

Mercy

He awoke to a calm ocean breeze, a gentle zephyr not felt since before man's earliest works of corruption. A beam of golden light blinded him as his eyes opened, but he soon found that the light caused no discomfort. Around him was a beach of pure, white silk, and in that instant he knew that in no place on Earth did such a pristine landscape exist.

No sand clung to him as he rose, and no grains found its way into his graying hair. He frowned momentarily, unaware of the locations of his father and brother, but the silence of the beach would permit no such unease.

He began to contemplate his surroundings, and found that they were familiar to him. His eyes found the road that he was looking for: A strip of golden sand that rose above the creamy white of the beach, flanked by rows of palm trees that stood as guards.

His feet fell upon the narrow path again and again, his bare, padding footsteps echoing in the tall palm trees and empty sand. The light in the sky cast a brilliant golden glow upon the ambience around him. The sky above was a simple, light yellow. The smell of the air was still tinged with a salty, watery scent.

Eventually, his path led into a large circle. Eleven other people arrived from the eleven other paths leading into the ring. The string of palm trees orbited the outside, and then went off along a large road ahead that faded into the distance. He joined his companions facing the central roadway, and continued his trek in silence.

As he left the ring, he turned to contemplate the last, thirteenth path in the ring, a cold, dark gravel.

As he walked, the white sand that surrounded the pathway began to fade to the yellows and browns of untouched dirt, and then eventually to a hard, unforgiving pavement. The golden road itself began to harden into an industrial turnpike.

Others began to join his trek, coming in from different roads that splintered off the main turnpike. None said a word, and simply joined the main group and continued walking. A sizable crowd coalesced, and the mass moved along.

In the distance, a skyscraping spire began to manifest itself, towering over an immense labyrinth of cold steel. The light beat down from above as strongly as ever, but in place of the calming gold that had bathed the circle of the Twelve, a dull, industrial grey was reflected off the city walls.

An immense, golden gate lay at the end of the road, a veritable pariah against its metropolitan surroundings. It shone with the same golden hue as the beach, brilliant and calming. The glow began to fade as he neared the gate; he was able to make out the signs of age and poor maintenance. Soot and dust covered a great portion of its surface, and signs of human vandalism covered the lower parts of the great arch.

He drew closer to the gate, and it parted with an enormous creak. The crowd surrounding him dispersed as he entered, and he stood, contemplating the endless

conurbation before him. He sighed as he began to walk down a crowded boulevard, knowing that in death life was not forgotten.