

Wasteland

Paula J. Marolewski

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To Ariane

My Sister & Best Friend

1.

This story is an old one to me now. But the memories are as vivid as if they happened yesterday. True life is like that. Time does not fade it. Years do not dull it. Reality impinges itself on our day-to-day world, and we are never the same.

For years, I have purposed to write these memories down—to commit to paper in the inadequate medium of words some pale reflection of ten days of my life. Ten short days. Ten short days that, to me, comprised more of my life than all that has transpired before or since.

Do not think that my mind was too preoccupied to write them. I wanted to. Desired to. Sat a hundred times in order to begin. But each time I sat, the Life within me called me to another purpose, and so I set pen and foolscap aside and let the memories wait—another day, another year. Now, the Life calls me to write, and I wonder if that means that I shall end as I began, like a true cycle. If so, I know that it is only an ending here—and the beginning of that for which I was laid hold of, all those years ago.

I will begin with my name—the place where we all must begin. The acknowledgment of self; and in that act, the acknowledgment of responsibility. My name is Michael Harrow. To those mavens of journalism, they will recognize in my name the killer of Joanna Macris, painter and naturalist. And they would be right.

I pled “not guilty” at the trial. But I didn’t understand the court, and I didn’t understand the country. I had been to trial before, and had purchased lawyers as shady as myself. But that was before. At this court, there was no jury, and there were no attorneys. Evidence was heard, witnesses sworn in, but I retained a stony silence.

At the conclusion of evidence, the judge summoned me to stand before her. I knew that hatred boiled from my eyes. But it glanced off her self-assurance like darts from armor-plating. “Michael Harrow,” she said calmly. “You are guilty as charged. The sentence for your crime is death.”

So that was it. I felt my muscles bunch, and I tensed myself to spew forth the vitriol that coursed like venom through my veins.

“However, it is the decision of this court to suspend sentence for ten days.”

I hesitated, wondering why this brief reprieve.

“You will be airlifted into the Aram Waste. You will be given a map, a compass, and two days’ supply of water.”

Her gaze was level at me. I kept my tongue behind my teeth.

“It will take you ten days to return to civilization. If you survive, sentence will be carried out.”

The gavel hit the wood, and the torrent of obscenity I had been keeping back broke forth. The judge gathered her robes and rose to leave, never bothering to look at me. The guards came up to flank me on either side, and I felt them prepare to drag me from the room. She did not turn, until I spat one intelligible sentence, “You b-----! Why

don't you kill me now? Shoot me and be done—or are you afraid to carry out judgement yourself?"

Her eyes were grey, and they seemed to weigh my soul. "I am not afraid to carry out judgement, Michael Harrow. No matter on whom it falls." Then she was gone.

2.

There was no appeal from that court, although I tried every idea I could cull from my infuriated brain. I was taken within the hour to a helicopter, shackled hand and foot, and gagged because I would not stop the flow of my profanity. Then we lifted.

It was a fast, military 'copter, and they did not fly her high. Since I could not vent my anger, nor strike out against the guards, I sullenly stared out the window.

Perhaps you have been in the Aram Waste. It is a scrub desert—sandstone monoliths rise from the flatnesses; sage and tumbleweed grow where watercourses occasionally run. All else is stone and sand. Sometimes, conditions permit actual dunes to rise up for a few miles; but most of the time, it is simply arid wasteland—burning hot, with a burning wind.

I glowered more and more darkly as the miles sped by below us. Death from exposure and thirst was an ugly one, and none too quick. And there was no water that I could see.

Hours passed, and my tongue grew thick and dry. Finally, I sensed a descent. But my guards did not remove my gag until the 'copter had touched down, and the blades were spinning to a slow crawl.

They jumped out, and pulled me with them. "Are you going to leave me handcuffed?" I spat. "Maybe set a rattler on me for company?"

"Quiet, Harrow. We'll let you go—when we're ready to."

"Why don't—"

"Be quiet."

Something in his voice quelled me, and I stood silently as he unfolded a map.

He held it before me. "Here," he pointed, "is where you are." The map showed the whole of Aram Waste. I stood—if I believed them—dead center. He flipped the map over. "Here is the route you should take." This side was an enlarged version, and showed individual monoliths and landscape features. A dotted line marked my theoretical trek. "If you follow this path, you should find food and water."

I said nothing.

He folded the map and put it in a pack. "There is a compass here, and water. If you wish, you can diverge from the prescribed path and attempt to re-enter civilization at another point. That is your choice. It will not change the judgement to be carried out on you in the slightest."

They undid my cuffs on hand and foot, and I tried to kill them.

When I came to myself, with my head throbbing and my vision spinning, it was to see the 'copter lifting off, spraying sand with abrasive force into my face and skin.

3.

I cursed the sky. I cursed the judge and the witnesses. I cursed Joanna Macris, whom I had killed. I cursed the world and everything in it, and I cursed Aram Waste.

But first, I cursed the sky.

I don't know what it is about us that we inevitably shake our fist at the fate which is of our own making, reviling the consequences of our sin, shouting out our blasphemy that it should be different because we want it so. But we do, and I did.

Then, I got down to the business of surviving.

I took out the map and the compass, and took a careful drink of water—uncertain of how long it would have to last me. I studied the map, and noticed an odd thing.

There were no distances marked.

No key to how long a mile was on the map.

I cursed again, but more softly. Then I took a reading on the compass, and set out to follow that unmarked dotted line on the ground under my feet.

4.

I walked for hours. And had ample opportunity to curse my own foolishness. To lash out against the guards had bought me a goose-egg on the side of my head, and the headache only got worse under the unrelenting sun. But I had no choice—I had to move. My destination was a treble-spired monolith, and I needed its protection from the predators of the night. And I had to think of what to do for food.

I knew nothing of foraging in the wilderness. Again I cursed. The guards had not been taciturn. Had I reined in my temper enough to be polite, they might have told me something of what was edible in this scrubland.

Or how to start a fire.

Or how to best keep safe at night.

But I had not, so I had to fend for myself as best I could.

That, of course, is what I had always claimed I could do. That I needed no one, and nothing. I was master of my fate, and no fool was going to gainsay me.

None except one.

Myself.

It was fine to claim superiority when there were other people's backs to climb on and over. When suckers grew like ripened fruit for me to pick. When I had at my disposal money and technology and rogue lawyers and free women and ammunition and knives.

But when it was simply myself, with a map, a compass, and the clothes on my back—then it was different. There was no one to be master over, and I could not master so much as the pounding in my head, much less my destiny.

I found prickly pear growing, and from a vague recollection tore carefully to get at the soft pulp. That put something in my stomach, and liquid as well. The treble spires grew large, and the shadow reached out toward me. I walked in the shadow, using the rock to block the blinding sun from my sore eyes. Often, I walked with my eyes closed, shuffling along the desert floor.

When I finally got to the monolith, I collapsed—heavy and dizzy. Just for a minute, I promised myself. I will lie down just for a minute, then find a better place to spend the night.

Then I passed out.

I woke up, and didn't hurt. Not my head, and not my blistered skin. Even the bleeding sores on my feet were painless. I rolled up, startled—and stared.

The rock spires still flung themselves like javelins into the sky above me, but the sky was a richer blue. No longer the blinding desert white. A rich, tangible blue. The

blue of the best summer sky you can remember – but more so. A blue that you want to swim in, it is so deep.

The rock, too, seemed a more solid hue. The color of red sandstone and jasper. Warm and inviting. The spires looked like pillars, prepared to support the bowl of the sky from now until eternity.

Dazed, I looked around me. And the desert was gone.

Where once had been scrub and sage and cactus – arid ground and unforgiving rock – a lush plain spread out. Knee-deep grasses of an impossible green undulated like the waves of the sea to the music of a playful breeze. Copses of trees scattered themselves here and there.

I rose, and not a single muscle ached. I touched my scalp; the goose-egg was gone. Stumbling forward, I headed toward a sound I'd barely hoped I'd heard – and around the side of the rock, I found a spring welling up, feeding a crystal clear pool in which darted brilliantly scaled rainbows. I fell on my knees and drank, and there was never a cup of water I had had that tasted like that pool.

