



*The Scimitar  
and the Glory  
Boxes*



Frederick Morse

# The Scimitar & The Glory Boxes

A novel of the natural and the supernatural.

A tale that spans two thousand years,  
from the Crucifixion of Christ to the year 2012.

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Dedicated to my wife Judy J. Eriksen  
Who has lovingly encouraged me in all my endeavors.

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## Chapter 1

The workshop of Ithykant was located in a shallow valley some distance from Jerusalem. He was a reclusive old man but knew how to gain audiences with the elite and powerful and ingratiate himself. He was a craftsman and carpenter who knew how to serve his masters well. He was a miser who not only loved gold but also loved to keep it. He spent little on his attire of musty woolen robes.

From the direction of Calvary, the mount of the skulls, Ithykant could hear the distant crowd's indistinct voices. Their sounds were contradictory. Some seemed to be cheers of rejoicing. Others seemed as if they were howls of lamentation. And upon the hill he saw three large wooden crosses. They were the very ones that he had made in his workshop and that had earned him goodly payments from the Romans for his material and labor. For two of them it had been necessary for him to go into the wilderness to find un-pruned olive trees of a height suitable for forming into the required pieces for the crosses. He had cut and hauled them to his workshop upon his donkey cart.

For the third and largest one he had traveled to Wadi Rubin on the Sorek River that flowed west of Jerusalem. There he purchased an extremely rare timber from Mesopotamia. After all it was Pontius Pilate that had ordered the crucifixion of Jesus and Ithykant reasoned that only an extraordinary wood would serve the purpose. And earn him a substantial payment from the Roman Prefect. He hefted the weight of the gold coins in the leather pouch tied to his waist rope. Yes, he thought as he stroked his scraggly gray beard, he had earned good pay for good work.

He abhorred crowds and would not go to the Mount of the Skulls while the people were there. He would wait until the next sunrise. It was possible that he could profit yet more from the crucifixion of Jesus and the two criminals. He went to sleep that night on his hay filled mattress as his mind considered the means by which he could earn more gold coins as a result of the blood lust that had taken three lives upon the Mount of the Skulls.

In the early dawn after The Crucifixion Ithykant again stood looking towards the hill of Golgotha. There were dark gray clouds in the distance and occasionally there were flashes of lightning within them and the rumble of thunder. The man stroked his beard as he hesitated. Finally he decided, "Yes, yes. I should go there. It is important." He yoked his donkey to his cart and the animal began a slow trudging walk. It would be at least two hours before the cart borne Ithykant would reach the mount of Calvary.

The Romans and the crowd that had jeered Jesus upon his cross had departed many hours earlier, dissipated by their acts of drunken sadism. Those who had mourned the death of Christ had taken with them his body and those of the two men who had died with him that day. The bloodied wooden crosses lay upon the trampled soil.

"Yes, it is good," mumbled Ithykant. "I was wise to come here." He dismounted from the cart and began to closely inspect the area as he searched for anything that might have value in addition to the wood of the three crosses. He saw the three iron spikes that had pinned Jesus to his cross. He had to stoop down three times as they were scattered about but he believed that there would be a good reward for his efforts. He tossed the large bloodied nails into the bed of the donkey cart.

As he turned to gather up the crosses he stubbed his toe upon a wooden plank. "Damn," he groaned. Looking down he saw that there was lettering in Latin upon the plank. The inscription was "IEVS NAZARENUS REX IVDÆORVM". "Ah, yes," mumbled Ithykant. "I heard that Pontius Pilate had ordered a written a sign be put at the top of Christ's cross. He named

him “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”” The man stooped, picked up the plank and flung it into the donkey cart. To himself he mumbled, “As most of the peasants are illiterate, Pontius Pilate could just as easily abbreviated the words to INRI and then have his Roman soldiers explain the meaning to the spectators.”

As his attention returned to the three crosses lying upon the earth he saw a man making a trudging approach. The stranger had a slouched posture and an expression of gloom upon his face. Ithykant called out to him, “Be gone with Ye. The crosses are mine. There is nothing here for you.”

The forlorn man stopped several paces away from Ithykant. He slowly raised his head and stared blankly ahead. In a hoarse tone of voice he said, “He whispered to me.”

“Who?” asked an irritated Ithykant. “There is no one else here.”

It was as if the man had not heard and he continued to moan out his words. “He whispered to me. He made a prophecy.” The man slowly sank to his knees in a state of exhaustion and despair.

Ithykant cursed, “Who the hell whispered to you? And who the hell are you?”

“The Lamb whispered to me,” answered the man.

“A lamb!” sneered Ithykant. “You have been talking to animals? Well, go talk to them some more and get the hell away from here.”

“I betrayed him,” groaned the man. “For thirty pieces of silver I sacrificed the Son of God. I am Judas, the evil one.”

The words focused Ithykant’s attention. “Silver tetradrachms? Do you have money upon you?” He stooped down and riffled through Judas’ robe in search of a purse but there wasn’t one. He stood up and spat at the man in disgust. “All you are doing is delaying my work. I must gather up my goods before someone else comes along and tries to take them.”

