just in a coma, maybe the mental exercise of imagining a short walk would help bring me out of it.

Virgil shrugged and went quietly back to his earlier position next to the large tree.

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I left the wood behind and began my journey towards the light. The ground gradually went from a greasy slick to a dry hard-pack and I was able to speed up my gait. The light and clear air lifted my spirits some and I started whistling an old Irish drinking song. I noticed that as I began the ascent, the vine-trees thinned out and the landscape turned barren: large boulders and formations lined valleys and gulleys. I didn’t know how far I had to go or even what I was going towards, but the trip was turning out to be pleasant and easy.

Of course, nothing is ever easy for me; I should have known. I heard the low growl before I saw the beast. It appeared from around the bend and slowly advanced, eyeing me all the way. It was a leopard of sorts, although it’s face was contorted: half animal, half human. I slowly started backing away, looking for a rock to throw at it. After I had gone a few paces, it stopped and turned away. I moved farther down the valley and decided to take another route.

The second valley I tried got much the same result except this time it was a lion, although its face was also weirdly distorted. On my third valley, I came armed with rocks. The beast blocking this path was a she-wolf and when it appeared, I almost cried

out in shock. I could have sworn that the human portion of its face was that of my ex-wife, Beatrice. This time I did not back away, but held eyes with the creature. Just as it was about to pounce, I pitched a rock at its forehead. It shrieked in pain and scrambled off to the side. Before it could turn, I was running up the valley toward a semi-enclosed position. I turned just as it came at me again and again I struck it. I was immediately off and had just reached a small clearing when I had to stop. There were only two paths ahead in the rocks, guarded by the leopard and lion. As I turned, I saw the she-wolf appear to block my escape.

I had to tell myself that this was just a dream and I couldn't get hurt. But fear was spiking through me. All three animals began slowly approaching, growling that unearthly sound. My only chance was to rush one of them, so I started for the leopard, pitching my remaining rocks. But this beast easily dodged them, leaping directly at me. I could hear the others pounding toward me, and I turned swinging my arms to fend them off. The weight of the three animals knocked me to the ground and I screamed in pain and agony as the beasts savagely tore me apart.

* * *

Some time later, I arrived back into the dark woods to find Virgil still standing next to the tree.

"Well, I see you met the Three Beasts of Worldliness." He shook his head in exasperation.

"I couldn't find any way past them." I was working my right arm, which had only recently been torn from my body. I have no recollection how it got reattached, but my throat and other body wounds seemed to be healing too.

Virgil just shrugged. "There is no way past them. To reach the Mount of Joy, you must first descend through the levels of the Underworld. The beasts you encountered represent our three main divisions: incontinence, violence and fraud. At least you got a preview of what to expect on your journey."

My mind raced trying to sort out options. "Okay," I sighed. "Let's get going."

* * *

One thing I learned in my consulting career was to get as much information on the company and competitive situation, problems and the like, before I went into the assignment. We had left the Dark Wood of Error (as Virgil kept calling it) and were now progressing down a plain towards what appeared to be a vast maze. As we got closer, the moaning grew louder and I could discern forms randomly moving about. I decided to learn a little more about what lay ahead.

"So, Virg," I started, "did this Dante character really go through Hell?"

"The Underworld," he corrected. "And yes, he was the only living person to ever experience the journey. In fact, I was his guide. But it was a disappointing trip. The idea was for him to overcome some of the obstacles as we progressed down through the Circles, but he kept fainting whenever the situation got rough and I had to keep bailing him out." Virgil shrugged. "But people were simple in those times and he was a poet and poets are quite sensitive I guess. There were times I just wanted to let him get swept away into one of the circles, but the decision had been made that he was to make it through."

"Why?"

“The King of All decided to publicize the existence of his domain to the living world. Mr. Alighieri was chosen for a tour because he was a skilled writer of his day.”

Some of the details from my high school English class were coming back to me. “So his poem describes Hell?”

Virgil frowned at my continued misuse of the term. “Yes and No. Mr. Alighieri was a Catholic from Florence in the early 1300's, so he had his own spin on what he saw. But I'd say he basically got it right. But you should know that The Underworld is a multiverse. It has existed since time began and it reflects the condition of Man in the period of his spirit's release.”

“So you're saying that I'm going to see an updated version of Hell.”

Virgil sighed at my comment. “That's one way of putting it. But I must warn you: whereas Mr. Alighieri got a free ride, so to speak, you will not be given the same consideration.”

I let that comment pass as we were reaching the edge of the maze. To both sides of us was a high stone wall that stretched to the horizon in both directions. Before us was a rounded arch approximately fifty yards across that met in the center with a smooth portion that had some inscription on it. I squinted to read the text and could make out:

BEFORE YOU LIES YOUR WORST NIGHTMARE

BEFORE YOU ARE PEOPLE IN A WORLD OF HURT

BEFORE YOU IS ETERNAL DEPRESSION

NOTHING HERE IS JUST, NOTHING HERE IS FAIR

I CALL THE SHOTS, I DO NOT CARE WHAT YOU THINK

ALL DECISIONS ARE FINAL

I HAVE BEEN HERE FOREVER

I AM NOT GOING AWAY

ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE, KISS YOUR ASS GOODBYE

Not as artful as I remembered from the poem, but the message was clear.

Virgil gestured ahead. "The Vestibule to the Underworld: the Land of the Risk Averse and the Criticizers. These souls in life never took a chance in trying to accomplish something and did little more than criticize those who did strive towards goals. We also have mixed in here those who never took sides and were only out for themselves. These souls did neither good nor evil in their lives and there are no threats here, but I suggest we transit this area as quickly as possible." There was distaste in his voice.

We passed through the gates and I could see the maze was really a series of temporary partitions, strung together in endless fashion. The moving figures were people going between cubicles whining at each other. The noise blended together in a grating monotony and I found my nerves getting rattled. Virgil had his face set in a scowl and picked up his pace. Then we were within them.

Those close by noticed us and several of them approached, either pleading or scolding.

“Don't go any farther. You don't know what you're getting into.”

“You're not capable of handling what's beyond here.”

“No one ever appreciated me and no one will appreciate you either.”

I had enough of this in the living world and it was already getting on my nerves here. Virgil was likewise angry. “Their torment is to be exiled forever in meaningless jobs, wandering between cubicles, and suffering the whining of others like them. But I liked this area a lot better when we had the hornets and wasps.”

I shouted back. “You're right. I'd rather be constantly stung by insects than have to listen to this for eternity.”

We finally pushed our way through the crowd and the droning began to fade as we made our way across a wide plateau. In the distance was a meandering river and at one bend was a crude dock surrounded by another group of people. Virgil led me in that direction.