The water nourished, and refreshed. I looked up, and grabbed at the fruit of the sweet-smelling trees that surrounded me. The flesh was firm and tangy, and full of juice that dribbled down my chin and onto my shirt. Berry bushes grew on the other side of the pool, and I laughed aloud as I ate my fill of them.

Invigorated, I looked up at the rock spires, and saw that they were not sheer. I could climb them. Casting caution to the wind, I sprang up and felt strength course through my legs. And I climbed.

Within seconds I had climbed above the trees. Within minutes, I had stretched and sweated, exhilarated, and climbed to the top of the lowest spire. But I didn't so much as pause. Not until I had climbed to the top of the tallest, throwing myself down at its crest – a flat space barely long enough to hold my prostrate form.

I breathed in air that seemed somehow as nourishing as the water from the pool – as if the air itself contained sustenance my body needed. When I finally caught my breath, I sat up and surveyed the land spread out below me.

The plain seemed to sparkle in the sun. As far as the eye could see. As if each grass blade was dipped in dew or diamonds. Here and there, patches of purple flowers swayed in the wind, sending up a perfume that intoxicated, yet also cleared the senses. Rock monoliths in the distance seemed to sing a bass chord under that unending melody, beckoning the wanderer on, to explore and seek and find. And far, far in the distance, the mountains sang.

I suddenly stilled, and it seemed that even the bird melodies hushed themselves. Nothing spoke except the sighing of the wind against the rock.

I had never before felt what I felt in that hour. Peace. Freedom from greed. From lust. From envy. From hate.

Because everything I ever wanted was spread around me, and it was good.

Then I awoke.

5.

My head throbbed, and my mouth was parched: my lips caked with dust. My burned skin stung when I rubbed a hand over my face, trying to clear my thoughts.

I rolled upright, fighting a wave of dizziness. But it passed quickly enough. I reached for the pack to find the water.

Then I paused. All was as it had been. A dream? I stumbled up. The sun was just rising over the horizon. I had slept through the night.

I made my way around the side of the monolith, where the spring had been.

There was nothing. Or so I thought at first. Then I saw that the ground was wet. Damp. I dropped to my knees and began to dig feverishly in the sandy dirt.

I had one goal in mind, and that was to replenish my water flask, and drink what I could. So I dug. And dug. I found a flat shard of rock, cracked from the sandstone, and dug with that.

After a half-hour, as far as I could judge, I had dug a hole nearly two feet deep. But though the ground was decidedly wet, no water pooled while I waited. The spring was too dry.

I think it was then that I felt the first burning in my eyes. I rubbed at them impatiently, but only succeeded in setting them afire from the dirt on my hands. Then I did weep, in earnest, desperate to clear the contamination without using the too-precious drinking water. And in the weeping was the unspoken fear that I would not have enough water—that I could find no more—and that I had wasted the cool of the day in digging that had brought me nothing.

I drank then, sparingly, and unfolded my map with trembling hands. A spring was marked at the next stopping place. But a spring had also been marked at this one. And if this was the dry season, there was no guarantee there would be water. Anywhere.

I set off with my compass in hand. If the map was accurate—which I had no way of knowing—then I had to go twice the distance today as I had yesterday. And I had to find water.

I tore the flesh out of more prickly pear as I went, and kept my eyes open for food sources. Which made me think, irrepressibly, of the dream. When I had eaten my fill, and it had been good.

Why do we fight so much for life? It is ingrained; an obstinate, stubborn will toward self-preservation no matter what the cost. I had little water, no food, a mild concussion, blisters, and burning. I was a condemned criminal, sentenced to death even if I did survive this ordeal. Which made the ordeal itself pointless to me. Why survive it? Why try? When nothing but a hangman's noose awaited me at the end?

Because somehow, in this trackless wilderness, I knew that they would find me when I emerged on the other side. If I survived. Then the suspended sentence would be

carried out. But pride reared its ugly head even here, even threatened with exposure and judgement. I would survive. I would survive long enough to tell them to go to hell before I died.

But that thought gave me no comfort. No sadistic, anticipatory pleasure as it usually did. For there was no one to vent the anger on. It turned inward, souring like bile in the belly. This time, I was at the bottom. Chances were very likely that I would not survive. I would die in the wasteland, and my bones would be picked clean by dingo and vulture alike. Doubt—self-doubt—pushed my thoughts beyond my venomous desires. What if I didn't survive?

What if I died?

6.

Perhaps you have always known that you have an immortal soul. I did not. What I wanted, I took, and thought nothing of anyone else's pain. Escaping judgement meant buying a shyster lawyer and paying him well.

But what of judgement where there are no lawyers? No jury of your peers whose opinions you can sway? No media to play to? No court of appeals, and no higher authority?

When what you are is what you are judged to be?

As I walked, blindly putting one foot in front of the other and only sometimes remembering to check my compass to see whether or not I had veered from the straight path, I wondered.

There was nothing here I wanted. No money to covet. No woman to seduce. No man to rob. No pornography. Or violence. Or alcohol.

What was I when I had no outlet for my vices?

What was I when I was alone?

I quickly realized that I could still give in to vice. Dream up bloody revenges or conjure sexual fantasies. But I also realized that they wouldn't satisfy my cravings. I would spin deeper and deeper, seeking pure sadism and lust—

And I would die.

Torn with unsatisfied hunger.

Inflicting pain on no one but myself.

In such a state of mind, I would not be able to cope with the strain of surviving this hellish landscape. So I had a choice. Think, and maybe survive; or give in to temptation and hope death came quickly.

Pride reared its head. I would survive.

If I could.

What, then? What was the dream I had had? For dream it was, yet I could still taste the fruit in my mouth, feel the wind on my face. It was the Aram Waste, but it was not a wasteland. It was—as it could be. As it should be.

And I had been happy. For the first time in my life.

7.

For me, the realization that I might—just *might*—have an immortal soul, came through that single glimpse of happiness.

I suspect that for others, it has come through pain. Or parenthood. Or the death of a loved one. That moment in time when you truly know that there is more to life than your body, than your set of years on this earth. When even the acknowledgment that you have a mind is not enough. When only the affirmation that you have a soul satisfies.

I will not dwell on my childhood, or my teen years. I will not, because despite the dysfunctionality (to put it politely) and the abuse (to put it correctly), I was responsible for my actions. I would have denied that then, but I know it now. What I was, was my choice.

But I can say that because of my choices—as well as the choices of those around me—I never knew happiness. I knew hunger. Physical hunger. Sexual hunger. Emotional hunger. Mental hunger.

Spiritual hunger.

And I lashed out and grasped and laid hold of the things for which I hungered—or what I thought would satisfy my hungers—and called that happiness. But it was not. At best, it was satiation—as when a scavenger eats its fill of the bloated, dead flesh of its prey.

But in that dream, I had known happiness. A happiness that came from outside myself—and therefore that satisfied. For it is not possible that we in ourselves can fill the hunger within ourselves. For otherwise, we would never be hungry. The very fact that we hunger and thirst for more is proof that we cannot supply our own needs.

I had been full in body, and full in spirit. I had fed, and drank, and climbed, and laughed. Laughed in a way I had never laughed before. With no derision, no scorn, no mockery.

This single thought kept me moving over the arid wasteland until I reached the second monolith and sank beneath its shade.

8.

That was, I know now, my first touch of reality. Of Life. The dream—the dream that disappeared into the sunrise and left me as hungry and thirsty and hurting as I had been when I had fallen asleep—somehow sustained me through the treacherous desert and brought me to the place I would camp the second night.

Unlike the fantasies and perversions I had engaged in all my life, this dream did not grow stale and unsatisfying to the touch. Instead, each time I turned it over in my mind, it comforted and sang. It was as if I could still see with that crystalline clarity I had had in the dream. Enough to see the drops of dew on the grasses, and feel the stone beneath my fingers.

So I did not understand why, when I sat down next to the low, sloping sandstone monolith, I wept.

I believe that was the quickening of my soul. I desired that Life. I wanted to live the dream again—endlessly, to the fullest. Not only the Aram Waste, but the wasteland of my soul had been full of life. Of Life.

