

NOTES FROM THE HALLENBERG-HARPER EXPEDITION TO HELL

DAYS 12 TO 14: PAOLO AND FRANCESCA

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By Day 12, Chadwick's condition had worsened. The numbness that had begun in his fingers when he'd touched the waters of the Acheron, had spread up his left arm, and he was unable to stop shivering. Again, Harper and I tried to make contact with Base Camp, but the radio just picked up static – and the occasional snatches of a person screaming. I tried not to think too hard about *that*, and instead helped Harper pitch our tent on the driest patch of ground we could find. Dark clouds pressed down upon the barren plain. Our compass needle continued to spin unhelpfully on its bearing, and the EMF reader was off the scale. By my best calculations, I reckoned that we must have begun our descent into the Second Circle of Hell.



Day 13: There was more rain during the night, and by morning the landscape had turned into an endless mire. Chadwick was vomiting again, and barely able to stand, but after what had happened at the Gate, I didn't dare suggest turning back. Despite Harper's reluctance, we pressed on... We hadn't travelled far before the thin, grey light began to falter, and a contrary wind came blundering out of the darkness – disregardable at first, but later gusting strongly enough to knock us over. Rain continued to machine-gun the mud, and my altimeter told us that we'd reached a depth of nearly six miles... As we half-walked, half-waded across the featureless landscape, I kept catching the sound of voices on the wind. I steeled myself to ignore them, just as I ignored the now-almost-constant screaming that our radio picked up whenever we tried to use it; but every so often I'd see a flutter of grey in the distance, like curtains caught in a gust, and I knew that I was catching a glimpse of those souls condemned to be swept along by this preternatural maelstrom for eternity as punishment for their Lust. We were now properly within the Second Circle of Hell.

That night, we were unable to pitch a tent in the wind, and Chadwick's numbness was dangerous close to his chest. I didn't dare think what would happen when it reached his heart.

Day 14: After several sleepless hours huddled in the lee of a rock, listening to Chadwick's increasingly feeble breath, I could stand it no longer. I put on a pair of headphones, and took the recording equipment out



into the storm, hoping to pick up some of the voices that were trapped there. Controlling the microphone boom in the gale was not easy, but after a couple of hours' unsuccessful struggle, I finally managed to catch the sound of two people talking. It only took me a moment to identify the language as Italian; but between the wind-battered sobs, and the roar of the storm, for a

while I could determine little else except that these were two lovers, who'd been killed by a jealous husband, some time in the thirteenth century. At one point, when the cassette tape ran out, I thought that I'd lost them, and I almost gave up in frustration. But after walking around in circles for about ten minutes, pointing the microphone boom in different directions, I tracked them down again, and this time I was able to get a positive identification: they were Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini, bound together in the Second Circle of Hell, just as Dante had immortalised them. The excitement of this discover temporarily drove away my worries about Chadwick, and my lurking dread that our route home was now cut off.

Unable to see the lovers, I tried to call out to them, using a loudspeaker; but I couldn't make myself heard

over the roar of the storm. I'm almost certain, however, that I *did* glimpse a ghostly flutter of cloak and gown entwined, high up in the cloud-deck, as the two lovers were swept off into the deeper reaches of the Second Circle

Later, as I trudged back to where we'd made our camp, I tried to recall what I knew of Paolo and Francesca. Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, gives only a few oblique hints of their history; but Boccaccio, writing twenty-seven years after Francesca's death, fills out the narrative with further (possibly apocryphal) details. Essentially the story is this. Guido I da Polenta of Ravenna has been at war with the Malatesta family. To bring about peace, he arranges for his daughter, Francesca, to wed the brave but crippled Giovanni Malatesta, son of Malatesta da Verucchio, in or around the year 1275. But (at least according to Boccaccio) Guido knows that his daughter will never agree to marry the disfigured Giovanni, and so he convinces Francesca that it will be Giovanni's handsome younger brother, Paolo, waiting for her in the chapel (Boccaccio conveniently seems to forget that Paolo was already married, a fact Francesca would almost certainly have been aware of). Francesca goes through with the wedding in good faith, only to discover the morning afterwards that Paolo has been switched for Giovanni at the last minute. Having already fallen in love with Paolo, she is understandably upset, but both she and Paolo do their best to honour the arrangement, until one day, as they sit reading about the love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere – a story that seems to uncannily mirror their own – they are unable to resist kissing. Thus begins a passionate

love affair that last for about ten years, until, at some point between 1283 and 1286, Giovanni surprises the two lovers in Francesca's bedroom, and kills them; in other words, the usual tragic ending that you'd expect from this sort of story – although personally, I'd always felt more sympathy for the deformed Giovanni than the handsome Paolo. Excited by my discovery, I took the cassettes back to the rock. But my euphoria was short lived. The Acheron-numbness had finally reached Chadwick's heart, and stopping it dead. He now lay on his back in the mud, grey-skinned and slack mouthed, his face washed by the torrential rain. Harper had opened the vodka from the medicine kit, and was once again trying desperately to radio Base Camp; but his eyes were wild with terror, and I began to fear that he was in the first stages of a nervous breakdown. I tried to get him to calm down, telling him that he needed to rest. But he just tore at his hair, and sobbed that we were doomed. The wind, meanwhile, continued to batter around us, knocking loose dark thoughts from our minds, and carrying with it the faint whiff of excrement from the *Third Circle of Hell* below.