As we got closer, I could see that the river was almost completely black although it did flow sluggishly. At least the people weren't moaning; they just milled aimlessly about waiting for something. None of them took notice of us.

I walked over to the edge of the bank and was overpowered by a foul odor. “Whoa, Virgil. I don't know what kind of industrial plants you've got upriver here, but you need to get some environmentalists on their cases.”

Virgil peered thoughtfully at me. “Most of our environmentalists are on the Fifth Circle: The Wrathful and Sullen. You might see some later on.”

I noticed sudden movement from the zombie throng to our right and saw what had caught their attention. Coming out of the mist was a long skiff traveling slowly to the bank. At the stern, sculling with a large oar, was a stooped figure. As the craft drew nearer, I could better make out the features of the oarsman. He was an old man; sparse white hair littered his creased skull; a nose out of size for his face; thin emaciated arms and legs; dressed in rags. I had seen many like him begging on the streets of Chicago, but one feature stood out. He had coal red eyes that burned with hatred and bloodlust. He was cursing at the people now crowding to the ramp. "Back off, you wretched souls. I'll take only a few of the unlucky. Back away."

"That's Charon, our ferryman to the other side." Virgil motioned with his head. "We'll have to cut in line if we're to make decent time." He started pushing his way through the crowd.

The old man had docked his small boat and was sizing up the crowd when he noted our approach. "Ah Virgil, they have you on another escort, eh? Well, you'll have to wait. There are many damned souls ahead of your charge and I don't play favorites. I should be able to accommodate you in a thousand years or so."

Virgil scowled and stepped forward. "I have the power of the Angels and the passage of the King of All. You will take us across now or I will bring down great wrath upon you, old man."

The ferryman shook in anger. "Your threats will not sway me this time. I will transport in my own time and manner. Ferrying souls across Acheron is hard work and I don't see anyone else volunteering to do the job. I will..."

“Excuse me.” I stepped forward. “Why don’t you just make some simple changes that will speed up the process and result in less work for you?”

He glared at me malevolently and spat worms onto the ground. “Changes? I’ve been transporting souls for over ten thousand years. I’ve got experience and I don’t need you to tell me how to do my job. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

“I’ll tell you what. If I can cut your transit time in half and reduce your workload, can we cross with this group?”

He eyed me suspiciously. Then a small smile creased his face. “Yes, but if you fail in your promise, I will cast you into the waters of Acheron.”

Virgil was vigorously shaking his head.

“It’s a deal,” I said.

Virgil gripped my arm. “You don’t want to be cast into Acheron. You…”

“Relax, Virg.” I turned and faced the milling throng of souls. “Okay, listen up. I need some volunteers. You, you, all of this group here.” I went around pulling out the more fit looking individuals and set them to gathering up the slabs of wood littered along the shore. Others I set to wrenching off branches from the wire trees and showed them how to interlace the strands. Within a short time, we had a good set of oars.

When I had the new oarsmen placed along the side of the skiff, I turned to Charon and Virgil, who were watching the proceedings with interest. “No reason we can’t get these souls to do a little work, now is there? So what we now do, is when we launch, we will not head directly across, but angle downstream with the current. With our crew here stroking and the speed of the current, we should build up a pretty good head of steam. There’s a large boulder about one hundred yards away where the current is fast. Charon

will just steer, not scull, and aim for the right side of that rock. Once past, turn hard to port and we'll let the current whip us around. We'll then head on a forty-five degree angle continuing with the current until we hit the other side. Once there, our oarsmen will just pick up the skiff and carry it back up the bank to the original launch point. We'll be across in no time."

Charon scowled, but started ranting at the on board souls as Virgil and I set the beat of their oars. Although the ride got a little bumpy in the rapids, we made the transit without incident.

As the souls were loading up the boat for the trip up the bank, Charon turned to us. "Be off with you, damned consultants. I hope Minos has your place picked."

"Minos?" I looked at Virgil.

"You'll find out soon enough. We are just getting started."

He turned and we headed off, leaving the stench of Acheron and the cursing of Charon behind.

* * *

I stood at the edge of the road and surveyed the scene before me. This couldn't be right. Stretching in both directions was an endless subdivision of small tract homes: all identical. They sat on small lots, immaculately kept. The movement of many people could be seen. We began to walk down the street, drawing curious stares from the inhabitants.

"Are you sure we're still in Hell, Virg?" I waved good-naturedly to a slim woman in a print dress who was trimming some bushes in front of her house. She stared back suspiciously. "I expected to see fire, brimstone, boiling blood, that kind of thing."

Virgil kept up the pace keeping his eyes straight ahead. He looked nervous. "You'll see that soon enough. This is the First Circle: The Virtuous Onlookers. Everyone is born with certain capabilities, but these people never strived to make the best use of their talents. These souls didn't really sin, so they are not tormented."

"Except for eternal boredom," I mused. "Isn't this a bit harsh?"

Virgil shook his head. "Life is a gift and short. The Angels look dimly upon those who don't make good use of their time on Earth."

"What's holding them here? What's to stop any of them from making the journey to the Light?"

"Nothing is stopping them. Any one of them can go. But none of them will."

I decided to put that theory to the test. To my right was a tall slender man riding a mower. Although the grass looked to be entirely cut, he kept riding his mower about, smiling as he stared into the distance. I cautiously approached and when he saw me, he stopped his engine.

"Hi, my name is Lee Burgess." I held out my hand.

"Stanley Johnson." He reluctantly shook my hand then quickly withdrew it. I could see he was uncomfortable. "I can see you don't belong here."

That was a strange greeting. "No, Stanley. My friend and I are heading toward the Light. Would you care to join us?"

Stanley backed up a step, shaking his head vigorously. "Oh, no. I couldn't do that."

"What's the matter? Do you like it here? Do you want to stay here forever?"

My question clearly distressed him for he began wringing his hands and shaking his head wildly. "No, I don't like it here. But I can't go, I just can't."

I looked over to Virgil who nodded that we should be on our way.

I turned back to Stanley, as I noticed others materializing and approaching us. "Sure you can, Stanley. What can happen? You're already dead."

"No, no." Stanley continued backing away.

Suddenly a rock struck me on the side of the head. Pain flared behind my eyes. I turned in the direction of the assault and saw a large group of men and some women. They all had hateful expressions. The rock thrower shouted. "You're not from here. You have no right to interfere with us. You are going to pay." He cocked his arm to pitch another stone at me.

