

# Wasteland

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- EXCERPT -

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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-spined 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—heady 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.