

Demyan's Inferno

The sound of the Apocalypse began with cheers of celebration. Demyan was a member of the Russian Hazmat troop; he was with the group that would fight in areas after chemical or biological spills occurred or when these types of weaponry were used. Being a lyndwurm, his scaly flesh helped protect him from the hazardous materials and agents. However, he was still required to wear a suit over his snake-like body. His hands had been melted off and replaced with cybernetic appendages after a drum of acid was accidentally spilt. Having no wings, a lyndwurm was considered inferior to their draconic brothers, but their exceptional speed of movement on the ground more than made up for the lack of flight.

Demyan had seen many things in his life; from the deadly Marburg virus to terrorist attacks with the chemical known as VX. But what had recently occurred was like nothing he had ever seen before. The world was financially in ruin. No economy had been safe. People were desperate for any kind of change for the better. It had become cheaper to live independently and support yourself rather than working through a career. As a result the corporate structures of the world collapsed as there were few, if any, employees at all for the corporations. Because of the new system where people lived self-sufficiently, the natural resources quickly became scarce as trees were chopped down for heat and shelter. Many people were returning to their feral states. It was then that World Leaders came up with an idea in an effort to resurrect the Old Way of life. Borders of countries rearranged to the point where most continents had become a single entity. The concept of countries no longer existed. North and South America had become one large body, the countries of Europe had ceased to exist and formed one large coalition. The Middle East and Africa merged and the Asian countries fell together along with Australia and the Pacific Islands. Russia was a special case where, being so large, it stayed as one body. Russia was the only former country that was not affected territorially by the global shift of borders. The economies of the now unified nations had improved, but only slightly. The end result did little to help the people, and the leaders of these nations were mostly incompetent in their positions. So much had changed in so little time, and bids for power between factional leaders in the new nations were increasingly violent.

It began in Europe, now called the European Coalition of Peoples (ECP for short). There the people saw what they considered to be a glimmer of hope in an ailing world of economic collapse, natural destruction, and a feral transformation. A great lion arose, swaying the people to his side, who offered to return the world to an original state of stability; and the people believed him. "Together we will return to the Old Way!" became the slogan of the lion. The people would chant this. He first became popular in the lands where Italy used to lie, and he quickly took power by popular support. The people would do anything he proposed to bring back the Old Way.

Demyan, however, living in the Russian territory, did not trust the lion. There was something off about him that he simply did not like.

Demyan would return to the Cathedrals in the city of Tula where he lived and would volunteer his time to aiding the poor of the nation with donations, shelter, and food. Demyan was not a lavish person. He lived a simple life, only owning what he needed. Not that anyone

owned much anymore, but he owned the bare minimum; living a life of relative poverty didn't bother him and he enjoyed the humble concept of living the way he did.

"I remember where I was when the sirens had gone off," Demyan said to Patya, remembering the events that had transpired. "It was in the Cathedral. I was serving a man, a cat...possibly a Himalayan. Yes, it was. He had very thick fur, I remember. Anyways, I was serving him his soup when the air raid sirens went off." Patya nodded his head calmly. "Then I heard these explosions. I wasn't sure what it was at first, but as soon as I heard the rumbling of the bombers overhead, I knew we were under attack."

"Go on, Demyan. The more you get out the better," Patya said back in a calm tone.

"Well, after that I went outside. Not the best thing to do during an actual air raid, I suppose." He chuckled. "But I guess my curiosity overcame my training. I went out and saw massive planes overhead. Bombers of some kind. I knew war had begun from some nation and I wasn't sure what to do as I had not been in commission for some time, but I dashed to Tula Military Base. I moved as fast as I could, somehow managing to live through the bombing, until I reached the base. Everyone was in confusion. It was chaos. My friend, Andrei, he pulled me aside. He told me that the ECP was attacking us. I didn't believe it at first, but I didn't trust their new leader; I didn't put it past him to do such a thing. The whole world saw he was building an army and no one did anything about it."

"So what happened next?" Patya questioned.

"Well, after that we tried to fight back with anything we could...but like the rest of the world, Russia wasn't in the shape to fight. How this leader of theirs managed to muster up the people to start a global war of unification and raise such a force was beyond me. But we stood no chance. His armies began to assimilate the peoples and lands into his own, creating a One World and killing any who opposed him. But those of us, the Resistance, we hid. We hid and fought when we could. His response was like that of a barbarian."

"What did he do?"

"Scorched Earth. He tried to burn us out. After conquering a piece of land, he would just burn it all. Before his ground assaults, he would use Napalm to burn everything. That's when the famines began. There were still territories across the Earth that he had not taken. This man was ruthless and had no sense of morality. His war crimes were enough to sentence him to nine consecutive eternities in a world prison! But the world had had enough. If he wasn't going to play by the rules of war, no one was going to."

"And that's when forbidden weapons were used?"

"Correct. The worst kinds. The ECP armies and their allies and the rest of the world's armies used their biological weaponry. Now, I had been trained in the event that something like this happens, but never on the scale that it did. There was little, if anything, I could do, but I still tried. Marburg, Ebola, Anthrax, Plague, Small Pox, Botulism, and everything else that the world feared was released in major cities, killing unknown numbers. These plagues spread like wildfire, infecting people, creating the need for quarantines...and so much death. That's when the war slowed down. With so many people incapacitated, it was hard to wage a war. The world resided to a Cold War-like state; both sides waiting to release their retribution on each other."