When I was alive, my temper sometimes got me into trouble. My better sense deserted me now. I sidestepped the rock and threw myself at my assailant. I crashed into him punching and kicking. We were both on the ground and I was getting as much as I was dishing out. But then I felt multiple fists and feet stomping on my torso. Then shovels and spades began hammering and stabbing at me. Blood and pain coursed throughout and I panicked. I tried to rise, but a woman smashed a brick into the side of my skull, splitting it. I knew that act would have killed me on Earth, but I just felt the excruciating pain. I looked around and saw another group descending on Virgil, who had been heading in my direction to help

I was almost completely limp with pain and stopped striking out, but the mob showed no inclination to let up. I had a vision of spending eternity lying on this sidewalk getting the shit beat out of me. My mind was fogged with pain, my blood was flowing

freely, and many bones in my body were broken, but I didn't pass out. Losing consciousness in Hell just didn't happen, I now knew; you had to experience the torment.

I had to do something. Visions of my Army training flowed through my mind, particularly one course I had always found particularly disgusting. I grasped the head nearest to me and chomped down hard on a man's nose, tearing at it like a mad dog. It came off in my mouth and he fell away screaming. Displaying the bloody morsel in my mouth, I grabbed at a woman's ears and ripped them cleanly from her head. She too shrieked and ran off. Noses and ears are soft cartilage and easily separated from their owners. Next I went for the eyes. Using my index fingers, I plunged them deeply into the sockets of two more people. This got the desired results, as the mob backed out of range, looks of horror on their faces. I kept the nose prominently displayed in my teeth for effect as I limped away.

A few yards down the street, another group had paused in their beating of Virgil, to watch me approach. I shook my head and growled like a madman. They backed off a few steps and I was able to grab Virgil by the arm. He had been badly beaten, but I noticed he gave good account for himself: several others lay in agony on the ground around him.

Our broken limbs slowed our pace down the street, but the mob was still in some disarray, so they kept their distance as they followed. Their angry chanting continued and soon we felt the sting of more rocks, but nobody seemed to want to be the first to directly attack the nose biter. Before long, the other side of the subdivision hove into sight. We dragged ourselves across the boundary and collapsed in the mud. By this time, the mob had mostly dispersed and were back to going about their aimless yard tasks.

“What is their problem?” I gasped.

“Although they're in Limbo and therefore not tortured, those are some of the most tormented souls we have down here. There is nothing sadder than wasted potential.” He was examining his several shattered bones protruding from his arm, which were, even now, reforming and healing. “So where did you learn to bite off noses?”

“I used to be an Army infantry officer.” I began to examine my wounds and found that the bleeding had slowed and that my fractures were also rapidly resetting and mending. Lacerations were almost completely covered by the new skin of scar tissue. After a short while, I could stand solidly on both of my legs.

“Well, we seem to recover remarkably fast down here.” I continued massaging my arm.

Virgil grunted. “Of course. We're dead. But we will feel the full extent of pain. Please remember that the next time you go looking for trouble.”

Virgil turned and I followed him down a left, winding path.

* * *

We hadn't gone far before we came to another stone wall. In the center was an opening, and beyond that stood a large throne. There were more of the vacant eyed souls clustered about. Suddenly a whip struck out from the throne and grasped one of the people and flung him screaming down into the chasm. A few seconds later, the scene was repeated.

Virgil nodded at the throne. “The Judge of the Damned assigns each soul its eternal torment. We have to stop here to get our orders. Since we're travelers, we'll go to the head of the line. This is strictly procedural, nothing to worry about.”

As we approached, I could see a large animal standing upright. On closer examination, it looked to be an oversized bull with some human form in its torso. Like the other beasts I had encountered, it had a demonic face with a savage visage. The tail was long and seemed to be able to extend to any length. The demon bull was addressing a soul as we neared.

“Step forward and confess your sins,” it roared.

The person was a slight, balding man who began trembling as his words poured forth. “I have cheated and stolen my entire life. As a kid I shoplifted from the local department store. In high school and college I paid or threatened others to do my work. I lied on my resume and in my interviews to get jobs. I cheated on my wife twelve times and...”

“Jeez,” I whispered to Virgil, “doesn’t this guy know when to shut up?”

“Each soul carries its sins as a great burden in life and they are eager to confess them before the Judge.”

I eyed him skeptically to see if he was putting me on. He seemed serious.

I turned back to the demon bull, who had pronounced sentence on this soul, and saw the man being flung down into the chasm. His screams faded as he fell from sight. I turned back to Virgil. “Hey, I remember now. That guy is Minos, right?”

“That’s what the poet called him. Mr. Alighieri was fond of naming our demons after figures in Greek mythology. Minos is just The Judge to us, but you can call him whatever you like.” Virgil stepped forward into an opening before the throne and I reluctantly followed.

Minos stared down at us, smoke and fire coming off his body. He roared, "Step forward and confess your sins."

Virgil nodded for me to begin. I cleared my throat and started. "Oh I never really sinned: maybe just a few minor indiscretions when I was young; immature behavior and all, but no real sins. I'm just passing through on my way to the Light."

The demon bull started with surprise and held my eyes. He snorted a puff of smoke out of his nostrils. "Are you a lawyer?"

"Management consultant."

"Just as bad." He turned and consulted a large ledger. "Ah, yes, Lee Burgess. Commonly called Leon. Well, your many little indiscretions have landed you here, but I see that the King of All will be your judge; presuming you make it that far." The bull consulted some other pages and turned back to us. "You may proceed although you will never make it to the Ninth Circle. You will be stopped before then and tormented for all eternity."

I turned to go, but Virgil stepped forward. "Wait a minute. We'll need our papers in order to enter the City of Dis."

Minos waved a paw at us. "I've forwarded your orders. You don't need any papers; we're wireless now."

Virgil frowned. "Are you sure they'll get our orders?"

The bull leaned forward and smiled maliciously. "Trust me."

* * *

As we descended, the winds began to pick up noticeably. At first I welcomed this change as it might clear the air of some of the foul stench that seemed to be everywhere.

But the wind began shrieking and it was difficult to keep moving forward. Soon debris was assaulting us and I had to hold my arm in front of me in order to shield my face. But the shrieking was not just the wind; there were numerous objects flying about, as if caught up in the vortex of an invisible tornado. They were people and they were crying out.

Virgil motioned me to a depression in the rock and yelled in my ear. "Circle Two: The Carnal. This level hasn't changed much over the centuries. We must be careful. We don't want to be swept off the edge here."

We slowly made our way along the ridge, keeping a hold on the greasy rocks. Several times I slipped and lost my footing, but Virgil had my arm each time and pulled me back upright. I turned and studied the flying souls. They were all naked and the men each had an erection. They were spiraling everywhere, but seemed to be grouped in pairs or threesomes. As they cried out, they were frantically struggling to reach their partner, only to be swept apart just before touching each other. When this happened they would howl in anguish and begin the struggle anew. Some of them were flying close to the edge and they grabbed at us as they went past. I could see the rage and lust in their eyes as they swept by.