After I had cried, I circled the sandstone hulk to find water. And I cried again when I found it—a thin trickle coming from the side of the rock, with moss sending green tendrils down through it. I drank the last of the water in the canteen, and set it against the trickle, thankful to be able to hear it dribbling in to fill the container.

The sun was just setting, so I took the chance to climb up the stone's bulk, to see if I could find a good place to sleep. I found a hollow there in the top of the rock, and put my pack down in it. Then I explored further.

The sandstone had holes weathered into it on one face—like a hundred postal nooks. As I watched, I saw swallows flitting in and out of them. Shutting my mind to nausea, I clambered down the face and raided half a dozen nests. All had eggs, and I ate them all, complete with the embryonic chicks inside. Then I drank a full canteen of water, and set it back against the trickle. I gritted my teeth and swore that I wouldn't throw up from thinking too hard of what I had just eaten. I found a prickly pear, and ate a bit more—to settle my mind, rather than my stomach. Then I drank more water, climbed up to my hollow, and succumbed to my exhaustion and slept.

9.

I shouted with exultation when I awoke and found Life back in the wasteland. I threw up my arms, stretched to my fullest, and shouted aloud. Then I drank in the sight.

The grasslands spread again before me. I had no pain; no hurt. The trickle I had set my canteen at I could hear from where I stood—a gushing torrent pouring from the rock.

I leapt down from the sandstone, watching with abandon as birds, swallow-like but more brilliant, winged their way to and from their rock nests. Their wings shimmered with amethyst and emerald, and their tails were like a grace note in a melody.

I ran in the plain, feeling the freedom of strength and joy in a fashion I had never before known. The grasses didn't hinder me, though they reached to my waist. They were soft against my skin, no matter how fast I ran into them.

I stopped finally, turning round and round and staring at the blue bowl of the sky. Then I ran back to the sandstone behemoth.

When I reached it, I panted for breath, pressing my hand against it, trying to take its solidity into myself. Because I was frightened. As I had all but danced in the plain, I had wanted to thank someone—*someone*—for the beauty around me. And I had wanted there to be others to share it.

I sank down next to the miniature waterfall gushing forth from the rock, and put my head in my hands. Me? When had I ever felt gratitude? Or the desire to share beauty with others?

The answer?

Never.

Gratitude was for the weak. The strong took what they wanted. And there was no sharing in the places I had been. Only selfishness.

Now, I caught a glimpse of why those attitudes never led to happiness. And the truth that pleasure is a poor substitute for joy.

I reached out a hand to cup it under the waterfall.

And stared.

My fingers and palm were bloody. But I felt no pain.

I began to touch my palm with my other hand—and saw that that one was bloody as well.

I plunged both hands into the waterfall, scrubbed at them vigorously and with revulsion, and drew them out again. Blood seemed a perversion to bring into this pristine place.

As I drew them back, dripping and clean, an image superimposed itself in my mind—

—of standing in a bathroom, washing my bloody hands.

Cynically inspecting the result.
Casually wiping them dry on a towel.
And smiling at the thought of Joanna Macris' body, shoved ruthlessly behind the
garbage in an alley.

10.

"NO!" I shouted it. Screamed it. Shuddering in horror, I thrust my hands back under the falls. But the blood, washed from my skin, couldn't be washed from my mind.

Dully, I fell back to the ground and stared at the pool formed by the waterfall. So this was not paradise. Because I had brought my deeds with me.

As I sat and stared, devoid now of all peace and happiness, I saw that the pool had murky lines trailing in it. Lines of faint red. Disgusted, I swept my hand through the pool, seeking to dissipate the diluted blood.

Bright crimson streaks swirled out from the path my hand had taken. And my hand came away bloody.

"No!" This time, the cry had a touch of frenzy in it. I had defiled the water. Made it unfit and ugly. Disbelieving, I tried desperately to wash away the blood under the torrent from the rock.

And the water turned to blood.

I stumbled back and fell, and sharp pain burst through my spine. But my eyes were riveted to the waterfall. For though I was no longer touching it, the rock was pouring forth crimson. The pool was stained incarnadine. And the stream that ran from it began to carry the sign of death to the plain and through the land.

Horror struck me; a horror of knowing without knowing how I knew. I clambered up the rock hulk, skinning knees and elbows and palms, so that my blood ran freely with the murdered blood I had shed. I turned at the top, and my worst fears were realized.

It was as if I watched time-lapse photography. The bloody stream flowed livid into the plains grasses. Everywhere it touched, the ground grew sickly, the grasses perished, and the stench of rot and decay rose up. The single stream spread like fingers, dividing time and time and time again, so that with logarithmic expansion, the plain curled and shriveled. The cry of birds became a death knell, and the wind stilled to nothing so that the reek and pall hung heavy over the landscape.

The sky itself darkened, and turned an ugly reddish grey, hazed and barren.

In time, the decay was complete, leaving the ground to crack and parch under an unrelenting sun.

I stared in disbelief at what I had done.

Then with a scream, I collapsed to the stone, clutching my head in my hands and feeling them still slick with blood.

11.

I crouched, panting in the hollow of the rock. Shaking. I lifted my head. My hands were dry. Dusty, but not bloody. Aram Waste had returned.

I shuddered, and climbed to my feet. Stared at the wasteland around me.

I had brought this. I had brought this place upon myself.

I had spurned the good, rejected peace and fulfillment and joy. I had chosen self-gratification, greed, violence, and lust.

I had done this.

I.

Memories of dishonest lawyers resurfaced. Courts where I'd perjured myself and sworn myself innocent. Testimony given where I'd borne false witness, and seen an innocent man sentenced to prison.

I had done this. There was no one else responsible except myself.

I know now that this was a beginning. It was not yet the end. I regretted and mourned the loss of the good, but that was because *I* had lost it. I did not think yet of what I had lost for other people. I did not mourn the evil *because* it was evil. I mourned because I had lost the good.

But holiness begins in such small places as these. If the One who is truly good can only bring us to a place of desire, the desire for the good, no matter how selfish that desire may be—he can then go on to bring us to the higher place. The place where we desire not the joy and happiness the good can bring, but the place where we desire to *be* good ourselves—and so bring that joy and happiness to others, like a fountain fed by an underground river whose depth and breadth we can never comprehend.

I only knew then that I had been given a good and perfect gift, and that I had destroyed it.

I cannot express the dulled pain and dejection I felt as I slid down the rock to retrieve my canteen. I drank it to the full, and set it back to fill again. As I waited, I took careful stock of my body.

I was no longer thirsty, but hunger pressed at me relentlessly. Only my exhaustion each night had brought me sleep. The foods I had eaten had given me diarrhea, though I hoped that I had gained some nourishment from them. My head still ached, but that was more from the sun and my hunger than from the clip I'd taken to my skull.

My face and arms were burned and tender to the touch. My feet were blistered and sore.

I had nothing to eat, nothing to stop the pain, nothing to soothe my skin, nor heal the blisters.

I blinked once. Then looked around me again. And saw the aloe plants.

Hastily, I broke the thick, succulent leaves, and watched in relief that I had not been wrong—sap oozed from the broken ends. I smeared it on my face and arms. It burned briefly, but then brought relief. I rubbed it on the blisters as well. Then I uprooted the plant, and shoved it into my pack.

My canteen was now full, so I capped it carefully and took out my map and compass. I had far to go, and there was no spring marked.

12.

By mid-day, I had to stop to re-apply aloe to my feet. Then I gritted my teeth and pressed on.

I had my eyes trained on the distance, where I could see my goal—a low-lying sandstone form like the spined humps of a dragon. It took a while before it registered that I was seeing something else—something very important to me.

I was seeing vultures, circling on the thermals, spiraling down, but not landing. I started to run.

I was fortunate. The dingoes were easily frightened by my shouting and the belligerent waving of my arms. I threw rocks at them, and they ran farther, until they finally disappeared into the brush.

