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THE CHASM

A JOURNEY TO THE EDGE OF LIFE



For most of a day I'd been climbing a sharp incline of rocks and shale, aiming for an outcropped ledge that would afford a better view than anywhere else in this strange land. Finally, scrambling up the last twenty feet, I stepped out on that ledge and looked. What I saw took my breath away.

There it lay, stretched out against the horizon as far as I could see—the thing I'd been warned about, the thing I'd been told was ultimately unavoidable. The sight of it was even more devastating than I'd feared.

Here I was, traveling somewhere I absolutely had to reach. Though it's true that just a short while ago I'd never dreamed such a place even existed, and until today I'd been trying like the devil to avoid the way there, yet I'd finally embraced that road and where it led.

Only to find my way now blocked by the biggest obstacle imaginable.

No, it was absolutely *un*imaginable. And unacceptable.

All that mattered for me now was the place I could still glimpse even farther on the horizon, far beyond the barrier below me. *I had to get there*—I had to reach the shining city that rested on the great white mountain. The place called *Charis* by the other travelers I'd met on this road.

Desiring it now so strongly, I could still recall that moment so many days ago when I caught my first glimpse of Charis. Initially I thought it seemed cold, even oppressive. Our band of travelers that day had rounded a bend shaded by rock towers, and there it was, off to the west, rising high on a ridge. Silently we had all stared at the distant city.

From where we stood, all we could see between us and the mountain crowned by Charis were rolling green hills graced by a ribbon of red. This was the red road I'd already heard about before I ever knew anything about Charis. Amazingly, I first learned of that road in a cave I'd entered one evening to escape a pounding rain and crashing thunderstorm—and something far worse. But that's another story, to tell another time.

As my traveling companions and I continued absorbing our first glimpse of the faraway city on the summit, it took only a moment for my heightened vision to pierce its walls. How did this happen? I can't explain it, but I was as certain of my perception as I could be. My intuition told me that enthroned in that place was a dreadful tyrant, intolerant, squashing creativity and initiative. I envisioned him granting his subjects freedom enough to make a mistake just so he could condemn them for it and command their execution. I'd long ago learned to trust my instincts, and they told me this city was a monument to the pride of some self-proclaimed, glory-hungry sovereign who delighted in robbing men of their dignity.

As this insight intensified within me, our silence was broken by one of my companions—a white-haired, craggy-faced man dressed in a tattered toga. “Behold,” he said, “Charis, the City of Light.”

Light? How could that old geezer be fool enough to miss what I sensed so clearly?

Then another traveler, her face glowing, suddenly gasped, “Do you hear it? *Music!*”

I heard nothing. Who was she trying to kid, and why?

With enchanting fervor she exclaimed, “Songs of life and learning, choruses of pleasure and adventure! In a thousand languages!” She broke into dancing, joined soon by some of the others.

Even as they twirled and high-stepped, they kept looking toward the city. Following their gaze, I found my perception changing, despite my resistance. The coldness of the place was gradually replaced by light and warmth and by what seemed to be the radiant energy of people there celebrating. The city began to shimmer on the horizon, touched by sparkling blues and greens and golds that blended with the sky and sunlight, pulsing in and out of my vision.

Soon I could hear the music from the city, and then what sounded like a geyser of laughter exploding from a fountain of joy.

My traveling comrades went on to speak of Charis as the city of a certain king whom they described in fantastic language. But my ingrained caution surged up and overtook me again. For the time being, I refused to let myself be drawn to this city. I reminded myself that I knew of someone who could take me elsewhere, to a better place.

I'd met him on the morning I stumbled out of that cave, when I wandered in a daze, not knowing where I really was. I started running, and as I came into an oak grove, a man bounded in my direction. He was tall, muscular, and handsome, with a neatly trimmed copper beard. He wore sandals and an emerald toga, cinched at his slender waist with a braided red cord. Though his dress was like a statesman's from another era, he somehow appeared modern and fashionable.

"Welcome, traveler," he called in a rich clear voice, smiling broadly.

I wanted to grill him with a dozen questions, starting with "Where are we?" and "How did I get here?" But I didn't want to reveal too much about myself and my ignorance.