I was in the lead and turned to ask Virgil a question when I saw it happen. He had just looked up at me when a woman came flying over the path. With a scream she reached out and caught Virgil by the shoulder, throwing him off his feet. Her momentum was too great to drag him with her, but he had lost his grip on the boulders and was sliding towards the edge. In desperation, he grasped a small outcropping and a single wire vine as his feet dangled over the edge. He grimaced in pain as the vine cut through

his palms. His other hand was losing purchase on the slick rock and bodies were grasping at him as they flew past. I could see panic in his eyes and I knew he would soon be swept away.

The force of the winds had increased to the point that moving uphill against them was impossible. Fortunately, Virgil had been blown downwind of my position. But if I left the rocks, I would be swept away too.

I needed Virgil and I had to do something. A little further along the edge I noticed that the wire vines increased into tangled masses that went over the side, then ran up again along the path. But there were no vines between Virgil and myself: nothing but smooth pathway. I lowered myself onto my stomach and motioned with my hands what I wanted him to do. He looked at me in terror, but nodded his understanding. I rubbed my stomach along the oily mud to gauge the adhesion, and let go. The wind whipped across my back but I was only slowly moving. I found that by raising and lowering my torso to vary my cross-section to the wind, I could control my velocity. I began to slide along, but soon realized that my rate was becoming too fast; I couldn't slow down enough and I was racing right at Virgil. We were both about to be knocked off into the chasm.

At the last moment, I changed my game plan. I swung my body around such that both of my arms were in front of Virgil. I then splayed my legs towards the wire vines. At the instant I grasped Virgil's outstretched hands, I felt the painful bite of wire in my calves. I screamed in pain as we both went off the ledge, but we stopped as the vines were now fully entangling my legs. I couldn't move any further, but Virgil let go with one of his arms and using the force of the gale, swung us towards the downwind ledge. On his third try he grasped the vines that held my legs and began pulling us up. Soon the

razor sharp wires were slicing across our entire bodies, but we were both able to pull ourselves over the ledge. Eventually, we made our way back to the rock cropping and huddled, while we regained our breath. Finally, we slowly began to crawl back down, making sure we stayed out of the reach of the flying banshees.

* * *

As we progressed, the wind gradually died out along with the howling from the carnal souls. We found ourselves on a plain of mud that appeared to be slowly drying up. The foul smell had returned, although not as noxious as before. I noticed the mud was filled with garbage and even bits of turd, and I had to turn away to keep from gagging. But there was no one about; the entire area was silent.

Virgil," I asked. "Where are we now? I don't see anyone being tormented."

"Circle Three: The Gluttons. Or to put it in your modern day parlance: the fat slobs and the drunks."

"That's still a sin?"

"Yes, as long as there continue to be millions of starving people in the world. In fact, it's our fastest growing sin. We've had so many souls coming in of late, that we had to give them their own separate funnel. That's why this circle is abandoned now. We've had a hard time supplying enough three-headed dogs to keep up with the supply. Some souls have to wait years before we can get around to tearing their bodies apart. It's a real problem."

"You know," I said, rubbing my chin in thought as we continued our swift gait across the plain. "There can be more effective torments than physical pain. How about more mental torment, like humiliation, for instance? For gluttons, especially, that might

be more painful than getting torn apart and would help with your three-headed dog problem.”

Virgil shook his head, but he was smiling and I could detect a trace of approval in his eyes. “So you want to consult with the King of All? Tell him how to improve his operation here in the Underworld?”

“He can't be any tougher than the Chief Executive Officer of Niagara-Mohawk.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

* * *

We stood at the edge of a murky swamp, while Virgil strained to pick out something in the distance. I couldn't see anything in the gray, so I turned my attention to our surroundings. The swamp appeared to be shallow and was interspersed with small plots of land. I could see a churning in the thick waters and there was the incessant moaning of the damned, which was becoming our constant companion. On closer examination, I saw that the mud was infested with people struggling just below the surface.

Virgil turned and answered my questioning eyes. “Circle Five: The Angry and Resentful. What we used to call The Wrathful and Sullen. Before us is the Marsh of Styx.”

“Wait a minute, what about Circle Four? Hoarders and Wasters, I think: the guys pushing rocks around.”

“That was changed to the Land of the Obscenely Wealthy. Lately we found that most people who acquired great wealth achieved it through committing greater sins than

hoarding. So we recently reorganized and eliminated Circle Four. You'll find most of those souls distributed along Circle Eight: Fraud and Treachery." He gestured off to the distance. "On the other side is the City of Dis: Circle Six and the beginning of the lower levels of the Underworld. There is where the rough stuff really begins. A boat should be along soon to take us across the marsh."

As if on cue, a bright red torch flared up and remained lit. Within a few minutes, I could hear the hum of an engine, and then I could make out in the gloom the shape of a boat. As it approached, I could see that it was under power. As it got nearer, I was surprised to see that the boat was of modern design, not the old wooden skiff we saw at Acheron. Upon closer examination I noted that it was a bass boat. And to complete the scene, a man was seated in the back steering a small outboard motor.

The buzzing increased as he got nearer and I could make out his features. He didn't look like any demon; he was in his mid-forties, balding, with a huge beer belly. He had a baseball cap on his head that read "CAT" clipped with various artificial lures. He face was flushed in the manner of all alcoholics, and his eyes blazed with the fire of a mean drunk. He had a silly-ass grin on his face.

"The Boatman of Styx." Virgil nodded ahead. "Mr. Alighieri called him Phlegyas, but we just call him Bubba." He started for the bank to meet the boat. "Let me do the talking."

The portly fisherman hefted himself up and moved forward to meet Virgil. But his grin faded as he looked around. "Where is everybody?"

"We're it, Bubba. Now let's get going." Virgil started pushing me into the boat.

“Now wait.” The boatman sprayed spittle and his face contorted. “I’m supposed to take over more damned souls than just one. I don’t run a personal taxi service here. And where’s your papers?”

Virgil stopped and feigned anger. “Mr. Burgess is an important traveler and the King of All sent me personally to escort him to judgment. The Judge has already sent the orders ahead and if you don’t stop wasting our time here, I’m sure the King will be glad to cast you into some burning pit to be forgotten for eternity. There must be plenty around who can work a boat.”

Bubba’s face faltered and I could see that Virgil’s bluff would work. The boatman shook his head in fear and disgust. “Ah, they never tell me anything over there.” He motioned for us to get in. “Keep your hands and feet in the boat, unless you want to be dragged into this and spend eternity fighting them.” He gestured at the thrashing slime. “That’s where I was for a couple thousand years before I got this job.”