The kill was fresh—a fawn-like deer creature that I had not seen in the days I had been in the Waste. Probably nocturnal, seeking whatever shade it could find during the day. Throwing a defiant yell at the vultures, which swooped lower in the absence of the dingoes, I pulled meat from the creature's bones. I had a vague recollection that in the wilderness, meat should be eaten as raw as possible so that the nutrients weren't cooked away. As long as it was fresh.

Of course, I didn't have a choice.

I gagged innumerable times, but I forced myself to eat my fill. Ignoring the probability that I would become ill from infection from whatever had been in the dingoes' mouths.

When I stumbled on, it was bare minutes before I heard the vultures land.

13.

There is something about degradation that strips us of our pre-conceived notions of ourselves. Survival pushes us past our comfortable boundaries, rips away social niceties, and shines a blinding light in our face that shows us what we really are.

There was something violently humiliating in being reduced to raiding birds' nests, and eating the kill left by wild animals because I could not even bring down a kill myself.

I had fought vultures for my dinner and had been frightened of them. My stomach was protesting violently the food I was putting into it, yet was also trying to pull enough nutrition out of it to survive.

I was no longer master of my fate. No longer the proud ego that looked with disdain on the world.

I would have given anything to have met somebody who would help me. Feed me. Bandage my bleeding sores.

But I knew that I would find no one. And that very hopelessness made certain that the last cords that bound me to my pride were broken.

All except my will to survive.

There was no energy to think about revenge. No strength to spare for hatred. All my concentration was on keeping myself moving. Focusing on reaching my destination and not falling on the way.

Ego took too much thought, and so it was put aside. I was the pawn of the wasteland. If the wasteland chose to feed me, it would. If it chose to give me drink, it would.

If it chose to kill me, it would.

In such state of mind, I reached my destination. There was a small cave hollowed in the side of the sandstone leviathan, and I sank inside it, uncaring.

14.

For the first time, I did not fall asleep immediately. I stared out at the night. At the stars spread across the infinite expanse. At the shadows cast by moonlight from the scrub bushes.

I did not want to fall asleep. I felt uneasy. I feared dreaming again.

I never tried to convince myself that they were “just” dreams. When you have tasted Reality, you know it. It verifies itself. Things that touch on the spiritual soul may be good, or they may be evil. They may be truth, or they may be the deceit of hell. But there is no question that they are more than dreams.

At that time, I would not have known how to tell the difference between truth and falsehood. But I was in the grip of Another, and my path was being guided by that One’s eye. All I knew was that I feared going back to the bloody landscape of my dream.

But sleep came. Like the grim Reaper; silent, inexorable, relentless. It dragged me down and I know I moaned, for there was a moment between, when I was aware of what was happening – aware of the dream, aware of the stone around me –
– and I was afraid.

But I did not return to the dying wasteland. It was night, and I looked about me, puzzled.

I was in a city. It seemed somehow familiar, yet somehow not. The crazy nightmare of a surrealist’s dream.

Buildings, grey in the moonlight, flung themselves with impossible perspectives upward. Windows were elongated with distance; angles bent so that the edifices loomed above and threatened to fall and crush the deserted streets below.

I walked uneasily on the cracked sidewalk. Cars passed periodically; dark monsters with no human minds.

Then I froze.

I had seen no pedestrians, but now I saw one. A woman with a lithe step, walking purposefully along the other side of the street. Purposeful, but just a little bit nervous.

I knew her. But the last time I had seen her, she had been dead.

I screamed her name. “Run! Run!” Because I could see, behind her, the cause of her anxiety. A man was walking, and no one knew his name better than myself.

How can I describe what happened within me? I had walked that street some strange life past – in a time when I walked with arrogance and pride. When all those around me were fodder for my lusts. When I knew how to cause fear, and I caused it deliberately, purposefully, like a sadist drawing a knife.

It was this – this that I had done, that caused that bloody wasteland. That turned Eden into Earth. This act . . . and the hundreds and thousands that had gone before it. I had lost what was good, and settled for something less.

And it was not enough that I had destroyed myself, but I had destroyed another as well.

I felt her heart beat as if it were mine. The hammering terror of fear. The quickening of her step as she darted a look behind her, then paled and began to run.

But where I had fed on this then, I loathed it now.

Because of this, there was no one with whom I could share the glories of that paradise plain. I had killed those who would have shared it. Killed them, and killed it as well. Because of this, I had destroyed that thrumming melody that had played a promise of hope . . . the secret hope that I had never before entertained, that there was *Someone* to thank for it. *Someone* whom I could dive into, as into an endless ocean.

This, then, was what I was. A black hole, endlessly feeding and never satisfied. Taking good and sucking it in so that no light could escape any longer. Devouring human flesh and hopes and dreams for my own cynical pleasure. Raping reality to titillate my senses for a passing breath.

And I saw all that I had given up. Not only the paradise plain, but the joy of human relationship. The laughter of being able to give. The peace of healing, rejoicing, trusting. The chance to absolutely, truly, completely – in a way I had never before imagined possible – be myself. Be everything I wanted to and was called to be. The freedom of boundaries set in place by a caring Other.

Joanna Macris was still running. Shouting helplessly against the constriction of her throat. And I was running, too. I was running to stop myself, my other self, my hated self, who ran with vicious laughter to overtake his fleeing victim.

As in a dream, I could not reach them in time. I hurled myself against an invisible wall of molasses, and watched helplessly as he – I – grabbed her and flung her into an alley. I choked and vomited as I heard the sounds of her muffled screams.

I knew what was happening, and I screamed myself and pounded the pavement. Slammed my fist against the broken asphalt until I was sure the bones would break.

Then there was silence.

I looked up, and saw myself sauntering from the alley, my hands carelessly in my pockets. Grinning as a police car cruised steadily by.

I tripped as I tried to rise, then sprinted across the street, freed from my immobility. I tore at the trash piled high until I was able to find the still, pale form.

She was like a rag-doll. Battered and discarded. Bruised and wide-eyed in hopeless fear. Blood still oozed from the multiple stab wounds in her abdomen, and I cried as I pressed my hands against them.

I cried. And I stared through my tears as the blood kept seeping around my fingers, beginning to pool beneath her body. “I can’t stop the bleeding!” I cried out.

I pressed harder. Desperate to stop the consequence of the murder. It continued to ooze, and the pool began to send out thin trickles over the pavement that snaked into cracks and wandered in jagged course toward the sidewalk.

"I can't stop the bleeding!" This time I shouted it, and I felt fear as I pressed more, trying to find where to place my hands to stop that crimson flow.

"What would you do if you could?"

I jerked my hands up, dripping and red. The voice came from the air around me. Reverberated off the concrete buildings. Throbbled under my knees.

It was the voice of my judge . . . and yet somehow not.

"I want . . ." my voice trailed off in a hiccup.

"What would you do if you could? You cannot bring her back to life."

I stared dully at the wounds that would not stop bleeding. The trickles had reached out to the sidewalk, and curled into the street. I did not need to look to know that they would spread the same devastation and infection that had destroyed the bountiful plain.

I threw my head back defiantly. "Why didn't you stop me?" My throat tightened, and what was supposed to be a shout came out as a whisper.

"How could I have stopped you?" It was somehow a male voice as well. The tones were pitched so that they changed, modulating from feminine to masculine.

"I gave you a moral conscience, Michael Harrow. I gave you truth, written and spoken. I gave you creation and history and example. What more should I have done?"

"You should have—you should have—" I gulped.

"I should have struck you dead before you reached her?"

I bowed my head. "Yes," I whispered.

"And so removed from you moral responsibility? No, Michael Harrow. You made your choice. You must live with the consequences."

"But the consequences to *her!*" I screamed. "It wasn't fair to *her!* Why should she have to suffer for the evil I have chosen?"

"Because otherwise, free will is not free. That was my choice."

"Then you shouldn't have given it to us," I mumbled. I could no longer raise my eyes from Joanna's bleeding corpse.

"If I had not given it, what then?"

"Then I could not have chosen to be evil."

"But neither, Michael Harrow, could you have chosen to be good."

I pulled myself to my feet, and turned away from the body. Stood at the entrance to the alley, and looked out at the blood-stained streets.