“I must tell someone what He said,” pleaded Judas.

“Very well, tell me, and then be on your way,” said Ithykant.

Judas told him in a stuttering and raspy voice.

Ithykant shuddered and shook his head in disbelief. “No. No, that can’t come to pass. You must have been drinking wine. Yes, that’s it. You are just a miserable sot. Now get out of here!” He kicked Judas in the side to urge the man to rise and leave.

Judas mumbled, “The young girl’s hands bled.”

Ithykant looked about the hill but saw no one else. “There is no young girl here you fool.”

Judas groaned and said, “When they drove the iron spike into Christ’s left hand to begin to nail him to the cross the little girl’s left palm began to bleed, just as Christ’s did.”

“What are you saying?” asked Ithykant. “That they drove a spike into a little girl’s hand?”

Judas shuddered. “No. There was no spike through her hand. But she bled nevertheless. When they hammered the iron spike into Christ’s right hand then the little girl’s right palm began to bleed. And when they nailed His feet to the cross the little girl’s feet bled also. But she felt no pain. She was surprised and fearful but she felt no pain. How can such a thing be?”

“It can be if you drank considerable wine and then had hallucinations,” suggested Ithykant gruffly. “Be gone out of here. I have work to do and don’t need fools delaying me.”

Judas was staring into space with a forlorn expression. “Christ did not cry out either. The spikes tore through his flesh and bones and the blood spurted, but he did not utter any sound. He smiled just a little. How could he smile as the spikes tore into his hands and feet?”

Ithykant was exasperated by what he felt were drunken mutterings. “Get away from here, you damned annoying bastard!”

Judas slowly struggled up to his feet, turned and trudged away.

Glad of the man’s going, Ithykant then labored to lift and lug the three crosses onto his donkey cart. Once they were loaded he stopped to rest. He felt that his hands were damp and

looking at them he realized that they were smeared with blood. "Three men died here and they bled quite a bit. The crosses are drenched in their blood." He reached into his cart for a sweat rag that he kept there and then pulled his hand back with a curse. "Now I have stuck myself on something sharp! What a cursed place this is for a poor and honest working man." Ithykant reached into the cart and carefully grasped the twined sections of Hawthorn vine that formed a circle about eight inches across. It had remained caught in a sliver protruding from Christ's cross. He cursed, "I can't even fathom the purpose of such a weaving of thorns branches. Idle hands are the Devil's tools."

Ithykant wondered for a moment if the fact that the still wet blood of Jesus had penetrated into his skin would cause him any harm. Might Christ have been ill with some disease? He cast the Crown of Thorns away in disgust. When it struck the ground a blood stained and sappy twig end penetrated the acidic soil. To Ithykant's consternation a new leaf unfolded and spread wide in a matter of seconds. Then other leaves flourished as the Hawthorn bush grew to the size of a man in just a matter of minutes. "I must get away from this place," he said with a shudder. "I am imagining that leaves grow in the wink of an eye!" Panic set in and Ithykant turned to climb onto his donkey cart with the intention of whipping the animal into its fastest possible trot away from the Mount of Skulls.

But before he got even a leg up he froze at the sight of another figure approaching. The man wore a loose fitting but heavily woven tunic, such as a monk might clothe himself. There was a scapula that covered his shoulders and tied at the throat. To it was attached a cowl, the hood that warded off rain.

"Who in hell are you and what in hell do you want?" queried Ithykant loudly, but with some quaver in his voice.

"I am Singevor," replied the man in a deep and raspy voice that did nothing to calm Ithykant. He slowly approached the donkey car but because of the cowl his face remained shadowed.

As the man turned his head slightly, the old carpenter thought that he saw a flash of dim light glisten on canine teeth, or fangs. Ithykant became very apprehensive. Because he thought that the man might be dangerous he reached into the cart and grabbed one of the iron spikes as a possible weapon. "Why have you come here?" he asked the hooded man.

"The aroma drew me," admitted the dark figure.

"Aroma?" Ithykant had an expression of incredulity. "I smell nothing. There are no victuals here."

"Blood," said Singevor. "I smelled blood. Surely you have smelled a butcher shop." He inched closer yet to Ithykant and the donkey cart. The draft animal hee-hawed and attempted to shy away, but it was constrained by the harness.

Suddenly the man exhaled hoarsely and abruptly turned away. "What is in the cart?" he asked, as if repulsed in some manner.

"Crosses," stammered Ithykant. "The crosses that held Jesus and the two thieves."

"It is not the crosses that bother me as they are merely wood, but are they bloody?" asked Singevor.

"Yes, of course," replied Ithykant.

The man shuddered slightly. "The odor of that blood displeases me and I am not often displeased by blood. Is there any other objects about that have Christ's blood upon them?"

"I was cut by a bloody thorn," complained Ithykant. "From a crown of Hawthorn that they put on Jesus, I think. It grew into that small tree just over there."

Singevor stepped backwards two paces and kept his face turned away from the cart and the hawthorn bush. "So, his blood is mixed with yours then."

