



*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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Please email me with your comments

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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 lthykant 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 lthykant?"

"I don't know anyone named lthykant," 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!"

The warrior swung his sword out to the right, and then using both hands on the grip he slashed it back towards the man's neck. It cleanly decapitated the chieftain and the head fell to the ground as the body slumped downward.

That evening Alakinani ate the evening repast of boiled sheep, rice and tea in the chieftain's hut. In attendance sitting around on cushions were his senior warriors and Lavi. With appetites satisfied the Emir spoke to Lavi. "You have fashioned a very strange scimitar for me. It defends me with little effort on my part. It seems to fight the battle by itself. Yet the blade will not allow me to kill my opponent. Though I swing it ferociously at my foe, it injures him not at all."

Lavi remained silent.

Alakinani held out his right hand with the palm upward, "And every time that I grip the pommel I later find blood on my palm. Yet no blood had been spilled at that time. Where does the blood come from? My palm shows no wound."

Lavi breathed in deeply and exhaled slowly. "Christ has been quoted by some as having said, "I come not to send peace, but a sword.""

Emir Alakinani growled, "What in hell does that mean?"

Lavi shook his head and replied, "I don't know except that Christ spoke of a sword. Perhaps it is the one in your hand."

The Emir was annoyed. "It seems that all you ever think about is Christ. We are here to conquer Petra and become wealthy. Your words should embrace only those things. Be silent about priests and such."

Speaking to his other warriors he commanded them, "Dig into the earthen floor where you sit. Use your swords and spears. These tribesmen always bury their wealth under the floor of their huts. If they buried it for safe keeping out in the desert somewhere they wouldn't be able to sleep at night for fretting that someone might be out there pilfering their gold and silver."

The men started prodding into the sandy hut floor with their weapons and very soon one of them shouted, "I hit something. Look here. It is an old rag that is wrapped around something." Removing the rag they all saw that it had contained some gold coins and jewelry that glistened in the firelight. The man dutifully handed the golden items to Emir Alakinani.

The Emir said, "Because this is the chieftain's wealth I will take it as plunder. Any other gold or silver found by you men is yours to keep." This statement caused the others to rush to the hut's doorway in order to go to the other huts of the village and probe their dirt floors for treasure.

The next morning the pillaged people of the tribe were assembled into the three groups of men, woman and children. Emir Alakinani strutted out of the main hut and addressed them in a loud voice. "You men have a simple decision to make. You can swear allegiance to me, man by man, and therefore save your families and yourselves. If you refuse to swear your obedience to my every command then all of your family members will be beheaded before your eyes. Your children first. Then your wife, or wives. And then yourselves. You can see that your chieftain is minus his head and that is a preview of your own fate if you defy me.

If you swear your allegiance to me your families will be spared and may remain here in peace. But you men will become soldiers in my army as we go to attack the Nabataeans at Petra. You will share in any treasure that we win in Petra. You can then return here to your families as wealthy men. In the instance where a man might perish during battle his share of the booty will be carried back here to his family."

The Emir unsheathed his scimitar and held it out at waist level. "Now, come forward, man by man, and touch the blade of my sword as you declare that you will serve Emir Alakinani faithfully."

The first man stepped forward and placed his hand upon the sharp bare blade of Alakinani's scimitar. In a firm voice he declared, "I swear allegiance to Emir Alakinani!"

One by one the other sixty-two men of the tribe swore their undying faithfulness to the Emir. No man declined to do so. And that allowed the women and children to quench their fears of horrible deaths at the hands of the raiders.

Alakinani instructed them. "Go and spend this day with you loved ones. The men should decide who their captain will be and that man will come to me for further instructions. We will depart at sunset. You have only a few horses but bring all of them. During our trek to Petra we will march only at night, as we will camp during the hot daytime hours. That is so that those of you that will be afoot can conserve your vitality for the battle that is to come."

Hours later as the globe of the dust reddened sun touched the distant horizon the warrior battalion of Emir Alakinani set off in the direction of Petra. As Lavi rode beside Alakinani he said, "There was a stranger among us today. He said his name was, Singevor."

"Do you mean a man of the village?" asked the Emir.

"No," answered Lavi. "He was a stranger that was dressed like a monk. He was unarmed so I did not think that he was a danger. But he did a repulsive thing. He lapped up the blood of one of the dying men."

Alakinani snorted disbelief. "Lavi, I think that the excitement of the fighting has caused you to have delusions."

Lavi was staring vacantly toward the horizon. In a low voice he said, "I certainly hope that's what it was. May God forbid that it was what I thought that I had seen."

Alakinani asked, "Where is this blood drinking demon that appeared from nowhere?"

"Lavi answered, "I lost sight of him during the battle. But I don't think that he has gone very far from us as I feel a dread." He turned in his saddle and looked back over his left shoulder. In the distance a figure that had the appearance of a hooded monk was standing at the top of a sand dune and looking in their direction. To the Emir, Lavi said, "We always have to search relentlessly for good fortune. But bad fortune is easily found."

Chapter 3

Raka had ridden upon his horse in search of the villa of Gur, the furniture maker, the man to whom Ithykant had sold the three crosses. People in the market place had told him that Gur owned a large villa just outside the northern border of Jerusalem. As he approached the structure he noted that it was within a walled compound and was a building of some magnificence situated upon a hill. The large villa and grounds had an aura of elegance. The structure was cream-colored stucco with light blue ceramic tile inlays around the door and windows. The gardens were lush with brilliantly colored flowers. The pomegranate trees were heavy with fruit ready to be harvested.

At the closed metal entry gate there was a hanging rope attached to the cradle of a bell. He tugged upon the rope and the bell rocked in its cradle as it pealed a mellow tone with a long resonant after hum.

A manservant came to the gate. "What is your wish?"

Raka stated, "I wish to speak to Gur."

"Then you must go to Benghazi," said the servant.

"Does Gur not own this villa?" asked Raka.

"No longer," replied the man. "He sold it to Shamir and left for Benghazi."

Raka grunted slightly, "The name Shamir means "a thorn". Who is this thorny person?"

"He is a savant, a man of great wisdom and vision," the servant informed him.

"Is this now a temple?" asked Raka.

"This is a hall for the purpose of discourse," said the servant. "You may enter and speak with Shamir as he is always considerate of guests." He unlocked the ornate ironwork gate and swung it open to allow Raka to enter upon his horse. Once inside Raka dismounted. The servant said, "Enter through the main door. I will stable and water your mount."

Raka climbed the marble steps to the large ornate bronze front door and pushed to swing it open. Before him was a marble floored great hall with elegant embellishments. He stepped inside as a beautiful handmaiden beckoned him to traverse the hall to another door. As she opened it Raka saw a blonde haired bearded man in brilliantly white robes standing near a dining table.

"Enter Raka of Michmash," invited the man in a mellow tone of voice.

Raka had a quizzical expression as he approached the man. "How do you know who I am? For some reason you appear familiar but I am quite sure that we have never met."

"Perhaps in another life," said the man in all truthfulness but the fact was lost to Raka. "Sit and you will be fed," said Shamir as he took his seat at the table.

Raka sat across the table from Shamir and eyed him. "You seem a man of some wealth but that is strange for I know all the men of wealth in Jerusalem and I don't know you. How did you come upon your fortune, might I ask?"

Shamir removed a pale blue silk purse from the folds of his white robe. He reached inside of it and extracted a gold drachma. He placed it upon the table. He reached into the purse again and brought forth a second gold drachma. He placed it on the table beside the first. He then handed the purse to Raka saying, "Reach in for a golden drachma."

Raka fished his fingers about the inside of the silken purse but he felt nothing. "It is empty," he said.

"Give me the purse," requested Shamir.

Raka handed the silken purse to the man. Shamir reached inside and extracted a third gold drachma and he set it on the table beside the first two.

Raka was awed. "You have a silken purse that provides golden drachmas only for you!"

Shamir nodded.

Raka asked, "How is it possible for you to extract an unending number of gold coins from an empty purse?"

Shamir answered a question with a question. "How was it possible for Jesus to feed a multitude with a single fish?"

Raka waved his hand in dismissive gesture. "I have heard that fairy tale. The adherents of celebrities often embellish stories about their favorites. Or they make up tales out of whole cloth. Christ will soon be forgotten but the history and greatness of Pontius Pilate will live on. By his wise deliberations he prevented a riot among the population when he decided to have Christ crucified."

Raka stopped talking and pondered the situation for a moment. And then he drew his sharp dagger from a small scabbard at his belt. "I imagine that if I hold this keen blade to your throat then you will bring forth countless gold drachmas for me," he proclaimed with an evil smile.

Shamir calmly observed the man for a short time and then said, "Pick up the three golden drachmas."

Raka assumed that the threat had worked and smiled broadly as he scooped up the three golden coins and clenched them in his left fist. "I will not be satisfied with a mere three gold coins. You will soon give me many more or suffer death at my hands."

"It is one thing to get a fortune, but it is another to hold onto it," said Shamir in a calm tone of voice. "Open your left hand and gaze upon your treasure."

When Raka opened his hand it was empty. The three coins had vanished into thin air. His jaw hung agape.

Shamir said calmly, "You could cause me by threat to give you a thousand gold drachmas. But you could not hold onto them."

Raka's thought process was in shambles as he sat stunned and confused by what had just occurred.

Shamir explained, "That is because you attempted to take the coins by thievery. My servants perform honest labor and when I pay them in gold it is theirs to keep."

"Are you a sorcerer?" asked Raka as he pushed away from the table with his apprehension growing. "Is it possible for you to make me disappear, as you have done with the coins?"

"Calm yourself," Shamir said soothingly. "And put away your blade as you can't harm me with it." He lay his open hand palm down on the table. "Strike your blade down through it," he offered to Raka.

Raka hesitated for a moment but his curiosity finally drove him to raise his knife and then stab it down into the man's hand. There was no blood spurt. He wrenched the blade out of the wooden table beneath the hand and raised it upwards. There was no wound in Shamir's hand. But when the man in the white robes slowly pulled his hand back a stab mark in the table was revealed.

Raka jumped to his feet in an agitated state of mind. He quickly looked about the room to locate all possible exits in the event that he was attacked. A large window revealed a courtyard lined with colorful flower beds around a lush grassy lawn. The man's attention was drawn to a donkey that was munching a cud of grass. "I know that donkey!" he gasped. "I know it because of the oddly shaped white streak upon its left neck. That is Ithykant's animal."

Shamir said nothing and remained calmly seated at the table.

A distraught Raka turned and stared intently at him. "When I look at you I see Ithykant but also I don't. You are him yet you are not him. But you cannot be Ithykant because Ithykant is dead. I killed him with this very knife. This knife that I hold in my hand. The one that cannot cut you."

Shamir gestured towards the chair that Raka had been sitting on. "Please sit down. Calm yourself. Tell me why you have come here."

Raka forced himself to control his apprehension and finally moved to the chair and sat down. The servant appeared with a ceramic bowl containing clear water. He held it before Raka who understood that he was to wash his hands before eating. The bowl was finely decorated with the images of blue colored vines and leaves and was a work of art. He sheathed his dagger and dipped his fingers into the cool water. The servant handed him a clean white cloth in order that he could dry his hands. The servant then left with the bowl and cloth.

Finding his voice Raka said, "I am a historian. A scribe. I create finely illustrated manuscripts that detail the lives of important people. My current manuscript is that for Pontius Pilate, the man who condemned Jesus of Nazareth to death by crucifixion. History will forever remember him for that historic action. The crosses that were used in the crucifixion are his tools and should be preserved. I was told that they were taken after the crucifixion and sold to the wood worker Gur. The man from whom you procured this villa.

Shamir said nothing.

Raka asked, "Do you know where the crosses are?"

"Yes," replied Shamir.

"Are they here?" asked Raka.

"The wood of the crosses is safe," said Shamir.

Raka breathed a sigh of relief. "Then Gur did not make them into glory boxes?"

Shamir said again, "The wood of the crosses is safe."

Raka spread his hands in a gesture of agitated confusion. "Are they now glory boxes or not?"

Shamir repeated the words, "The wood of the crosses is safe."

Raka expression changed to one of discovery. "That bowl! The one that I just washed my hands in. I have seen that bowl before. I was in the hall of Pontius Pilate when he condemned Jesus and I saw him wash his hands afterwards as he prepared for his meal. Pontius Pilate washed his hands in that very same bowl!"

Shamir nodded agreement.

Raka was in an excited state of mind. "That bowl is a glorious article of great historical value! I must have it!"

Shamir said, "You have had it. In the same manner that you had the gold drachmas."

Hearing that, Raka slumped dejectedly in his chair. "You are committing a horrible torture upon me but you have not even touched me. You possess historical items of immeasurable value yet I am the historian. I would give all that I possess now in order to possess them. But I fear that you will not allow that and I am powerless to discover some means by which I could compel you to relinquish them to me."

Shamir advised, "Calm yourself. My servant arrives with food and good wine. Eat. Drink. Relax your nerves."

The servant set down a tray of spiced meats, a plate of bread and a bowl of fruit. He positioned a baked clay plate in front of Raka and poured red wine into a plain ceramic goblet.

Raka nibbled at the meat and sipped the wine. He had very little appetite. After a few minutes he motioned to the servant that stood a few feet behind him that the meal remnants should be removed. The servant cleared away the items and left the hall with them.

Shamir remarked, "You ate no more than Christ at his last supper that was attended by his believers. And you ate from the same dish as Jesus and you sipped from the same wine cup he used."

Raka snorted slightly. "To hear his followers tell it the wine chalice, the grail as some call it, was made of pure gold, not every day baked clay."

Shamir said, "Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. If there were gold and other precious objects present at the table he would have been richer and of cleaner conscience had he but filched them and left his friend unharmed."

Raka had no interest in the objects as they had no relationship to Pontius Pilate. They were nothing but the table crockery of Jesus' last supper. He was much more interested in Shamir's intentions and asked, "What is your purpose?"

"To serve God," answered Shamir.

"Do you mean Christ?" asked Raka.

"No. I mean God," stated Shamir.

"What is your God's name then?" queried Raka.

"God," affirmed Shamir.

"Yes, certainly," said Raka, "but what is your God's name? Apollo? Eros? Zeus?"

Shamir stated, "God is God and no other. God's name is God."

Raka shrugged. "Do you mean the one that people say that they are made in the image of?"

Shamir smiled just slightly. "If we were made in the image of God the implication would be that God had to periodically visit a toilet in Heaven."

"The one thing would seem to follow the other," agreed Raka. "How will you serve your God?"

"By trying to convince people such as you not to commit evil," responded Shamir. "Or at least, not to commit more evil than you have already. I will converse with history's murderous degenerates and attempt to form a philosophy that can be gifted to the population so as to allow them to live in peace. I will search for an argument to persuade the common people not to let madmen rule them and dictate their destiny. The only reason that madmen do achieve absolute control of a national population is because the sane people of that nation allow them to do so."

Raka snorted derisively. "You will require great good luck to succeed in that endeavor. Humanity is not salvageable. To win in this life a person must be more evil than his opponents. It is a simple formula."

Shamir replied calmly, "I hope to prove you wrong. Evil does breed evil, but in a similar manner, goodness breeds goodness. There is a tipping point and if there is sufficient goodness it will topple and destroy evil."

Raka made an observation. "You appear to be in excellent health. Your teeth are fine and your skin is clear. I notice only a single imperfection. The tip of the index finger of your right hand appears to have recently bled slightly."

Shamir nodded. "The morning after the crucifixion I accidentally impaled my finger upon a bloody thorn of the crown of briar that the Romans had wedged painfully onto the head of Jesus. The blood on the thorn was still wet so our two bloods flowed together in my veins, that of mine and that of Christ's."

Raka snorted slightly. "So now you are a "blood brother" to Christ."

Shamir said, "I only know that you killed me when I was Ithykant. But later I arose alive as Shamir."

Raka gasped out, "I knew that you appeared familiar. But how did you survive my knife thrusts?"

Shamir answered, "I was resurrected."

Raka could not accept it and he could not deny it. He said skeptically, "Christ's followers say that he arose from the dead on the third day. Did you have to wait three days?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I have no idea," replied Shamir calmly. "I only know that my mission is to attempt to dissuade evil people such as you and other madmen from doing further evil."

“And if I am not compliant?” asked Raka.

“Then you will do evil,” answered Shamir.

“Why wouldn’t you kill me to prevent my doing further evil?” asked Raka.