Virgil nodded that I should do as Bubba suggested and we were off.

Although the mud about us seemed thick, the boat glided along smoothly. We had traveled only a short distance when, through the gloom and fog, I could make out the outlines of what appeared to be a great fortress. At the edge of the marsh, massive stone walls towered sixty feet in the air and there were parapets distributed evenly along the top. The entire scene was cast in an eerie blaze of red light and I could hear a thrumming in the distance, as if heavy machinery were in action. As we got closer, I noticed a large gated area that was closed and what looked to be numerous dancing figures lining the top of the wall. The figures had long tails. As we further approached, I could see that the

shoreline was ringed with a series of hills that were partially covered by patchy groves of leafless trees.

A large splash and a thumping on the side of the boat brought my attention back to our immediate surroundings. I could now see that the people trapped in this foul slime were fighting each other in the most savage manner. Many seemed to be battling to get onto one of the many patches of land that dotted the marsh. Their cries of rage were chilling.

Suddenly Bubba put the boat over hard to starboard. He was turning to avoid a patch of land.

And standing there was a man, fully upright, glaring at us. He was short and stooped and had on the remnants of a business suit. He leaned down occasionally to strike at other figures reaching for him. I tried to better make out his features, and then my eyes went wide. "Bubba, stop," I screamed. "Head over there."

My outburst surprised both Bubba and Virgil, but the boatman swung the craft around and headed directly for the spit of land.

"Leon, what is this all about?" Virgil's voice betrayed concern.

But now I had some fire and rage. Usually I'm the most mature and logical of men, but sometimes I'll do stupid things. "I know that guy, Virg. I'm going to go do a little payback."

The boat beached and I hopped onto the islet, directly in front of the slime-covered figure. "Perry Barry, do you remember me?" I snarled.

The figure blinked in doubt. "No, but you are not going to take my land from me. I fought and struggled to gain this ground." His eyes narrowed.

“Lee Burgess. You were my first supervising partner at Wheaton, O’Neil and Associates. You did everything possible to sabotage my career there: lied to the senior partners, took credit for successes you had nothing to do with, blamed me and others for failures you caused, ridiculed us unmercifully, worked us like dogs, gave us poor evaluations and references. Ring any bells? You almost drove me out of the business.”

His eyes shifted to the waterline and he kicked at another soul before turning back. “Yeah, so what? It was just business, nothing personal.”

“Oh, Perry, you don’t understand,” I said smiling as I took a step forward. “In business, everything is personal.”

I punched him squarely in the middle of his face and he went back but not down. He kicked out at my groin, but I anticipated that move and partially blocked his foot with the side of my thigh. I grabbed his extended leg and knocked him off balance. He fell to the side and I pounced on him, trying to break all of his ribs with short jabs to the torso. He screamed in rage and pain, but continued striking back. The fury in my blood blocked out all pain and I roared as I leaped up and began kicking at his head. He moved quickly for a fat man and I was momentarily thrown off balance. This enabled him to regain his feet, and we were now facing each other again.

For an instant I realized my surroundings again and noted that our fight had increased the frenzy of the souls struggling in the mud. Writhing, grasping arms came from savage, hateful faces as some were even making it up to the shoreline. I turned back to see Perry’s eyes narrow, and I was just able to anticipate his charge. Turning sidewise, I pivoted and used his own momentum to carry him over my waist. I swung around and using all of my strength, hoisted him up. I was about to throw him directly at

my feet to continue my assault, but instead, took one more step forward, and threw him as far as I could. It wasn't too far, but I got him over to the shoreline. I saw the panic on his face as several arms grasped him. He began striking back at them and would have broken from their grasp if I hadn't further intervened. I threw myself at him and pushed his body further towards the shoreline. He flailed back and forth trying to simultaneously fight off me and the tormented souls in the mud. Finally there were too many arms on him and he screamed as he was dragged into the slime. The mud erupted in a cauldron as arms converged on Perry, ripping him apart. I stood back from the spectacle and raged. "Damn you to eternity, Perry Barry, from me and all the countless men and women you cheated and ruined. Death is too good for you. Get ripped apart forever. You belong here, and I'm glad I helped make this happen."

Perry finally disappeared into the mud and I backed away, trying to catch my breath. Now my better sense began to return, so I stepped back onto the boat, taking care to avoid the grasping arms below. Virgil and Bubba just stared at me, their mouths agape.

I plopped down on the rear seat and tried to wipe off some of the putrid slime I picked up in the fight. "Man, I'm a mess. Have they got any showers over there in Dis?"

Bubba pulled the crank to start up the outboard. "I don't think I've ever seen anything like that." There was approval in his voice. He revved the engine and we moved away from the spit of land.

Virgil also looked at me strangely. "You know, Leon. You just might make it to the Ninth Circle.

* * *

Bubba had no sooner left us off at a small alcove when we got bombarded with fire balls. They crashed down on all sides of us and caught some of the underbrush. Soon there was fire all about. Virgil motioned to our left and we were off in a sprint. As long as we kept moving, we avoided the fire. We finally entered into a thick woods and the artillery ceased. Virgil led on for another hundred yards and then stopped at the top of a hill. He motioned for caution and we both slowly peered over the crest.

The massive stone fortifications we had seen earlier from a distance were fully spread out before us. The walls were a dark gray rock shimmering from the heat of fires spread along the base. There were slender towers spaced every fifty yards and the light of more fires shown from within the empty windows. The dancing figures on the walls were grotesque caricatures of donkeys. They were prancing about, their tails twitching spastically as they screamed obscenities in our direction. They were calling our names: taunting us.

Virgil's attention was off to the left and I saw a large gate that was closed. He slumped back down and shook his head. "That gate should be open."

He leaped up onto the hill and spread his arms theatrically. "Demons of Dis. Open the gates. We have passage approved by the King of All."

There was a screech of laughter and more fireballs came in our direction. "Where are your orders?"

Virgil jumped back up. "The Judge forwarded them to you. Open the gates immediately or I will bring the wrath of the Angels down upon your worthless carcasses."

There was more shrieking laughter, and the donkey-demons increased their frenetic rushing about. "You cannot enter the City of Dis without orders. Go back to the Judge and get them. Then we will open the gates."

An avalanche of fireballs came plunging down on us, perilously close. I could feel the heat singeing my skin. We jogged off a bit to the left to get further out of their range. "More damned screwups," Virgil muttered. "Well, we can't go back, so we'll have to force our way through."

"How do we do that?"