"Yes, I guess that you might say that."

Singevor said, "I knew that there was something that caused me to feel repulsed by you. Has anyone else been here?"

"A man. Earlier. I think that his name was Judas."

Singevor asked, "Where did he go?"

Ithykant pointed. "Off that way."

Singevor turned and walked slowly off in the direction that Ithykant had indicated.

Ithykant shivered, not from cold but instead from fear and stress. To himself he said, "I must leave this place for he might come back. His face was always in darkness so I don't even know what he looks like, ugly or handsome, light or dark skinned." He climbed up onto the donkey cart and whipped the donkey into a fast trot.

Ithykant arrived back to his workshop as darkness fell. After unloading the crosses and stabling the donkey he dropped onto his sleeping mat in exhaustion.

The next morning he rode his donkey cart into the village. Upon arriving at the workplace of the blacksmith he greeted the man. "Hail to you, Lavi. I have some iron for sale. The very iron that you sold to me at a high price. I expect that you will therefore pay a good price to get it back."

Lavi stopped his work and responded to Ithykant with a sneer of derision. "What do you have, you miserable money hungry wretch?"

Ithykant laughed, "We all have an appetite for gold." He gestured toward three iron spikes that lay on the floor of his cart. "You must recognize them. They are of your own hot labor at the forge."

Lavi thought for a moment before answering. Then he said, "You first paid me for the iron nails and then you sold them to the Romans, making a good profit. Now you pilfer them back and desire to make yet more profit from me. Is the blood upon them even dry yet? And I am sure that you bemoan the fact that the two thieves were only bound to their crosses with rope and not nailed as Christ was."

"It does seem that the Romans wanted Christ to suffer more than the two hoodlums," said Ithykant. "That is a shame as otherwise I could have had triple profits. But hurry your decision. If you don't buy them there are other ironsmiths that will. Decide quickly before I leave."

"I will give you a tetradrachm for each of them," offered Lavi.

"Only three silver shekels?" Ithykant smirked in anticipation of profit.

Lavi opened his leather purse and counted out the three coins. He held them in his outstretched hand towards Ithykant. "Take them before I close my fingers around them."

Ithykant quickly snatched up the coins and then he nodded to Lavi that he could gather up the iron spikes from the cart.

Lavi smiled as he placed the spikes next to his hot forge. "Emir Alakinani has ordered that I forge him a sword of Wootz steel. The layered steel of Damascus. I had been quaking in my boots because I did not have the iron for such a steel blade and I feared that I would lose a very profitable task. But here you come, a messenger from God so to speak, and place the very items I need into my hands for a very low price."

Ithykant spat at the blacksmith. He resolved in his mind to be very sure not to sell the wood of the three crosses for less than a very good price. He spat again and climbed upon his cart for the ride back to his workshop.

One hundred and forty days passed before a mounted rider visited Ithykant's workshop. The old man had seen the approach of the man on a sleek black horse and noted that his attire was that of a man of some wealth.

"Shalom, Adon Ithykant," called out the lanky Raka as he dismounted.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Ithykant asked.

"I am a scribe. A sofer. My name is Raka. I am Raka of Michmash."



"What do you want of me?" queried Ithykant.

Raka hesitated as he tried to assess Ithykant's nature. "I desire just a little information. I am also a historian. I create illustrated manuscripts."

Ithykant shrugged. "I have no need for such a thing. You are wearing fine cloth for a peddler so I imagine that your prices are high anyway."

Raka said, "I am not selling anything. I am only searching for a little knowledge. I believe that you may have witnessed the crucifixion of some several months back in time. Calvary is visible from your doorway."

Ithykant shrugged again. "I only saw it from a distance so I don't know any details. There was another man there that witnessed everything. His name is Judas. He was paid thirty shekels to betray Jesus. Go talk to him as he knows more about it than I."

"I can't talk to him," stated Raka. "He was found hanging from a tree branch."

Ithykant was confused and apprehensive. "I did not murder him. He had no money so there wouldn't be any sense to it."

Raka said, "Judas hung himself but that is a very strange thing."

Ithykant shrugged. "What is so strange about a man hanging himself?"

Raka informed him, "It is strange because there was no blood in his body. How does a man with no blood hang himself? He had first tried to cut his wrists but he didn't bleed much from those wounds as there were no pools of blood found. Do you think that someone took his blood?"

Ithykant was galvanized by the thought that he might be suspected of murder. "There was another man. His name was, Singevor. Perhaps he had a hand in it."

"What did he look like?" asked Raka.

"I don't know," replied Ithykant.

Raka was suspicious. "You meet a man, learn his name, but yet you don't know what he looks like. That does not seem reasonable or believable."

"It is so," stammered Ithykant. "He wore a hood and it shaded his face. But he seemed to have fearsome teeth. Fangs almost. Maybe he took Judas' blood."

Raka demanded to know, "What else do you know besides unbelievable tales of purloined blood? Did you take anything away from the hill?"

"Those crosses were mine!" said Ithykant defensively. "I made them in this very shop and I had every right to reclaim them!"