“Because killing you would not be persuasion. It would just be punishment. And very clearly also, prevention,” explained Shamir. “But my task is to convince you and others that evil should not be done, of your own good consciences.”

Raka stood up in preparation of leaving. “You might as well attempt to balance the world on your back like Atlas. And I ask now, am I free to leave?”

“Yes,” answered Shamir. “Go and write your history books in the hopes that some good may come of them. Perhaps even accidentally.”

The servant escorted Raka out to the iron gates where his horse was tethered. The man mounted and rode slowly off towards Jerusalem.

A mother and her young daughter of eleven years had been standing nearby and the servant escorted them into the hall where Shamir waited.

Shamir smiled a greeting. “Good afternoon. I welcome you to my home.”

“Good afternoon, Shamir,” smiled the mother. “With me is my pious daughter, Chanina. At the crucifixion of Jesus her hands and feet bled. The same as those of the poor soul that was nailed to the cross. But she did not feel any pain and there were no wounds. Just blood.”

The young brunette girl had silky hair and blue eyes. She said politely and calmly, “Good afternoon, Shamir.”

Shamir smiled at the lass and asked the mother, “Do you know what is wanted of you and your daughter today?”

The woman replied, “Your servant told us that for a gold coin all that we would be asked to do is walk through the halls of this wonderful mansion.”

“That is correct, my good lady,” confirmed Shamir. “But I must make you aware that Chanina’s hands and feet may bleed again. But as you have related to me, we should not expect any lasting adverse condition.”

The woman said, “We will agree to that for two gold coins. After all, my little darling may suffer some anxiety when she bleeds. ”

Shamir smiled slightly and said, “I agree to the new price.”

He stood and turned to walk towards a large closed door. The servant moved ahead and opened it for the group to pass through. Before them was a long hall richly embellished with beautiful murals of nature scenes. They walked slowly down the hall in silence.

After about fifty paces the young girl stopped and appeared apprehensive. “My palms feel strange,” she informed her mother. “And my feet also!”

Along the right hand wall some twenty paces further down the ornate hall there were three intricately and beautifully carved wooden glory boxes. There was one large chest and two smaller ones.

Looking at the girl’s palms the mother gasped. “She’s bleeding! There is blood oozing from her palms! And look at her feet in her sandals. They are bleeding also.”

“Please don’t be afraid,” soothed Shamir. “It is Stigmata. She is nearing the wood that held Christ during his last moments of life. She is sensitive to the Passion of Christ.” To the little girl he asked, “Do you know where you are, Chanina?”

She nodded. “I am in your house. You asked us to walk down this hall and said not to be afraid if my hands and feet bled.”

Shamir said to the mother, “She is not ecstatic. She is completely aware of her surroundings. She is a remarkable little girl with a strong mind.

We will turn around now. I needed only to know how close she could come to a certain thing before the stigmata began.” He reached into his silken purse and extracted a gold drachma. He placed it in the palm of the right hand of the young girl. Removing a second gold

coin he placed onto the palm of her left hand. "That will be a fine medicine for you, now won't it?"

The young girl closed her fingers about the gold coins and started to walk back up the hall the way that she had come. After a short distance she said, "My palms feel better now." She opened her hands and looking closely at her palms while moving the gold drachmas about she said happily, "The blood is gone!"

The servant escorted the now smiling mother and child out of the villa and then returned to where Shamir was standing in the hall.

"We must move the holy relics during the next couple of days," Shamir concluded. "They are too easily detected by a pure and innocent person."

The servant said, "It will be done as you command. In the meantime the monachos, the monastic scribes, await an audience with you. Should I have them enter?"

Shamir nodded. "Yes, have the members of the scriptoria enter."

The servant opened the hall entrance door and bade a man and a woman to enter. The two were clothed in cheap but clean hooded robes and were barefoot. The color of the robes that they wore was slate gray. The servant gestured to chairs and invited them to sit.

The woman was elderly and peered at Shamir with light blue eyes. She asked, "What task have you chosen for me?"

Shamir answered, "The young lass, Chanina, was here moments ago and you must have seen her leave. You are to assure that all that pertains to her future days, and to that of any of her offspring, is dutifully recorded. Before you pass from this earth you must assure that another monacho, a diligent scribe, takes up your task where you leave off. The task is without end."

The old woman nodded that she clearly understood Shamir's instructions.

The hooded man was also elderly. He had a clean shaven face and gray eyes. "I await your instructions," he declared to Shamir.

Shamir said, "Raka is intent upon locating the Arma Christie. If he learns of the existence of the little girl, Chanina, he may attempt to use her affliction of the Stigmata to help him locate the relics. You must assure that he cannot do so with her. Also, her offspring might possess Stigmata and in future times Raka's decedents, or other nefarious individuals, might attempt to exploit them in their search for the relics. You must act to prevent such a thing. You must be sure before you pass this earth that other dedicated individuals will take up your task where you leave off."

The old man nodded and said, "It will be done exactly as you instruct."

Shamir told the two of them, "You and the generations of monachos that follow you will reside here in this mansion. My servant, Abdullah will make all the arrangements for you. Go to the main hall and await him."

The hooded woman and man rose from their chairs, bowed slightly to Shamir, and left the room.

Abdullah entered and stood awaiting his instructions. Shamir said, "You and the family generations that follow you will live in this mansion. You and they will never want for anything. The well will always provide pure water. The cupboards will always be filled with food. The armoires will always contain fresh garments. The house will not fall into disrepair. I will leave the blue silk purse and to receive wages all any of you need to do is to reach in and take the allotted amount.

The wood of the crosses will remain here after we have placed them in a more secure location. It is your duty and the duty of your progeny to prevent their taking by anyone. You will also care for the monachos that will live here."

Abdullah asked, "How long will you be gone?"

"Perhaps for centuries at a time," replied Shamir.

Abdullah said, "I accept the responsibilities that you have given me. Also, I announce the arrival of a stranger who wishes to speak with you. He waits in the main hall for an audience."

Shamir asked, "What is his name and what does he seek?"

"His name is Singevor," answered the servant. "He did not reveal his reason for being here. And I notice a strange thing about him. It is the time of bright daylight yet his face seems always to be hidden in the shadow of his cowl. He has the attire of a monk but I am very sure that he is not such a person. Should I allow him to enter?"

"Yes," replied Shamir. "I met him the morning after the crucifixion. I remember that the early light glinted on a canine tooth, but I could not detect any other aspect of his countenance."

The servant went to the hall door and opened it to allow Singevor to enter. The man walked slowly into the room and approached Shamir, but as the distance between them closed the man turned away and stepped back a few steps. The man's face was in shadows even though the sunlight streaming in through the windows brightly illuminated his clothing.

Shamir made an observation. "You seem to be repulsed by me for some reason."

Singevor said, "I detect an odor that I cannot abide. The same one that I sensed on the day after the crucifixion of Christ. It was Christ's blood on the cross. It has a crisp and aromatic scent, but yet it repulses me."

"It is in my veins due to the prick of a bloody thorn," said Shamir. "Why are you here?"

"Because we have something in common," replied Singevor in a calm but raspy voice.

"And what might that be?" asked Shamir.

"We are both immortal," answered Singevor. "You by the grace of Heaven. I by the command of Hell."

Shamir asked, "What is your affliction?"

Singevor answered, "I must consume fresh human blood in order that I do not suffer horrible agonies. The blood quenches my pain and awful distress."

"Did you drain the blood from Judas?" asked Shamir.

Singevor admitted it. "Yes. He had first attempted to commit suicide by slashing his wrists. But he did it in quite a poor manner. So he hung himself. In the minutes that it took for him to expire I was able to drink his blood from his slashed wrists. Quite a poor quality. But my choices were extremely limited."

"Do you kill people in order to obtain their blood?" asked Shamir.

"No," replied Singevor. "I cannot cause myself to even harm a person, let alone murder anyone."

"How then do you usually obtain fresh human blood?" Shamir asked.

"War," stated Singevor.

Shamir understood immediately. "You drink the blood of the mortally wounded upon the battlefields. As a consequence you need not kill anyone."

"Yes," said Singevor. "I must eternally search out places where warfare is occurring and there I easily find blood to slake my never ending thirst. The very wonderful thing is that there is always war and bloodshed somewhere in the world. Madmen take nations into war because sane men and women allow them to do so. If everybody was insane then there would be no wars because then such a despicable thing couldn't be organized. Madmen declare wars and sane men conduct them."

Shamir nodded agreement.

Singevor continues, "It is an extraordinary thing that those that most profit from war do the least urging for a nation to engage in war. The cannon makers do not lobby for national conflict. They are well aware that fools will do that for them, and leave them blameless. It is those that profit the least, and most often suffer greatly in war, that abets the madmen. It is the simple minded that use phrases such as "Freedom isn't free" that send the innocent young off to die in some God forsaken place of horror. Almost always it is for no good reason."

“Why are you here?” asked Shamir.

Singevor answered, “I’m aware that you will journey, over the centuries of time, to engage in discourse with the madmen that initiate war and other atrocious acts, such as genocide. I will follow you to hear their words and perhaps be able to speak them into the Devil’s ear. It may possibly earn me a release from my eternal thirst for blood. I long for a peaceful rest.”

Shamir said, “If the past is an indication of the future, the journey will be endless, for I fear that the sane will never restrain the insane from war.”

Singevor said, “To draw one’s country into war is the simplest of matters. All one need do is denounce the pacifists by accusing them of lacking patriotism. Then the pacifists will fall silent and only the voices of the war mongers will be heard.”

“In all the wars that have ever been fought, no good and lasting objective has ever been achieved by the aggressor,” said Shamir. “When a benevolent nation wins a war all it does is stop an evil.”

“To prevent a war a nation should be so completely armed that no other nation would dare to attack it,” asserted Singevor. “But the problem is that such an armed nation would soon be drawn into an aggressive war by a madman leader who would convince the populace that they are so heavily armed that they could not possibly lose a war of conquest. Then we find that the supposed cure for war actually leads to the sickness of war.”

Chapter 4

Shamir entered Rome in AD65 just one year after the Great Fire in the historic city. The Emperor Nero was twenty-seven years old at the time and engrossed in the planning and construction of the immense Domus Aurea, the Golden Palace.

During a balmy August evening Shamir appeared in Nero's private quarters. The great room was illuminated only by oil lamps. The unexplained presence of a bearded man in white robes who had stepped out of the shadows did not disconcert Nero as he was accustomed to hallucinations due to alcohol, drugs and mental derangement.

"Greetings to you," smiled Nero. "What favor do you come begging for? Or do you wish to merely hear me sing? I am in fine voice this evening, having practiced earlier for a chosen few."

Shamir said, "I come to ask why you do evil."

Nero snorted a laugh. "All about me wish to do evil to me and you ask why I do evil in return? To save myself, fool. Besides, it does some times give me pleasure." He smiled a little.

Shamir said, "You have constructed a colossal amphitheater and within it you have murder committed in the most horrible of ways. How does that save you?"

Nero squinted slightly at his visitor. "You do not appear to be a man that has experience in the governance of a population. You don't realize that every population is quite basically a blood thirsty mob."

Shamir shook his head negatively. "That is a harsh and all-encompassing declaration. There are always good people."

"Rome has been at war, somewhere, with someone, for nearly twelve-hundred years," stated Nero. "Now, why is it that in twelve-hundred years the "good people" have not brought the wars to an end?"

Shamir was silent.

Nero continued. "We are engaged in the Parthian War. We have a rebellion in Briton. And we expect that within a year there will be a rebellion in the Judaea Province and then we will have our first war with the Jews. War, war, war!" Nero ranted as he flopped down into a large cushioned chair and reached for a golden wine goblet.

"And you believe somehow that those wars justify murder in the Circus Maximus?" asked Shamir.

"The horrors that take place in the coliseum are a piddling fraction of what occurs during and after battles in the field," stated Nero. "Hundreds die in the coliseum but many thousands die on the battlefields and in the towns and villages that are ravaged by war."

"So, you justify one evil by stating that it is lesser than another evil," observed Shamir.

Nero shook his head. "I don't justify anything. I merely do what I must do in order to survive the attacks by my many enemies. In regard to the external wars, many Romans believe that we must attack them, the perceived enemies, before they attack us. If I stood in the way of their blood thirst they would drag me off to the gallows for treason to the state. They would claim that I was not patriotic, and if there has ever been one accusation that causes a citizen to be damned by his fellow citizens, that is it. Subsequent to my execution they would still go off to war, delayed perhaps only by a celebration to commemorate my demise. Now I ask you, by what logic should I sacrifice my life for the sake of distant people that I have never seen and never will see?"

Shamir made an observation. "But you can see the victims in the Coliseum. You can see the blood drain from their veins as they are murdered by men or maimed by wild animals."

"Yes," confirmed Nero. "And so can the blood thirsty mob I mentioned earlier. You are going to make the point of my argument for me. If the population of Rome wanted the horrific

games to cease they would only need to say so. Dictators don't rule by force, they dominate with the permission of the people."

"So, you absolve yourself and blame the population?" asked Shamir.

"Now you are thinking with a clear mind," laughed Nero.

"But as Emperor you have the power and the authority to raze the Coliseum to the ground and end the horrors that take place there," argued Shamir.

"My dear man in the white robes, you speak of Rome and Romans as if you knew something of them," sneered Nero. "Let me enlighten you a little. Just last year there was a great fire in Rome. Now how could that be? You are currently standing in a marble palace. Marble cannot burn. But the greater numbers of Romans live in huts and hovels constructed of sticks. And sticks do burn. And we are all the better off for that. Because with the citizens in their hovels there was filth and vermin. And many horrible diseases. The daily lives of the public mob are atrocious. They are hungry every day. They are sick every day. They suffer without warmth during the cold nights. They labor twelve hours a day for a pittance. They abandon their newly born babies at the temples because they have no means to care for them. And the babies keep coming because the only pleasure in the miserable lives of the peasants is the act of procreation."

Shamir argued, "The state should improve their living conditions. It is the obligation of the state to do so."

"Ah, ha!" snorted Nero derisively. "And the state should pay for that with thin air?"

"What do you mean by the question," asked Shamir.

"I mean," said Nero in a rising and angry voice, "that the greater part of the money has been spent on the armies that are conducting the foreign wars."

"And the remainder?" asked Shamir.

"Where the hell do you think that it is, you ignorant man?" asked an irritated Nero.

Shamir guessed, "The elite have it."

Nero smiled slightly. "You have a brain at least as large as a pea. Yes. The elite have it. And if I ever attempted to take it from them I would be very suddenly dead."

Shamir observed, "But you have funds for the Coliseum. Use those for the common good."

Nero sneered slightly. "The only thing that the mob has that is of any real value to them is their lives. The only people that could be less than the Roman mob would be the people that are losing their lives in the arena. If I took the games away from the blood thirsty mob I would also be very suddenly dead. I must placate the mob. They demand their Circus Maximus. There would be instant riots if the coliseum were closed. The people live in miserable conditions and their only respite outside of a few moments engaged in the sexual act is the free games in the coliseum. These games last an entire day and sometimes days. And the citizens always demand more. More victims. More excitement. More entertainment. And also there is free food during the games. Better food than they have ever consumed in their hovels."

Shamir noted, "You are sacrificing Christians in the Coliseum. Why them? They can't harm you as perhaps others can. Christians are not armed."

Nero shook his head in a dismissive manner. "You have no knowledge of Rome and Romans. I wish that you would return to wherever you came from and let me get some sleep."

Shamir said, "You martyred Peter last year. What harm had he done to you to cause you to take that atrocious action?"

Nero was becoming exasperated and spat out. "He professed that there was only one god. And the man would not shut up. He ranted on and on about it for more than thirty years."

"Where is the harm in that?" asked Shamir.

"You don't understand the culture of Rome," replied Nero, his voice rising in intensity.

Shamir persisted with his question. "Why do you persecute the Christians? Why is their religious beliefs offensive to you?"

Nero waved a hand in an irritated manner. "Christians mean nothing to me one way or the other. I don't care an iota about their religion. But the Augures and the Collegium Pontificum care very much."

"Who are they?" asked Shamir.

"They are the priests of Rome," replied Nero. "They permeate all of Roman daily life. They have many temples and many gods. And because of that they are powerful and rich. The Roman citizens make donations at the temples in order to obtain the good will of the gods. There are gods for the harvest. Gods for the choice of a marriage partner. Gods for the start of a business venture. There are gods for every possible situation. To win the good will of these gods the Romans bring money to the temples for the priests. They bring also valuable objects. And as the occasion may call for it, their sexual availability.