"That's when the territorial purges began, yes?"

"Correct again. With the inability to wage war against his enemies, he searched for the ones within his own lands. It was no secret that the Faithful of the world hated him and did not agree with his methods. How could anyone? Yet his own people still loved him and followed all that he said. So the Purges began. Cathedrals, Temples, Mosques, Shrines, everything. He

spared nothing. He tore down landmarks to all religious institutions of the world and then he began to kill us off. He hunted us down, treating us like the feral, killing with no remorse of any kind. The Faithful still held on under his regime in underground sects. Hell, it's the only way I survived as long as I did. When we first went underground I volunteered to stay on the surface to help people into our safety. Every day there was a risk of being caught. Luckily I never was, but I had brought at least a hundred people into our care, away from the purges." Demyan looked back at Patya. "Do you remember the first earthquake and when the sky went black?"

"I do." Patya crossed his arms, the flesh of his wings hanging down making it look like he was wearing a robe.

"So you remember the massive earthquake in the Rhineland of Old Germany that was felt across the European Continent! The group I was with thought it was right under us, so we ran to the surface, fearing our underground sanctuary would collapse upon us. It was then that we saw how dark it was, even with lights from the cities. The stars were not lighting the sky, the moon was a scarlet red. We stared for what seemed all night. When the sun rose it wasn't as bright...and as soon as it rose fully into the sky an eclipse blocked out the sun."

"I remember that, as well."

"That wasn't all. That night after the eclipse even more had taken place. Meteor storms in the sky were apparent without the stars. From what I had learned, many had landed across the globe, creating craters and impact sights in cities and the countryside; and, although the war had slowed down, naval battles raged on. Nuclear powered ships were being destroyed and they poisoned the seas. In response to the naval battles, ICBMs were launched...nuclear and chemical. Dirty bombs poisoned fresh water...and I remember...I remember reports of a massive solar flare. A third of the world lost power."

"That too, I remember that," Patya said again more forcefully.

"Then you remember the mutated feral insects from the radiation and their sweeping across the globe, tormenting everyone but killing none. When the war surged back, a third of all people died from fire, smoke, chemicals, plague, famine, and war!"

"You sound excited over the amount of death," Patya began.

"No, I'm excited to talk with someone else who went through it all! How could I have been happy when I heard that our brothers and sisters in the sea had all perished because of the poisoning done by the naval battles and weapons used? Or how all the fresh water went stagnant and our brothers and sisters of the fresh water died? Billions died!"

"Demyan—"

"Or what about when the sun expanded and melted the Polar Regions and heated the world beyond normal levels? Or when we all lost our electricity? What about when entire islands sunk from earthquakes because the world had been destroyed on such a massive scale? Were you happy when all that happened?"

"Demyan, you don't understand. Just finish what you want to tell me."

"Oh, sorry, I was ranting there...but at least I covered a lot of the events. Well...I guess there's really only one thing left till you can tell me about what happened in your side of the world during all this." Patya nodded slowly at the lyndwurm. "Well, you remember when the three leaders rallied the remaining survivors to Old Israel, right? Because the lands they lived in formerly were now uninhabitable? Very few were still alive. The wars and all events had killed off nearly eighty percent of everyone...and the Lion and his followers felt victorious. But we, the remaining Faithful, weren't going to let him reign. I was with them when we rose the armies against him." Demyan looked at his cybernetic hands, "I remember my hands were sporadic

with their movements. They get like that when I'm anxious because the cybernetics can't process the signals my brain sends to them properly when I'm doing something involuntarily. But we were right there on the field; our armies versus him and his followers. In a battle cry, we all surged forward against him. You remember; you were there. But I remember I was somewhere within the middle ranks of our army. We swept across them easily. They were all too weary to fight against us. I remember when I ran out of bullets, I just began fighting them with my bare hands. Literally tearing limb from body. Thinking back on it scares me. That I could do that. But I guess anyone is capable of anything when in such a rage and a moment like that. I had been in warzones before, but this was something else. Like me, as soon as they ran out of ammunition they fought in a feral-like state. The canines ran together as packs, tearing down anyone that they saw; the felines stalked others in the commotion; the avian flew and dive-bombed with their beaks and talons; reptiles and amphibians were tearing flesh, fur, feathers, and scales from bone. It was like nothing before. The brutality lasted for what seemed to be forever. It was all just a single afternoon right? But you remember how when we were finally victorious? When they sounded the trumpet when the Lion was killed? The celebration was beyond that of Victory Day back in Russia. So tell me, where were you when all this happened? What's your story, friend?"

Patya let out a long breath, having to have listened to the retelling of events he had already witnessed. "Well Demyan, truth be told, I wasn't here for any of these events, but I witnessed them all."

Demyan made a face of complete perplexity, not understanding how that could even be possible. "What? What do you mean by that?"

"Demyan, I've been dead for centuries. The Seals were broken and the Apocalypse is over. I'm here, with many others like myself, to take you all to up. You're Ascension. Look around you, Demyan."

Demyan, in shock, looked around him as he was instructed. There were many he had never seen before talking with those he recognized; the one's he didn't recognize would reach out with their paws or hands and when those whom he did recognize and remember grabbed them, they would fade away.

"So it's true. It did happen. How, how did no one see this?"

"No one was meant to see it happen, Demyan. Not until now. Are you ready to come with me?"