"Call me Joshua," he said, extending his arm. I was struck with the strength of his grip. I couldn't help staring into his eyes—morning-glory eyes, radiant blue windows of experience and knowledge and promise, deep-set eyes I could get lost in.

He invited me to join a group of travelers he was with, but at the time I preferred to go further on my own. Joshua put his arm around me. "Go if you must," he said, then gave me a solemn look. "But be careful who you trust." This country, he explained, was beautiful, but not always safe.

Here was a man with inside information, and I wanted to know what he knew. Still, for some reason I held back from asking him. As I turned to go on my way, Joshua smiled broadly and waved his great right arm, bronzed and powerful.

Soon I met him again, after I'd joined another group—the travelers on the red road who shared with me that first faraway glimpse of Charis. By now I wasn't so sure about the red road and where it led. I told Joshua, "I'd like to check out some other options."

"I'd be happy to serve as your guide," he answered. He led me off the red road, and down a series of roads that were gray—roads that promised me all the things I'd ever wanted.

When we first set out, Joshua pointed ahead and told me, "Lead the way, my friend." Though he was my guide, he showed me respect by walking to my side, a step behind me, giving me a sense of control. I liked that.

I was in conquer mode, so we marched down the terrain at a fast clip. It was a plunging path at first, filled with sharp turns and lined with thorn bushes that kept nipping at my pants legs. After an hour, we hadn't reached a single rise in the trail.

"Does this path only go down?" I asked.

Joshua laughed and answered, “To the very heart of things!”

The path kept descending, and our pace kept accelerating.

Finally, after dropping into a treacherous bog, we came to an intersecting path that rose upward toward firmer ground. Reaching the top of a slope and emerging from some trees, I came to a halt. Before me, positioned amid a half-dozen towering spires of rock, stood a glass-and-granite high-rise building. The sight of it was dreamlike, yet so vivid, down to every detail. As I walked toward the structure, heart pounding, I stopped abruptly. This was the office building where I worked! I’d never seen it like this, isolated from the surrounding cityscape, as if it had been uprooted by some alien power and transported here.

I entered the familiar ground-level front door with Joshua a step behind. We took the elevator to the twenty-fifth floor, and I instinctively walked through the maze of work stations toward my corner office. Joshua gazed approvingly at the view through the windows towering beside us. “You belong here, don’t you?” he asked me.

I nodded. This was my world, and I had sailed its waters as expertly as any sea captain had ever commanded his ship and his men.

Inside my office, Joshua said with a wave of his hand, “This is what you were made for, isn’t it?”

Before I could answer, my attention was drawn to a photograph on the desktop, a picture of my wife and two children. It had been taken three years earlier, when we still lived together. I couldn’t get away from the office that day to make the studio appointment, but my wife told the photographer to take the picture anyway. “It’s more realistic with just the three of us,” she said to me later, twisting the knife.

Joshua and I left the office. But after stepping off the elevator and out the front door, everything went out of focus—until I suddenly found myself with Joshua in my condo, listening to classical music. The absence of transition made me think I must be dreaming, yet I was completely lucid, and my blue recliner chair was as tangible as it could have been, right down to the little coffee stain on the right arm.

For a few hours I was immersed in a whirlpool of melancholy and reflection, going wherever the melodies led, over the mountains and valleys and through the deserts of my life. Especially the deserts.

“The music’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Joshua said.

“Yes. Beautiful.”

I followed him as he walked down a hallway lined on one side with oak shelves filled with my books. “Commendable,” Joshua commented as he pulled out volumes here and there. “You have a genuine thirst for truth.”

He fixed those radiant blue eyes on me. “I know you can find what you seek on one of the roads traveled by the great minds. Choose any of them. I’ll take you there in an instant. And if you don’t like one of them, I’ll take you to the next and then the next.”

For some reason I shook my head, believing there was something more I wanted, something no great thinker could lead me to.

No sooner had I turned down this offer than we materialized back on a gray road. Before us stood more buildings rising up from the rocks and sagebrush. We entered a maze of mall interiors, where my eyes were drawn to displays of power tools, antique guns, shiny knives, snow skis, camping gear, sports clothing. We looked over a balcony to see spotlights

zooming over showroom floors filled with the latest-model cars and pickup trucks, boats and RVs, snowmobiles and motorcycles.