If a person becomes a Christian then they have no need whatsoever for the Augures and Collegium Pontificum with their various gods and rituals. That is because Christians say that there is only one God. If there is truly only one God then no one has need for all the Gods of the Augures and the Collegium Pontificum. Christians threaten the livelihood of the Augures and the Collegium Pontificum and that is an extremely dangerous thing to do to anybody.

So the priests of Rome come to me with their demands that I eliminate the Christians. Or they will eliminate me. My choice is quite simply made, don't you see? The Christians offer me nothing. Not protection. Not wealth. Nothing. Further, I would endanger myself if I helped or protected them in any way. So I send them to the Coliseum."

Nero sipped some wine and breathed deeply. "There is another reason to sacrifice the Christians. Some blame me for the fire in Rome last year. They accuse me of wanting to clear the space of shanties in order to construct the magnificent Domus Aurea. They began to call it maliciously the Colossus of Nero. So it became necessary to find another culprit for the suspected arson. And ready at hand were the Christians. If the Christians did not exist I would have to create them. Their deaths placate both the priests and the blood thirsty mob known as the population of Rome."

"So the followers of Jesus are no more to you than cannon fodder," observed Shamir.

"It has been thirty years since the crucifixion of Christ," remarked Nero. "And what is there to show for it? There is no church. No wealth. No owned land. No owned cattle. Only a group of fanatics who actually don't seem to mind being martyred. They walk into the arena of the Coliseum and face the ferocious beasts as if they were going to sit down to tea together.

In a few years they will all be gone. The history books will record the deeds of Pontius Pilate and Nero. But Christ will only be a footnote, if even that."

Shamir could not see a way to alter Nero's behavior. He instead sought to cast shame upon him. "It is said that if your name is written in Aramaic then numbers can be attributed to the letters. When they are summed up the result is six-hundred-sixty-six. The number "666" has become known as the "number of the beast."

Nero scoffed at the statement. "That's it? That's all that they can say? They think that a number will insult me?"

Shamir said, "Perhaps it is coincidental that six years ago you had your mother Agrippina murdered."

Nero did not deny the murder that he had ordered. "Agrippina would not shut up. She was forever critical of anything I did and especially of the wives that I chose. And she wanted my stepbrother, Britannicus upon the throne. It was her fault that I had no choice but to poison him.

My mother had poisoned Claudius with mushrooms. I thought that it was quite appropriate that I poison her in turn. But she always shook it off. She made it so damn difficult to

kill her. I had a professional poisoner work herself to exhaustion trying to find a powerful enough poison to kill my hag of a mother, but to no avail. When tried upon my slaves they dropped like flies. It was very much an annoyance that my mother would not succumb. Finally I sent the Captain of the Guards and his men to slay her. Now at last I have some peace.”

Shamir said, “The world’s population asks why you do these horrific things. They say that they are the acts of a madman.”

Nero laughed aloud. “Really? On the one hand they ask why I do that which I do. And on the other hand they believe me to be a madman. So they ask a madman for a logical answer to the cause of his insane acts. Their question is itself insane.”

An old hag entered Nero’s chambers. She glanced at Shamir but quickly convinced herself that he was not a danger. She turned to Nero and said, “My dear Nero, you are awake far into the night.”

The emperor smiled fondly at the woman. “Ogangia, you are welcome to visit. The bearded man is beginning to bore me with unanswerable questions. And he would accuse me of being a sadistic dictator.”

Ogangia laughed slightly. “But my dear Nero, you are a sadistic dictator. The man is perfectly correct.”

“You are a seer, my sweet Ogangia,” smiled Nero, “so please, look into the future and tell us if I will be the only malevolent leader in Rome.”

The hag took Nero’s golden wine cup into her hand and peered down into the purple fluid. “I see something that will happen about nineteen-hundred years from now.”

“Does it happen here in Rome?” asked Nero.

“Yes,” she answered. “I see a small balcony on a building just across from the coliseum. A man is giving a triumphant speech to a crowd of thousands of cheering Romans. They seem to adore him. His words bring happy tears to the eyes of many of them.”

“What is his name?” asked Nero.

“I see not a name but instead a title,” replied the woman. “The title is “Il Duce” which means “The Leader”. But I am being confounded. There is another man in the same years that calls himself “The Leader” but his title is “Der Führer” in the German language. This one is clearly a mass murderer as he causes six million people to die.”

Nero laughed uproariously. “My bearded apparition, you fault me for killing hundreds of Christians and yet in the future there is a man that kills millions of people!”

The seer informs them, “I can see now that the Roman dictator is named Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini. The German’s name is Adolfus Hitler. They both lead their populations into ruinous wars.”

Still laughing Nero asks the seer, “How did they force their populations into war?”

“The Italian and German populations went willing into war,” she answered. “Il Duce and Der Führer used only words. They both accused those that did not agree with the war of being unpatriotic.”

Nero laughed uproariously. To Shamir he exclaimed, “There! There it is! The patriotic populations go willing to war.” To Ogangia he said, “You have pleased me greatly.”

There was a metallic clatter of armed guards making an entrance into his bed chamber. “Hail, Nero. Is this man assaulting you?” asked the Captain of the Guard. There was a platoon of eight guards with him.

Nero was in a foul mood having been reminded of the murder of his mother. Not of the memory of the murder, but of the memory of his mother. “Yes. Slay him. I’m tired and need to sleep upon my bed. I am tired of talking.”

Shamir turned to face the Captain of the Guard. “Do what you will with me.”

The Captain of the Guard commanded his men, “Surround him. Don’t let him flee.” One of the guards stepped to the rear of Shamir in order to prevent him from escaping but Shamir

simply stood facing the captain as Nero shouted angrily, "I commanded you to kill him. Kill him now or you will go to the Coliseum with the Christians."

The guard commander motioned to one of the guards beside him. "You. Use your spear to slay him. Quickly!"

The armed man hoisted his short shafted spear and then flung it full force at Shamir's chest. From his position it appeared to Nero that the guard had missed the man entirely and that the spear had passed harmlessly on the other side of his bearded visitor. Nero cursed, "You damn dolt! How could you miss at such a short distance? You will be lion food before the next sunset!"

But the guardsmen had seen the spear pass entirely through Shamir without harming him in the least. There was a groan from the guard standing behind Shamir. After passing through Shamir unimpeded the spear had impaled the guard. The other guards stood with eyes bulging in their sockets and mouths agape as the stricken man grasped the spear shaft in agony and sank to his knees. He began to cough blood from his mouth because the spear had penetrated his right lung. Then the blood began flowing in gushes as the man paled.

From the shadows in the great room that was dimly lit by the oil lamps, Singevor appeared. He approached the wounded man and crouching down in front of him he began to drink the blood directly from the man's mouth.

Nero rose to his feet, not in distress, but in rapt attention to the bloody scene. He called out, "You there. The monk drinking blood. I wish to have you for the Coliseum. What a spectacle! What a glorious performance. The Roman's will adore you! I will pay you handsomely. And to think of all the liters of blood that have gone to waste in earlier times. How much blood can you drink on a fine afternoon?"

Singevor sated his blood thirst and stood up facing Nero. His face was in the shadows of his cowl and Nero squinted in an attempt to discern his features.

The captain of the guard regained his composure and drew his sword from its scabbard. He stepped toward Shamir and using both hands upon the sword's hilt he swung the heavy blade in a long sweep that passed through Shamir's neck. The bearded man's head remained intact upon his neck as he smiled slightly at the contingent of guardsmen. They all moved back a few steps as their minds attempted to comprehend what had just transpired. Then they turned and fled en masse.

Nero was perplexed. "How have you scared them off?" he asked Shamir.

"By doing nothing," replied Shamir.

Chapter 5

In December 1864 Shamir appeared in the house of the President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis. The Southerner was in a forlorn mood as he sat in an armchair in front of a fireplace. The Confederate Armies had been crumbling before the onslaught of the Union forces and all of the news that had arrived during the past months had been bad. He glanced at Shamir but otherwise took no particular notice of the robed man. No more than he would of a Negro servant.

Shamir stated, "It was a mistake to fire upon Fort Sumter, South Carolina. There were only eighty-five Union troops in the fort and surely they were no military threat to the Confederacy."

Jefferson Davis grumbled, "It was a Union Post on Confederacy terrain."

Shamir said, "So, it was just the principle of the thing."

"Yes, dammit!" exclaimed Davis.

"I think that what maddens you," said Shamir "is that president Lincoln got the Confederacy to fire the first shot of the war. It made the Confederacy appear to be the aggressor in the conflict."

Davis was red faced. "He threatened to resupply the fort. We could not abide such a thing upon Confederate soil."

Shamir said, "The Civil War has cost America over six-hundred and fifty thousand lives. More than half a million lives lost because eighty-five troops were going to receive food rations."

"Damn you!" shouted Davis. "It was a matter of honor."

"It would seem a small matter of honor," observed Shamir. "Almost undetectable, in the grand scheme of things."

Davis sat sullen and silent.

Shamir prodded the man. "For a slight affront the Confederacy entered into total war. And it was a war with an outcome that was foreordained from the moment the first shot was fired. There was never any possibility that the Confederacy could triumph over the Union forces."

Davis replied, "We felt that our cause was just and holy."

"You consider slavery to be holy?" asked Shamir.

"All we ever asked was to be left alone," said Jefferson. "We only desired peace. We asked no concession of any kind from the Northern states."

Shamir shook his head. "Actually, the South proposed unending and great intrusion into the lives of the people in the free-states. For the Northerners to abide that would be a great concession. Not a small one like Fort Sumter."

Davis asked irritably, "What in the world are you talking about?"

Shamir answered, "I speak of The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that was pushed through congress by southern politicians. It guaranteed ceaseless trampling of the rights of non-slavery states. That act mandated that anyone in any state that encountered a runaway slave was obligated to take action to return the slave to his owner or face heavy fines and imprisonment. You Southerners were a bunch of damn fools to bring about such laws as it guaranteed the end to slavery in America."

"What?" exclaimed Davis with great irritability. "You would deny us the right to reclaim our own possessions?"

Shamir said, "The Southerners completely ignored the legal rights of the Northerners. It gave the right of warrantless search to the slave holders. If any person claimed that a certain household was harboring a runaway slave then the authorities could enter the house without a

search warrant. In 1791 the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution protected citizens from unreasonable and warrantless search and seizure. So the Fugitive Slave Act was unconstitutional because it directed the violation of the Fourth Amendment. It absolutely infuriated the Northerners. Many of them had previously taken a neutral position regarding slavery in the southern states. But with the great intrusion into their private lives and homes their ire rose and they lashed out at the concept of slavery. Actually, not so much at slavery, but instead at you arrogant Southerners that believed that you could declare the legal civil rights of Northerners null and void.”

Jefferson Davis scowled, “But we could not just let the slaves run away.”

“Yes, you could have.” Shamir pointed out some facts. “There were more than three million slaves in the south. In any given year only about seven hundred ran away. That was less than one two hundredths of one percent of the total. The slave birth rate was vastly greater than that. If a business of any kind suffered such a minute loss it would hardly come to anyone’s notice. And for that miniscule loss the Southerners brought about the deaths of over a half million people. And in addition you caused the destruction of numerous of your farms, estates, towns and cities. That was an incredibly stupid endeavor.”

Davis shouted angrily, “You are ignoring the right of Southerners to protect their property.”

Shamir asked, “Is that your argument. Well, it is backwards. The slave desertions went from seven hundred a year before the war to a grand total of over a half million during the war. The truly remarkable thing is that three million slaves did not rise up in rebellion. The south would have experienced a blood bath had that occurred and the North would have won the war without raising a finger.”

“The war was to protect the livelihood of the greater number of our citizens,” asserted Davis.

“No it wasn’t,” countered Shamir. “The data released after the census of 1850 puts the lie to your statements. Statisticians had computed the yearly income of the deep southern states at \$110,000,000. They then had separated that into two equal parts and determined how many families earned each half of the wealth. The answer was that one half of one percent of the families earned as much as the other 99.95% of the families and that the richer families owed their wealth to slavery. Your war was to protect only one half of one percent of the Southerners. All other Southerners suffered ruination of their property and lives. Very many of the slave owners and their male family members were exempt from military service. The absurdity of that situation is plainly seen. Non-slave owners fought and died for pampered slave owners who remained home at their estates while enjoying a safe life of ease.”

Davis began to rant. “The great majority of our citizens rose up to defend their life styles.”

Shamir said, “Not the life styles of the great majority of Southern families. Instead it was to defend the life styles of the elite. The great numbers of people in the vastly poorer families appeared to be ready, and even eager to fight and die for the right of the elite wealthy families to remain wealthy slave owners. We should never underestimate the propensity of adults to act in an ignorant manner; even lose their lives, because of an inability to simply think a matter through. If the South wins the Civil War, it will do nothing except raise the taxes upon their poorer families in order to pay off the war debt. There is no possibility that a Southern victory will improve the living conditions of the majority of the Southerners.

Jefferson Davis swung his arm in a dismissive manner. “The plantation owners created a great economy for all southerners. They deserved to be protected for the sake of the many others. A rising tide floats all boats.”

Shamir said, “Not if the boats of the greater part of the population have holes in their bottoms.”

Jefferson Davis attempted once again to argue that slavery benefitted the population of the South. "The cotton that the slaves harvested raised the living standards of all white people in the South."

Shamir shook his head negatively. "Your assertion is false. The presence of slavery in the south lowered the living standards of the non-slave owners. The estate proprietors used slaves in tasks that in the north resulted in good paying jobs for free men. Slaves tended to all the farm animals. They also tended to all butchering and hide tanning. They tended to the meat smoke houses. The slaves were used for timber cutting and hauling of logs to the sawmills. And the slaves worked in the mines. Many thousands of good jobs were lost to the southern free men because of slavery. Their families had less to eat, poorer clothes to wear, less education and less medical attention as a result of slavery."

Jefferson Davis simply sulked as he had no good rebuttal.

Shamir approached Davis and said, "You have good reason to be silent. But break that silence and answer an obvious question."

"Obvious or aggravating?" asked Davis.

"Both," said Shamir. "The question arises as to why there were no cotton mills in the South. Why ship raw cotton to the Northern cloth mills or to the cloth mills of England and France? Why not manufacture the cloth in your own domain?"

Davis knew the answer but remained silent.

Shamir said, "I will answer my own questions. If there were cloth mills in the South then they would have used slave labor. Certainly the white people of the South would not be hired as employees in the mills, no more than they were hired to work at any other tasks that were performed by slaves.

But then the comparison between the Southern and Northern cloth mills would have been easily made. In the North white people earned good wages working in the cloth mills. And the working conditions were much better than that of slaves in the cotton fields. The white people of the South would soon demand that the slaves be removed from the mills and replaced by white people and that the wages for them be made comparable to the wages in the north.

What then would the "share croppers" of the south demand? Those that barely eked out a living farming small plots of the estate owners' land. All would demand greater pay or profit, and a great many of the Southerners are share croppers. Then the "white slaves" of the south would be no more. The elite and the estate owners would be burdened with the payment of decent wages to the poor whites."

Davis sulked deeper into his chair.

Shamir continued by saying, "The Northerners have factories where they manufacture weapons and other military gear and supplies. The south has cotton fields. The north has immigrants arriving on a daily basis and many of these have joined the Union Army and Navy. The south has no new recruits. The north has vast farmlands where crops are raised to feed their people and troops. In the south the land is planted to cotton and people can't eat cotton.

The population of the north is twenty-one million and the population of the south is seven million. A child in grammar school could deduce that the northern armies contingents would always be greater than that of the southern armies.

The south has soldiers of high morale and bravery. But morale and bravery can be blown away to nothingness by cannons. Only if the south had the industrial establishment of the north, their population numbers, and their agriculture; then the south could win the Civil War."

Jefferson Davis countered, "The Northerners had no reason to fight us and we never expected that they would."

Shamir said, "The Fugitive Slave Act served notice on the Northerners that the Southerners intended to intrude deeply into their lives. You imposed fines upon them if they didn't help return your runaway slaves. You entered and searched their homes without court

ordered warrants. They began to imagine how bad things would become if the South won the war, and that was a grand call to arms. You of the South caused those of the North to fight you, just as you would have fought them if they trampled upon your rights and privacy in such a manner. You were a worse enemy to yourselves than those that were actually shooting at you.”

