

Bliss

It was the most appropriate word using a woefully inadequate language to describe the indescribable. The song of angels, ineffable to man or woman.

And what of words?

Words belonged to a humanity of which he was no longer a part of.

*Humanity*, the ultimate irony. The very antithesis of being human.

*"Have you no humanity?"* he was once asked as he drove that last nail through tender flesh and bone. He had sneered callously at the question and placed a wineskin to his mouth to drink, the slops escaping his cruel, grinning lips.

To be human was to persecute and exploit, punish and torture, hate and kill. There could be love, but it was seldom altruistic, often tempered with jealousy and obsession, and rarely love for its own sake, for compassion's sake.

Bliss

It was everything and everywhere. It surrounded him, filled him, and he was not alone. There were others here with him, innumerable souls, each a thread in the tapestry of unity. They too were part of the whole, part of *him*, as he was part of *them*.

There was no fear, no hate, no rage, no loneliness, no despair. These emotions he vaguely recalled, remembering their destructiveness. Now there was only contentment, fulfilment, happiness and love. Time had no meaning for him. Thousands of years might have passed or just a few brief seconds.

There had been a time when he *had* been human. He remembered that much. But there was pain in those memories, along with a burning shame and deep regret for the things he had done. Those emotions had been left behind long ago, discarded like the skin of a snake. Now he was no longer a man but something else, something much more, beyond the petty concerns and narrow minded intolerance of flesh.

He sensed a disturbance within the bliss, imperceptible at first but growing. The unity began to unravel, and the loneliness of individuality crept in, heavy and familiar. Human feelings came back to him. First fear, dragging in its wake a crushing panic. He may have cried out but there was no sound yet, no voice, no physical body to make the scream, only the sense of it, the memory of it.

The dread of it.

He could feel bones beginning to form, followed by layers of muscle and sinew, fresh skin enclosing organs and veins.

There was no language yet. He had not spoken for so long and had forgotten the feeling of the sounds forming in his throat, the words being released like birds taking flight.

Then the unity was gone and he was alone, the cold stark void almost too much to bear. Replacing the emptiness was a soft thumping, quiet at first but getting louder. With shock he remembered the sound was the beat of a heart.

His own heart.

Each beat was a pulse of existence, a reminder that he was once again tethered to the mortal coil.

Gravity was the first sensation he became aware of, the feeling of weight, of substance pulling at his fledgling body. The perception of air moving over new flesh, hair follicles stiffening to its passage. Each of his senses awakened. He could smell the damp of the sea and hear the metronomic murmur of the tide merged with the rush of wind. He realised he was laying on something soft and warm, digging his fingers into fine sand, grains abrading his skin.

He sat up slowly and opened his eyes. The brightness of the light sent arcs of pain through his head. Instinctively, he shielded his eyes until they adjusted to the unfamiliar glare. His blurred sight cleared and he realised he was on a deserted beach. His only companions were a handful of sea gulls circling high overhead.

The sun was hard and bright in an azure sky, dotted with wandering cumulus clouds, unhurried, untroubled, impossibly serene. Halos of gold gleamed at their crowns and shadows pooled in their quiet folds. They travelled with the calm assurance of things that have always known their place in the world. No wind hurried them; no horizon intimidated them.

Slowly, he stood on bare feet and walked unsteadily into the advancing tide which raced to meet him. The sand beneath his feet was hard and compacted and had rippled into those still waves, past echoes of the tide.

There was heat in the sand and the cool touch of the ocean. The sensation of fine, wet granules oozed between his toes, and water pulsed over his skin. He lingered at the water's edge, the tide swirling around his feet. The wind picked up, carrying with it the scent of salt and decay, and he shivered, not from the chill, but from the sudden awareness of his own renewed vulnerability. The gulls wheeled overhead, their cries embodying his own anguish that threatened

to spill from his lips. He pressed his hands to his face, feeling the unfamiliar solidity that had so recently been nothing but memory.

The tide surged again and he skipped back in shock at its sudden icy touch. He laughed and his hands went to his mouth in surprise. The sound had aroused distant memories. He looked around again as more images flooded his mind. The camaraderie of soldiers. Nights in winehouses and brothels, the brief warmth of bodies pressed together in fleeting moments of comfort. The daily rituals of survival and loss. He recalled the weight of armour, the ache of wounds, the exhaustion that settled in his bones after long days of marching and fighting alongside his fellow soldiers. Thick calluses on the palms of his hands from wielding sword and shield. He remembered the faces of those he had loved and lost, the hollow ache that followed each death, the guilt that gnawed at him in the quiet hours of the night.