Raka's demeanor brightened. "Ah, so you have them? May I see them?"

"Did the Romans send you?" Ithykant became concerned. After all Romans were prone to crucifying thieves. "I am not a thief. Tell your Roman masters that I am an honest tradesman. The crosses were strewn about on the ground. They would have gone to decay if I had not lifted them up to my cart."

"Adon Ithykant," said Raka, soothingly now, "I am not in league with the Roman's and I will not tell them that you have the crosses. I wish only to view them. As a matter of history. Pontius Pilate has washed his hands of them."

Ithykant calmed a little and said, "I sold them."

Raka face darkened anew and he asked with intensity, "To whom?"

"A furniture maker," answered Ithykant. "They were fine wood. The blood would not stain them much. The man intends to saw them into planks and make fine chests. You know, for dowries. Glory boxes."

Raka's anger began to show once again upon hearing the words. "What was the man's name? Where is his shop?"

"His name is Gur. His shop is in Jerusalem." Ithykant backed away as he was becoming very fearful of Raka.

"I must go there and stop him," declared Raka. "Before history is destroyed."

"I am sure that you are too late," stated Ithykant. "It has been months and surely by now they are the property of a new bride. He paid well for the Mesopotamia timber that I bought."

"Wood from the land between the rivers?" asked a keenly interested Raka.

"Yes," confirmed Ithykant. "The seller said that it was Arbor Notitia, the tree of life from the Garden of Eden. I didn't believe it but I bought it anyway. Pontius Pilate laughed at the story and paid me extra for the pleasantry of it."

Raka's face reddened deeply with anger. "And you sold this cherished wood to a furniture maker! You fool! You damned fool! Did you take anything else from the Mount of Calvary?"

"Yes," answered the now extremely apprehensive Ithykant. "I took three bloody iron spikes. The ones that nailed Jesus to the cross."

Raka was galvanized and demanded, "Give them to me!"

Ithykant's knees trembled slightly. He feared Raka might become so angry that he would now tell the Romans that he was a thief. "I don't have them. I sold them to the ironsmith Lavi. He used them to fashion a sword of Damascus steel for Emir Alakinani." Upon seeing that the words seemed to infuriate the scribe all the more he added apologetically, "I only got a mere three shekels. I am but a poor tradesman."

Raka's face reddened with rage. "You miserable dog! The Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate commits an historical act and you erase the fact for three shekels!"

Ithykant was alarmed by the intense tone of the man's words. "Why are you so interested in Christ anyway? He was just a vagabond. He didn't even have his own temple."

Raka swept the words away with a dismissive movement of his arm. "Who in hell cares about Jesus? He will soon be forgotten. But the history of Pontius Pilate will live on. He is a powerful person who has the lives of many people in his grasp. If he but nodded in your direction his guards would make you shorter by a head. Pontius Pilate commands the Roman Legions. Jesus Christ commanded an army of twelve. And one of those was a sniveling traitor.

People would pay great sums of money to see and touch the tools of Pontius Pilate's supremacy such as the crosses and the iron spikes. The masses adore the seeing of the instruments of torture. You threw away a fortune for a miserable three shekels!

Jesus leaves nothing behind. No temple, no property, no gold and no silver. There is nothing that people would pay to see or touch. There are temples to Jupiter, Venus, Minerva, Bacchus and very many more. We know these names but we don't remember the names of the priests, clerics or rabbis that practiced within them. The populace will long remember Jehovah but will soon forget the name Jesus."

Ithykant backed away until he was up against a wall. He feared for his life. And he had reason to do so.

Raka drew out the scimitar from the scabbard at his waist.

Ithykant tried to think of some way to appease the man. "Wait! Judas said that Christ spoke to him. I will tell you what he said."

Raka stepped closer to the man. "Tell me then."

In a hoarse whisper, that being all that he could manage, Ithykant revealed the prophecy to the threatening man.

"That is impossible!" exclaimed a shocked Raka. "You must be lying."

"No! I swear it is as he told it to me," quaked out Ithykant.

Raka snarled out his words. "Others may come to seek knowledge of the whereabouts of the crosses and the spikes. They are worth a great sum of money. And they would find you, a blabbering fool that tells all."

Ithykant removed the coin pouch from his waist rope and held it out to Raka. "Here! Take it all! The gold coins that Pontius Pilate paid me, and the silver ones that Lavi paid me. It is all that I have."

“You have one thing else that I need,” said Raka.

“What?” asked the terrified Ithykant.

“Your life! In order to bring about your silence!” voiced Raka angrily as he lunged at Ithykant and drove the point of the scimitar into the man’s abdomen. Then using both hands upon the hilt of the short sword he pulled it upwards until it cleaved into the heart. As Ithykant slumped down to his knees Raka withdrew the blade and stepped backwards. The murdered man fell forward onto the earthen floor. In his outstretched hand was his coin purse and Raka stooped down to gain possession of it. At that moment he felt a surge of compassion. Responding to it he walked to the stable stall of the donkey and opened it. “Come out dear animal. You could starve to death before someone else comes to this place.” The animal shied away from the smell of Ithykant’s blood and trotted out to freedom among the spring grasses upon the rolling hillside. Raka wiped his bloody scimitar on Ithykant’s shabby robe, mounted his black horse and rode off towards his large stone villa that was situated just outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Ithykant lay in death on the earthen floor of his workshop. As the light of day began to fade into early evening, a small spot on his right hand index finger began to glow and shimmer. It was the spot where a thorn from the hawthorn crown had punctured him, mingling the blood of Jesus Christ with his own.