Then the streets seemed to tip dizzily, as if in a silent earthquake, and I felt myself dropped back into the sun-baked reality of Aram Waste.

15.

The sun was up, and the birds were no longer calling. If they had called at all that morning.

I was absolutely silent as I climbed down from my cave, shouldered my pack, and read the compass for my next destination.

Now I was truly afraid. Afraid to sleep. Afraid to be awake. Afraid because with the realization that I had been wrong, and that I had an immortal soul, came the deep, unswerving knowledge that I was damned.

The voice of my judge throbbed in my head. Allowing me no way out—I was responsible. I. And I would bear the consequences of my sin.

In the social structure and order that I hope you enjoy, it is easy to feel contempt and embarrassment when the mention of sin is made. Sin is a gross term. An ugly one. We prefer to label it, “Freedom of choice.” “Alternative lifestyles.” “Situational ethics.” “Tolerance.” It’s fine to label a murderer as a murderer—unless, of course, that murderer holds political office, or is an upstanding citizen, or a savvy lawyer. Then it is a matter of “extenuating circumstances,” and at best, “manslaughter,” or preferably “temporary insanity.”

But to define wrong as sin, and to use images such as leprosy in order to convey it—that is a social *faux pas* of the first order. But that, too, is the first symptom of sin: for just as leprosy destroys nerve-endings so that the victim is not aware of decaying and wounded and rotting flesh, so also sin deadens our senses so that we are unaware of our decaying and wounded and rotting souls.

We throw a thousand excuses at sin. We claim that our dysfunctional families and society made us what we are. We agree that if it feels good, and doesn’t hurt anyone, it can’t be wrong. We affirm that if the end is good, any means is justified in attaining it.

But this is all hypocrisy and self-justification. Just as we claim that there are little sins and big ones. For if murder is the destruction of the body, isn’t gossip the destruction of trust? Slander the destruction of relationships? Adultery the destruction of fidelity? Isn’t anger as sharp a blow as physical abuse, and isn’t gluttony as much an orgy as alcoholism? And for the passive sins—isn’t sloth the killer of ingenuity? Pride the hammer-blow to equality? Envy the destroyer of peace?

If we can ever get on our knees enough to acknowledge sin, we will find damnation coming hard on its heels. This is another subject to be ignored by polite society. We all know that we sin, but we refuse to call it by its rightful name. We all know that we will die, but we dance desperately in the sun in a vain effort to stay the coming of the night. But once you realize the truth of your own immortality—once you hear the voice of your judge reverberating through the night-time of your soul—once you recognize sin for the rupture in the universe that it is—then you will know the fear

of damnation. For to give up an infinite good – to spit in the face of *Someone* of infinite good – is an infinite evil demanding infinite retribution.

But that is not a topic of conversation for morning coffee breaks. We save it for the bedsides of the sick and dying, and wonder why the hopelessness remains.

The time to deal with death is when you are still alive. Afterwards, it is too late. Face your fears and doubts and questions while you have the strength to seek out the answers. The strength to hammer on the door of eternity until Truth lifts the latch.

For he who asks, receives. He who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

16.

I walked, and I did not so much as trouble to look for food. I no longer had the stomach to eat.

I did not spread aloe on my blisters or burns, either. I welcomed the pain. Tried to drown in it. Sought some mortification of my soul through the pain of my body.

I drank sparingly and continued to walk with the doggedness of despair.

In years since, I have seen often that we shy away from such despair. We want to spare others the path that I trod in the Aram Waste. We want to move hastily from sin and damnation to the good news . . .

But I myself move too hastily on. I believe we do ourselves and those we love an injustice when we do not allow time to drink deep of the cup of despair. That cold hand that grips our soul is often a doorway: the threshold into hope. It takes away the last grains of pride. Leaches out the last reliance we put in mortal friendships. Removes the last speck from our eyes that would blind us to seeing ourselves as we really are.

When we gloss over despair, we cheat our souls of knowing the full abundance of grace. If I am rescued, I want to understand the peril I stood in. If I am healed, I want to comprehend the illness with which I was struck. Only so will my life ever afterwards sing of gratitude and be characterized by vibrant change. Despair of the soul is the recognition of sin and damnation. To be saved from that eternal hell of self and separation is something I want to comprehend to the fullest.

17.

Those were not my thoughts, however, as I struggled through the Aram Waste. I only knew that I was desperately in pain – within, more so even than without – and that there was no hope. I had murdered, and my life – and my soul – was forfeit.

The only thing that kept me from lying down where I was to die was the thought that this was a small, if useless, penance I could do for my sin. I would get through the Waste, and survive long enough to be publicly executed for justice.

I pressed on.

18.

When I reached my campsite, I was roused enough from my inward-focus to double-check my map. The mound of sandstone was just that—little more than a mound, with no protection at all to be offered from the wild animals. A spring was marked on the map, but I found only damp ground. I weighed the water in my bottle, and swallowed hard.

Through careful rationing, I had not used a full day's allotment of the precious liquid. But though I could probably make it one more day on what I had, I could *only* make it one more day. I could not stretch it further.

I frantically sought the map in the waning light. The next day's goal did not have a spring marked. The following did. Nor were there any springs marked off the trail set out for me.

I folded the map very slowly in the twilight. I had been lightheaded through the day from insufficient food. Though I could probably make it through tomorrow, I was not at all sure I could make it the day following without passing out. I had tried to keep aware of any prickly pear around, but the vegetation had grown sparser and sparser, and I had not found any during the day. The ground was too cracked and dry even for the cactus.

So it was the same backwards or forwards. But forwards I might possibly find a spring or cactus. Backwards I knew I would find none.

Still, I didn't lie down. I sat with my legs crossed, staring out across the Waste. All my fears returned to me. And as I listened to the night sounds, I had another fear: I feared that I would die before the dawn. For I heard the yipping calls of the dingoes, and I had no protection at this rock.

The hours passed in this sitting-without-thought state of my despair. The moon climbed high in the sky and my head swirled. I finally admitted that if I did not sleep, I would pass out on the morrow, regardless of water. Awkwardly, I laid down, putting my head on my pack.

I felt the tears start, and I couldn't seem to stop them. They trickled down my face and dripped off my nose, wetting the back of my hand. Convulsively, I dug my hand into the dirt, as if to try to hold on to something. Then I felt my face screw up and I started to cry like a child, pounding the ground with my fist, afraid of the dark, and afraid of nightmares.

A long while later, the choking sobs subsided, and I lay and trembled and waited for sleep to come.

19.

It was not the devastated plain. Nor the abandoned city. I lifted my head slowly, and gazed around me.

At the courtroom.

It was entirely empty of people. The chairs for the observers and reporters were there, but pushed out of line, as if people had gotten up and shoved them out of the way, and no one had straightened them yet.

The judge's seat was there, and the gavel lay atop her table. The witness stand stood vacant.

"Michael Harrow."

It was the judge's voice. Emanating from nothing, but vaguely coming from the vicinity of her chair. I wet my lips nervously and tried to stand erect despite my shaking knees.

"Michael Harrow." Again, the voice modulated from woman's to man's and back again. Somehow holding undertones that were too deep to hear.

"I am here," I said in barely a whisper.

"How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

My eyes darted nervously to and fro.

"How do you plead, Michael Harrow?" The voice demanded again.

I remembered saying "not guilty." Speaking evenly and with a sneer in my voice. But there was no way I could form those words again.

"Guilty," I whispered.

"How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

I forced my chin to steady, and I said in a clearer voice, "Guilty, your honor."

"You speak truly, Michael Harrow. What would you do to right the wrong you have done?"

I hesitated. "I don't know," I finally said. I swallowed hard.

"Then think on it, Michael Harrow. We will wait."

I looked about aimlessly, then went and sank into the defendant's chair. The voice did not reprimand me for impertinence for doing so. I began to think.

After a long time, I lifted my head. "Can pain expiate it?" I asked. My voice tremored.

"What kind of pain, Michael Harrow?"

"The kind—as much as I inflicted." I suddenly felt heady, and weak, and dropped my forehead to my hand. I realized that I was frightened to suffer what I had done to Joanna Macris.