Without answering, Virgil stood up again and reached upward. "Angels of Light, I beseech your aid. Strike down upon these evil demons who bar our path. Come down and guide us through the gates of Dis."

At that instant, a fireball struck at Virgil's feet, engulfing him in flames. He cried out in agony, but held his ground. "Angels of Light I call upon you to come down and smite these demons who desecrate our path of right."

I'd seen enough. I leaped upon Virgil and began rolling him in the dirt trying to put the flames out. In the process, I set myself on fire, so we were now both screaming in agony.

Suddenly, the sky erupted and bolts of light came crashing down. I looked at Virgil, whose face was almost entirely melted, and mouthed the question.

"The Angels used to personally come down in times of emergencies, but now they just respond from above. Those bolts should crash open the gates."

I looked over the hill and saw that the light was striking well off into the distance. "Not with that kind of shooting," I screamed.

Virgil turned and groaned when he saw the results. "Time was when they'd come right down and personally march with me through the gates when this happened.

Now..." He shrugged in desperation. "Now, we are truly lost."

"Oh, come on, Virg. Your arty just needs some spotting." I scanned the area looking for a better vantage point of the walls and gates. To my right I saw a huge tree, the top of which provided a great viewing site. The only trouble was that it was completely on fire. I tried searching for something else, but found nothing. Oh, boy, this was gonna hurt.

Getting every bone in my body broken by the suburbanites on Circle One: that was painful. Having razor sharp vines slice through my arms and legs on Circle Two: that really hurt. Getting my body torn apart by those Beasts of Worldliness in my abortive attempt to take a shortcut to the Light: that was agony. But nothing can really compare to having your entire body consumed in flame. And because I was in Hell, I couldn't just pass out and die: no relief there. These thoughts arched through my mind as I made my slow ascent up the tree. By the time I reached the top, I could see that most of my skin had melted off and my skeleton was showing in large patches.

But I had the view I needed. The bolts of lightening were still coming down from above, but they all seemed clustered about ten miles inside the city gates. "Virgil," I called down, "start relaying my spots to your angels." He nodded his understanding.

When directing artillery in the Army, we used to spot using clicks, or kilometers, and meters as a unit of measure. What did they use down here? I'd have to resort to trial and error. "Down forty, left ten," I screamed.

The lightening stopped for a moment, and then there was a loud piercing as several bolts crashed into the marsh roughly two miles behind and just to the right of us.

“Up ten, right two.”

The crashes came just behind the gate and sent the donkey demons scurrying away.

“Down one, fire for effect.”

Suddenly the ground around me lit up in flame and thunder and I was violently thrown from my perch. I lay sprawled as the noise deafened my senses. Suddenly, something was lifting me up. It wasn't a man, but a blackened form that spoke. “Let's go, the gate is open.”

Virgil dragged me along as we sprinted towards the twisted wreckage of the wall. Once we had passed through, we paused, uncertain which way to go. That decision was made for us when we saw the donkey-demons regrouping to our right and gathering some more of their fireballs. Virgil made another of his pleas to the Angels and the bolts shifted closer to the demon pack. We took advantage of the confusion and continued away from the wall. The scene before us was an open plain of large gravestones, each grave partially excavated and spouting gouts of fire. We made our way to one of the larger monuments and crouched down behind it.

The blackened cinder of Virgil turned to me and said, “Welcome to Dis.”

* * *

I stood at the edge of the cliff and stared down into the valley below. The rock face was nearly vertical and there was an oily river that turned into a waterfall over the edge. I looked for some kind of passage down, but could find none.

Virgil and I had completed our recovery and had passed through Circle Six without further incident. “Heresy doesn’t carry the same relative degree of evil as it did in the old days,” Virgil explained as we walked along. “In fact, there’s been some reordering of sins. Circle Seven now only contains the suicides, perverts and money gougers. Circle Eight has been expanded to include all forms of fraud, including treachery. The murderers and war makers have been taken out of the first round of Sins of the Lion and now exclusively occupy Circle Nine.”

“Why the change?” I asked.

Virgil’s face took on a grim and disapproving tone. “Technology has made killing much more efficient than in the time when Mr. Alighieri made his descent. Now, the decisions and actions of individuals can carry so much more pain and suffering than before.” He paused as if he wanted to say more and then shook his head. “You’ll see when we get down there.”

By now, we had reached the cliff edge and I waited for him to tell us how we were to proceed. After a moment of silence, I said, “What now?”

“Below us is Circle Eight. There’s an easier way that takes us through Circle Seven, but this way is quicker.”

“Straight down?” I stared at him in shock. “I’m no rock climber, we have no tools for this, and I’m afraid of heights.”

Virgil smiled. “Use your hands and feet and don’t look down.”

* * *

The speed of our descent was aided by our clumsiness: Virgil and I both fell twice, resulting in massive internal injuries and broken bones. While excruciatingly

painful, the Underworld's peculiar laws of physics rapidly rehealed us both times. Now we sat at the base of the cliff and took stock of what lay ahead.

It was utter chaos. Before us lay a series of parallel ridges connected at various points by natural bridges. These bridges were in various states of disrepair. Running and flying along the ridges were small figures that looked like large possums with bat-like wings. They each held some kind of sharp weapon: pikes, grappling hooks, swords, pitchforks, long sticks, and the like. They were all screeching and randomly racing about poking at whatever lay in the valleys. Occasionally, a figure would climb out and attract the attention of a horde of small demons who would pounce and stab.

Virgil thoughtfully surveyed the scene. "Circle Eight," he explained. "Fraud and Treachery. Each valley represents a different type of sin. But in the reorganization, things have gotten a little out of hand. The demons on this level are normally the most disciplined of all, in fact they had a form of military hierarchy. But with the sudden influx of souls and the additions of valleys, things have gotten confused."

"So what?" I shouted.

"So, normally we'd get immediate passage. All I had to do is negotiate with the demon leader and we'd just waltz right across the bridges. Now we're going to have to run the gauntlet."

We started off at a slow trot and crossed the first two bridges without incident. As we passed, I glanced into the valleys. Each had some variation of putrid slime, boiling mud, or pitch tar and the figures were either thrashing in the cauldron, or marching along the side. Everyone was trying to climb the walls, but the screeching demons viciously stabbed at them. There were not enough demons to do the job,

however, and some of the damned made it up to the ridge. They would then madly rush off, attracting the attention of their pursuers. Our slow progress, and tactic of heading away from escaping souls, kept us from being noticed.