A flash of brilliant lightening lit up the sky above the workshop and an explosive clap of thunder accompanied it. The donkey hunkered down in abject terror as its bulging eyes stared at the threatening sky. It began to rain in large heavy drops. In seconds it became a downpour.

A white robed man with a light brown beard appeared in the doorway of the workshop. When he stepped outside the rain ceased above him but continued all about him. He remained completely dry and with each footfall the earth beneath his sandals instantly was without water.

Upon seeing him all of the donkey’s fearful trembling ceased. The animal trotted to the man and as it neared him the rain stopped above it and the donkey was instantly without wetness. It nuzzled the man and allowed him to mount. They began a journey to Jerusalem with the rain parting about them as the donkey stepped along.

## Chapter 2

Raka of Michmash arrived the next day at the blacksmith shop where Ithykant had sold the three iron spikes to Lavi. From astride his horse he greeted the ironworker, "Shalom, Adon Lavi."

The perspiring laborer paused in his efforts at the hot forge and said, "I am not Lavi. He sold me this business a month ago."

Raka became anxious. "Where is Lavi now?"

The man answered, "Either in the Nabataean Kingdom or dead. Most likely dead."

"What do you mean?" asked Raka with nervous intensity.

"Lavi has joined with Emir Alakinani who has raised a mercenary army and plans to attack Petra," answered the blacksmith. "The Nabataeans demand payment from any caravan passing through their land and Petra is said to be bulging with gold, silk and other treasures as a result."

"Why do you think that Lavi might be dead?" asked Raka.

"Because the Nabataeans are fierce and merciless," the man replied. "Trying to steal their treasure is like trying to grab the fangs out of a cobra's mouth."

"Did Lavi make a sword for Alakinani?" asked Raka.

The man nodded. "Yes. And a very fine one it was. He made it of Wootz steel. It is hammered and layered steel. It takes and holds a keen edge."

Raka became very perturbed upon hearing that and queried, "Did he use three iron spikes that he bought from Ithykant?"

"I don't know anyone named Ithykant," the man said, "but Lavi said that he used three iron spikes in the making of the scimitar. He laughed and said that he bought the spikes for silver and was selling them for gold. I wasn't paying much attention. Do you plan to buy anything from me?"

"No," Raka shook his head. "But I would have paid good gold coin for those iron spikes."

The man was slightly confused. "That seems an odd thing to say and odder to do. If you want I will go and find you some iron spikes. Or make some for you right here at my forge."

Raka shook his head. "No, but if you learn of Lavi's whereabouts in greater detail I will pay you a gold coin for the news."

At that moment Lavi was upon his horse and galloping for his life along with Emir Alakinani and his band of forty-eight mercenaries. They could clearly hear the war cries of the bloodthirsty Nabataeans that were in pursuit of them in the desert east of the red rock city of Petra. The enemy was some distance behind them but the sounds of their blood curdling cries carried easily on the desert air.

Alakinani had hoped to approach the city of Petra undetected by the Nabataeans but had unexpectedly encountered a patrolling contingent of the battle-hardened warriors. There had been no alternative but to attempt to out run them because he and his men would surely have been slain if captured. The Nabataeans had no tolerance for strangers intruding into their domain.

The horses under the Emir's men were near the point of complete exhaustion after the long gallop in the hot desert. Alakinani's mount struggled up a gently rising slope and at the top the Emir could view the terrain to his front. He reined in his horse and stared at it. It was roughly flat for some distance and would not provide any immediate position for defense such as a grouping of boulders.

As Lavi rode up beside Alakinani his heart rose in his throat because of his feeling of hopelessness. He concluded that they were doomed as there was no place to hide. The Nabataeans clearly out numbered them and would soon overtake and slaughter them.

Alakinani drew his scimitar and held it aloft. "We are saved!" he shouted. "Follow me!" He turned his horse obliquely to the right and spurred it into a gallop. As he raced onwards he began a wide circling movement around the flat expanse of sand that had lain before him.

Lavi thought that the man was insane as clearly the best chance to escape would have been to ride straight forward as speedily as possible. Why ride in a curving fashion?

When Alakinani had finished a half circle of about five hundred meters across he abruptly reined in his horse and sat looking back in the direction of their pursuers. His men had followed in his tracks and also brought their mounts to a halt. "Fan out to my left and right!" he commanded his men. "Shout insults at them! Call them cowards and sons of whores! Say that their mothers milk the male camels! Hold your weapons aloft and dare them to enter a battle with us!"