"I, I guess so."

Demyan reached out with his cybernetic hand and grabbed the bat's hand. His vision blurred and the world faded before him. The next thing he saw was not what he expected.

Demyan and Patya stood before a seven walled castle, illuminated by an unknown source. As the two walked in, Demyan saw that the interior was good, but not what he thought Paradise would be. There was a beautiful meadow with much flora and fauna within the castle. However, the entirety of the castle and meadow was empty. "Is this truly Paradise?"

Patya still looked forward. He outstretched his hand in front of himself, "This, Demyan, is Limbo, the first Circle of Hell. This is where those who did not have a proper portal to faith, yet were virtuous used to reside. You are in Hell, Demyan, but not forever. I've been instructed to show you what you have been saved from by remaining faithful. Your actions in life have spared you from all that you will see."

"This is Hell? But this isn't bad; this is actually a nice place."

“Did you not hear me, Demyan? This is Limbo, not a place of horrible punishment and torture, but where those who were virtuous in life went. Those who denied went further down to the sixth circle of nine, but those who were never given true faith yet lived good lives were here.”

The two continued to walk through the castle’s meadow. The whole place had a haunting feel to it since it was empty. It was also completely silent. Even leaves on the trees were motionless. Demyan stopped and looked around him in a full circle, trying to imagine what it was like when Limbo was occupied. “So they have all been taken back up into Paradise, then?”

“Correct, Demyan. Limbo used to be a very full place. Many were here, but at the end of the Apocalypse, they were all taken up to Paradise.”

“So who are you? And why have I been chosen to see what these various punishments are?”

“The reason, I do not know, Demyan. His reasoning is not of my understanding. But I am Patya, a general of Old Russia. I was chosen to take you through here, then up to Paradise. When you are ready, we can move on to the next area.”

Demyan nodded slowly and continued to look around him at the meadow and its various plants. The place looked peaceful, but was lacking something. The two walked together silently as Demyan took in everything. They walked past the meadows and entered the castle. The interior was like that of a medieval king’s. It was decorated lavishly and was very ornate. They walked through and entered a massive banquet hall that still smelt of freshly cooked food. The whole castle interior seemed pleasing enough, but still it had the feeling that something was missing. “Were you here before, Patya? When there were souls here?”

“I was.”

“What was it like?”

“Much like this, but with others here; I assume you mean what the mood was like when others were here.”

Demyan nodded. “Well Limbo was vastly populated, but there was always enough room for them all. It was a nice place, but that feeling you have now of something missing, was prevalent in all here. That is the feeling of His absence, as they did not know Him in life. However, they all know Him now, as He has raised them up.”

Demyan took in Patya’s words with the realization of what Limbo was actually like to experience. “Well, I guess there isn’t much more to see here then... let’s move on.” The two left Limbo and carried on into the depths of Hell as Demyan gave one last glance back to the desolate castle.

The pleasant smells of the meadow were soon replaced by the smells of charred flesh, burning fur, and sulfur. Distant cries of suffering could be heard. A boat waited along a river. A black cloaked individual whose eyes were but red specks in the void of his hood waited on the boat, motionless. Patya and Demyan approached the ferry and boarded it.

“This is Charon, the ferryman,” said Patya, “He would take the souls into Hell. However, now that the Apocalypse has ended, he isn’t so busy, neither is the Minos, Judge of Souls.”

“Where is he taking us?”

“Straight into the second circle of Hell...Lust.” Patya stood straight up as Demyan looked around him at his blackened surroundings. In the distance he could hear the roar of winds.

“What is there, Patya?”

“Wait, and you will see.” Patya’s words echoed throughout the seemingly endless caverns and tunnels of Hell as the boat slowly approached a high tower around which winds swirling. Demyan looked more closely at the visible winds spinning violently around the gray tower. It seemed out of place in the depths of Hell. The river circled around this tower, as the sea would around a lighthouse. On the other side of the tower the river poured out deeper into the depths.

Charon let Patya and Demyan off at a dock at the front of the tower and continued his way down the river. With not a soul left to ferry, he had nothing left but to endlessly drift across the rivers of Hell.

The two walked across an elevated path over the waters towards the tower. It was then that Demyan learned that what he heard was not the sound of winds, but the screams from those within them. The sight terrified him. Bodies were flung around without care as the tornado winds spun them about, smashing them against each other and the tower walls.

“Those who lusted in life for power, wealth, love, and so many other things were sentenced here in the Circle of Lust. The winds blow them about, just as their lust in life threw them about.” Patya said this in such a calm voice, as if he were describing a painting from a museum from the now-destroyed Earth. Demyan stared up at those within the winds. He recognized many of old who had been known for their uncontrolled lusts, and he nearly broke into tears when he saw a friend of his who had been famous for being a womanizer in life.

“How could you let this happen, Sergey!” Demyan screamed up at his old friend who was being tossed about in the winds. For a moment it looked as if the snow leopard had heard him, trying to yell back down to Demyan before the winds spun him around the tower and out of view. Before Demyan was able to get a response the winds did just that. The leopard was gone. Demyan fell to his knees, but Patya immediately picked him back up.

“Come, you have much more to see, I’m afraid,” Patya said sorrowfully as he lifted Demyan up and took him into the tower and through it, deeper into the circles of Hell.