Then the spotlights melted into marquee lights. Joshua and I walked into a fine restaurant filled with people in fine clothes, drinking fine wines. My heart suddenly buoyed when I saw a woman alone at one of the tables, a woman who'd been part of the group of travelers I was with earlier. She looked so beautiful tonight, so slight and delicate, dressed so elegantly. I studied every inch of her. The longer I looked, the more she filled my heart.

"Go sit with her," Joshua suggested. He led me by the arm and took me to her table, then excused himself: "I have other things to take care of."

The woman seemed pleased to see me. We dined alone and toasted with champagne. When the music began, we danced. I felt intoxicated.

She kissed me, then smiled and said she had to go.

"Can I...go with you?"

"Not tonight," she whispered, but she smiled as she walked away, and her eyes said yes.

Joshua came beside me, and motioned me down a high-ceilinged corridor, then toward a tinted-glass doorway where other men were entering. I followed.

Inside the building, it was hot and sticky. A foul odor turned my stomach. An army of nipping black flies buzzed around me. At first I swatted at them, but there were so many I finally gave up.

The stench overwhelmed me, and I fell to my knees, nearly vomiting.

Suddenly I felt fine, alive, energized, eager to move ahead. The foul odor was gone, and instead I smelled sweet perfume.

Through arched doorways I could see the women. I breathed deeply the perfumed air. It was glorious. My thoughts were on one thing only. I was hypnotized, like a moth fluttering around a blinding light. My longing increased until I knew I would sell my soul for the promised pleasures. I was awash in a tidal wave of passion.

Suddenly pain shot through my torso and up into my head like a runaway train. I reeled from the blow and tried to shake it off me. The pain was horrid. But I continued my quest despite the pain, obsessed with what I wanted.

I looked around at the other men, all of us indulging, none of us satisfied. Some of the men frantically redirected their longings, men looking upon men or even upon children. In a feeding frenzy we became predators, consumers of others, cannibals, no longer men but obscene appetites.

It became a prison riot, and I was in the thick of it. I was ashamed, but my shame gave me no power to resist. I felt helpless, like a junkie enslaved to his addiction.

Another wild rush of pain overwhelmed me, pain that deepened my emptiness. And the emptiness demanded to be filled. I entered beneath an archway, then another and another. I moved from place to place, indulging more and more, satisfied less and less. Still I came back for more.

As I entered one last archway, I didn't find what I expected. I saw my own wife—but I didn't know who she was. Not really. I'd never stopped to ask her. I'd used her as one more object, one more possession, one more hunting trophy.

I gazed up at swaying women on a stage. Then a shock wave assailed me, followed by a sick emptiness. I screamed in horror. My own daughter had joined the parading women on the stage.

In the din, no one heard me scream.

I gazed into the emptiness of my own daughter's eyes. I started pushing and shoving. I wanted to kill the men who lusted after her—vile men whose daughters I lusted after.

Something happened in that moment. In seeing my little girl, I saw my wife and the other women as they really were—frightened daughters and hardened mothers, desperate souls projecting images of delighted sensuality when inside they felt nothing but disdain for the men and themselves. The raging lust in my blood chilled into shame.

I sobbed hopelessly, then finally ran out through the tinted-glass doors and down city blocks of gnawing emptiness, finally collapsing in a heap.

I looked up to see Joshua. He stepped forward, smiling. “Come,” he said softly. “There’s much more to see.”

Before I knew it, we were walking into a lush hotel hallway. Joshua hesitated, looking as if he’d intended for us to go elsewhere.

Gilded elevator doors opened across the hall. Out stepped a well-dressed man, accompanied by a woman with the face and figure of a man’s dreams. They walked side by side down the hallway, laughing lightly in obvious anticipation.

I knew who they were, and what was about to happen. I felt my stomach turn.

They slipped into the room, not seeming to notice us as we stood observing them. Then I watched as the fool torched solemn vows made twenty-five years before and threw ashes to the wind.

“Stop!” I cried. “Don’t you see what you’re doing?” He couldn’t hear me, or wouldn’t.