"But what would that do for me?"

I jerked my head up. It was a different voice. Soprano. Mellow. Full of pain.

The voice I had never heard except in screams.

The voice of Joanna Macris.

20.

"Answer her, Michael Harrow."

My judge's voice. Commanding, but not harsh.

I stood up, trembling in all my limbs. "It would not right the wrong done to her, your honor."

"Then find what would."

I did not sit down again. I felt the presence of these unseen witnesses. "My death, your honor? Isn't that what I was sentenced to?" I was almost pleading.

"But what would that do for me?"

Joanna's voice again. I fell to my knees.

"Such are the demands of justice, Michael Harrow. But justice that punishes the wrong yet does not make right is a poor justice."

I felt myself begin to babble. "I will do whatever it takes! I will work for those in need—I will help the poor and sick and infirm—I will live exactly as you tell me to live! I will suffer and die as you order, no matter what it takes! I swear it! I will do anything!"

"But what would that do for me?"

I screamed. The voice of the murdered woman was quiet, unyielding. And I knew that whatever I could do—it could do nothing for Joanna Macris.

And because I could do nothing for her—

I could do nothing for me.

21.

There was a time that the voice of my judge said nothing. How long it was, I do not know. But finally, the voice called me to my feet.

"Stand before me, Michael Harrow."

I stood, ill in every part.

"Can you, then, do nothing, Michael Harrow? Nothing to right the wrong you have done?"

"No, your honor," I said thickly. "I can suffer just retribution, but there is no way to recompense what I have done."

"Do you truly understand even that part of justice, Michael Harrow?"

I hesitated, then shook my head. "No, your honor." I could not claim knowledge on any matter anymore. Everything was much deeper than I had ever known.

"Are you afraid, Michael Harrow?"

I began to shake again. "Yes," I whispered.

"Would it be just to imprison you where you could no longer harm another soul, Michael Harrow?"

My head pounded. "Yes."

"Would it be just to allow your hungers, which you have served as a slave all your life, to master you forever, Michael Harrow?"

I thought fleetingly of the beauty of the paradise plain. Of fulfillment. Of being truly satisfied. And it was with despair that I said, "Yes."

"Would it be just to torment you as you have tormented countless others, Michael Harrow?"

I fell to my knees again and began to weep, my head pressed to the floor. "Yes!"

"Are you afraid of this, Michael Harrow?"

I didn't understand. The voice of the judge, deepening and lightening like sunlight on a cloud-struck day, was not cruel. Not mocking. There was something of sorrow under the iron in the voice.

"Choices are eternal because the soul is eternal, Michael Harrow. Are you afraid of this?"

"Yes, your honor," I whispered. Then a plea rose to my lips, born of all the tears and fear and agony. "Have mercy on me, your honor!"

"There is a way, High Judge."

I picked my face off the floor, tear-stained and dirty. The voice was a new one. Tenor-baritone and coming from near the judge's chair, on my left. And the voice was rich with compassion.

"Justice must be satisfied." The sad-sweet soprano of Joanna Macris.

"Justice must be satisfied." The rising-falling modulated tones of my judge.

"Justice must be satisfied." My own affirmation, coming hard on my terror at what I acknowledged in the four simple words.

"I will satisfy it," came the tenor-baritone. And the promise was calm, and full of assurance.

22.

I jerked awake, my heart pounding. All around me was the scent of danger – and the soft footfalls of the dingoes.

With a wild yell, I grabbed the canteen and sprang up the mound of sandstone.

The pack didn't wait. Their approach by stealth broken, they surged up the rock. I laid about with the canteen as my only weapon, striking blindly at every movement. There were somewhere between six and eight, and the night was torn by yipping as I landed blow after blow. With a low growl, the largest leapt at me. I swung frantically and struck him on the side of the head, but my grip slipped even as I did so and the canteen went flying, exploding to the ground with a splintering crash.

Yelping with pain from their wounds and fear from the sound, the pack turned tail and ran into the night.

I stared in disbelief.

Then I slithered to the ground.

The canteen was shattered; the water already had seeped into the ground.

The backpack was nowhere to be seen. I vaguely remembered seeing a smaller dingo run off with it in his mouth. I recalled wiping my hands on it after scavenging the fresh kill; it would have smelled like something dead.

I was now in the Aram Waste with no water, no map, and no compass.

With an unearthly scream, I fell to the ground.

23.

I truly believe that had it not been for those final words I had heard in my dream, I would have died at that sandstone mound. Instead, I rose shakily to my feet, and headed in the direction of my next stopping place, guided by the stars.

It was some time before the sun rose up, which told me that I had gotten a bare minimum of sleep. Not that it would matter much, I reasoned. Without food, without water—rationality was fast spinning away anyway. And although I thought I might be able to find the next monolith, I could not remember the map beyond that point. So I would perish in the Waste.

But hope is that most untenable thing that in times of despair we grab onto as a lifeline. I had hope in four words that I did not understand. No—I had hope in the voice, because the voice spoke with compassion.

And with that hope, I struggled through the day.

The sun blazed bright and hot, and I grew lightheaded. More than once, I found myself staring at the crazed cracks in the ground from mere inches away, and had to pull myself to my feet once more, unaware of when I had fallen or how long I had lain unconscious.

By noonday I saw the monolith that I believed would be my grave. It rose up from the desert floor—huge, looming, with rounded sides sloping up to a high plateau. I kept my eyes on it and pressed on.

By this time, my tongue seemed to be filling my mouth, and my throat was in agony when I would try convulsively to swallow. My eyes squinted in the sun, and seemed swollen, though with fatigue or dehydration or fever, I could not tell.

I fainted at least twice more than afternoon, but pushed on, crawling when I could not walk, gasping when I could not crawl.

In a last surrender to the inevitable, I climbed the nooked and crannied side of the monolith, swaying on my feet as I walked to near the center of it and collapsed into a broad, shallow depression.

Every nerve was on fire, every muscle screaming that it could go on no more, but I hung on to consciousness just a little while longer—just long enough to see the sun sink blood-red into the horizon, and turn the sandstone into a glowing crucible about me.

24.

When I awoke, I was where I had lain down. I scrambled to my feet and looked around me. The plain was blood-soaked.

"MICHAEL HARROW!"

I cringed and dropped to my knees. The voice of my judge thundered over the desecrated plain. "I am here!" I said desperately.

"The time of judgement has come! The commandment is written: You shall not covet. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

"Guilty, High Judge," I answered.

"Bind him."

I lifted my head, searching around me frantically. I saw a group of men on the far side of the monolith plateau, their faces dark in silhouette against the sunrise. They pushed before them a white-clad man, shoving him so that he stumbled and fell. They held him down with their feet and stripped him; took his hands and bound them in front of him, cruelly tight. Then they jerked him up again.

"The commandment is written: You shall not bear false witness. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

I was mesmerized as I gazed at the bound man. I hardly heard myself reply, "Guilty, High Judge."

"Scourge him."

This time, I lurched to my feet. But the air seemed charged, and I could not approach closer to the group of men. They set up a whipping post, sinking it into one of the holes in the sandstone, and bound the man there. Then one of them took out a whip studded with glass and metal shards.

"NO!" I screamed it before the first blow fell. Before I saw the man's body gasp with the impact. I screamed it again when I saw the scourge continue to fall. Endlessly. Countlessly. Until the flesh was flayed from his back, and the blood dripped to the ground. He was loosed from the post and collapsed, and the mocking tormentors threw a purple cloak over his body.

"The commandment is written: You shall not steal. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

"I am guilty, High Judge! I am! Not that man! I am guilty!"

"Strip him."

The robe was torn from his back. Even in those moments, it had adhered to the flesh, so that the man jerked in agony. I could hardly see through my tears.

"The commandment is written: You shall not commit adultery. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

I could not answer. I could not. The man lifted his head and looked at me, and I saw in his clear blue eyes the same calm assurance, even though overshadowed by pain, that I had heard in an unseen voice. "Guilty, High Judge," I whispered.

"Crown him."