Jefferson Davis sulked in his arm chair. Finally he advanced a notion. “The slaves on the plantations never really rebelled against their masters during the war. That proves that they were treated well and that they loved their owners of the plantations.”

Shamir scoffed at the idea. “The loyalty that they were demonstrating was not to their white owners, but instead to their black families. The male slaves didn’t rebel out of fear that their wives and children would be slaughtered in reprisal.”

Davis made a dismissive gesture with his right hand. He then attempted a different approach to his arguments. “Our troops gladly went to war to preserve their way of life. It can’t be denied.”

Shamir stated, “Yes it can. You used the women of the South to achieve your goals for enlistment of the men. You urged the women to be derisive towards men that did not enlist. You urged them to scorn those men that didn’t come to the defense of their Southern womanhood. That greatly motivated many men, and gave them hope that they would be more romantically acceptable once they donned the Gray uniform.

And from the Southern Belles you also demanded their very piss. A loyal woman was advised to support the war effort by carrying her full chamber pot to collection places in the towns and cities. The accumulated volumes were then used as a source of nitrogen in order to manufacture gun powder.”

Davis said, “The Southern women were proud to help with the war effort.”

Shamir replied, “Yes they were proud to help. But had they known that your government was tearing up railroad tracks to obtain iron for cannons, they might have hit you with their pee pots. It is quite possible that the women could have advised you not to give up the ability to expeditiously transport troops and goods for cannon that were not really an effective weapon of war.”

“Women.” Davis said the word in a dismissive manner. “They know nothing of war.”

Shamir responded, “It was not advice about war that you should have asked them for.”

“What then?” queried Davis.

“Simple logic,” responded Shamir. “The men of the South decided to limit the export of cotton to France and England. You calculated that those countries would become so starved for cotton to support their cloth mills that they would enter the American Civil War on the side of the Confederacy.”

Davis nodded agreement with the planning of the Southern government.

Shamir continued, “But woman would have told you quite quickly, had you but listened, that France and England could obtain cotton from other places without going to war. Both Egypt and India had cotton for sale and that is the market that the Europeans used. The women would have told you that if they can’t buy a thing at one store they simply go to another store. How difficult is that concept to comprehend?”

Jefferson Davis yelled with exasperation, “Leave me alone! Where did you come from anyway? Are you a Northern spy?”

An elderly Negro maid named Quanesia heard Davis yell so she entered the room to discover if he needed any assistance. “Master Davis, are you alright?” Upon seeing Shamir, she asked, “Master Davis, do you want me to fetch Amos to shoot this man? Or is he some kind of monk? We can’t shoot a holy man.”

Davis gave her orders. “Go and get Amos. Tell him to bring his bird gun with both barrels loaded. The man is not a monk. He is an intruder. Have Amos shoot him and then throw him

into the pigs slops trough, the way we do with all animal carcasses, to have the sows eat his remains.”

“Amos can’t come at this moment,” said Quanesia. “He is whipping a runaway that done been caught and returned. It’ll be one hundred lashes so it might take him just a little while.”

Davis was annoyed by the delay and instructed her, “Go and tell Amos to whip faster, dammit!”

The woman hiked her skirt and rushed out of the house and into the cold air of the front lawn where the whipping pole was installed. The barebacked slave, whose name was Jame Hubbard, had been chained to the pole and Amos the white overseer, was engaged in the sport of lashing him. Amos smiled as he hauled his arm rearward, and then with all his might swung it forward so that the whip in his hand split open the skin on the back of the slave. Blood flowed abundantly from a number of lacerations. The overseer was sweating from his labors in spite of the winter air. As he hauled his arm back once again he noticed a hooded man standing about eight feet to his right. In spite of the bright winter sunlight the man’s face remained shadowed by his cowl. Amos paused in the whipping that he enjoyed so much, as he felt it his duty to challenge any stranger that appeared on the estate. “Are you a monk?” he asked. “Are you a Christian? Only God fearing Christians are welcome here.”

The hooded man approached the chained and bleeding slave. He leaned in toward the slave’s bloody back and began lapping blood from the open wounds.

Amos was astounded but not repulsed by the hooded man’s actions. “Be gone with you!” he shouted at him. “You’re interfering with my duties as commanded by the master of the estate. Away with you or you will enjoy the lash also!”

Singevor ignored the man’s threats. As a result Amos prepared to raise the whip high and bring it down on the back of the hooded man. As he tried to lift his right arm with the whip he found that he could not. It was as if the whip weighed hundreds of pounds. He grasped the whip handle with both hands and hauled at it with all his strength. The whip proved to be immovable.

Quanesia turned around and ran up the stairs to the front door of the mansion. She opened the front door, entered and locked the door behind her. She then ran to the parlor to inform Davis of the astounding sight that she had seen. “Master, Amos was whipping Jame when a monk appeared! He drank Jame’s blood right off his back!”

Davis stared at the woman for some seconds and then said, “Damn you Quanesia! I had suspected that my bourbon was disappearing faster than I alone was drinking it. Are you drunk now?”

“No, Master!” she assured him.

Davis commanded her sharply, “Then go get Amos and his bird gun to shoot this man!”

Quanesia paused in thought, and then asked Davis, “Can we get his robe off before Amos shoots him. That is some mighty fine cloth he is wearing. Much better than the homespun we all is got on these days.” She ran her hands down her rough cotton cloth dress.

Shamir raised his right hand and pointed a finger at Quanesia. In an instant she was adorned with a fine cloth dress. The fabric had twenty times the thread count of homespun, was almost silky smooth and carried a light blue gingham pattern. The woman was initially silenced with surprise, but regaining her composure she said, “Oh, Master Davis. We can’t shoot this fine man. No sir. I’ll just go and make tea for you all. That will make you feel better.” She hurried out of the room.

Davis said to Shamir, “Pour me a double bourbon from the decanter on that small table near you. I might just as well get drunk because I am already experiencing things that only a drunk would.”

Shamir went to the table and poured bourbon into a tumbler. He then carried it to Davis.

The Confederate President gulped down the entire contents of the glass and held the empty tumbler out to Shamir. "Another, if you please." Shamir fulfilled the request.

Quanesia returned with the tea, smilingly happy about her new dress. She set the serving tray down on a parlor table in front of Jefferson Davis.

Davis said, "Quanesia, I wish you to read the tea leaves. I don't really believe that such a thing is possible but I am in need of some good news, even if it comes out of the dregs of a tea cup."

The woman used a tea strainer to capture some tea leaves that she then placed into an empty cup. She stared at the wet, dark flora for several moments. Then she said, "I see a field of white crosses. They go on and on, it seems to the horizon. It is the burial place of many thousands of soldiers."

Davis asked, "Whose soldiers?"

"Yankee soldiers," she answered.

Davis' spirits lifted. "Wonderful. Where is this place?"

Quanesia said, "It is Arlington."

Davis was confused. "What do you mean by that? Arlington is the estate of our Confederate General Robert E. Lee. You must be mistaken."

Quanesia shook her head. "It is Lee's estate. The Union has buried great numbers of their war dead on his land. Thousands of them. They did it so that General Lee could never reclaim his land."

Davis lapsed into despondency. "What of General Lee?"

She answered, "I see him in April of the coming year. About four months from now. He is at a village named Appomattox."

Davis asked, "What is he doing there?"

Quanesia answered, "He is in the courthouse with General Grant."

Davis was electrified by the image of it. "Are they in a fight to the death? A duel? With swords?"

"No," replied Quanesia. "General Lee is surrendering his troops to General Grant."

Davis paled. After some moments he said, "Lee failed."

Quanesia shook her head. "No sir. He performed a great service to his country. He saved America."

Davis was confused by her statement. "How the hell could that be? He surrendered."

Quanesia said, "Many of the Confederate troops wanted to go on fighting a guerrilla war with the Yankees. But General Lee knew that would mean that America would be at war for centuries. State against state. Because he was so well respected by his troops, when he told them to return home and put down their weapons, they obeyed him. I can see a hundred years into the future and it is clear that no two states of the United States are at war with one another, so his words saved America."

"And slavery?" inquired Davis.

Quanesia smiled and said, "Oh Lordy, we are free!"

Singevor appeared in the room. Davis barely took any notice because his thoughts were in shambles as he stared blankly down at the floor. When he finally raised his head and looked about, only Quanesia and himself were still there.

Chapter 6

On July 16, 1944 Shamir appeared at Berchtesgaden in the Bavarian Alps. Adolf Hitler was in a dark mood as he sat sulking in an over-stuffed arm chair when Shamir entered the dictator's tea room. The morose self-styled military genius barely took notice of the bearded man in robes.

Shamir asked, "How many times have you heard the voices of your millions of followers shout joyously, "Sieg Heil!""

Hitler absent mindedly brushed aside the hairs of the forelock that hung down over his brow, as he had done all of his life. "Yes! Hail victory!" he mumbled distractedly.

Shamir said, "Not Yet. The Russians are advancing from the east and the Allies landed at Normandy to the west just a month and ten days ago."

Hitler remained silent and simply stared at the floor.

Shamir said. "Führer, you are in the jaws of a mighty Nuss-Cracker."

Hitler's face took on a mottled appearance. "It's the fault of the damn Japanese!" he shouted as he rose to his feet and flung his arms wildly about.

Shamir was puzzled. "The Japanese are nowhere in Europe. How can you blame them?"

"They attacked Pearl Harbor, the damn fools," Hitler spat out the words. "Most Americans had been against entering the war before that sneak attack but the very next day the military recruiting stations were over-run with American men begging to join the Army and Navy! If it had not been for the Japanese the Americans might never have entered the war. I might not have had to face a Western Front!

My generals were in dread of a Western Front and advised against Operation Barbarossa on the Eastern Front. But I felt that it was safe to attack Russia because American sentiment was clearly anti-war. There would not be a Western Front! Then less than six months later the damn Japs brought the United States into the war.

And that dammed Roosevelt. He is a dangerous foe because he knows how to use rhetoric. The Americans remembered what he said in his first inaugural speech. He told them that they had nothing to fear except fear itself. How I wish that I could have found those words before he did."

Shamir said, "But you declared war on America only days after Pearl Harbor. That is why the Allies are in Normandy this very day."

Hitler scowled. "I had hoped to make the best of a bad situation. I believed that if both Japan and Germany declared war on the United States then Americans might not allow Roosevelt to go to war against two countries at the same time." With a sorrowful expression he rolled his eyes upwards and in a pleading tone of voice almost moaned, "If there is a Christian God in Heaven he will come to my aid!"

Shamir said, "You have caused the murder of millions of people and now you ask God to help you. Aren't you late in finding God?"

"No!" shouted Hitler. "Review my speeches. Read my book. I have always defended the Christian church. And the church defended me. There was the Concordat of July 1933 between the Holy See and the German Reich."

"And you repaid the church by melting down all the church bells of German and captured cities," observed Shamir.

"It was necessary to obtain the metal for the war effort," Hitler defensively stated.

"Why then didn't you have all the ceremonial bronze Swastikas melted down?" asked Shamir. "There were millions of them."

Hitler snorted derisively at the idea. "Symbols often carry more weight than facts. One of the reasons I chose the swastika as the symbol of the NAZI Party was its symmetry. It fits very comfortably inside a circle, which is probably the most symmetrical figure possible. When the minds of the population are confounded and confused by the effects of the war they find solace in the calming symbol of the swastika. If I had melted down all of the metal swastikas the population would have felt desolate due to their absence.

And we remember that that one of the symbols of the Americans is the Liberty Bell. So destroying the church bells was psychologically refreshing for the population."

"With bombs raining down onto their heads do you think that they were much interested in such things?" asked Shamir.

Hitler replied, "The ignorant masses are forever entranced by symbols. And sometimes the symbols lack all logic. Look at the American political symbols. A donkey is the symbol of the Democrat Political Party and an elephant is the symbol of the Republican political Party. They use dumb animals to portray their organizations. At least I employed a design worthy of a war."

"And you employed propaganda at every turn," observed Shamir.

Hitler nodded. "The greatest difficulty with the development of propaganda is that it must reach the level of comprehension of the least intelligent of the population. A good propagandist must be able to think like the dumbest among us, and that takes intelligence. Many people don't think but instead they react. The intent of propaganda is to prevent their thinking and instead evoke the desired reaction. That is why it is always more difficult to fight against faith than against knowledge."

"You have told many lies in order to make progress towards your goals," said Shamir. "Are you not ashamed of your lies?"

Hitler swung an arm in a dismissive gesture. "It is not truth that matters. Only victory matters. Sieg Heil!"

Shamir made an observation. "You had a way of giving innocent names to your murder sprees. You gave the code name "Hummingbird" to your first orders for the killings of anyone that opposed you. Or worse yet, had knowledge of your younger years and flaws."

Hitler replied with a lie. "You are in error. I put down the "Röhm-Putsch". He was attempting a revolt against Germany using the Sturmabteilung that the Americans call the "Storm Troopers". Röhm and his evil compatriots were traitors. It was the "Night of the Long Knives", the "Nacht der langen Messer". That term means "vengeance" to the population. The German people accepted that I saved the Reich from a ruinous take over. Even the courts condoned the events."

"The courts legalized the murders that you committed," observed Shamir. "The NAZI judges did your bidding."

Hitler ignored the statement and instead said, "Most of the traitors were shot resisting arrest."

Shamir responded, "One of your talents was the correct choice of words to allay public outcry against your crimes. It is strange to some of us that when the public is told that someone was shot resisting arrest they somehow assume that justice was done. If the person had simply submitted to arrest then he would have lived. But if he resisted arrest he must have done so out of guilt and therefore got what he deserved. No matter that he was as innocent as a new born baby."

Hitler said, "I use emotion for the many and reserve reason for a few, just like all political leaders."

"I believe you," said Shamir. "You have used emotion like a weapon."

Hitler nodded. "Rhetoric has great power. I have sent armies of millions marching off to war. And I used words to do it. If I had threatened them with death they would not have gone any faster. It was rhetoric that fired their bravery and willingness to give their lives for the Reich. I didn't offer them wealth or threats, just ideals. The damn fools.

The civilians cheered their going off to war. The people succumbed to pure emotion and applied no logic whatsoever to the situation. I always depended upon that. In my speeches I transformed the audiences into emotion driven multitudes. I told them that they did not have to bother to analyze the difficulties of war. I would do that for them. They were happy to be relieved of the responsibility and burden of using logic."

"Millions have died for your war," said Shamir. "Don't you feel regret?"

Hitler shook his head. "I believe that my conduct is in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator."

Shamir suggested, "Perhaps the Almighty Creator has a different opinion."

"No!" shouted Hitler. "Just look at what I have achieved."

"You have achieved death camps," stated Shamir. "What a waste of life. Why didn't you keep them all alive and make them work in factories?"

"It takes food and medical supplies to keep people alive," answered Hitler. "I needed that food for my armies. I must keep the loyal German population alive also in any event so I feed them and work them in the factories."

"Why did you hate the Jews?" asked Shamir.

"I didn't in my youth and I don't now," replied the dictator. "I needed a target, someone to focus the hatred of the ignorant masses in Germany upon. Just as Nero caused the Roman masses to hate the Christians.

Over the centuries there have been many anti-Semitic governments. The groundwork had been done for me. All that I had to do was point a finger towards those that were already persecuted. I needed an adversary that the mobs could focus their hate and bigotry upon. An adversary that could not fight back. The Jews were excellent victims. Just as the Christians were for Nero. They didn't have an army or navy. They were vulnerable."

Shamir asked, "Why not persecute the Communists instead? You clearly viewed them as enemies."

Hitler scoffed at the idea. "Most Jews have Jewish surnames. They can be seen visiting their synagogues. Their shops sell kosher foods. The average ignorant person can identify a Jew. But Communists have respectable German surnames. They eat the same foods and dress the same way as typical German NAZI party members. The ignorant masses have difficulty detecting Communists. It was necessary to focus the hatred of the ignorant masses upon an enemy that they could easily identify. The Jews "fit the bill", to use an American phrase.

Speaking of Americans, who did they place into internment camps? The Japanese-Americans of course. Why? Because they were identifiable by the color of their skin. The most ignorant American could distinguish a person of Japanese heritage from the general population. But German-Americans were not visibly distinct from most other Americans. And many had Americanized their surnames. Schmidt became Smith."