Lavi was stunned. Had Alakinani decided that they were to all commit suicide? They were clearly out numbered and exhausted. They could not possibly hope to win in a pitched battle with the Nabataeans.

The enemy horde appeared in a full gallop at the top of the rise where Alakinani had declared that they were saved. The Nabataeans raised a hideous sounding war cry and then spurred their horses straight down the rise and directly towards the opposing force that sat taunting them, some several hundred meters to their front.

"Curse them!" commanded Alakinani. "Curse them and their mothers! Call them cowards!" He rose up in his stirrups and slashed his scimitar through the air and screamed oaths in what seemed to Lavi to be a gleeful tone of voice.

The Nabataeans came rushing onward at race speed upon their mounts, and yelling war cries with their raised swords flashing in the sunlight.

In the next moments Lavi doubted his own eyesight. A huge cloud of billowing dust arose in roiling swirls among the Nabataeans. The entire horde disappeared from sight in the bulbous clouds of fine dust particles that once stirred up were simply was so light and fine that they became suspended in the air. The clouds roiled upwards for a hundred meters.

To the Nabataean riders it was as if the ground fell out from beneath them as their horses plunged into a large depression that was filled with minute particles of dust. It had barely more substance than a mist and was the dry quicksand of the desert. Over very many years a great multitude of fine particles had been wind blown into the depression. The minute grains slightly repulsed each other due to static electricity and formed a voluminous mass with very little density. Then the accumulation, that was perhaps ten meters deep, had lain there treacherously, as if awaiting the unwary.

The riders to the front slid down the concealed slope and sank into the fine dust. They were pushed further forward and downward by the impetus of the riders behind them. There was no possibility of turning back before they slipped down the slope of the large depression that had been hidden by the great volumes of the powdery sand that it had cupped for many years. The Nabataeans attempted to rein in their horses but the animals and riders slid still further down the slope into the suffocating dust and darkness. The desert air was filled with the screams of fearful surprise from doomed men. Then there were only the sounds of choking and gagging as the dry dust clogged the airways of the submerged men and beasts.

Finally there was silence. The huge clouds of the powdery sand grains began to ever so slowly sink toward the earth but clearly it would take many hours for it to be back at rest on the desert floor to form a deadly carpet over the burial chamber of the Nabataeans.

Alakinani's men had at first been stunned senseless by the sight of the desert rising up to devour the Nabataeans. But once they fully realized that they had been saved they yelled out cheers of victory and sheer thankfulness.

The sun was starting to set so Alakinani commanded his men to camp where they were, ordering them to hobble their horses to prevent the animals from wandering about in search of graze and falling into the huge dust pit.

Lavi dismounted and after hobbling his horse he approached Alakinani. "What demon arose to devour them?" he asked.

Alakinani answered, "The very smallest of sand grains. Imagine that we take two grains of sand and rub them together for many years? What then would we have?"

"Dust?" queried Lavi.

"Yes, dust," confirmed Alakinani. "The deserts are filled with the dust of pulverized sand grains as the relentless winds over the ages grinds them together. But it is usually well dispersed and we hardly notice it. If there is a broad depression in the ground and it is located such that the winds blow in the dust but don't blow it back out, then there is desert quicksand. Dry dust finer than the finest powder you have ever seen. And it lies in a hollow only some several meters deep. Yet more than deep enough to swallow men and beasts.

Some years ago I nearly rode my horse into such a dreadful place and barely escaped with my life. I studied the appearance of the huge bowl of dust so that I could avoid such a danger in the future. The Nabataeans would have knowledge of such things and that is why I wanted their eyes to be upon us and not the ground beneath their horses' hooves. The dust has about the same appearance as normal sand but if one has time to study the terrain the difference becomes noticeable. It has to do with a slightly different play of light upon its surface.

They and their horses are down in that huge dusty grave and will become dried out mummies. Who knows who else might be down there with them? Perhaps entire caravans. There are many tales of ghost caravans. Men and animals that rode into the desert and then never returned. And never left a trace."

Lavi sank to the ground to rest. "Well, unfortunately your new scimitar did not get to taste blood."

Alakinani nodded as he hefted the blade. "Yes, but nevertheless I somehow sense that this beautiful blade had something to do with our enemies being vanquished."

Lavi knew well what was contained in the scimitar and asked, "Are you a follower of Jesus Christ?"

"The vagabond? The wanderer?" asked Alakinani. "Of course not. He didn't even build a temple before they nailed him to a cross. I suspect he doesn't have many followers."

"Lavi said, "People say that he performed miracles."

Alakinani laughed, "Did he ever make about seventy murders disappear from the face of the earth, as I did? Now that is a useful miracle."

"No," responded Lavi. "He didn't engage in warfare."

"Well, we remember Gaius Julius Caesar of Rome," observed Alakinani. "He slew his enemies by the thousands and because of that his name will live on through the centuries. I suspect that Jesus Christ will be forgotten by the time of the winter solstice."

Lavi shrugged. "There are many people that say that they are followers of Jesus."