The men fashioned a crown of thorns—a coronet of long, two-inch lances I had seen and avoided on the scrub plain. Then they set it on his head and took staves and hit it so that the thorns pierced the flesh and bone. The man fell to his hands and knees. Blood dripped into the clear eyes.

"The commandment is written: You shall not murder. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

"No—no!" I moaned. But I could not refuse to answer. "Guilty, High Judge." The words were torn out of me.

"Strike him."

The men set to, beating and kicking the bleeding and broken man. He did not cry out, yet the pain was palpable, tearing the air and setting the entire plain on fire. I struggled to reach him, but could not. After some timeless period, they desisted. In agony, I waited for the voice to speak again.

"The commandment is written: You shall honor your father and mother. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

I was so weak that I could barely speak. I could not bear what would happen when I did so. "Guilty, High Judge."

"Lead him."

My soul throbbed with a dull ache. A heavy bar of wood was put on his bleeding shoulders, and he struggled, and fell. Three times he fell, each time prodded up with a booted kick and jab. Finally, he reached the very center and crest of the monolith. He sank to the stone, naked and bleeding.

"The commandment is written: You shall keep the sabbath. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

It never ended. The litany of all I had done. And each time, the punishment fell on the innocent man. "Guilty, High Judge." I could not take my eyes from the man.

"Pierce him."

I screamed again. Clawing my way toward him, but gaining bare inches. The cross-piece was fitted to a longer timber, and the man dragged to lie on it. His face trembled in agony as the splintered board cut into his back.

His arms were stretched to the full, and I saw his chest heaving for air. A rough iron nail was placed at his wrist, and the hammer lifted.

"No! NO!" I begged, pleaded to the sky. The hammer fell, and I heard the cry of his agony. Three times more it pounded, until it had secured the flesh to the wood.

"The commandment is written: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

"I can't—I can't! Spare him, I beg of you!" There was silence across the monolith, broken only by the man's rasping breath.

I finally bowed my head to the ground. "Guilty, High Judge."

"Pierce him."

This time, I could not watch as the arm was stretched, and the hammer lifted. But I heard it fall. Four times, I heard it fall.

"The commandment is written: You shall not make for yourself an idol. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

I lifted my head and stared blindly at the dying man. "Guilty, High Judge." The words were hardly a sound on the wind.

"Pierce him."

I vomited though there was nothing in my stomach. His feet were placed against the wood, and a longer spike poised over them. The hammer lifted and fell. Again and again, nailing the body against the cross.

For a long moment there was no sound but the sougling of the wind over the monolith. Then the voice came one final time.

"The commandment is written: I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

My mouth trembled and I wept. I wept as I had never wept even yet. Then I looked up, and I stood. And through tear-blurred eyes, I said, "Guilty, High Judge."

"Crucify him."

I watched, shaking in every limb, as the men pulled and lifted the cross to the sky. They sank it with a jolt into one of the sandstone holes. The man twisted on the beam, struggling against the pain. Struggling for breath.

Struggling for life.

I stood there, and watched as the sun climbed across the sky. For all he had suffered, the dying came slowly. And all I could do was watch, as a silent sentry.

The breathing came more and more unevenly. Heaving as he stretched himself against dislocated joints, pressed himself on the nails in order to suck in a breath of air. And all the time, the blood dripped from his brow, his back, his hands and feet. Dripped down to the foot of the cross, and spilled in rivulets to form a crimson pool on the sandstone.

Suddenly, the sky was split by blinding thunder. Thunder that formed words, as the voice I now knew well became matched and joined to the tenor-baritone that cried out from the cross.

"IT IS FINISHED!"

I was electrified by the only words I had heard the man speak through his entire suffering. And I sprang forward, and suddenly found that I could do so.

But too late. The head fell against the chest. The lungs struggled no more. The bleeding stopped.

In agony, I turned and swung my hand against the shoulder of the man nearest me. Swung him toward me and shouted, *"How could you do this to him?!"*

He came about, and the others turned as well, and for the first time I could see his face clearly. "How could I?" he replied. "How could *you* do this to him?"

The face — all their faces — were my own.

25.

I do not remember waking. I remember fainting to the ground, somehow in the same hollow in which I had fallen asleep.

I only remember that when I became aware again, I could not move.

And I knew.

My last hope was gone.

The hope in the tenor-baritone voice was gone. Finished. Crucified.

For I had killed him.

I did not understand. The judge had condemned me. But the white-clad man had taken my place. Yet I had been the one who had struck and beaten and crucified him.

I lay on the monolith, and I did not move. The sun had already risen, and my tongue was dry and caked with dust. With the death of the white-clad man, I no longer had the will to even try to survive. There was no use. For he was dead.

The sun grew hotter, and climbed the sky. The sandstone began to shimmer with heat waves. I moaned and twisted, but remained where I was. My arms were spread full to either side. A final tribute to the Crucified One.

I longed to lose consciousness, but I did not. Like an after-image burned on my retina, all I could see was the Cross, shimmering darkly through the heat-haze.

The sandstone where I lay burned my skin, and my head pounded as if it must split apart. I could no longer have moved even if I had wanted to.

I did not ask for mercy, for mercy had perished with the Man. I waited to die.

Perhaps I did lose consciousness for a time, for I slowly became aware that the sky was darkening. It did not seem that enough time had passed for it to be nightfall. I cracked my crusted eyelids and tried to focus.

Black clouds were mounting above me. Billowing up, turgid with moisture. Lightning split the sky, simultaneous with a thunder crack that made me fear, even as I longed for death.

Then, as if the heavens opened in torrents, the rain began to fall.

26.

I lay there still, helpless in the rain. Just able to open my mouth as much as I could.

But the rain did what I could not. It washed the dirt from my eyes. Cleansed and freed my tongue. Loosened my throat.

And all the while, it soaked me through to the skin, removing heat and pain and burning. Thunder continued to crack and roll across the sky. With a sudden, involuntary movement, I realized I could swallow again.

With the coming of the rain, I found that I could cry. So I did, my tears mixing with the water from above, my voice finally able to lift itself in sobs that I had not been able to release in the burning hours of the day.

It rained, and it continued to rain. Within an hour, I tried to focus on a peculiar sensation I was feeling. With great strain, I lifted my head. I was lying in water! The hollow I had lain in as my deathbed was already four inches deep. My head was elevated on the slope, but my legs were awash in the water.

It was the pure abundance that finally drove me to movement. I struggled up, biting my lips against the agony in every joint, and threw myself into the water, drinking it in in great gulps. When I could drink no more, I lay so that as much of my body as possible was submerged in the life-giving pool.

The rain finally stopped, but the clouds took hours to dissipate. Bird calls sounded through the evening air.

I had no thought save that of thankfulness. There was room for nothing else. It was not a huge, explosive burst of gratitude. I was too weak for that. It was just the presence of thankfulness itself, as I lay buoyed by the water which had taken so many of my pains away.

Without knowing it, I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

27.

When I awoke, I had not moved a muscle from the position I had been in when I had fallen asleep. The water still lapped in a pool about me.

And I had not dreamed.

I pulled myself to a sitting position, cupping my hand again and again to bring water to my mouth. My clothes clung to me with a blessed coolness.

“If I am alive,” I said softly to the morning, “I must go on. Even though I do not know what I am surviving for.”

I drank until I could drink no more, washed my face one last time, and stood shakily to my feet. I had begun by wanting to survive to attain some bitter revenge. With what had happened, I had then wanted to survive so that I could face the scales of justice.

Now – I did not know why I wanted to survive. I knew that my execution would not satisfy – for it could not help Joanna Macris. I could not right the wrong, even though I suffered justly for it.

But I would try to survive. Simply so that maybe – before the inevitable end and damnation – I might understand.

28.

I walked slowly through the day. I did not know where I was supposed to be headed, so I simply struck a course east, away from the gargantuan monolith. I would keep the rock at my back, and hope to keep straight by doing so. The guards had said they would find me no matter where I re-entered civilization. I would trust that they would.

The loss of my canteen did not trouble me, for the rain had left dry watercourses running full. I went on.

I thought about the Man. The Man whom I did not know, but who had known me. The Man who had interceded and given his life when mine had been required of me.