Shamir gave an explanation for the Japanese-American internment camps. "During February 1942 President Franklin Roosevelt signed the order for the camps. On the surface their purpose was to prevent Americans of Japanese heritage from being

free to commit sabotage. That was the easily accepted justification on the part of the American public but that was not the real reason for the detention of many loyal citizens. The central purpose was to protect the Japanese-Americans by preventing other Americans from attacking innocent people in retaliation for the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. It was a humane action in that it was the lessor of two evils.

And this sets the stage for a momentous test of philosophies. The Americans protect the vulnerable while the NAZIs attack those that are least able to resist the attacks. Which course of action will result in a military winner?"

Hitler gave out a short laugh. "It is not by the principles of humanity that man lives or is able to preserve himself above the animal world, but solely by means of the most brutal struggle. The very first essential for success is a perpetually constant and regular employment of violence. The great strength of the totalitarian state is that it forces those that fear it to imitate it. The Americans in the pursuit of their own defense, and hoped for victory, will ultimately employ my methods and become as brutal as we NAZIs. And therefore Roosevelt will lose the war of wills and I will dominate in the history books.

The ignorant masses always require someone to hate. If I give them the Jews to hate then they won't find time or a need to hate me. Roosevelt had the gift of a sneak attack handed to him on a silver platter. He could focus the animosity of the American masses upon the Empire of Japan. It then became an easy matter to include the NAZIs."

Shamir continued to probe for answers for the NAZI atrocities. "Why did so many previously peaceful people go forth and do your murderous bidding? When the invasion of Russia began in your Operation Barbarossa, you informed the SS forces that they would not be punished by the Reich for any atrocities that they committed against Russian Jews. The result of that were innumerable horrors. People were beaten to death, hung en masse on scaffolds, shot, beheaded, and burned to death. Why did so many SS personnel and non-Jewish Russians commit such atrocities with so little urging?"

"It was the "runt of the litter" effect," answered the mad man.

"Are you speaking of dog and wolf cubs?" asked Shamir.

"Yes, exactly," replied Hitler. "All such litters have an Omega animal, the least of the least, designated by Omega which is the last letter of the Greek alphabet. All of the other members of the pack would habitually harass the Omega. They would bully it constantly and always force it to be the last to eat.

Animal experiments showed that if people constantly intervened to protect the runt, punishing any others that bullied it, and allowing it to always eat first, then there was a transformation in the pack hierarchy over time. The Omega animal became the Alpha animal, the leader and the most vicious. A new observer could never detect that the Alpha animal had once been the dominated runt. And there you have the answer to your question.

The broad membership of the SS included many of the weak in mind and spirit. But when I gave them free rein and protection they became Alpha animals. They did not need any instructions regarding despicable acts of torture against innocent Russians that had the great misfortune to simply be Jewish. I could wash my hands of any direct responsibility for the murders, not unlike Pontius Pilate."

Shamir said, "And that explains why your concentration camp operations ran so smoothly. The commandants and the guards were given free rein with a promise not to be held accountable by the Reich. And the local German populations say nothing in opposition to the camps fearing that they would become inmates themselves."

Hitler shrugged his shoulders.

Shamir quoted from one of Hitler's speeches. "In Passau, October 27, 1928 you said, "We tolerate no one in our ranks that attacks the ideas of Christianity. In fact our movement is Christian." Are NAZIs truly Christian?"

Hitler replied, "The majority of Germans are Christians. I would be a damn fool not to say that the NAZIs are also. It evokes instant kinship. If any in the population experienced animosity towards the NAZIs then they would be seen as being anti-Christian by the masses. Christianity is a very convenient thing for my purposes."

"Including military purposes?" asked Shamir.

"Yes, of course," responded the dictator. "My troops have before them the image of Christ dying upon the cross in a horrific manner. But Christ is venerated by the multitudes of believers. So the soldiers believe that if they die in battle for their country and the Reich then they also will be glorified in the eyes of their family, friends and the public. It is so very strange that warriors find it easier to face death if they think that the survivors will be proud of them."

"It seems that the German civilians agreed quite readily to go to war," remarked Shamir.

Hitler snorted a short laugh. "The American Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman said it best when he noted that "Hell hath no fury like a non-combatant." Those that think that they are in no danger themselves find it remarkably easy to send others into danger. They threw flowers into the path of the Storm Troopers and cheered the Blitz Krieg, the Lightning War!"

"But now Germany is being bombed day and night," observed Shamir. "What do they feel now?"

"Hitler said, "Regardless of what they now feel, having once openly agreed fully with going to war they will not now openly denounce the war. Go ask them. Go and ask those whose homes are rubble and who have family and friends among the casualties. Even if Russian bayonets were piercing their breasts they will not say anything except Sieg Heil, Hail Victory!"

"So, it will be war till the end," concluded Shamir. "No peace negotiations."

"Some of the generals were arguing for an agreement to end the war," said Hitler. "I cashiered them from the Wehrmacht. Or eliminated them in other fashions. It is not possible to negotiate an end to the war."

"I suspect that is because you would fear war crime trials, but without the benefit of your NAZI judges," commented Shamir. "At some time during the evils perpetrated in the concentration camps and the commission of other atrocities you reached the point of no return. The Allies would never agree to letting you escape the hangman's noose. Therefore you can't negotiate a truce."

Hitler sat down and sulked angrily. "I have been betrayed by cowards! The combined casualties at the Battle of Stalingrad are estimated at two million. What a glorious struggle between the righteous NAZIs and the godless Russian Communists!"

I elevated General Friedrich Paulus to Field Marshal and yet in the end the sniveling coward surrendered himself and his troops instead of fighting to the last man. If in all battles the German troops had fought to the last man I would at this moment be accepting the adoration of the German people as the triumphant victor in this war. My possibility of great military success has been thwarted by ignoble men that lacked the courage to die for the Reich. I have been cursed to lead armies of spineless men.”

Shamir made a suggestion. “Perhaps you could go out onto the battlefield and set an example of self-sacrifice, for the greater glory of the Reich.”

“That is impossible,” shouted Hitler. “I am their leader. Without me they would wander aimlessly.”

Shamir opined, “Perhaps they would wander to the concept of peaceful coexistence.”

Chapter 7

The young goat herder walked slowly among his animals as they grazed the sparse scrub vegetation of the Jordanian desert. To the goats he had the status of the alpha animal, surpassing even the Nanny and the Billy goats. While they often seemed to be milling about aimlessly they always tracked in the direction that he walked.

As he plodded along barefoot over the hot sand, Ahmed had been practicing the conversions from the Hijri calendar to the Gregorian calendar. The fifteen-year old Ahmed received only one day of school per month in his small and remote Jordanian desert village. There were no funds for a full time instructor for the children of the area so the only supplement to his meager schooling was the lore of the tribe's people. From them he knew that the Hijri calendar dated from the Prophet Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina more than 1431 years ago on the Hijri calendar and more than 600 years ago on the Gregorian calendar. And he was aware that the Gregorian calendar dated from the time of Christ. He computed that the twenty-fifth day of Thul-Hijjah 1421 AH corresponded to March 4, 2001 AD, the current date. Ahmed hoped that someday he could leave the desolate arid desert and move to a large Jordanian city. That would bring him into contact with Christians and thus he was interested in the calendar conversions as a matter of working knowledge.

His goats nibbled down every bit of coarse vegetation that they came upon. There was very little of it so he had to keep the animals moving over large distances in order for them to find enough to eat. He sometimes became lost for days in the arid landscapes of the desert and subsisted on only a small goat skin bag of water and some stale pita bread. When necessary he suckled a female goat's udder just as her offspring did. He never panicked when he found himself disoriented in some God forsaken dry valley, being confident that sooner or later he would find his way home.

He carried a walking stick, its principle use being to ward off venomous snakes that were accidentally disturbed by the passing of the goats and him. He had to be cautious as he lay down to sleep each night as snakes were drawn to a body's warmth, as were tarantulas, centipedes and scorpions. For those reasons he slept among the herd of goats, employing them as a living barricade against the nocturnal demons. Hours later, as he settled himself down on the bare sand for the evening he gazed up at the sky full of bright stars. He tried to imagine exactly what they were, and to understand why he could not just reach out his hand and touch them. They appeared so very clean to him, compared to his life-long proximity to the sand and dirt of the desert.

As he attempted to nestle down into his bed of sand he encountered a hard rounded object. He mumbled, "A desert full of sand and I have the bad fortune to lie down upon a rock." He moved off a little distance to avoid it. Then he remembered that he had not performed the sunset prayer, the Maghrib. From his bag of items he removed a small prayer rug. He flattened it out, knelt upon it and bent forward so that his forehead would touch the earth as a prelude to fulfillment of his Muslim obligations.

"Waa faqri!" he cursed as his head impacted something solid. He slouched back onto his haunches and in the fading light saw a small portion of a light colored object that was partially protruding from the sand. In exasperation he brushed more sand away with the intent of unearthing it entirely and casting it away to soothe his anger. It appeared to have a finger sized hole in it so he poked a digit of his right hand into it and pulled the entire object out. As he held it in front of him and finally realized what it was he became frozen in a state of shock and his face took on an expression of sheer terror. "Ayyyyy!" he screamed as he attempted to cast the object away in panic. But his finger was stuck tightly in the eye socket hole of the human skull and no matter how wildly he flung his hand about he could not free it.

The goats were alarmed by Ahmed's screams of fright. They all rose to their feet while bleating in fear of the unknown. Perhaps an Arabian wolf was among them. They milled wildly about, and bumping into Ahmed they knocked him to the sand.

"Allah akbar!" screamed Ahmed rising up again. "Muhammad, save me!" As he continued to fling his right hand about in an attempt to rid himself of the skull a sharp edge of the eye socket tore his flesh and his blood started streaming over the pure white object. "It is eating me! Allah, I promise, I will never neglect my prayers again. Please save me and I will pray one hundred times a day. Don't let it eat me!"

Because the sight of the white skull moving with rapid animated motion startled them into believing that it was some sort of wild prey animal, the goats went running madly off in all directions. Except for the alpha male goat, the Billy-goat, that viewed the rapidly moving white object as a predator of some sort. It approached Ahmed while defecating, urinating and exuding vile smelling excretions. It was the animal's natural attempt to cause a predator to believe that the goats were not palatable.

Ahmed was in a state of abject fright and the stench from the goat did nothing to lessen his fears. Once again he flung his arm strenuously and finally the skull came free and was catapulted into the air. When it landed it made a dull and hollow sounding clunk sound. Ahmed staggered backwards. He imagined that it was the sound of one skull striking another, and he was correct. "There are more!" As he turned to run he stepped upon yet one more skull, slipped on its smooth dome and fell to the sand. He was simply exhausted by fear and lay there weakly praying. The shock of his horrifying experience soon rendered him unconscious from sheer nervous exhaustion.

Soon it was full dark and the temperature fell quite rapidly as is common in the desert. The Nanny goat approached him cautiously, sniffing the air and ground for scents that might indicate that dangerous animals were nearby. She nuzzled Ahmed but got no response. Her instinct was that of motherly protection for the animals of her herd. She slowly lay down in the sand beside Ahmed, nestling against him to provide body warmth. She stayed with him through the night.

As the sun rose above the horizon the next morning Ahmed awoke shivering from the night's cold air in spite of the presence of the Nanny goat. His mind slowly allowed him to remember what he had experienced some hours earlier. He sat up. Off in the distance he could see small groups of his other scattered goats. Near his feet was a human skull and upon noticing it he rapidly scrambled backwards and then rose to stand upright. The Nanny goat also rose and moved off to be with other goats of the herd.

Ahmed quickly looked about for his walking stick as that was his only defensive weapon. He saw it lying a short distance off and just to the side of it was yet another skull. He approached the stick and gingerly retrieved it.

He called out to his animals. "Come goats. Come to me." Hearing his familiar voice the goats slowly converged on his location, browsing the coarse desert forage as they went.

The early morning sunlight glinted off what appeared to be a small metal object in the sand a few meters away from him. He slowly approached and inspected it. He finally realized that it was the point of a scimitar blade protruding from the loose sand. He was elated as he felt that if he retrieved it he would have a useful weapon against the demons that seemed to haunt the scene. Kneeling down he very carefully began to finger away the sand from the blade, moving deeper and deeper down into the small grains alongside the vertical blade. The blade appeared to be keen and he was careful not to cut himself as he dug. He thought aloud, "If I had stepped upon this point it would have sliced through my foot. I could have died of blood loss or infection." It took him more than an hour of labor but finally he held the scimitar safely in his hands.

Ahmed was the only child of his village that could read. He had pestered the two literate adults of the village to teach him, stating that he wanted to be able to read the Koran. In truth he did want to be able to do that, but he also knew that when he ran off to a city the ability to read would be a great asset in finding employment.

The scimitar blade was ornately engraved and among the flourishes along its length he could make out two words. The first was "Emir". He rubbed dust from the second word and discovered that it was the name, Alakinani. It was a truly beautifully made weapon and he guessed that it would have a high value.

Talking aloud he said, "I can't bring it to the village as the elders would just take it from me. I must hide it someplace in the desert so that I can come back and get it at another time."

He investigated the area further and discovered many other partially buried skulls and skeleton bones. To himself he said, "I don't see any wounds on them or broken bones so they probably did not die in battle. It was more likely a sandstorm that killed them. Not just a Haboob, as they could have gotten safely through a storm that lasted only hours. It was more likely a Khamsin, a storm that lasts fifty days. I see horses' skulls also so they must have been a war party that lost their last battle with the desert."

He looked off into the distance to seek a hiding place for the scimitar. About two kilometers to the east a rocky ridge rose some thirty meters above the sand and he expected that within the crevices he might find a good hiding place. Calling his goats he began trekking towards the ridge. He reached it about two hours later as the goats moved only slowly while foraging. With his goats browsing at the base he began to climb the rock structure. At a point about three quarters of the way to the top he found a narrow but deep crevice. He stuck the point of the scimitar blade into it a short distance and then flicked it side to side against the stone in order to create a loud ringing noise. He waited to see if any reptiles hissed or emerged. There was only silence and he did not observe anything dangerous. He pushed the scimitar into the crevice as far as his arm would reach. He then climbed back down to the sandy floor at the base of the ridge.

As he turned towards his goat herd he saw two camel riders approaching from a distance of about a kilometer. Could they have seen him hide the scimitar? Knowing that he could not outrun the camels he simply sat down and awaited their arrival as they were clearly riding directly towards him.

Some minutes later the heavily armed men dressed in desert Arab attire arrived, halted their camels and sat looking down upon him. "As- Salam Alaikum," said one of the riders.

"And the peace be upon you also," responded Ahmed.

"What were you doing up on the rocks?" asked the man.

Ahmed lied. "I'm lost and I was trying to get my bearings. I know that if I just wait long enough my goats will find their way home and all that I need do is to follow them. But I was curious about the surroundings."

The two men commanded their camels to sink to their knees and then they dismounted. One asked, "Have you seen anyone else?"

"No," replied Ahmed. "Are you looking for someone?"

"There are many looking for us, so we must be careful," answered the taller man. He unhooked a cloth bag from his camel's saddle rigging and tossed it towards Ahmed. "It is camel dung for the fire. We are going to kill one of the goats as we haven't eaten in days." He drew a short and sharp scimitar from a scabbard at his waist and walked off towards the goats.

Ahmed knew that it would be fruitless to argue over the goat that the man was going to slaughter. Instead he asked the shorter man, "Where are you travelling to?"

"Nowhere and everywhere," answered the man. "We are searching for martyrs."

Ahmed guessed immediately that they were searching for suicide bombers but he feigned ignorance. "Out here in the desert?"

"Do you understand martyrdom?" asked the man.

"Of course," answered Ahmed. "All Muslims do. And Christians also, I am told by the village elders."

The man nodded and asked, "Do you know what 'istish'had' means?"

"It means sacrificial death," replied Ahmed.

"But perhaps you are too young to understand what it really means," suggested the man. Ahmed was affronted. "I can understand many things."

"Have you ever considered it?" the man asked.

"No," answered Ahmed. "But others my age in the village have done so. The elders seem to urge them to do it, I think. At least it seems so."

The man smiled slightly. "So, your elders are very religious, true followers of Islam."

Ahmed shook his head. "No. I think they do it because there is not enough food for everybody and they wish that some of the children would just leave. They say that growing children each have the appetite of two grown men."

The man asked, "Do they suggest that only boys become martyrs, or the girls also?"

Ahmed shook his head again. "They can get a dowry for the girls so they don't want them to leave. If you went to my village today you could trade your camel for a young bride. You would not need to offer more than that."