“The Third Circle is Gluttony, Demyan. Where all those who reside took excess of life’s needs and wants, ignoring those around them for their own desires.”

They walked together out through the passages of Lust and entered into a sea of icy slush. Demyan and Patya walked across a catwalk that went over the sea and eventually down to the next Circle. Demyan looked over the rails of the catwalk and into the slush. Bodies bobbed and lay strewn about within it. Their eyes were motionless, as were the rest of them.

“What’s wrong with them?”

“They are paralyzed, forced to forever endure the chill of the waters. They are completely unaware of those around them, as in life they thought only of themselves. From time to time Cerberus will come down and force feed them, vomiting into their mouths, as many avian do for their young.” Just as he said this, the three-headed beast came down, and in an act of sheer putridity, did what Patya had said. Demyan turned his head, but the sounds of the regurgitation made the image clear enough for him. The beast left the sea and the punished, climbing back into the crevice where it consumed vast amounts of food.

Demyan looked back at the unaware souls, who only made sounds of pain. In the distance he saw another he knew: one of the professors from the Academy where he had learned about various biological agents that he could come across in his line of work. In life this particular professor of Demyan's had always been overindulging in food and drink. He wasn't a particularly good teacher in that, instead of grading papers and theses, he was out at buffets and bars. His high pay allowed for the excess of such things. Why he was kept as a professor for Hazmat Troopers, Demyan would never know. All Demyan could do was pity the poor raccoon as he said, "Let's go, Patya. I have nothing left to see here."

Patya lead Demyan down the catwalk over the Circle of Gluttony and down into the next Circle: Greed. Demyan had always thought greed was the worst of all sins, and found their punishment in Hell fitting for their deeds in life. He was also satisfied with the amount of politicians and other leaders that he saw in this circle.

"Here is the Circle of Greed, if you were unable to tell by the signs of molten gold and platinum. Those who would throw anything away in order to increase their own wealth have been sentenced here. Their punishment is quite clear and straightforward," Patya explained to Demyan in his casual tone.

Demyan was not a vengeful lyndwyrn, but he couldn't say that he did not approve of this punishment. The entire room consisted of molten gold and platinum, just like the gates that separated it from Gluttony. The two walked across a ledge of stone as the souls sentenced here pushed massive globes of gold and platinum up hills made from gemstones. When the two groups reached the top, they would slip on the gems and the globes would crush them and smash together at the bottom. Demons would fly down and use whips barbed with rhinestones on the souls, forcing them to push the globes up again. They were constantly up to their knees in the molten metals, as their bare paws, claws, and talons were pierced by the gems beneath. Occasionally the demons who ordered them about pelted them from above with bits of quicksilver and Fool's Gold.

Demyan was pleased with their punishment and Patya could tell. "You are enjoying their torture?"

"These people, to me, are the worst of the worst. I, personally, am not surprised that they are so high in the Circles and not lower down. This does make me fearful of the punishments that others have received, however." Demyan shuddered, if this was only the fourth Circle of Hell and this was the punishment given, how much worse could it get? He braced himself and nodded to Patya, letting him know he was ready to continue on lower into the pits of Hell.

The stone ledge led them through the Circle of Greed and deeper down into the Fifth Circle. "We will be entering Anger, one of the most populated Circles of Hell. So much so that the original punishment was unable to accommodate all those sentenced to it." Patya walked carefully down the ledge as Demyan slithered behind him. The sounds of pain and fighting echoed up from the gate to Anger. They walked up to the gate where a set of demons stood guard. Towering over the two the demons were their massive war axes. As they approached, the demons spread their axes that had been crossed over the gate and it opened. As they entered, the sounds faintly heard grew intensely louder; so much so that it reminded Demyan of the last battle that had defeated the Lion.

"What are they doing, Patya?"

"They are fighting each other. The punishment for those that held anger towards others in life and let it go unchecked is to fight one another endlessly; those are the lucky ones.

Beneath them, souls are trapped in a river, their nostrils barley above the waters. They are used as the flooring for this Circle, as an endless battle rages above them.”

Demyan looked on at the endless skirmish across this Circle. The arena in which these souls fought was massive. Patya had been correct that this had been one of the most populated, considering the ones who had been here the longest were now used as flooring for those above. In fact, Patya went on to explain that it would take them weeks to trek across this circle. The other circles were massive in their own respect, but Anger was the largest in Hell.

“Patya? I have a question.”

“What is it, Demyan?”

“Let’s say that in life a soul was both greedy and angry. How was it determined which Circle Minos would sentence them to?”

“Well, it all depended on which sin was committed and the severity of it all, how common the sin was made in their life, and a couple other things. But, let’s say you were an adulterer multiple times in life and then went on commit a murder. Murder is a greater sin than adultery; therefore you would be sentenced to the Seventh Circle. But let’s say you were greedy and used the wealth accumulated through that greed to be a glutton. Gluttony incorporates greed regardless, so a greedy glutton would still be sentenced to the Third Circle. It is a most complex system, but Minos did his job effectively.”

Demyan nodded slowly in agreement as his eyes trailed back to the fighting. He lowered his head, pitying them. “Let’s continue down to the next Circle, Patya. I’ve had enough of the fighting.”