We had successfully negotiated all but the last valley when we had to stop. All of the bridges within sight were crumbled and unusable. I stared down into the valley with the thought of going through that way, but was immediately disabused of the notion. Below was a vast river of boiling blood, with sulfurous steam pouring off. The poisonous stench made me gag and I had to cover my nose and mouth to breathe. The river was thrashing with souls screaming and as I looked closer I could see large snakes twisting among the bodies, striking out with regularity. Finally the head of one of the serpents rose up and I saw it had the head of a rat. It struck at the chest of a man and lashed up, carrying a heart in its teeth.

“Corporate grafters, the lowest level,” Virgil explained as he scanned in both directions for a useable bridge. “These are the senior corporate and government officials who used their position to loot their organizations. ”

“Kind of harsh punishment for that kind of thing, don't you think?”

“Not when you consider the number of people they wrongfully affected. In life, they were greedy, heartless men and women who enriched themselves while destroying the lives of millions of hard-working people. Their torment is to have their hearts ripped from their bodies for all eternity.” He stopped his scanning and stared at me. “We have to go to our left to find a bridge to cross. We'll run into some demons for certain. I can't think of any other way.”

“Let's get moving, then. This stench is killing me.”

We didn't bother trying to be discreet; we jogged towards a large group of possum-demons grouped in a cluster. They were merrily slashing down at souls with bloody swords, screeching gleefully the whole time. I looked at Virgil and the thought of just rushing through their midst occurred to both of us. But that idea vanished when one of the demons stopped his stabbing and looked straight at us. The others soon followed suit, and we were faced with a gaggle of curious demons sizing us up. We were still about forty feet away; too far for a charge to succeed. We stopped and I glanced at Virgil. What I saw gave me pause; Virgil was terrified and had no idea what to do.

The possum-demons skittered about, but held their position and continued staring at us. I didn't like the look in their eyes. The leader finally said, "And which bolgia did you two come from?"

I stepped forward. "We have safe passage from the Angels. Let us by."

This created a frenzy of laughter and screeching until the lead demon started whacking at his cohorts with his sword. The demons cringed under the assault and quieted down. "I am Colonel Malaconda. Tell me which valley you found your way out of, so I can properly dispatch your worthless soul."

These demons had a quasi-military structure, Virgil had said. That gave me an idea. I took another step forward and roared. "I am General Burgess, adjutant to the staff of the King of All. I have been sent down to straighten out this sorry mess of an operation you're running here, Mister Malaconda. I was hoping to see some basic military order here. But instead, I just see your troops running and flying about willy-nilly, while sinners are climbing out and running around unchecked. This is unsat,

Mister, completely unsat. Now, we're going to straighten out this cluster-fuck or you're going to be joining those doglegs down in the valley."

One thing I remembered from the military: no matter how high your rank, there was always someone higher who was shitting on you. The head demon was clearly taken aback and I pressed on before he got to thinking too much. "Call out your squad leaders, now."

Several possum-demons flew up on both sides of Malaconda. They called out in order, "Colonel CurlyBeard...Colonel Catclaw...Colonel Hellken...Colonel Grizzley...Colonel Crazyred...Colonel Pigtusk...Colonel Dragontooth...Colonel Cramper...Colonel Deaddog...Colonel Snatcher." They hovered expectantly.

Everyone's a Colonel? But I had to act fast. "Pigtusk and Dragontooth, take a squad of ten and head over to the third ridge and put down the group of thieves there. There's a breakout of hypocrites over on ridge seven. Catclaw and Hellken, take your boys over there and report back when the area is secured." Groups of demons started flying off. "Curlybeard, Grizzley, and Deaddog. Evil Counselors, ridge five, go." More demons swooped off. The numbers were down, but there were still too many to rush. "Crazyred, your squad will finish securing this area. The rest of you; there is a major outbreak of Falsifiers and Sowers of Discord." I grasped a grappling hook off the ground and raised it theatrically in the air. "Follow me."

I charged through the center of their group, but they cleared a path and screeched in bloodlust as they formed up behind me and followed, some running like me, most flying along. We had gone only fifty yards when out of the haze a large group of men and women, covered in boiling pitch, appeared crawling up from the valley. In their

midst was a bridge over to the edge of the circle: the only whole bridge I had seen for this valley. I turned and looked at Virgil, who was playing along with the charade by waving a pitchfork in the air. I motioned to the bridge and he nodded his understanding. When we hit the group, I started swinging my hook at the various souls and began knocking them back into the valley. The demons joined in and a wild melee followed. In the confusion, Virgil and I ran over to the bridge entrance. I waited until most of the souls had been beaten back down and shouted, "There's a larger outbreak just down the way. Malacord, split your forces and flank them on both sides. Don't come back until you can report that every sinner is back in the valley." The demons flew off and disappeared into the mist.

There were still a few possums striking down the stragglers amongst us, but we had to get going. Virgil and I raced off across the bridge. We got about halfway across when Crazyred flew up beside us with three of his squad. "That ridge is not in our territory."

"There are sinners there. Go back and secure your area. We'll take care of them."

But Crazyred read through our subterfuge. He screamed some instructions to his group and they began to descend on us. "I vigorously swung my hook at them, but only succeeded in causing them to momentarily scatter. Soon they were landing blows on both Virgil and me. Blood starting pouring from us as swords pierced our torsos. "Keep running, Virg." A swinging grappling hook took away the whole right side of my head, but the end of the bridge was in sight. With one last gasp we sprinted for the ridgeline.

I made it but Virgil didn't. Crazyred, seeing that I would escape, directed his attention to Virgil and succeeded in smashing his legs. Virgil lay on the ground, grimacing in pain. The other demons had surrounded him and were poking at him, trying to force him over the edge. But they weren't paying attention to me. I picked up my weapon and rushed them, swinging the hook in a wide arc. I caught three of them and they fell away in a shriek. Crazyred turned, but too late. I caught him square in the chest and he dropped his sword. I quickly retrieved it and stabbed him directly in the face. He shrieked and flew off. I turned to face the others, but they were hovering out of range in confusion. I was glad these demons had never served in the United States Army: I had taken their leader away and they were indecisive. I picked up Virgil and we limped off the bridge, to the last ridge, and out of the demon's range.

* * *

We stood on the shoreline of another vast marsh, but here the water was clear. Giant billowy clouds rolled across the sky and the darkness took on a sickly greenish tint. I hugged myself as I began to shiver uncontrollably. The deep cold was enhanced by a constant, biting wind. A light hail bit at our faces. The marsh had the sheen of water on the verge of freezing solid, but there was a bubbling along the surface that kept it liquid. There was something in the icy slush and it was crying out pitifully.