"If I went to your village today do you think that some of the boys would agree to be martyrs?" asked the man.

Ahmed was wishing they would go because he was not sure of their intentions. They might be planning to kill him and steal all the goats. "I am sure of it. Abdul especially."

The man had been alert to the possible approach of anyone else and been peering off into the distance as he spoke.

"Are you watching for someone?" asked Ahmed

"We are Al-Qaeda," the man informed Ahmed. "There are many looking for us. Especially the Fursan al-Haq. The Knights of Justice."

"Al-Qaeda? The base? What does it mean? Who are the Fursan al-Haq?" Ahmed acted as if he didn't know and was curious.

The taller man came walking back carrying the skinned and butchered haunch of a goat. He tossed it down into the sand in front of Ahmed. "Light a fire and cook this."

Ahmed gathered some dry forage and kindled a fire of dried camel dung. He placed some rocks near the low flames and stretched the meat over them to cook.

As the aroma of grilled meat reached their nostrils the shorter man asked, "What did you hide in the rocks?"

Ahmed was taken by surprise. "I was just looking around. I didn't hide anything," he lied.

The taller man brandished the short scimitar that he had used to slaughter the goat. "We have binoculars. We saw you hide something that reflected the sunlight. Something made of metal, we suspect. I just cut off a part of that goat. I can just as easily cut off a part of you. The part that you most treasure." He stepped menacingly towards Ahmed.

The young goat herder scrambled to his feet. "I will get it for you. It is a scimitar that I found. I hid it in a crevice. But there was a snake in there and it almost bit me."

Both men cringed slightly at the mention of a reptile.

"Go kill the snake with your walking stick," ordered the taller man. "Bring us the scimitar. Go now!"

"Yes," said Ahmed. "I'm going." He turned to walk to the rocky ledge. When he heard a "thunk" sound he turned back towards the taller man.

Blood was spurting out of the man's chest in rhythm to his heartbeat. Then there was the sound of a far off rifle shot reaching their ears.

The shorter man declared, "A sniper! The Fursan al-Haq!" The wounded man fell face down into the sand. The other man jumped atop his camel and urged it to rise. There was another "thunk" and he fell over backwards, slid off the camel and landed on his back in the sand. There was the sound of a second rifle shot. The camels were unperturbed.

Ahmed lay flat down onto the sand so as not to provide a standing target to a sniper. After a few moments he heard the sound of a truck engine as a vehicle approached. A short time later the truck pulled up beside him and a uniformed man opened the passenger side door and stepped down to the sand.

"You can get up, goat herder," said the man. "You have nothing to worry about." After assuring that both of the other men were dead he said, "I could smell that goat meat for kilometers. We have ripe dates and bread. May we sit and eat with you?"

"Yes, of course," replied Ahmed.

The driver dismounted from the truck and the two men lugged each of the corpses to the truck bed and loaded them into it. "We have been hunting them for days," said the first soldier. "Did they try to convince you to become a suicide bomber?"

"They began to speak of it," confirmed Ahmed. "But I don't think that I could ever do such a thing. I don't know why others do such a thing but some of my friends have spoken of it."

The soldier sat in the sand near the campfire where the goat meat was roasting. "Some think that only Arabs are willing to commit suicide. But during the Battle of Waterloo the French formed up in their usual columns and ranks and marched towards the British. The French used no protective cover at all, they simply marched into the musket balls fired by the British. The result of the battle caused Wellington to report to his government, "They came on in the same old way, and we defeated them in the same old way." Didn't the French troops commit suicide?"

The other soldier said, "And the Japanese had their Kamikaze airplane pilots. They died for their Emperor, who they believed to be God like."

The first soldier added, "And there were the Nazi Youth Brigades. Those young men actually wanted to die bravely in battle for their murderous leader, Hitler. How were they different from young Arab Jihadists?"

The second soldier said, "The American General George Patten had the right philosophy when he said, "The object of war is not to die for your country but to make the other guy die for his." In the back of our truck are two men that failed to learn that advice."

Ahmed turned the goat meat over to continue its roasting and said, "I think that you are saying that a suicide bomber gains less for his side than if he simply fought in a good military manner, taking no more risks than necessary."

The first soldier replied, "The Americans, British, French and their allies were not suicidal but they won the war against Germany and Japan, which did have suicidal units. If we Arabs ever wish to rule others, we should learn to use sound military tactics and strategies."

Ahmed said, "But suicide bombers can be terrifying. You never can know where they might explode their vests."

The soldier replied, "Out here in the desert one danger is you can be struck by lightning. Often dust storms create lightning. Does that fact stop you from traveling about the desert with your goats?"

In Baghdad, Karachi and Kabul there are suicide bombers. But the city residents still go about their daily business. Suicide bombers are a fear tactic. But they cannot win a war. Or even a battle."

The goat haunch was now roasted so the three of them sat and ate meat, bread and dates while drinking shai, the sweet tea that Ahmed had brewed in a small pot. They had to share the single cup that he had in his kit.

The years passed. In February 2010 Ahmed bought the small general store in Amman, Jordan where he had worked for the past several years. He had lived frugally, saving as much

money from his weekly salary as he could possibly manage. He spoke and could write Arabic, English and French well enough that he also earned money as an interpreter.

Chapter 8

On March 24, 2010, several people were seated in the lounge of Le Chateau Frontenac, the premier hotel of Quebec City, Canada.

Juliana Engton was a fifty-year old art historian who had managed to maintain a fairly youthful appearance. To idle away the time as she waited for a client that she was to meet she made small talk with the bartender.

"Why are flowers pretty?" asked Juliana idly. She smiled and sipped a glass of Chablis.

"I don't know. Why do you ask?" responded the barkeep.

"I suppose because we always want the answers to things," answered Juliana. "We feel itchy if we don't know the answer to something. Well, do honeybees appreciate prettiness? Are things that are pretty to us also pretty to bees?"

The man shrugged. "Well, I don't think that I would be attracted to a three toed sloth but another three toed sloth might be, so I am going to guess that what is pretty to one species is not necessarily pretty to another."

"OK, so are flowers pretty to bees?" Juliana was being playfully insistent.

"I have to say the answer is no," stated the man. "I don't think bees know what pretty is."

Juliana asked, "So then why are flowers pretty to us? We don't go around pollinating them. Why should flowers care one iota about how we regard them?"

The bartender said, "Well, it can't relate to our propagating them by planting beds of flowers for their beauty because in the wild, where people have never before gone, great fields of beautiful wild flowers exist."

"Why do flowers smell nice?" asked Juliana.

A man seated three bar stools from Juliana had overheard the conversation. He decided to participate. "Not all do," said Olin Colner with a smile. "Carrion flowers look nice enough but smell of rotten flesh. The odor attracts flies and they pollinate the flower. Maybe one insect's stink is another insect's perfume."

Juliana shrugged. Her thick dark hair had sheen and that caught the attention of Claire the waitress.

"You must spend a couple of hours on your hair before you come out in the evening," Claire said to Juliana.

"Actually, after I shower I just dry it with a towel and then comb it out a little," Juliana informed her.

Claire scowled. "What a depressing thing to say! The rest of us have a bad hair day every day while you have a gift from God." Turning her glance toward Olin she said, "Tell me something good to lift my spirits."

Olin accommodated her. "There are fifty states in America and no two are at war with each other."

Claire narrowed her eyelids in mock displeasure as she turned away in order to serve a new customer.

Olin turned toward Juliana. "My name is Olin Cloner and I'm just passing time until my client shows up."

Juliana smiled, "That's a coincidence because I am also waiting for a client. I'm an art historian. My name is Juliana Engton. What do you do?"

"I'm a forensic scientist," answered Olin.

An elderly gentleman with the appearance of a banker entered the lounge and at a glance deduced that Olin and Juliana were the people with whom he had requested a meeting.

Olin stood up. "Mister Livingston I presume." He then smiled and said, "I've always wanted to say that and I hope that you forgive me Mr. Livingston."

Charles Livingston replied with slight irritation, "I have heard that a thousand times. It wasn't even funny the first time."

"I will reduce my fee slightly." Olin made a peace offering as he shook the man's hand.

Juliana stood up and remarked, "The coincidence continues as I am here to meet Mr. Livingston also. She shook the man's hand as she said, "I'm pleased to meet you, Sir." The three of them sat down at a lounge table and Claire took the man's order for a Highland Park scotch neat.

A young man, neatly dressed and with the appearance of someone that was employed in the financial district, entered the lounge, walked directly to the bar and sat at a stool. He set his briefcase down near his feet.

Olin opened the conversation. "Sir, I believe that the purpose of this meeting is...."

Juliana made a slight hand motion to interrupt the conversation. She stood up and out of polite habit the two men rose to their feet also because a woman was standing. She nodded her head towards the lobby of the hotel and stepped in that direction. The men followed her. When they were standing in the lobby she said, "That young man almost certainly has a sensitive microphone in his briefcase with the intent of recording our conversation."

Olin asked, "How the hell do you know that?"

Juliana asked, "When you entered the lounge what was the first thing that you did?"

He answered, "I looked around to see if perhaps Mr. Livingston had arrived early. And then I sat at the bar a few stools away from you. You are not completely without attraction."

Juliana said, "So in general, you would expect that anyone entering a bar might glance around to see who was already present. It is something that we do naturally. Even if we are not there to meet anyone. That young man studiously avoided looking at us. He strode to the bar without looking to the right or to the left. That means to me that he is there to observe us surreptitiously. But he is amateurish regarding the task."

Mr. Livingston nodded agreement. "I have been followed in the past. Miss Engton is wise to advise us not to conduct our conversation in the bar." He motioned to a man that obviously was in his employ and the man stepped closer in order to receive his instructions. "Charlie, there is a young man at the bar with a briefcase at his feet. Collect both him and the briefcase. Let me know what you learn."

Without speaking Charlie entered the bar, walked up behind the man and tapped him on his left shoulder. When the young man turned to his left Charlie used his right hand behind the man's back to drop a small pill into the drink glass on the bar. Charlie said, "I'm sorry. I thought that you were someone that I knew. Drink up and I'll buy you a drink for the bother. Bartender, please give the gentleman another of what he was drinking and the same for me."

The young man became somewhat confused by the encounter and by realizing that Mr. Livingston, Juliana and Olin had left the bar. He said to Charlie, "That's alright. I was just leaving." Reflexively he lifted his glass and finished his drink. As he bent down to grasp his suitcase he began to slump from the effect of the drug that Charlie had dropped into his drink. Charlie quickly propped him up while saying to the bartender, "He could never handle his liquor." He placed a twenty dollar bill on the bar, hoisted the briefcase and helped the now staggering man out of the bar, through the lobby and into a limousine that was parked at the curb.

Olin conceded the situation. "Let us talk here in the empty lobby. I believe that you have acquired an ancient manuscript. If I understand correctly the manuscript has been carbon fourteen dated at very near year 33 AD, give or take fifty years?"

Livingston nodded affirmatively. "Yes. There is no doubt as to the authenticity of the manuscript's age. Or the scribe that penned it. His name was Raka of Michmash. Several earlier manuscripts of his are in museums. The one under discussion here is believed to be his

last. It is thought that he went mad while researching the history for its content and putting it to colored ink illustrations and gold leaf.”

Juliana’s curiosity was aroused. “A person might think that his earlier and saner manuscripts would have more value than one he constructed while out of his mind.”

Livingston explained. “This manuscript is a history and was written just a few years after the Crucifixion. On his death bed Raka held the manuscript to his chest and said to his son, “Ostendo eventus Arma Christi”.”

Juliana asked, “Was he saying that the manuscript revealed the destiny of the Instruments of the Passion? For example the very cross that Christ died upon?”

Livingston nodded. “That is what we believe that he meant.”

“Where are they then?” asked Olin.

“No one knows,” declared Livingston. “That is why we contacted the two of you.”

Juliana smiled slightly. “I can assure you that I don’t know either.”

“But, you may be able to find out,” responded Livingston. “Our guess is that Raka encoded the manuscript and we need to decipher the encryption. You have studied very many illustrated manuscripts quite closely in order to determine their authenticity and to quantify their monetary value. Our hope is that your experienced eyes will detect something that has eluded all the others. As regards Mr. Colner, if the information we desire is somehow hidden chemically his forensic science expertise may lead to its discovery.”

“But if the text is in Hebrew then there are a multitude of scholars that you can call upon to interpret it,” observed Olin.

“Several experts have seen, read and translated the text,” said Livingston. “It comes across as a beautifully illustrated but simple history book written just subsequent to the crucifixion in 33 AD. It mentions Arma Christi but there is no hint of where they might be.”

Juliana said, “It could have been that Raka was a liar or delusional. Or he did not want everyone to know the secret location of one or more of the Arma Christi for fear of looters.”

“Or his son may have been a liar,” suggested Olin. “Perhaps he made up the story about the manuscript in the hopes of increasing its value. After all, many people would pay great sums of money to possess any one of the Arma Christi. The Instruments of the Passion.”

“We suspect that the secret, if it does exist, is not in the words of the manuscript but instead in the very intricate and colorful illustrations,” said Livingston. “Juliana, you have appraised hundreds of such manuscripts. Your estimations of their worth included both the value of the text and the artistry of the illustrations. Therefore you have intently scrutinized very many illustrations and if there is anything odd in Raka’s renditions you are the person that would most likely detect it.”

“Has the cover and all of the pages been x-rayed?” asked Olin.

“Yes,” confirmed Livingston. “There is no hint of any type of invisible ink or other hidden messages. Examinations were also performed using infrared light and cameras, as well as viewings with ultraviolet light. Absolutely nothing surreptitious was detected. I have with me a folio of all the images and photographs.” He handed Olin the briefcase that he had brought to the meeting.

Juliana asked, “Where is the actual manuscript?”

Livingston replied, “In a very safe and secure place.”

Olin said, “You must realize that we will of necessity expend a significant number of billable hours on this task.”

Livingston nodded. “We are a group of seven very interested individuals who are funding the project. We propose to pay you a set amount.”

Juliana said, “At the moment I don’t know how to estimate a set fee.”

“You don’t have to,” responded Livingston. “If you each provide me a bank account number I will deposit ten million dollars into each of them by close of business tomorrow. That

money will cover any costs that you incur for equipment, travel, your labor, the labor of others, or anything else.”

Juliana smiled slightly. “I believe that you have just made us an offer that we can’t refuse.”

“Actually, that is not the entire offer,” said Livingston. “We believe you both to be honest people but all humans can fall prey to temptation. If after expending the ten million you have not discovered the secret of Raka’s manuscript we will conclude our association. But if you do discover the location of one or more of the Arma Christi the bonus for each of you will be a hundred million dollars. We believe that you would prefer to take honest money of that amount before you might be tempted to sell the treasured item or items on the black market. There are very many wealthy people with that kind of available money just in America alone. We remember that the Wall Street bonuses for 2009 totaled forty billion dollars. Tax breaks for the wealthy are a wonderful thing and we offer to pay you but a very small part of just the tax breaks.”

Olin and Juliana were stunned into silence.

Livingston continued to speak. “Just before you do accept my offer you should come to the full realization that for the kinds of money involved there are numerous nefarious and brutal people that would torture you to obtain information regarding the location of any of the Instruments of the Passion. They would most probably then kill you. That undesirable situation could occur even if you actually don’t know the whereabouts of the sacred objects and they only initially believe that you do. By accepting my offer you place yourselves into grave danger.”

Juliana smiled slightly out of nervousness and said, “I’ve always thought that I would like to learn how to handle a gun. I now feel impelled to do so. I for one accept the offer.”

Olin nodded. “I learned how to handle weapons while in the Army. But it will be difficult to carry a rocket launcher as a concealed weapon. Nevertheless I also accept the offer.”

The following day in Olin’s private laboratory they began the analysis of the photographs of the first page of the manuscript.

“Perhaps there might be a stereogram effect,” suggested Juliana. “Let’s stare at the page’s illustrations until our eyes cross. Maybe some sort of image will pop out, like the computer generated art that contains hidden objects.”

They stared at the photo for several minutes but without any good result.

Olin made a suggestion. “Let’s buy a set of color filters for our camera. So, for example, we can photograph using a red filter and then print out only those elements of the illustration that are in red ink. The same for the other colors.”

“That’s a good idea,” agreed Juliana.

Olin teased her with a question of physics. “Let’s say that a gold ingot is on the floor inside an unlit room. We install a small window in one wall. The pane of glass that we use transmits only red light. We then shine a green light from outside onto the pane of red glass. If someone were standing inside the room, what color would the gold ingot appear to be?”