He charged headlong into the advancing tide, falling to his knees and splashing like a child, the water lapping at his thighs. He briefly examined himself. He had been a tall muscular man; years of hard military life having honed his body into the shape it now assumed. His stomach muscles were as hard and rippled as the sand, and nearly the same colour. He felt his chin, there was stubble there, perhaps a few days' growth, and his head was smooth. He had a memory of a blade scraping along his skull, removing the long hair of his youth.

As the ripples around him subsided, he could see his face in the mirror surface of the water. There was a time it might have been considered a handsome face, a noble visage. His cheekbones were high and carved, lips full and eyes blue, like marbles. Eyes that had witnessed too much death. He had forgotten his many transgressions, or perhaps more accurately, had chosen not to remember them.

He explored this new body. He could still feel where blades and spears had slashed at his flesh, the rope-like scars snaking across his skin from the crude sutures he had received for his many wounds.

His hands went to his cheeks and felt something wet there. Tears shed for this irretrievable man, this flesh and blood memorial. For he was nothing more than reanimated flesh, here in spirit only. The facsimile of a body long since turned to dust.

He leaned his head back feeling the sun on his face. These were the simple pleasures he remembered. But those moments were brief and precious against the backdrop of pain, suffering and death he had experienced each day. He had lived a violent life and endured a violent death as was the way of soldiers.

He turned away from the sea, walking slowly back toward the dunes. The sand was warm beneath his feet, the sun breaking through the clouds in shafts of golden light. He paused, listening to the silence, feeling the weight of history pressing down on him. In the here and now, the beach was empty and peaceful. He could see the present overlaid with both past and future. As the shoreline stretched away on both sides, time reached out to a cold empty infinity and back to a prehistoric womb. One moment he saw a black sky empty of starlight and the next a land flowing with lava.

Somehow he knew the shoreline would be soon strewn with dismembered bodies and blood-soaked sand, the sea frothing red. He tried shutting his eyes to it, but even that was denied him. It was *who* he was, *what* he was, what had to be endured in painful retribution for his many sins.

He looked to where there stood phantom rows of metal crosses embedded in the soft sand, each with the spectral bodies of mutilated soldiers draped over them like bloody marionettes with their strings cut. Another distant memory came to him, one of his own, of the wooden version of the cross equally decked with pale flesh wilting in the sun.

He looked down at his hands, flexing his fingers, marvelling at their strength and dexterity. How many times had these hands wrought suffering? How many times had they been stained with blood, both his own and that of others? The memories came in waves, relentless and unforgiving and he felt the fresh bloom of shame.

“No, please,” he begged, his voice hoarse in his throat. “I don’t want to remember.”

A distant hillside.

Roman soldiers laughing and drinking wine.

“For pity sake, let me rest.”

A crucifixion.

A man’s face.

A cheek and one eye. Above the eye, a head adornment fashioned from thorns.

“Please, no more.”

Several thorns piercing skin, blood running unheeded from the wound and down the face like tears.

A long spear thrust into the ribcage.

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed. “How could I have known.”

But even as he offered that wretched apology, he knew that ignorance was the last bastion of hate. He looked down at his hands again, at the small wound there where a thorn had

punctured his own palm as he had forced the crudely fashioned crown on the head of the man to be crucified.

*“Now you’re a king,”* he had mocked. The guilt burned anew, a wound that would never heal.

All his human memories abruptly resurfaced afresh and with them came a pain reserved only for childbirth. It ripped through his being as he fell to his knees and screamed. This time the sound was piercing, the agony sharp. He opened his eyes spilling fresh tears onto his own face.

The sun had gone, replaced with black clouds and rain falling from a brooding sky. He stood with resignation and walked along the sand to where the shade of disfigured bodies lay in the surf, dancing to the rhythm of the tide. Around him he could see the expanding red stain of death washing in from the sea and spreading out across the sand.

Out towards the distant horizon, the ghost image of ships were forming and behind him, in the dunes, he could hear the sound of machine gun breaches snicked shut with full magazines.

It was to be very soon.

He was needed again and he had tears to shed for them and perhaps even a few for himself.