The two continued down the lengthy trail of Anger and left the Circle. Upon entering the Sixth Circle, Demyan and Patya were greeted by a massive, solid obsidian gate. “This is the gate of Dis. All who are below are treated far worse than those above them, and this gate is to show to them, even more, that their punishment is the most severe of all. I would suggest you close your eyes. The Gorgons are outside this circle, and if you but look into their eyes, you shall never leave this place.” Demyan quickly closed his eyes from fear of being trapped in such a wretched place for eternity. “My wings shall also cover your face, Demyan. I will tell you when we are safely beyond their grasp.”

“Are you not afraid yourself, Patya?”

“I already have claims to Paradise. I have been there. You, however, have not yet entered the most sacred end.”

Patya did as he said and led Demyan towards the Circle of Heresy. The Gorgons, including Medusa, confronted Patya and begged him to let them look into the eyes of his follower. Patya slapped them aside. “Be gone, vile creatures, lest you invoke His wrath!” And with the mention of Him, the creatures shuttled off; back to patrolling the grounds within the Circle of Heresy.

The Gate of Dis opened slowly before the two, Demyan with his face still covered and eyes shut. Patya led him carefully into the inner Circle where crackling flames could be heard deep within. Patya lifted his wings, “It is safe, Demyan, and you may now look.”

Demyan opened his eyes to a barren waste. “Where is everything, Patya?”

“They are beneath us. This is the Circle of Heresy. All those who foolishly denied His existence are here, trapped deep beneath us in their flaming tombs there is no hope of ever getting out of their sepulchers.” Patya bent down to one knee and used his hand to scoop away the dirt on the floor. Digging deeper, he revealed a stone slab, “Press your ear to it, Demyan.”

Demyan did so, placing his head flat against the slab. Being a lyndwurm, he did not have ears like those of others, but like those of reptiles. Head upon the stone, he could hear and feel the pounding against it, along with the screams and crackling flames of whatever poor souls were trapped beneath. "How many are trapped beneath there, Patya?"

"It is hard to say; some of these tombs hold only one, while some hold hundreds upon thousands. Some are heated at various degrees, but all experience an endless torture."

Demyan pushed the dirt back over the slab and moved on. "I'm certain I would know some down here...if I could only see them."

"But would you want to see them? You fell to the ground in Lust. Could you withstand the sight of someone you knew in this torture?"

"You're right. Let us go before I become too curious."

The two then continued down the barren Circle as the trapped souls beneath banged upon the tops of their tombs. The vibrations of their anguished screams and pounding reverberated down the length of Demyan's slithering body, giving him a chill of fear that hit his core. Imagining the torture these souls barely endured was not a pleasant thought in the least, yet Patya walked on next to him as if this was a normal activity for him.

In the center of the Circle was a spiral staircase winding straight down through the ground. The obsidian stairs were supported by a pillar of bone. The bones were from an unknown species that Demyan couldn't identify, but definitely from a huge one as the rails of the pillar of bone were the dead beast's ribcage. As they descended, the smell of fresh blood rose, a smell Demyan was familiar with, from his years of treating cases of Marburg (a disease so ghastly it literally melted the victim's internal organs which would then spew from orifices of the body).

"What is next, Patya?"

"The Seventh Circle and it's Three Rings: The Circle of Violence. These stairs will take us over the first Ring, then down into the second and the third. The First Ring is for those who were violent against others. Their punishment is to be forever immersed in boiling blood while shot at by Centaurs with bows, and a Minotaur keeps watch. They are immersed according to their sins."

The spiral stairs ended, leading to a gangway over the blood. The gangway itself was made from the bones of the same large beast.

Perhaps it was a basilisk? Demyan thought to himself. *A very big basilisk.*

As they walked carefully across the spine of the creature, Demyan looked down. It was true that there was no prejudice here. Not a single species was spared. Canines, reptiles, amphibians, felines, avian, mammals, and the aquatic all were here. Even the mythical creatures, like himself, were immersed here.

"Demyan?" a voice called from below.

Demyan looked down into the blood and saw his brother, who was known to be remorselessly violent to anyone who even looked at him wrong. "Nikola?"

"Demyan, save me!" Nikola screamed up towards his brother through the blood that covered his mouth. He was submerged up to the parting of his mouth.

"There's nothing I can do for you now, Nikola. I tried to help you in life, but you refused and ran off! You brought this upon yourself!" Demyan looked back up and marched past Patya.

"No! Demyan, don't go! Come back!" Nikola swam through the blood, trying to catch up with his brother, pushing others aside who were trapped with him; his flesh had burnt through

his scales and every movement pained him. He finally stopped moving when the Centaurs shot a volley of arrows into his back.

When Patya caught back up with him, he found Demyan standing at the entrance to the next Ring of the Circle. It was a murky, wooded area. Acting as if he had not seen his brother only seconds ago, Demyan asked Patya, "What is in this Ring?"

Patya hesitated for a second, taken aback by Demyan's disregard of what had been witnessed. He sighed and said, "This is the Ring of those who were violent against themselves or their property. Those who committed suicide and the profligates." As he finished, a group of mixed species ran past them. They were being hunted by feral hounds and while being chased they snapped the limbs off of the trees in the forest.

"Who were those, Patya?"

"Those were the profligate. As you saw, they are chased and mauled eternally."

"Where are those who killed themselves?"

"They are all around us. When sentenced, they are transformed into trees, their limbs knotted and gnarled. Feral crows tear the bark from their flesh as the profligate endlessly break their limbs. They feel all of this as if it were happening to their mortal bodies."