Suddenly I saw the dropping blade of a guillotine, spilling my blood on the clean sheets of a luxury hotel. I saw the face of the woman of my dreams after a night of blind passion, when beauty faded and she became demanding and ugly, one more dried-up carcass on the great web, a revolting reminder of my own condition.

Then I saw the worst of it, hidden from me until that moment. The drama, everything I’d just seen, was being acted out on a stage—and in the audience set my wife. She stared at us, at me and the other woman. She silently watched my betrayal, watched me violate my vows, watched the ugly procession of the lies I had become. I saw her sobs, her grief, her anger, and then watched as her face hardened against me, against life itself.

I called her name and cried out, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you!” She couldn’t hear me. Too little, too late.

Just when I thought nothing could be more horrible, I saw my two children seated beside their mother, observing the same ugliness, watching their father weave his own web. They saw me embrace this woman in our “secret” hotel room that was on center stage of the universe.

The truth is, as I was later instructed, there’s no such thing as a private moment; the whole cosmos is our audience for everything we do in the dark.

I cried out to my son and daughter, “No, you don’t understand. It wasn’t like that. It wasn’t as bad as it appears.” But everyone in that cosmic auditorium knew the truth was *exactly* as it appeared. My children could see right through me, right through the traitor they once loved and now despised. I saw the stunned looks on their faces, the disgust, the brooding anger. I felt the heart-stab of their hurt and confusion. I watched them turn from me.

“I’m sorry!” I spoke the words I’d never said to them before.

I watched them recklessly run away from the auditorium. I knew they were going to choose their own wrong roads—because the man they trusted was a turncoat and a liar and a cheat. I saw them hating themselves for having once loved me.

If there was a hell, was I there already?

I turned away and ran, hearing the sound of clanging metal in my pocket, too frightened to reach in and discover what it was.

I ran and ran, not knowing what direction I was going, my eyes blinded by tears and wind, trying to outrun my shame. Finally I collapsed beside the brackish water of a scum-covered pond.

What I'd experienced on the gray roads had only left me thirstier and sicker, as if I'd drunk salt water when I craved fresh.

As I lay on the ground, I looked up to a plum tree, where a large gray owl perched on a low branch and studied me. He swiveled his head back and forth, without blinking, as if scanning me curiously. His implied question seemed the same as mine—who was I, anyway?

The owl suddenly looked behind me, and I turned to see Joshua walking toward me. I got on my feet, trying not to appear as weak as I felt.

"If there's nowhere else to go," I told him, "I'll return to the red road."

"There are other places," Joshua said, his voice full of optimism. "Lots of them. Don't give up yet."

He specifically mentioned "roads of religion." *No*, I thought, *those aren't for me*. But before I realized what was happening, he'd led me to an overlook, and we gazed down into a dusty valley, more like a gulch. Countless roads were leading out into the distance, as many roads as there were directions.

"They all have something you can benefit from," Joshua said.

"Is it possible to find...the truth?" I asked him.

"That's a lifetime pursuit. You need to look far and wide to find bits of the truth that you can weave all together into something that satisfies you."

He smiled. "Forward," he urged me.

Forward. But to where? To which road? Was there such a thing as truth? Would one of these roads take me there? I felt a glimmer of hope. Was I right to hope? Or was I just a fool?

Joshua led me to a deep canal, and beside it, a three-sided wooden building, open in the front, with candles, incense, books, altars, and offering boxes on display. Inside, a quiet group of worshipers stood or knelt.

We approached a man in a red robe, meditating in the lovely silence.

"Which religion is true?" I asked him, whispering, as if I didn't want to admit the question was mine. "And how can we know?"

"We practice all religions here," he said, "for we see truth in all of them."

"How do I know what to embrace and what to reject?"

"Embrace what you wish and reject what you wish. It's yours to choose."

"Yes, I understand it's all my choice, but what I mean is, what *should* I choose?"

"You should choose only what you wish. We won't force anything on you."

"Yes, yes, I know you won't force me, but...I'm looking for *truth*."

"Commendable," the man said, nodding wisely. "There's truth in all religions. You must choose for yourself."

I threw up my hands and walked away, wondering if I was insane or he was. Shaking my head in frustration, I kicked the dust with my boot.