Alakinani said, "That makes no sense. There are followers of the God Apollo but there are no followers of his priests. Christ was the priest of Jehovah. So I imagine that there are followers of Jehovah but not of his priest. But now, enough of this talk. We need our rest so wrap yourself in a blanket and sleep."

The desert night was cold and many of the men caused their horses to lie down in order that they might nestle against the warmth of the animals. After sleeping for more than an hour one of the mercenaries turned in his slumber and rolled onto a scorpion that was pressed between the left side of his neck and his horse's belly. The scorpion instinctively snapped its tail into the man's carotid artery injecting venom directly into the blood stream. With each beat of the man's heart the venom was pulsed into his brain. The sting of the deadly insect was horribly

painful and the man screamed out in agony. The other men were up on their feet immediately in alarm being unaware of the cause of the man's cries. The man's startled horse rose to its legs and the scorpion scampered away. The victim went into convulsions and the others backed away from him in fear of the unknown. Had an arrow been shot into their midst from afar? Was a serpent among them? Was it a demon wreaking vengeance for the slaughter of the Nabataeans?

Several minutes later the man breathed his last and died. The others remained upon their feet unwilling to lower their guard and awaited the light of dawn.

As the sun rose over the horizon Alakinani gave instructions to his men. "Let him lie there. Don't touch him as you might suffer the same fate, whatever it was. Mount up as we are going to ride to Wadi al Mouda, which is towards the sunrise. There we should find food and water once we kill anyone that attempts to stop us from taking it."

The men were relieved to be up and onto their mounts and were eager to depart the moody place. The thought of blood letting fired their enthusiasm and they began to laugh and joke among themselves.

Alakinani led them to the east with Lavi riding beside him. The Emir was in good spirits and swirled his sword over his head in anticipation of battle. "This fine blade is yet to taste blood. I feel the urge to lop off some heads to test its keen edge."

Lavi was pensive. "I am but a blacksmith and I am here to service the weapons of your men. I didn't expect to be in battles and I hope that you don't desire me to kill anyone."

The Emir sheathed his scimitar and spoke to Lavi. "In Wadi al Mouda the men that we capture will be given a choice. If they submit to me and swear allegiance they and their families will live. If they resist I will first decapitate their children before their eyes, then their wives and finally them.

If they obediently join my army then you will see to it that they are properly armed by arrow, spear or sword."

Lavi asked, "How could you ever trust them? Wouldn't one of them slit your throat when given the first opportunity?"

Alakinani shook his head. "Among these people the most important and treasured thing that they possess is their word of honor. If they gave their word to the devil they would keep it for eternity. I face only one necessity. I must conquer them in a fair battle. I must prove that I am the better man. If I cut off enough heads with this scimitar that will be proof enough for them."

Lavi brought up a more immediate concern. "We need to find water soon. The horses are struggling. You should have the men dismount and walk to save the animals."

They were nearing a dry gully where perhaps once in a decade rainwater would wash through it. Alakinani nudged his horse down the embankment to the dry bed. "We will ride along this depression because sometimes such a thing arrives at a small watering hole or an oasis."

Lavi and the other men followed him. They rode slowly along for a quarter hour when Alakinani gripped the grip of the scimitar. "I have a strange feeling," he said to Lavi.

Having seen the man place his hand upon his weapon Lavi had become apprehensive. "Have you seen some enemy?"

"No," answered the Emir. "I have felt the blade move of its own accord."

"Perhaps it is the hot sun upon your head that makes you imagine things," suggested Lavi.

"The blade moved and it moves now," declared Alakinani. "It is as if it wishes to be free of the scabbard." He drew the scimitar, held it out and away and then released it. The point sank downward into the sand. He dismounted and retrieved the weapon. He motioned to the men near him and they dismounted. "Dig down into the sand right here."

They had no digging tools so they started to claw away the sand with their bare hands. As they proceeded to move away the dry grains one of the men cried out, "I smell wetness!"

As they continued their labors it became apparent to all that they were now moving damp sand. The other men urged them on and some dismounted to help with the work. A foot further down they reached a point where water seeped through the sand and began to pool. In short order that created a depression four feet across that rapidly filled with water. Over the next hours all of the men and their horses slaked their thirst.

Later Alakinani held his scimitar broadside in his hands. "Lavi, I am certain that this blade has mystical qualities. It showed me exactly where water was to be found. How did you come to make such a thing?"

Lavi said, "It contains the iron of the three spikes that nailed Jesus Christ to the cross."

"Bah," snorted the Emir dismissively. "I can not believe that some minor priest is responsible for the miracle of finding water where none seemed to be. I would sooner believe that Tethys, the Greek Goddess of fresh water was our savior. That is far more sensible a thing."

The other men were eating dried dates, a food that never seemed to spoil under any conditions, and that is highly nutritious. With water available others cracked off pieces of dry hard bread and softened them with the liquid.

The night was spent in the gully but the men were restive as their thoughts were of the man that had died screaming the previous evening.

Near midnight a man awoke and asked, "What is that sound?" As others awakened they also heard a distant sound, as if a large creature was moaning somewhere off in the darkness. The loudness of the unfathomable groaning rose and fell with the intensity of the night breeze.