It was then that Demyan realized that the moans he heard were not of a wind, but of the trees around him. In pain they cried out without mouths as the crows tore them apart and their limbs were broken.

"When we reach the sands, we will have entered the last Ring of Violence," said Patya. And with that, they walked through the dreadful woods.

"Here in these sands, three groups are punished. The burning sands are rained upon by flakes of fire and those that are punished here sit, lie, or wander through it all."

"Do you think I will see anyone I know, Patya?"

"Perhaps, you did know many usurers in your life. Did you not?"

"I believe so..." Demyan trailed off, looking into the barren wastes of the desert. As he watched, souls walked, sat, and laid in the sands as the fiery flakes fell upon them.

"Do not fear. You will not be harmed here, for you are not to be punished." With that Patya wandered ahead of Demyan, beckoning him to follow. So that is what he did.

Demyan slithered through the sands, following his guide. The flesh, scales, feathers and fur had been burnt and charred on those that resided here. Demyan looked around him for someone he knew. Many who lay in the sand watched as they passed, unable to move or speak. "Who are they that lay in the sands? What was their sin?"

"They were the blasphemers of life, those who spoke impiously of Him."

They continued on, seeing groups wandering the sands. These souls gave looks of awe towards Demyan and Patya as the sands parted before them and the flakes of fire burnt out before landing on them.

Again, Demyan asked, "And who are these that walk the sands?"

"These are the impure, walking the sands of Hell eternally."

As they continued, they came upon groups who sat in the sands, wearing amulets that resembled family crests around their necks. "These are the usurers, those who lent money with intent to cheat others with unfair interest."

Demyan finally saw a face he recognized. It was the man who had put his parents into great debt with the charges he made from the money he had lent. The family crest of this Persian

Cat hung from his neck like an anvil weighing him down. The flakes of fire seemed to be attracted mostly to these souls, seeming to circle and scorch them in a tornado of flame.

“Is that you, Selim?”

“Who-who are you? Why do the fires and sands not scorch you?”

“Selim, it is Demyan, the son of the family you so wrongly cheated.”

“Demyan...ah yes, Demyan...the wyrms who I lent money to!”

“*Lyndwyrms*, Selim. There is a difference.”

“Yes, yes. That is right. But why are you here, Demyan? Were you one of the impure?”

“No, Selim. I have been chosen to see the punishments I have escaped by following His tenants. And so, here I see you, among the others from life I knew.”

Selim looked up, trying to see through the fire to see Demyan’s face. “Please...know that I am sorry Demyan. You are not the only one that I have spoken to recently. My punishment is just. Forgive me in your heart, and perhaps this eternity will be a bit more bearable.”

“Selim, I forgave you long ago. There is no need to hold onto the past anymore for me.”

“Thank you, Demyan. Now go, and leave this place as soon as you can.”

Following Selim’s advice, the two continued out of the sands.

“It is no wonder you have been chosen to Ascend, Demyan. You possess humility and forgiveness few in your time had,” Patya said.

“It was how my parents raised me. Everyone can be forgiven, but it is up to them to make the repentance they need.”

As Demyan finished his statement the desert came to a close and an area made completely from stone the color of dull iron opened up before them.

“This is the Eighth Circle, where Fraud of all sorts is punished. In the center is an abyss that drops down straight into the Ninth Circle of Treachery. This Circle is broken up into sections where the many different sins of Fraud are punished. I will carry you down there myself, as there is no other way down.”

Patya spread his arms out, forming a twelve foot wing span, and began to fly up. Hovering above Demyan, he grasped his shoulders with his mammalian feet and lifted the 300 pound lyndwyrms off the now stone flooring. Down they flew to the first section of the Eighth Circle.

Upon their arrival Patya began, “This is the first section, where the panderers and seducers are punished; a pair that dates back as far as history itself. Those who whored and pimped are forever scourged by demons as they are held in place by shackles.”

Demyan looked out upon the pairs. Their tears and cries of agony were now nearly voiceless in the ears of Demyan; Hell had begun to take its toll on him. Now he simply pitied those who were here. Demyan only wished he had done more in life to help others avoid this fate, especially when he saw the face of the prostitute who had approached him in the Old Caucus lands when he was serving there. He had only told her that he wasn’t interested, and to consider changing her ways.

The dull, iron colored walls of the Eighth Circle continued on as Patya flew Demyan through the sections of the Circle. “The next section is the flatterers. They are condemned to swim in excrement, just like that which they spewed from their mouths in life.”

Demyan held back a chuckle at Patya’s blatant opinion of those here. He, too, felt the same way about them. Although he saw no one he remembered here, he was certain that at least one he knew was trapped under the feces here.

Those that lie, playing on one's emotions for their own gain, deserve nothing less,
Demyan thought to himself as they flew past this section. It was by far, probably one of the most stomach turning sights in Hell.

The next section was much more silent than the rest; only the sounds of crackling flames and a gut-wrenching snapping noise were heard.

"This section holds those guilty of simony. Those who sold pardons and false ceremonies are sentenced here for the fraud they committed by knowingly giving out false ceremony. Their heads are set in stone underground as they are held upside down by their feet. Flames scorch the soles of their paws, talons, tails, or fins as they are held firmly in place."