Joshua had disappeared for the moment, but a man with a square jaw, a Middle-Eastern complexion, and long, jet-black hair approached me, and easily began a conversation. He seemed to sense my situation. As we talked, I mentioned how lately I'd been able at times to observe what I never had before— "to see into other worlds. It's as if I've been given eyes that see what isn't there."

"Or is it that your eyes now see what was there all along?"

"Seeing is believing," I answered. "If you can't sense it, it isn't real."

"In a world where seeing is believing," he responded, "men believe much that is not true. And they disbelieve much that is true."

His eyes scanned the great plain spread out before us, full of people walking on the various roads. His gaze pulled mine with it, and I saw a hundred red-winged blackbirds in sudden flight, appearing to flee from something I couldn't see.

The plain suddenly transformed into an immense battlefield. I quickly recognized two opposing forces. On one side were great gladiators with eyes of fire, warriors from the bright city of the west. Lifting swords against them were soldiers with cold shark eyes—dark warriors from the realms of gray.

Some of the fighting took place on the ground, and some above it, as if the air had an invisible floor. Sparks flew from clashing swords, and lightning bolts pierced the sky while thunderclaps exploded.

Meanwhile the people I'd seen earlier on the gray roads continued walking on the ground underneath the great combatants. They appeared translucent now, almost invisible. Most of them stepped casually, unguardedly, apparently unaware of the battle raging above and around them—yet they, too, were being assaulted by the gray warriors.

Behind and above me came a flapping sound. I turned to see a monstrous carrion-fowl plunging at me. I ran as he circled again and came at me from behind. He dived and pursued me, coming at me this way and that, as if he were herding me somewhere. Before I knew it, I found myself on the plain, in the thick of battle.

Arrows shot past me. Then I heard a swoosh and felt something pierce my left shoulder. I saw the arrow just before I felt the pain, as lightning before thunder. I screamed in agony.

I fell to the ground and writhed, looking for help but seeing none. I clasped both hands around the shaft protruding from my shoulder and pulled, screaming as the arrowhead tore the flesh that had closed around it.

I swooned, the pain threatening to sweep me into unconsciousness. I opened my eyes to see a powerful warrior standing over me, his face contorted. He raised a sword high, like an executioner. I froze, held by pain and fear. He brought down the sword, and I saw it glimmer in the sunlight just a moment before it sliced into my right arm, just above my elbow. Waves of convulsing agony ushered me into the darkness.

Warm blood from my shoulder wound awakened me—or maybe it was the deep cut above my elbow that screamed for attention. I tried to stop the bleeding, but my right arm hung limp and useless.

Where was the enemy who'd cut me? Why hadn't he finished me off?

Twenty feet away stood the answer. Battling my attacker was another great warrior—I saw only his back and his jet-black hair dangling halfway down it.

Surprisingly lucid, considering my pain, I lay still, trying to bind my wounds with strips of my torn shirt. Clanging sounds of battle surrounded me.

Suddenly the black-haired warrior, my defender, was slammed to the ground. The shark-eyed soldier who'd sliced my arm now raised his sword and laughed sadistically as he swung it down toward my head.

My bodyguard, immediately back on his feet, stepped up and swung his sword horizontally, deflecting the enemy's blow so it missed my head, instead slicing a quarter inch of flesh off my left forearm. Howling at the white-hot pain, I tried to clutch the wound with my limp right hand.

In a cloud of combat dust I crawled to lower ground. Helpless, with nothing to defend me, I could only hurt and watch. The people on the ground, walking the roads, still seemed oblivious to the battle. Many of them fell beneath blows from the dark warriors—some screaming, others with no more than a groan or whimper.

Trembling at the fierce warfare around me, I lay low. As I looked from east to west, I became aware of two gigantic commanders at opposite ends of the valley. My gaze was drawn inescapably to the commander of the dark army, with shark eyes in a contorted face. Cruelty sprang from his eyes like smoke and fire from cannons. He gloated and taunted, cursing the air above and the ground beneath. He fired flaming arrows and poisoned darts into people who did nothing to defend themselves.

My heart stopped when he turned and noticed me watching him. He stared at me like a stalker. His eyes flashed, and for a moment my skin seemed to burn under the napalm of his hatred. Why was he looking at me when countless others filled the battlefield?