“Black,” answered Juliana without a moment’s hesitation.

During the course of the day they procured the color filters and took photographs of the manuscript page illustrations. They developed the film and then spent several hours perusing the photos. They turned them at various angles. They inspected the images’ reflections in a mirror. They scanned the images into a computer and over the course of the next several days used various image analysis software programs to investigate all aspects of the photographs.

At the conclusion of that method of analysis Juliana remarked, “I have heard it said that if a person stares at a group of truly random numbers long enough that a pattern will emerge.”

Olin nodded. “Yes, but the pattern is only a flight of fancy in the mind of the beholder.”

“I would settle for at least that,” laughed Juliana. “I have not been able to detect the slightest discernable hidden pattern or message in the illustrations.”

"Maybe that's because Raka was in fact insane and there isn't any hidden message," opined Olin.

"Aha!" exclaimed Juliana. "Perhaps you have hit on a very good suggestion."

"I didn't make a suggestion," declared Olin.

Juliana explained, "Perhaps we should show these photos to some people that are certifiably insane."

Olin understood immediately. "It would be a sort of Rorschach inkblot test except using Raka's complex and colorful illustrations."

"Exactly," confirmed Juliana. "Not everybody sees the same thing when they look at a Rorschach inkblot. So if we show the illustrations to enough crazy people one of them might perceive the clue that we are missing. If Raka as a mad man used steganography, the art of concealed writing, to hide messages in the illustrations a real nut case might be able to detect it."

Eleven days later Olin and Juliana met with Dr. Erchlic Tenstat in his office.

"Do I understand correctly that you wish to make a donation of fifty thousand dollars to the psychiatric ward of the hospital?" asked the doctor.

"Yes," confirmed Olin. "But there are strings attached."

The doctor shrugged. "There always are. Do you wish a ward to be dedicated to your names?"

"No," answered Juliana. "We wish only to be allowed to converse with several of your patients in private. Those that you consider to be the most hopeless cases."

The doctor was taken aback. "I must be sure that we abide by all ethics. I can't simply allow the satisfaction of morbid curiosity."

Olin opened his briefcase and took out a photograph of one of the pages of the illustrated manuscript. "Our interest is academic. We wish to know if the author of the manuscript was insane when he designed these illustrations. We are interested in whether they evoke specific emotions when viewed by certifiably insane people. We request nothing else for our donation and you may do with that money as you please."

The doctor's expression changed ever so slightly upon hearing those last words.

Thirty-five minutes later they were seated at a small metal table with the first patient. Olin laid the photographs on the table. "Samuel, could you please look at these photographs and tell us what you see?"

The elderly Samuel had been staring blankly into space but now his gaze focused upon the photos of the illustrated manuscript. After a few moments he said, "They are only half there."

Olin and Juliana could make no sense of the man's remark. "What do you mean?" asked Olin.

"I can read Hebrew," replied the man in a flat voice. "I can see that they are only half there."

Juliana said, "Don't focus on the text. Just look at the illustrations."

Samuel raised his head and looked at them. "The problem with you sane people is that you can't see anything at all. At least I can see that they are only half there." He stood up and refused to participate further.

The next patient was a young lady named Shelia. She looked down at the photographs on the table. "They have a beautiful optical rhythm. I can hear it."

Olin asked in a quiet voice, "What words do you hear?"

She shook her head. "There aren't any words. Just sounds. Like when I play my violin. My violin doesn't speak words. But I know what my violin wants to tell me."

"What do these illustrations tell you?" asked Juliana.

"That I must go and play my violin," she replied.

The third patient was a middle-aged man named Harold. The doctor had selected him because he was intensely attracted to all things religious. He looked down upon the photographs. "They are the Devil's work," he mumbled.

"Why do you say that?" asked Juliana.

"Because there is nothing Christian here," he replied. "The bright red parts are like the glowing coals of Hell. The dark parts are like deep sorrow. It reminds me of Rodin's "The Gates of Hell." He was making reference to the large and very intricate bronze sculpture in a garden in the outskirts of Paris, France.

"Do you see Christ's cross," asked Olin.

"No," Harold responded. "I told you, there is nothing Christian here."

Juliana sat back in her chair. "Well, I must tell you, Harold that is the last thing we had hoped to hear you say."

The man tapped a photograph with his finger. "These were drawn by a non-believer. He was not pious. I have seen thousands of drawings by Christians and I tell you that this man was not a Christian. It is as if the moneychangers at Herod's Temple in Jerusalem drew them."

Olin said, "Well, the text is not meant to be religious at all. It is written as a history of the time of the Crucifixion. While many historians are religious there is no requirement that they be so. So let us not debate the secular nature of the author. Instead search for some hidden code in the illustrations that relates to the possible location, or hiding place, of one or more of the Arma Christi."

Harold shook his head negatively. "No. There is nothing there. The illustrations are ornate but that is all that they are. There is no secret message." He shuffled the photographs into a number of different orientations as he peered at them. Finally he said, "There is no hidden message. Whatever you are looking for you seem to be looking in the wrong place."

Juliana sat back in thought for a few moments. Then she asked Harold, "Do you believe in Griffins? The flying beasts."

Harold replied, "Many people believe that Griffins saved Jesus from being cast from the hilltop in Nazareth. Luke 4:28-30. They have the head of eagles and the bodies of winged lions. They have the ability to become invisible and that is why the people of Nazareth did not see them, they only felt their presence."

Juliana nodded and said, "They also are believed to hide and protect holy treasures. Can you perceive griffins in the intricate illustrations of the pages?"

Harold peered intently at the photographs. Finally he said, "No. There is nothing. You people are wasting your time with these illustrations."

After Harold had left the room Juliana slouched back in her chair. "Maybe we're dealing with a hoax. Maybe Raka's illustrated manuscript is nothing more than an illustrated manuscript. Maybe a story has been concocted about it in order to raise its value."

"It could be," said Olin. "For some reason millions of people will believe a hoax before they will believe the truth. Roswell for example."

"Did a UFO actually crash land at Roswell, New Mexico in 1947?" inquired Juliana.

Olin shook his head negatively. "No."

"How the hell do you know?"

"It is really simple," answered Olin. "There were reports of scattered debris."

Juliana didn't see the point of the statement. "Wouldn't you expect that if a UFO crashed?"

"No," replied Olin. "The nearest habitable planet is most probably light years away. So if they traveled at speeds even approaching the speed of light it would mean that the trip would take years. That significantly increases the probability of a meteorite strike during the trip, as opposed to the chances during only the weeks long trip of our astronauts to the moon.

That means the UFO metal would have to be extremely strong in order to prevent the meteorite from penetrating the material and either killing the little green men outright or exhausting their spacecraft's internal atmospheric gases into the vacuum of space. That actually did happen to two Russian Cosmonauts, by the way.

Tough spacecraft metal would not have broken to pieces upon impact at Roswell. It would have drilled its way deep into the earth. So the fact that scattered wreckage was reported convinces me that the object had been man-made here on earth. Probably of light grade aluminum."

Juliana pressed on with the subject. "Why was it that so many people believed that it was a UFO?" she asked him.

"There is a truism," Olin said. "If you want people to believe an outlandish thing then make the lie as farfetched as you possibly can, because for some reason people will believe a great lie before they will believe a small lie."

"Give me an example," demanded Juliana.

He satisfied her request. "During the Irish potato famine of 1845, there were many people in America that believed that it was a hoax by the Catholic Pope. They fully suspected that he first faked the deaths of about three million people. He then convinced several million Irish immigrants to go along with the scam and use it as a cover story as to why they were entering the United States."

Juliana was skeptical. "For what reason?"

"So that millions more Catholics would be in America and ultimately take it over for the Pope to rule," Olin informed Juliana "The accusations of the plot led to very poor treatment of the Irish immigrants and many businesses had signs reading, "Irish need not apply" for jobs."

"Why did one crop failure cause so many deaths?" asked Juliana. "Were potatoes the only thing that they had to eat?"

"The potato crop failure devastated Ireland because it was a major cash crop," answered Olin. "Without potatoes to sell for income the Irish farmers were broke and couldn't buy bread, milk, meat, medicines, or anything else for that matter."

"That reminds me," said Juliana. "A while back I heard about one of those Irish immigrants who arrived in New York City in the 1800's. The Irish didn't know what hot dogs were and this Irishman goes up to a street vender and buys one to find out. When it is handed to him he looks at it and says he wants his money back. The vendor asks why. The Irish guy says, "There's no way I'm going to eat this part of a dog!""

The door opened and an attendant escorted a timid appearing young man to the chair at the table. "This is Timothy," he said to Juliana and Olin.

"Hello, Timothy," said Juliana. "We would like you to look at some photos that we have here on the table."

Timothy looked at Juliana. "I know why you want me to look at them. My psychiatrist says it's because I have pareidlia. Many people see images in clouds. But I see images in everything. That's why they keep me here. Because I see things all around me that other people can't see. Everywhere in the world I look I see strange things that other people don't. The people out there think that I am crazy and won't have anything to do with me. I can't get a job and I can't go to school."

"Please look at the photos," Juliana requested in a soft voice.

Timothy looked down at the photos spread out on the table. He pointed at the photo of the first page of the manuscript. "I dimly see a man's face. He is wearing a hood so his face is in shadows. But I can see that he has fangs."

"Fangs like a wolf?" asked Juliana.

"No," replied Timothy. "Fangs like a vampire."

"You see Dracula in the in the photo?" asked a skeptical Olin.

“Not Dracula,” said Timothy. “Not like in the movies. This man is very much more evil. He is a fallen angel.”

“Like in the bible?” asked Juliana. “One of the Devil’s helpers?”

“Yes,” answered Timothy. The young man fidgeted nervously. “I sense that the man still exists. I don’t want to look at him anymore.”

Olin asked Timothy, “Look someplace else in the illustrations. What more do you see?”

“A tree,” responded the young man.

“What kind of tree?” asked Juliana. “A shade tree? Is it a deciduous tree or an evergreen tree?”

“It is the only tree of its kind,” stated Timothy.

“A one of a kind tree?” asked a skeptical Olin.

“Yes,” responded Timothy. “It reminds me of drawings that I have seen of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.”

“The Tree of Knowledge?” asked Juliana. “Do you mean the apple tree from the Garden of Eden?”

“Yes,” said Timothy. “I see apples hanging from the branches.”

Olin suggested a reason for the image. “There are many illustrations of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as they eat the forbidden fruit. This seems to be a very common religious rendition of the subject matter.”

Timothy concentrated more deeply as he peered at the illustration. “The tree transforms into a large wooden cross and then back again.”

Olin asked, “Like the wooden cross that Christ was crucified upon?”

“Yes,” responded the young man. “Like the drawings I have seen of Christ’s cross.”

Juliana asked, “Can you see any letters or words?”

Timothy looked up at her apologetically. “I can’t read. They took me out of school when I was a little boy because I upset the other children when I told them about the things that I see. I have never been able to learn how to read because I don’t see letters and words like other people. I see only images when I look at pages of books. The letters form images of many kinds.”

“Well, why do you think that the tree transforms into a cross?” she asked gently.

“I think that it means that Jesus’ cross was made from that tree,” stated Timothy.

Chapter 9

The Jasmine Tea Room was crowded with patrons but Juliana and Olin managed to find seats at a small table. The restaurant was popular because of its fine teas and bakery items. The aromas wafted out of a window that the proprietor purposely left open during business hours. He knew that often customers would be drawn in by simply following their noses.

Juliana remarked to Olin, "The beautiful smelling flower named Yellow Carolina Jasmine is quite poisonous."

Olin was slightly confused by the statement. "It is listed right here on the menu. Jasmine tea. Are you saying that they are selling poison?"

Juliana explained. "The tea leaves are covered with common Jasmine petals for a number of days. They take up the enchanting scent of jasmine. The flowers are then removed. The problem occurs when people attempt to make their own Jasmine tea in order to save a few pennies but mistakenly use the poisonous variety. It is like people and mushrooms. More people die each year due to eating toxic mushrooms than actually live and enjoy edible mushrooms."

Olin said, "Well, just to be on the safe side I think that I'll forego the jasmine tea."

"Livingston called about an hour ago," she informed him. "He said that the young man from the bar at the Frontenac worked for a very dangerous group of people."

"How dangerous?" asked Olin.

"Livingston told me that after they got him to talk they released him. Charlie followed him and saw that he was picked up by two men in a car and they drove off. Charlie followed them using the GPS signal from the small device that he had emplaced in the man's shoe while he was drugged."

"Where did they go?" asked Olin.

Juliana answered, "Out of town to the country side. That is where they dumped the young man's body."

Olin was silent for a few moments. Then he asked, "Do you think that we are in over our heads?"

Juliana shrugged. "Life is full of threats. The soldier survives a horrific battle and performs a feat of great danger and heroism. Then while they are awarding him the Congressional Medal of Honor, the excitement of that causes him to die of a heart attack."

Olin nodded slightly. "You're right but we had better keep our eyes open."

They both were a little startled when a man at a nearby table rustled his newspaper while turning a page. As he held it open in front of him to read his face was hidden and Juliana and Olin both wondered if the man was keeping them under surveillance.

Juliana guessed that Olin had been thinking the same thought as she had been. "He wouldn't have made noise with the newspaper if he was here to spy on us," she assured him.

The waitress came and took their order and then they both sat silently with their own thoughts. As Juliana sat awaiting her tea she glanced over again at the man that was holding up the newspaper that he was reading. Suddenly Juliana became clearly galvanized and shifted in her chair.

Olin asked, "Is something the matter?"

She had an excited expression but said nothing. She stood up and walked around to another chair at the other side of the table and sat down again. Olin couldn't make any sense of it. She was now seated facing the back wall of the tea room when usually she preferred to be facing toward the front of the establishment.

She leaned towards him and said in a very low voice, "Don't react to what I am going to tell you. If the bad guys are watching us with binoculars or a telescope I am sure that it will be someone that can read lips. That's why I am facing away from the window."

Olin remained placid as instructed.

Struggling to hold her voice down Juliana said with restrained intensity, "I think that I know how to discover the secret of Raka's manuscript!"

Olin was stunned and asked, "How?"

Juliana face took on a disapproving expression. "Didn't I just tell you to shut up?" she whispered hoarsely to him.

In an attempt to recover the situation Olin asked, "How do you usually take your tea?"

Juliana instructed him, "When you want to say something lower your head and talk toward the table top so that they can't see your lips."

Olin bowed his head and asked, "What do you think that you know about Raka's illustrated manuscripts?"

Juliana replied, "Crazy Samuel told us what we were missing!"

"Crazy Samuel?" asked Olin.

"Yes, crazy Samuel," she replied. "He told us that it was only half there. And that is the answer!"

"That doesn't sound like an answer," observed Olin, speaking down to the table top.

Juliana instructed Olin, "Look at the man's newspaper. What do you see?"

Olin looked up momentarily and then talked down to the table top again. "The sports page," he answered.

"I mean, in general, what do you see?" she asked.

"A man reading a newspaper," Olin replied. "The sunlight is coming in the window behind him so I can see that there are photos and printing on the side of the page that he is looking at."

"Voila!" exclaimed Juliana.

"I don't get it," admitted Olin. "What do sports photos have to do with anything?"

"Nothing," confirmed Juliana. "But the fact that you can see that they are present on the other side of the page is the key point."

Olin hazarded a guess, "You're telling me that we can't see Raka's code because we are looking at the wrong side of the page in the illustrated manuscript?"

"No," Juliana replied. "It is that I think that we have to look at the pages overlaid on each other. We first make a transparency of each page. Then we overlay each of the pages, one by one, over the first page. I suspect that, for example, when we overlay page sixteen onto page one that we will then see the entire code for those two pages.

Page two would match up with another page, say page eight. And so on. That would be why Samuel, in looking at just single pages said the "it's only half there". Don't you see?"

"Yes, I do!" exclaimed Olin with a broad smile while still talking down toward the table. "That's a brilliant idea, even if it doesn't work. But it just might." He stood up in preparation to leaving the tea room and returning to their laboratory.

Juliana grabbed his coat sleeve and indicated that he should sit down again. "If we don't leisurely finish our tea the bad guys could suspect that we are in a hurry to go somewhere and do something important. We have to appear as discouraged as usual."