The bodies of the simonists shook from the pain of the fire upon their soles. It was then that Demyan realized the snapping noises he was hearing were the sounds of bones breaking as the damned tried to recoil from the pain. Being unable to move, the force they exerted was enough to break their bones. It seemed as if the bones healed themselves after a few moments, only to be broken again. The scene caused Demyan to cringe with imagination.

With the disturbed sensation in his lower body (as he had no legs) Demyan had Patya move him on to the next section. "And here are the Diviners, Astrologers, and Magicians. Those who claimed to read the future for their own profit and the giving of fraudulent counsel to others are forever forced to walk in a maze of traps here. Their heads are on backwards, yet they walk normally."

Demyan looked out and saw pits of fire, spiked walls, crude traps, and a large assortment of other devices used to inflict pain and suffering. The backward heads had their eyes gouged out as well.

"Because they gave false information of the future, all here will never be able to see what is before them or behind them. They continually walk off steep cliffs and into traps."

If there was one thing Demyan couldn't stand, it was not being able to help someone who was about to walk straight into danger. For this reason, Demyan had Patya continue on immediately.

"Here in the Fifth Section, the corrupt politicians are forever immersed in boiling tar. Their abuse and fraud by stealing the people's funds and their actions using political power for their own gains are sentenced."

"Their sentencing is true. Many times had I tried to expose these people in life, but at least they all got theirs here."

Demyan, in life, had wanted nothing to do with these types. Doing all he could to expose them, he was gladdened that divine justice was served to them properly. He tried to look in and see faces that he could recognize, but not a single face was recognizable through the tar that bubbled across them. Demons also guarded the pots of tar so that none could escape. Any time one got too close to the edge, the Demons would thrust their trident-like spears into them, sinking them back into the tar, away from the edge.

"What's next, Patya?"

"The Hypocrites. You will see their punishment."

Sensing Demyan's wish to leave the Inferno sooner Patya picked up the pace. He flew Demyan over to the Sixth Section of the Hypocrites. Upon gazing below, Demyan saw that they were all clothed entirely in a gray metal.

"What are they wearing?"

“Lead, Demyan. They are forced to run endlessly without rest as the weight of the lead bares upon them, and every month increases.” Some of those below appeared to Demyan as solid blocks of lead, moving slowly behind the rest. “Come Demyan. I can tell you are weary of your stay here.

“The Seventh Section contains all the thieves of the world. Here they are endlessly transformed into different species.”

Demyan saw bones break as bodies were rearranged. It was impossible to pick anyone out as they were not what they once had been. There were screams of pain as bodies rearranged, bones broke, flesh melted off, and all regrew. There was no resting in Hell for the damned, only torment and pain. Reptiles became mammals, mammals became avian, avian became water breathers, and the water breathers became amphibians, then the amphibians became supernatural, and the supernatural became reptiles. All in an endless cycle. Demyan had waited here long enough to watch the whole process transpire with a cobra. The changes could only be described as this: it was truly gruesome.

And so they moved on to the next Section of the Eighth. The only light in this section came from flames. “Here are the false advisors, those who knowingly gave false advice to others for their own means without the use of sorcery, but only their own corrupted wit.” Patya continued to talk of those here, many of whom were political advisors and stockbrokers as well.

Demyan looked upon them; they flailed and ran about, trying to put out the flames that engulfed their whole being. Each one was covered completely within flames, as if clothed in them. The stone floors and walls of this prison did nothing to help them put out their tormenting flames. This section was the brightest he had been in since Limbo, but that was only because the amount of people here, all on fire, who lit the section ablaze with their fiery clothing. It was hard to make out anyone specifically through their individual flames, but Demyan was able to make out a few faces he recognized from his time. All were well known government advisors.

Demyan had a morbid thought pop into his head while watching the souls run about on fire. The scene reminded him of a song that was written many years before his time and he couldn’t help but sing it in his head as he watched. *Don’t you see their bodies burning? Desolate and full of yearning, dying of anticipation, choking from intoxication.* With a shake of his head Demyan let Patya know he was ready to move on. He was beginning to pity those here less and less, and condemn them within his mind for all they had done in life; not one here didn’t deserve to be here, including his brother.

The Ninth Section of the Eighth Circle was a circle itself in shape. The souls were packed tightly. Single file, they circled about. “Here in this section, those who spread scandal and unrest; those that split families and countries, continents and relationships, and splintered all factions are sentenced to circle eternally, having their limbs randomly lopped off and regrown.”

Demons whipped them constantly to keep them moving, Demyan saw. At four points of equal distance from one another, a demon stood with a sword in his claws. As the damned passed, he would slice limb from body. About halfway to the next their demon limb would grow back.

“So, their limbs are split from their body, separating it from them...and that symbolizes that, in life, they did the same with those they came into contact with. Correct?”

“Well, it seems you understand the punishments here now, Demyan. But nevertheless, I have been tasked with taking you through the entirety of Hell. Do not worry. The Eighth Circle is nearly complete. After the Ninth, you will be taken to Paradise.”

With Patya’s words they went on to the last of the Ten Sections of the Eighth Circle. “Here are the falsifiers. Those who made false money, cures, and other counterfeit items are sentenced here, where they are plagued with diseases of all kinds.” Patya looked down at Demyan, whom he was still carrying. Demyan seemed most interested with this Section.