But for what? Could he pay my debt? How could he satisfy justice? No matter who he was?

And what of the dual voices at the end, crying that all was finished? What was finished?

Besides his life, I had no answer.

I had no answers. I had come to that place where you can no longer so much as voice the questions—because you aren't certain exactly what they are. The questions plunge deeper than our limited language goes, and strike at chords within the very heart of our soul.

I did not understand how I could have killed the Man. Yet I had. As viciously as I had killed Joanna Macris. I had killed him.

He was the antithesis of everything I had been. He was the fulfillment of everything I longed to be. But he was dead. And that seemed to spell the end of any hopes I could have of changing who I was.

Even in the mere days left to me.

When evening came, there was no sandstone cleft to shelter in. I sank down next to a running watercourse, drank, and stared at the sky.

When my words came, they came uncertainly. "High Judge—if you can hear me, please have mercy on me. At least let me understand before I die."

I pillowed my head on my arms, stared for a while at the night, then slept.

29.

I awoke again, dreamless. But curiously rested—more so than sleeping on the rain-soaked ground could account. I drank deeply, and struck again toward the rising sun.

I did not know then that this day and the one previous had been an intimate time. A time of waiting. In a world of newspapers, electronic communications, and world-spanning satellites, we expect immediate answers. Ask a question, do a search on the computer, and the solution presents itself.

Not so with things of the spirit.

Waiting humbles us. We have to wait, to work through our frantic mental exercises, before we recognize that we truly do not have the answers we seek. That no amount of brilliant deduction will satisfy the questions within our souls.

Waiting allows time to truly ask the right questions. To dive below the surface issues and symptoms to the matters that truly trouble us. To the doubts and fears that threaten the bedrock of our identity.

Waiting brings loneliness. It is a lonely thing, to wait with only your frail, failed humanity for company. Because ultimately, waiting lets us whisper that we are not looking for words, but for a single Word. That the hunger of our soul does not need a solution, but a Savior.

I made it to a quiet sandstone hill that evening. And I curled up silently on the rock, and fell asleep.

30.

I woke to brilliant light. White light. Light far brighter than the sun at noonday over Aram Waste. I jumped to my feet, for the white light hid a Presence I had heretofore only heard, unseen.

"Michael Harrow."

"I am here." I thought to kneel, but something held me erect.

"The time for final judgement has come. How do you plead, Michael Harrow?"

I was silent. Tears coursed down my cheeks as I remembered what had happened the last time – times – I had answered that question.

I hung my head, and whispered, "May I ask a question, High Judge?"

"Ask, Michael Harrow. The answer will not be denied you."

"Did hope die when he died?" I did not specify who I spoke of. I knew my judge understood.

"No, Michael Harrow. Hope did not die."

"But how?" I pleaded. "How could he satisfy justice? How could he right the wrongs – and pay the price for my sin? Is there truly nothing that can be done to satisfy justice?"

"He did satisfy justice, Michael Harrow. He both righted the wrongs, and paid the price."

"But I killed him!"

"He gave himself willingly to death."

"But death conquered in the end." I felt myself trembling. "Death conquered in the end! He cried out that it was finished! Hope was finished! Life was finished! Death conquered him!"

"It was death itself that was finished, Michael Harrow. He cried out before he struck the final blow against sin and hell and death."

"How?" I cried. "No man could conquer death! No man would right the wrong done to Joanna Macris! No man could pay the debt that I owe!"

"No man could, Michael Harrow. But I am not only a Man. I am also Life. And when Death tried to swallow me, it found that as light vanquishes the dark in any room, so Life conquers Death wherever it lies. It is the stronger, for it pierces through Death as light pierces through darkness."

I stared, and I could not stop staring. Out of the bright whiteness came the Man whom I had crucified. Clothed in robes of brilliant crystalline hue, face unmarred, back unbowed. No blood flowed; only the scars remained.

I sank to my knees in worship.

He came and touched my shoulder. The voice was the same: a tenor-baritone that soothed and healed and comforted. I raised my head in wonder. "You can right the wrongs done?" I whispered.

“Yes, Michael Harrow. For Life has at its disposal true healing, and infinite and eternal good. I can right every wrong done. Even the one done to Joanna Macris.”

“And you . . . you can pay my debt to justice?”

“It is satisfied, Michael Harrow. The one true Life may intercede for any life. For I am the Source and Sustainer of all things. Only so could I do what I have done. And only as a Man could I have done what I did for you.”

“Truly satisfied?”

“Truly, Michael Harrow. So much so, that it is true to say that my death was yours.”

“Your death . . . and—?”

He smiled. A warm smile that seemed to reach down and embrace me. “Yes, Michael Harrow. So much so, that my Life now is yours.”

My mind spun. But I was not given time to think. The strangely modulated voice spoke again.

“How do you plead, Michael Harrow?”

The Man—my Life—stood before me. And he smiled as he extended a hand to me.

Wordlessly, I accepted his help to rise to my feet. I took a deep breath. “High Judge—I plead not guilty. For I accept the death of this Man as my own. In him, I have died, and justice has been satisfied. And—my life is hidden in his Life.”

The modulated voice spoke for a final time. *“Justice has been satisfied, Michael Harrow. You are found innocent by this Court.”*

I turned to stare at the Man, my Life. And as I did, his countenance grew brighter and brighter until I could look no longer, and I fell on my face before him.

31.

I woke, and drank of a small remaining stream. I was no longer afraid. Wordless, I began to set out toward the sun.

True Life is such. A touch of Life leaves us quiet, as it changes and restructures our interior soul. Had I a companion with me at that time, I could not have spoken of what had taken place within me. As something intimate and precious, I held it to my breast tenderly.

I knew, too, that I was no longer alone. I walked in Life, and the Man who had satisfied my debt to justice walked with me, though I saw him not.

I wanted to live. But I was returning to a different court, and the suspended sentence for my crime. While I no longer feared death, I faced an execution in this life.

I kept to my eastern course, the rock of the Cross always at my back, guiding me.

32.

I slept that night dreamless, back pressed against a small sandstone mound. When I woke, I drank, and set forth. It was the tenth day, and I could see civilization on the horizon. Skyscrapers rose up, beckoning me to a place I no longer called my own.

I pondered little as I walked the final miles. Only confided my sorrow that I would have no time to prove the change in my soul, and asked for peace to face death without fear.

The sage brush grew thick as I neared the city boundary. When still at its outer border, at the first rough dirt road, I was met by two guards.

“Michael Harrow?” They said quietly.

I looked down at myself. Clothing torn and dirtied and bloodied. Wasted from want of food and burned from the sun. Bearing the marks of my near brush with death. “Yes,” I answered. “I am Michael Harrow.”

“You are summoned by the judge.”

I hesitated. Then I took a deep breath and asked, “Sirs, would it be possible for me to be brought first to the Gallerie d’la Arte?”

If they knew why I asked, they did not show it. “That is permissible. Come with us.”

They brought me there without a further word being spoken. Brought me in, pushing me past the gaping pedestrians and museum-goers who stared at my unkempt, filthy appearance. And they must have known where I wanted to go, for they brought me to a large, open hall, and it was abruptly emptied of people. They themselves did not remain either, and I was alone.

Alone with the paintings of the woman I had killed. I stared at her rich colors. The reds and burnished yellows of the sandstone monoliths of the Aram Waste. The advent of shadow, and the dazzling displays of blood-red sunrises.

I heard movement, but did not turn.

A voice spoke behind me. Feminine. Clear. “Did you survive?”

I still did not face her. I gazed at a single painting. It showed what must have been a portion of a sandstone monolith, where a hole weathered in the rock was filled with rain water. But in the sunset light, the water took on a crimson hue.

“No.” I shook my head. “No, I did not.”

“Look up at me, Michael Harrow. Stand before me.”

It felt as if my body weighed far more than it should, or even could. I pulled myself to my feet and stood before her. But I could not look at her.

“Since you have died, Michael Harrow, justice has been satisfied. Go forth now – and live.”

My head jerked up, but all I can remember seeing is her hand signing a benediction over me –

The sign of the Cross.