Floating in the marsh were small flat boats, each carrying two figures swathed in the heavy coats I recognized immediately as army. And not just army, but infantry: grunts, the common foot soldier. I had once been one of them. I strained to identify the patches that would tell me their units, but the words were foreign. Each soldier carried a rifle with bayonet fixed, eyes focused on the water, and occasionally stabbed down into

the mush. Soldiers also lined the shore, patrolling against figures that tried to crawl up from the frozen lake. When a figure began to crawl out, the results were always the same: a soldier would viciously bayonet the screaming person back into the hellishly cold waters.

Virgil turned his blue face to me and chattered. "The Ninth and final Circle: the War Makers. Here are the men and women of position: leaders, politicians, senior officers, whose callous decisions and actions caused the suffering of so many soldiers and civilians through wars, persecutions, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and the like. I said before that the Underworld is a multiverse that reflects the times. Technology has allowed fewer individuals to create more vast suffering than in the times of Mr. Aligheri." He nodded at the scene before us. "This section is Stalingrad. The suffering that took place there is almost unimaginable. The damned here are the Russian and German politicians and senior officers who created that obscenity. Their torment is the worst of all: they are forever drowning in icy water and if they try to escape, they are stabbed back by the soldiers they doomed to suffer in life."

I saw a soldier break off from his vigil and approach us. As he came, I saw the vacant stare of all combat weary soldiers, and in that instant my courage deserted me. Distant memories that I had long suppressed came flooding back to me in the eyes of that soldier and I shook in fear. I realized for the first time, that I was not in any coma and there would be no awakening. I was dead and I was taking a journey to my damnation: a torment that I knew awaited me: a torment I deserved.

The soldier stopped before us and stared hard at me. "You are one of us."

I met his eyes. "Yes."

“You suffered combat.”

“Yes. Mogadishu, Somalia. But nothing compared to what you suffered on the steppes of Russia.”

“And you have great guilt.”

Images of that horrible day came flooding back. “Yes. I was a junior officer and men in my care died.”

“And what is your sin?”

I hear the loud chattering of the helicopter that skimmed along the rooftops and took us to our drop point. I see the crumbling streets and buildings and the jeering, taunting men in rags, waving guns in the air. I hear the popping of rifle fire and the chaotic search for the enemy. I see the panicked shouting and bawling of my sergeant, as my men are dispersed to protect our flank. I see us running in all directions as dust flies off the sides of buildings from the bullets. And I see the grimace and cry of my troopers as they are hit and double over in pain. I see the spouting blood, the far-away stare as they fade off, and my desperate pleadings for them to just hang on.

I looked back to the German soldier before me. “My sin is that some of my men died...” I choked in misery as the weight of my guilt stole my voice. I finally croaked, “...and I didn't.”

“No,” the soldier said. “You cared for your men. Whatever your real sins, you will not be tormented here. We are to take you across.”

He motioned for us to board one of the flat boats that had come up to shore. Virgil and I stepped over the prow and we began our final journey.

* * *

And now I'm standing in a small conference room. In the center is a finely polished oak wood table with a faint red sheen. At the head is a large, ornate high-back chair. Large paintings line the walls, all scenes of fire, ice, demons, and screaming souls. I'm wearing a suit now and I'm clean and comfortable for the first time since I began this journey. I'm by myself as Virgil bade me farewell; the final reckoning I must face alone.

The clicking of a door opening drew my attention, and I saw a tall man, also in a business suit, enter the room and walk towards the high-back chair. He was trim and handsome, about fifty years old with wavy graying hair. But his eyes: they were a blazing red. He was carrying some documents that had his attention.

He finally noticed me and nodded. "Mister Burgess, you may begin."

My mind went blank and I was suddenly seized by a paralyzing terror. My arms and legs lost all feeling. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

The King of All frowned in irritation. "I'm a very busy angel, Mister Burgess. I run the largest corporation on Earth and I don't have any time to waste. Before you came to us I believe you were complaining about not getting a chance to make a presentation to someone. Well, now you have your chance. And your presentation better be good, or I will cast you down into the pit of irrelevance: the worst possible torment for a man like you." He sat back and steam began pouring from his ears.

I took a deep breath. When in doubt, make it short and to the point: no bullshit. "I am a sinner, and I make no excuse for it. And if I had it to do over again, I wouldn't change a thing. But my sins were those of trying to accomplish great goals in life: not running governments, armies, or corporations, but rather succeeding in the small tasks laid before me and the opportunities that arose. In so doing, I've failed many times, but

I've always come back and tried again. I've made mistakes and I've hurt people, but never through intended malice. I have loved and made some people happy. I have my hates, prejudices, and weaknesses. When I had a chance to show compassion in the Marsh of Styx, I struck down a colleague. But I have served alongside fellow men and women in good times and bad, including war. My journey here has shown me that there is tremendous suffering in the world and the true measure of a man is the extent he can alleviate even a little of that suffering. I know I've made little impact on the world and perhaps no one will miss me, but I've tried. If that is not good enough for The Light, then I accept whatever torment and damnation is my due."

The steam stopped pouring from his ears and he remained motionless for a moment. Finally, he leaned forward and smiled. "Well, that was refreshing, Mister Burgess, not the whining and pleading I usually hear." He fingered a small box and leaned forward. "Marge, will you prepare the order for passage to The Light?"

I was thunderstruck. My journey was at an end. "I'm being allowed to go to The Light," I stammered?

His smile returned. "Not you, Virgil. He has served me well. And if you do likewise, you may see the Light in a thousand years or so. No, Mister Burgess, you have just begun your journey. You must work and strive much harder if you are to see The Light. As you mentioned, there is great suffering throughout the world and nothing ever comes easy. I have witnessed your journey here and I have need of someone with your skills. I have many problems that must be solved." He rose. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have an Underworld to run. You have a lot of work ahead of you. Better get to it."

* * *

She finally stirred and then sat up. She shook the long blond hair out of her eyes and fearfully looked around. I stepped forward and when she noticed me, she instinctively shrunk back, holding up her arms to ward off any attack. I stopped and held up my hands to indicate I meant her no harm. Finally, she looked at me suspiciously. "Who are you?"

I smiled. "My name is Leon, and I'll be your guide."

I recommend John Ciardi's translation and interpretation of Dante Alighieri's "The Inferno" available through Mentor's New American Library publishing arm. It appears to me that Dante's purpose in this story was to portray Hell as a trial by fire to some as much as a place of eternal damnation to others. Also, he used this story construct to express his opinions on the social mores of his day (the 14th century), including specific individuals (even a Pope finds his way into Dante's Hell) whose actions he detests. Although I don't bring individuals I know into the story (except Dick Metzler, who I portray in a respectful light), like Dante, I have made my updated version of 'The Underworld' reflect my cynical opinion on some of the social mores I see today.