Alakinani was awake and alert and he could clearly hear the sound. "What the hell is that?"

Lavi answered, "It is the singing sand dunes."

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked the Emir.

Lavi said, "Sand dunes often are curved. Some appear as a crescent shape. The top of the dunes are usually sharply shaped and the breeze blowing over the edge creates a sound not unlike a man blowing air over an open top of an empty jug. The cooling night air sinking down the inside slope of the sand dune increases the effect and it is therefore most often heard at night. If the curve of the dune is in our direction we can hear the sound quite easily. It is sort of like cupping your hands at your mouth to make your voice carry further. It throws the sound in the manner of an amphitheater where even those at some distance can hear whispers from the stage."

"Shut your mouth Lavi," commanded Alakinani. To his men he called out in a loud voice, "It is the blessing of the God of War upon us. He knows that we go tomorrow to do battle at Wadi al Mouda and he wishes a fine victory for us. Look to your weapons and to the trappings of your horses. Be ready to win a great battle and make the God of War proud. Blood will flow freely tomorrow and the God of War will drink of it to his fill.

If any man finds silver or gold tomorrow it is his to keep. Take the women as your desires demand. Show no mercy to anyone. Sleep now with the blessing of the God of War and be well rested for the battle."

He turned to Lavi and growled out, "Don't ever say to the men what you said to me. You may be right about the sand dune noises but that would not put my men into a fighting mood."

In the morning's first light before the sun rose above the horizon Alakinani had his mounted men on the move towards Wadi al Mouda. They came to the crest of a low hill and could see down onto the village where the first of the awakening residents were walking out to the toilet areas some distance from their stick huts. They were unarmed and not yet aware of Alakinani and his men.

The Emir drew his scimitar and with a war cry urged his horse down the slope of the hill toward the village. His men drew out their swords and galloped down after him, howling madly to frighten their intended victims.



The startled and now alarmed villagers realized that they were under attack and ran back towards their huts in the hopes of gaining their weapons. But Alakinani's men were soon among them. The raiders rode into them slashing viciously with their scimitars. spurts of blood arched into the morning air and severed limbs fell to the sand. Other villagers ran out of their huts brandishing scimitars and spears. They engaged the mounted raiders, attempting to lame the horses in order to bring the attackers down to earth. Their efforts were ineffectual and they were slaughtered in short order.

Lavi had stayed back out of the area of the fighting. There were many wounded and dead bodies lying on the blood drenched sand as the fighting continued. Suddenly Lavi became aware that someone was standing near him as he sat upon his horse. Looking down he saw a person that he thought was a monk because of his hooded attire. "Who in hell are you?" he demanded to know as he placed his hand on the grip of his short sword.

"I am Singevor," answered the man in a raspy voice.

"Where the hell did you come from and why are you here?" Lavi demanded to know further. He could not see the man's face because the hood shadowed it.

"Isn't the battle beautiful?" asked the man with apparent interest in the slaughter.

Lavi was appalled at the statement. "It is murder called conquest. It is not possible to call it beautiful."

Singevor said, "It is an ill wind that doesn't blow someone some good. And you, Lavi, are you not here in the hopes of gaining loot? Are you not just letting others do your murder for you?"

Singevor slowly walked towards the nearest of the bloody wounded men and upon reaching him he sank to his knees and leaned in closely over the victim. Scarlet blood was pulsing from a spear wound in the right side of the unfortunate man's chest. The injured man feebly attempted to push Singevor away but he was too weak to effectively raise a defense.

Lavi was aghast and revolted. He said aloud, "He is lapping the man's bloody wounds!" Alakinani rode to the largest hut in the village and dismounted before the opening. "Sheikh of Wadi al Mouda! Emerge and fight me!"

A middle-aged man stepped out into the early morning sunlight. He held a well-formed scimitar that he raised as he lunged towards the Emir.

Alakinani had no difficulty deflecting the man's blade with his scimitar. The village Chief swung his blade again and again but Alakinani's scimitar easily rendered the strikes futile by deflecting them away. The Emir felt as if his scimitar was moving of its own accord, merely carrying his hand along with it. He experienced no sense of exertion.

After some minutes he could tell that the chieftain was tiring and with a simple flick of his scimitar against the other man's blade he caused it to fly out of the grip of his opponent.

The exhausted and unarmed man stood staring at Alakinani bereft of any hope of seeing the sunset that day. The Emir swung his scimitar out to his right to gain distance for his killing swing and then with all his might swept it towards the left side of the man's neck with the intention of beheading him. As the scimitar neared the man's throat Alakinani felt the blade rise of its own volition and flash past the top of the man's head without causing him any injury. The Emir and the chieftain stood staring at each other, Alakinani in disbelief, and the chieftain in stunned confusion because his head was still upon his shoulders.

Alakinani pointed his blade at the man's abdomen and lunged forward. The scimitar point did not pierce the man's skin but the chieftain was pushed violently backwards as if struck by a blunt lance.

The Emir called out to one of his men who approached quickly at the command. He instructed him, "Behead this man!"

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