He looked out at all those here and he saw many criminals and mafia members, none of whom knew him, but whose infamy was well known. He recognized many diseases upon their souls that he had worked with and seen in life. Marburg, Ebola, Malaria, Plague, Botulism, Small Pox, Anthrax; the lists went on and on. He could pick out each disease these sinners were afflicted with. Scabs, sores, scars, rashes, boils, oozing pus, internal bleeding, feverous symptoms, choking, an inability to swallow or breath; all told the diagnosis to him, or at least gave him a good idea of their affliction. In his life he had seen every disease, and had known all of their effects on the body. He found this to now be the worst punishment by far. No one liked to be sick, even with a common cold. But few knew the horrors that diseases like these created.

Demyan simply stared out at them, diagnosing each one based on what he knew; it had been some time before he heard Patya asking him if he was ready to move on. Demyan simply nodded his head, still looking on at the souls who were literally plagued as Patya flew him to the deepest pit of Hell: the Ninth Circle.

The Ninth Circle was freezing and filled with black. Everything was frozen over. The gray stone of the walls, ceiling, and floor had become an ice sheet. As Patya set him down on the ground after being flown around for what seemed centuries, Demyan was careful to not fall on his side, as he had no legs to support himself. Patya was careful on the ice as well, knowing any misstep could cause him to slip and fall. So they treaded carefully on as Patya explained, “This is the Circle of Treachery. Treachery against family, community, guests, and God are punished here. All are in the ice. You can tell who is committed here for what sin based on how they are encapsulated in the ice. Those who committed treachery against family are encased to their heads in the ice, those against community only have their eyes exposed while the rest of them are frozen over. Guests jut from the ice. Their tears have frozen their eyes shut. And those against God are deep within the ice, twisted in mortally impossible ways. Yet here, they feel the pain they would in life. At the center sits Satan, entombed in ice, forever to remain there and never to move from his spot again.”

The cold chilled Demyan as he looked upon the glaciers of ice and souls. The final Circle of Hell seemed much more unforgiving than the others. The punishment was not as visually terrifying as the others, however, the sheer fact that those in these deepest of pits could feel the ice burn them as their bodies remained painfully twisted showed that this was the ultimate punishment. He couldn’t imagine the pain they felt in the ice.

“Another one?” a voice called from the ice. It was a black cat of an uncertain species. Only his head was sticking out from the ice.

Demyan approached the male within the ice, “What do you mean?” Demyan said.

“You two aren’t the first to come through here. Only a while ago did I speak to another. But perhaps that was centuries ago...time has lost all sense to me.”

“Is this true?” Demyan asked Patya.

“Others came through here, as well. They were ahead of us. Some more are behind us, too.”

“The others explained the Apocalypse happened. But I guess the signs down here were obvious, as well. Over there are the Leaders.” The cat moved his eyes to the right, showing three lions encased next to Satan. “I’m Hans, and...as you probably know, I’m down here at the bottoms of Hell for murder...of family.”

“Patya told me who was where.”

“Well, unless you wish to chat me up, you may as well ascend up to Paradise. I can tell by your sunken eyes you are weary of being here so long. At least you chose the right way in life, lyndwyrn. The ice here burns everything on me. My face is numb, yet it feels as if I am being stabbed with needles repeatedly. Look around you once more; see what you have been saved from. Look at those over there, those who are bent in ways that make my frozen body cringe; at those who cannot see; and remember those above, who never chose repentance.”

Immediately after he finished, Hans looked down and seemed to forget that there were two in front of him. He simply gazed at the icy floor, recounting the evil deeds he had once committed.

Demyan slid back from the cat and looked around him once more. Then nodding at Patya, he let him know he was ready. Patya placed his hands on Demyan’s shoulders, and the last thing he saw before a flash of light was the image of Satan, encased in ice. The enormous fallen angel looked like a satyr with wings, but was really nothing but a shadow against the black ice.

When his vision returned, Demyan saw he no longer had cybernetic claws, but his original, given claws. Demyan looked up from his claws to the beauty that surrounded him. Meadows and rolling hills backed by vast mountain ranges carried on. Rivers clear as crystal cut through the landscape and from the mountains gorgeous waterfalls crashed into lakes and seas. Homesteads were made entirely of natural properties. It reminded Demyan of a great fantasy work that he so loved.

He began to slither through the fields, taking in the crisp breezes that smelt of lavender; among the homestead were seemingly endless gardens and fruit bearing trees. Then as if carved into the side of the mountain itself, Demyan saw a massive mansion which had been built around rivers and waterfalls that flowed through the mountain. He began to riddle off all of the sights aloud, in awe of the marvels he witnessed. Demyan then slid toward the mansion, but turned around to see Patya still standing where they first appeared, “Are you coming, Patya?”

Patya nodded and followed after him. Leading him through the gates where the mansion’s entrance was. “So this is what he sees...” Patya said under his breath so quietly not even Demyan, who was no more than a few inches away from him, could hear.

Patya led him in and in the splendor he remained forever, eternally grateful that he had stayed true and pious in life.

Demyan turned back to Patya, who was standing at the gates, “Thank you, Patya.”

“Do not thank me. I merely led you through. You saved yourself from those pits.”

Demyan turned and looked out upon the endless expanses of perfection of Paradise, “I’m glad I did.”

Patya walked up and put his hand on Demyan’s shoulder and looked out with Demyan. Hills and fields of snow, along with forests of pines went on in an endless expanse. Cold wind

brushed comfortably across Patya's face with the smell of pine, "There is nothing as beautiful as this, is there Demyan?"