He hoisted a gigantic harpoon and pointed it at me. Just as he threw it, I rolled and heard a loud swoosh as it cut through the air with hideous fury. It passed only inches from me, then grazed the black-haired warrior by my side. My defender cried out and grasped his left leg, but he stood his ground.

Panicked, I got up and ran, stumbling, unsure where to go.

Looking back I saw the dark lord open his mouth in mocking laughter, a sound so great it rose above the roar of battle. Then he swung bolas round and round in the air, keeping his eyes on me. When I could hardly stand the sight of one more circle of those metal balls, he released the weapon. It flew, hitting my legs and wrapping itself around me. I heard the sickening crunch of my own bones. It beat me to the ground, pummeling me even after I fell.

I could hardly breathe. Broken and bleeding, I knew I would surely die.

Shark Eyes glared at me, then marched across the valley, taking huge strides toward me. He carried a battle-ax.

I tried to crawl away, but couldn't. My head in the dirt, a flood of images raced through my mind, images of a broken life I would never have a chance to fix.

Just then I heard a great voice, speaking a language I couldn't understand. I turned to see the bright commander also marching toward me, from the opposite end of the valley. His face was rock solid, his chin set and resolute. His eyes kept returning to me. They were loyal and kind, burning with an unquenchable fire. He did not scream or gloat.

I silently pleaded, *Keep coming!*

But suddenly he stopped in his tracks, then looked up to the sky as if listening to someone. Was it his commander in chief?

The dark commander marched on, gloating and energized when he saw his enemy stop.

My spirit felt trapped in frozen flesh. In what I assumed would be my final seconds of life, I became strangely contemplative about this ancient war I had witnessed for the first time. The conflicting missions of the two armies seemed to have no fog, no gray, only black-and-white clarity. I had lived my life in compromise, rule-bending, trade-offs, concessions, bargaining, striking deals, finding middle ground. But in these two great armies there was no such thing. Good was good, evil was evil, and they shared no common ground.

Though racked with pain, my thoughts were lucid and focused. I looked around again at the little people oblivious to the battle, who seemed to fancy themselves neutral and at peace, hoping to maintain dual citizenship in the two warring kingdoms. I was shocked at their ignorance and indifference to the gravity of this ferocious war. Above all, I was crushed to realize I'd been just like them, blind to reality.

I turned toward the hideous face of the dark commander, only thirty feet from me now. As I writhed, the irony struck me that the greatest moments of clarity I'd ever known would now be culminated in my slaughter. I would have welcomed death, but I had a horrible feeling that what awaited me on the other side was far worse than oblivion.

Poised above me now was the raised battle-ax. Trembling, I looked into the shark eyes of my gloating executioner.

I watched the ax fall. But just as it came upon me, Shark Eyes disappeared. All the warriors from both sides disappeared. The people on the plain popped back into normal view, as solid as the warriors had been the moment before.

Silence.

I lifted my head from the dirt and looked from side to side. It took me a moment to realize the pain in my shoulder and arms and chest had disappeared, replaced by an aching void within me.

I looked around, relieved. All seemed peaceful. There was no battle. At least, none that I could see.

Once more, the square-jawed man with long black hair approached me. He was dripping with sweat, haggard and limping, favoring his left leg.

"What happened?" I asked, but before he could answer, he turned into a raging fire. My face blistered at the heat. Then a portal opened in midair, giving me a moment's glimpse of something beyond. With his face grimacing and resolute, like a soldier headed back to battle, the black-haired warrior walked through the portal to the universe next door.

When he was gone, I ran my hands over my body again, barely able to believe my wounds were gone and I could move freely. I stood slowly, reeling, then sank back down to the ground and clutched the dirt, closing my eyes.

It was dark when I awoke. I got up slowly, knees creaking, neck stiff. Hearing a crackling sound, I peered through tree branches and saw a fire in the distance. I walked to it, and found Joshua sitting there, staring into the flames.

“Good to see you again,” he told me.

I studied his face, sculpted and powerful and kind. He looked remarkably like the commander of the bright army. For a moment I felt certain it was him. I almost asked why he’d stopped, why he hadn’t defended me against the dark lord.

“Have something to eat, then go back to sleep,” he said in a gentle voice. “We have more to see tomorrow.”

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