In a building across the street from the Jasmine Tea Room a second floor office had been rented by people that were very interested in what Juliana and Olin might be saying and doing. As Juliana had suspected they were using a telescope in an attempt to read the lips of the two as they sat at the tea room table. They also had attempted to employ a sensitive and directional listening device but street traffic and several customer conversations in the tea room had interfered with their attempts to single out the conversation of Juliana and Olin. The fact that Juliana had her back to the device and Olin was talking down into the table had also obscured their words.

The larger of the two middle aged men, the one named Herb, swore because of their poor results of the surveillance. "Damn it! Why did she change her seat? Had she seen us

through the windows? And why is he always facing down when he talks? I think that they know that we are watching them.” Herb mopped his balding head as there was no air conditioning in the office.

The other man, the thin one named Stan, said, “We were back far enough from the window and we have an anti-glare coating on the telescope lens so she shouldn’t have seen any glint off of it. That damn guy rustling his newspaper doesn’t help our audio recording any either. Shirley, did you get anything so far?”

A middle aged red-haired woman named Shirley, replied, “No. When she turned her back I couldn’t get any reading of her lips. And the guy is talking down toward the table, so again there is nothing. I think that they may have guessed that we are watching them and can read their lips.”

Stan wore a concerned expression. “The Group is not going to be happy with us. They surely expect some decent result for the money that they pay us. They could have us killed the way they had us kill the man from the bar that didn’t get a recording of the meeting with Livingston. All he did was not get a recording, and now he’s dead.”

Herb said, “Wait a minute. The woman has paid for her tea and drunk it. Now she is standing up and it looks like she is going to leave.”

In the tea room Juliana had stood up and Olin rose also. As they turned to walk to the front door she said aloud, “I’m going to do some shopping for the rest of the day and then go back to my apartment and just relax. I’m tired of thinking about the manuscript.”

Continuing the ruse Olin said, “I’m heading to my apartment for a cold beer and I’ll just keep trying to figure out what we are missing in our analysis. I’ll meet you at the lab tomorrow morning. Have a good day.”

When Juliana got to her car she unlocked it, got in and then sat thinking a while. She guessed that most certainly they were under surveillance by people with technically sophisticated equipment. She concluded that they almost certainly had cracked the code of her cell phone and were monitoring her conversations. As well as her location, using GPS. She speed dialed a female friend and arranged a meeting to go shopping. She later met her and while they were shopping at the mall Juliana used cash to buy two phones loaded with pre-paid minutes because they did not require her to reveal her identity.

The next morning she met Olin at his laboratory and gave him one of the phones. “Use this kind of phone from here on out,” she advised him. “When the minutes are used up dump the phone and buy a new one. This way they can’t tap our conversations and there’s no GPS that they can use to track our movements. We will leave our regular phones with GPS here in the lab and we can check voice and text mail periodically to keep in touch with our friends.”

Over the next several hours they used the lab equipment and computers to make transparencies of all the pages in Raka’s illustrated manuscript. Then they began the process of overlaying the richly embellished illustrations in the hope of deciphering hidden messages that might have been concealed by Raka.

When they overlaid pages one and twenty-eight Juliana exclaimed, “I see something in Aramaic. I think that it indicates that there was an ironsmith named, Lavi.”

“What about him?” asked Olin.

“I’m not sure,” she replied. “It’s something about three pieces of iron.”

“Well, if he was a blacksmith I would guess that he used iron,” observed Olin. “Why would that be important enough for Raka to put it into code?”

Juliana mused, “Since we are looking for the Instruments of the Passion it is possible that Raka was making reference to the iron spikes that nailed Jesus to the cross.”

“Does he indicate what happened to the spikes, or pieces of iron?” asked Olin.

Juliana exhaled dejectedly. “I think that they were destroyed.”

“How could they be destroyed?” asked Olin. “Did they rust away to nothing but dust?”

Juliana shook her head slightly. "No. I think that he writes that they were hammered into a sword. They were used to make a scimitar."

"Does he reveal where the scimitar is?" asked Olin.

"Petra," replied Juliana.

Olin was puzzled. "Petra? The red city in Jordan? The one that is carved into cliff walls?"

"I believe that is what he's indicating," confirmed Juliana. "But it's vague. It's more like he means near Petra. In the desert."

"In the desert? That isn't much help."

"I agree. Deserts are big places."

Olin joked, "Maybe we can go hunting for it with a big magnet."

Juliana sat back in her chair. "There are probably millions of scimitars in the Middle East. I can't imagine how we would know we had found the right one even if we had it in our hands. Raka doesn't describe it. But he does indicate who Lavi made the blade for. It was made for an Emir. A man named Alakinani."

"What do you suggest," asked Olin.

"I suggest that we go to Jordan," answered Juliana. "The possibility exists that this Emir Alakinani passed the scimitar down through his family line and that they have it. Perhaps we might be able to find his relatives that are alive today. Or maybe the scimitar is in a museum."

Olin agreed. "It's worth a try. I'll make plane and hotel reservations for us using the throwaway phones."

Juliana was deep in thought as she overlaid other pages onto page two. "This is beginning to sound like Raka was insane. When I overlay page two with page thirty-three, additional names can be read. One of them is, Ithykant. The other one is, Shamir."

"Well, that's good, isn't it?" asked Olin. "The more names the better, I would think."

Juliana laughed in exasperation. "The problem is that Ithykant was killed. Raka then writes that Ithykant became Shamir. He seems to be stating that Ithykant was resurrected from the dead, as Shamir."

"A zombie? He's saying that Shamir is a walking talking zombie?" Olin was laughing nervously.

Juliana shook her head. "No. He seems to be stating that Shamir is immortal. With some sort of magical powers. Given to him accidentally by Christ."

Olin suggested, "Maybe you're right and Raka was insane. How could Jesus accidentally give someone immortality?"

Juliana continued deciphering the illustrated manuscript. "Raka indicates that Shamir was prick by a bloody thorn on the crown of thorns that the Romans jammed onto Christ's brow."

Olin laughed nervously. "So what does that mean? That Christ's blood flows in Shamir's veins?"

She replied, "Raka apparently thought so, from what I read here."

Olin said, "I hope that you get to some information that could actually help us."

Juliana continued to evaluate the pages of the illustrated manuscript. She laid out page three and then began placing transparencies of other pages over it. When she got to page forty-five she could then read additional coded illustrations. She said, "Raka indicates that the three crosses of The Crucifixion were sawn into planks and then used to construct Glory Boxes."

Olin asked, "What are glory boxes?"

"Hope Chests," answered Juliana. "They were also known as Dowry Boxes. Girls and young women used them to store their most precious and valuable things. But it appears that means the crosses are lost to history. How could we ever prove that the Glory Boxes really are the wood of the crosses?"

"Analysis of ancient blood stains is now relatively common," Olin informed Juliana. "One of the most well-known experiments was with the Shroud of Turin. The cloth that some people had suggested was the burial shroud of Jesus and that his likeness was imbedded into it."

"I think that you mean that highly technical experiments can be performed to determine if blood over two thousand years old is on or in the wood of the Glory Boxes," concluded Juliana.

"Exactly," responded Olin. "In fact it may be possible to extract usable DNA. If you think about that for a moment, it could lead to the determination of the existence of progeny of Christ, if any."

Juliana said, "I think that there was both a book and a movie on that subject."

"Would you care if Christ had descendants?" Olin asked.

"Not particularly," she replied. "Breeding often counts for nothing. It is unusual that the progeny of great men and women also go on to be great. It could happen that if Jesus had a descendent alive today, it would be a homeless person living in a cardboard box in an alley. Great sons and daughters of great mothers and fathers are very few and far between."

Olin smiled slightly and said, "But very many people search their genealogy records."

Juliana responded, "They hope to find a connection to a "great" ancestor and usually stop searching when they find the horse-thief, rapist or murderer. A woman recently wrote in to Dear Abby and said that having lived a good and decent life she fully expected to go to Heaven when she passed away. The problem was, she wrote, that if her mother and father and other relatives were in Heaven, then she didn't want to go."

Juliana laid out the image of page four and began overlaying the other pages over it. When she used page seventy three she suddenly tensed up. She appeared to Olin to be startled by something that she could now read.

"What do you see?" he asked her.

She answered, somewhat haltingly, "Raka writes that a young girl named Chanina experienced Stigmata at the Crucifixion."

"Her palms bled when Jesus was nailed to the cross?" Olin asked for confirmation.

Juliana's throat was dry as she replied, somewhat hoarsely, "Yes."

"That seems to disturb you," observed Olin. "Is there a problem?"

"No, there is no problem," lied Juliana.

"Well, I thought there was for a moment," said Olin. "What else can you read?"

"Raka indicates that a sect of female ascetics accepted a duty assigned to them by Shamir," she said. "Their assigned duty was to record the blood line of Chanina. The purpose apparently was to keep track of people that experience stigmata. At least that particular blood line of Chanina's descendants."

Olin surmised, "If we believe such a thing as Shamir being immortal then he exists somewhere today. Is there any information on how one might locate him?"

She answered, "Raka indicates that Shamir had a villa on the outskirts of Jerusalem. After we go to Amman, Jordan we should go to Jerusalem."

Chapter 10

When Juliana and Olin arrived in Amman, Jordan they did not have a clue as to how they might proceed to locate any item of the Arma Christi. They were on a blind hunt. After checking into a hotel they visited the souk, the principle market place of the city. All souks in the Middle East are full of the pungent aroma of a multitude of spices and to find a souk one need only follow one's nose.

The scent of shawarma drifted on the light breeze to their nostrils and their appetites immediately spiked. They walked up to the street vendor's stand where he was roasting thin slices of spiced lamb on a vertical spit. In Arabic, Juliana asked for two servings with tabbouleh, the Arab finely chopped and seasoned salad. The vendor shaved thin slices of the roasting meat into a drop tray and then scooped them into pita breads as a cradle for the meat and the tabbouleh. Juliana paid with American dollars and then she and Olin continued walking as they relished their hot delicacies.

In most Arab souks there are an abundance of small shops that sell gold jewelry and the same was true for the Amman souk. Making small talk Juliana said, "Many women of the Middle East wear their wealth in the form of gold necklaces and earrings. That way they get to enjoy displaying it and also assure that if the husband absconds with a new wife, the first wife at least has something of value."

Olin nodded. "I have been noticing that very many of the women are wearing gold jewelry."

Juliana informed him, "The authorities make spot checks of the vendors to assure that the women are not being cheated. For example, to check to see if sixteen karat gold is being offered as eighteen karat gold. It is difficult to tell by eye if it is the one pureness or the other. And vendors sometimes sell an inferior karat item and pocket the difference in price."

Olin being a scientist guessed, "I would expect that the authorities use hardness test kits. The more pure a gold sample is the softer it is, and vice versa."

Juliana said, "You are correct, of course. But can you guess how they punish vendors that attempt to cheat their customers?"

"Jail time, or a fine, I would guess," he answered.

"That would be the American way," she smiled. "What do you imagine the Arab way is?"

"Well, under Sharia Law a thief would get his hand cut off, for a first offense." He shuddered a little bit at the thought of such a thing.

She shook her head negatively. "A person that cheats his customers is by definition, greedy. The way to hurt a greedy person is to cost him money. The authorities force the man, with slashes of thin whips to urge him on, to pile up every item in his store into the street. The Gold Police then drive their vehicles back and forth over the gold jewelry until it is all quite mashed and unsalable. Then they leave.

The vendor still has his goods but he must now have them all melted down and once again worked into jewelry. Also, his women customers are well aware of his cheating because everybody in the souk saw what the authorities did. So the ladies will no longer buy from him even if his jewelry were resurrected. The punishment is actually more effective than an arrest, a thing that the women might not even hear about."

Olin remarked, "That is very interesting information. But let me ask, do you know how Arabs get a recalcitrant camel to do their bidding?"

Juliana remarked, "I wasn't aware that you knew anything about stubborn camels."

Olin continued telling his informative story. "Let us say that a large male camel has lain down and refuses to get up. It is mostly male camels that defy their owners. So anyway, all that a camel owner has to do is to get two fist sized rocks, one in each hand. He then walks around

to the rear of the male camel where the scrotum bulges out when the camel is down. He then spreads his arms wide, and bringing them back together he smashes the camel's balls between the rocks. You may be sure that the camel is instantly upon its legs."

Juliana gasped, "Holy shit! What a horrible thing to do."

Olin went on. "An Englishman once saw an Arab do that and asked, "My God! Doesn't that hurt?" The Arab answered, "Only if I accidently get my fingers caught between the rocks.""

Juliana laughed aloud. "You're a scientist and a standup comic."

"I wasn't telling a joke," Olin assured her.

They continued their sauntering walk through the souk. After some minutes Juliana suggested, "It is possible that the bad guys have their people everywhere. It wouldn't be very difficult for them to discover that we flew to Amman. They could have had people at the airport on the lookout for us."

Olin nodded. "We should always assume that we are being watched. It is the wisest thing to do."

"Juliana said, "Let's go back to the hotel for dinner. I want to try a Zumot wine."

The hotel was within easy walking distance. After refreshing themselves in their rooms they met again in the restaurant.

"I think that we should rent a car and not depend upon taxis," said Juliana. "We might never know who exactly the taxi driver is or who he works for." Olin nodded agreement.

When the waiter came to the table Juliana informed him, "We would like a bottle of Zumot Winery's Saint George Cabernet – Shiraz." As the waiter walked off to get the wine Juliana said, "I will order the rack of lamb when he returns. It just seems right for this part of the world."

Olin said, "I will probably have the same. With that out of the way, I must say we don't seem to be getting any closer to our goal."

"The souk is the place to get a clue, I am sure," stated Juliana. "Somewhere between here and Petra is where Lavi and Emir Alakinani ended up, as best we can determine from Raka's manuscript code. If we discover nothing in the souk after a few days, then I suggest we rent a Land Rover and equipment for an excursion through the desert to Petra." Olin agreed.

They drank their wine and ate their meal in silence, each with private thoughts. Afterward they took the elevator up to their floor.

Olin walked Juliana to her room door and said, "Well, Good Night. I'll see you at breakfast."

She replied, "You will see me sooner than that."

Olin asked, "What do you mean? Do you plan that we should go somewhere this evening?"

Juliana answered as she turned the key and opened the door to her room, "I'm not sure that it would be safe for us to sleep alone."

It took Olin several seconds before he grasped the thought that she was offering an invitation. "Oh," was all he could manage as she grasped his arm lightly and gently tugged him into the room and then closing the door.

"I must warn you of something," she informed him.

"What?" he asked.

"In the odd chance that you might prove recalcitrant, you should be forewarned that I keep two fist sized rocks under my pillow," she said in a low voice as she leaned forward to kiss him. After a few moments she said, "Oh. I sense that you keep a big rock in your trousers."

They moved to opposite sides of the bed and began to undress slowly. As their naked bodies became visible to each other they remained silent. Juliana pulled aside the covers on her side of the bed and lay down. Olin did the same. They moved slowly and smoothly into an embrace. As time passed it became apparent that Juliana would have no need of rocks.

After breakfast the next morning they returned to the souk. They walked the alleys of the market place for more than an hour before they came upon a shop that sold cutlery of all kinds. Hanging from brightly dyed thin ropes were a number of scimitars encased in highly decorated scabbards. The rich artistry of the silver inlays into the leather of the scabbards was quick to catch a person's appreciative eye.

Juliana entered the shop and greeted the owner, "As-Salam- Alaikum."

"Wa-Alaikum-Salaam," spoke the man in return of the greeting.

Juliana looked about the shop for a few moments and then asked, "Do you have any relics of the past? Antique scimitars?"

The man said in English, "I have some that are perhaps a hundred years old. Some are the work of very skilled craftsmen. They are handed down from father to son for generations. But in these hard times finally a son sells it to me or another buyer. I have one that has a pommel of gold as the counter weight to the steel blade. The blade is of hammered hot steel that was first beat into thinness like paper, then folded back and beat again. This was done many times over and the blade becomes intricately layered and almost indestructible. Would you like to see it?"

"Certainly," replied Juliana.

The man pushed aside a beaded curtain and went to the rear of the shop. She could hear the tumbler spin on a large steel safe, and then the creak of the safe door hinges. The man returned with the scimitar and held it out across his palms for her inspection.

She hefted the scimitar in its scabbard and inspected its rich inlay of gold threads that formed a complex geometric design. The leather of the scabbard was in prime condition. She slipped the blade free of the scabbard and it glinted brightly in the sunlight. It was richly engraved in flowing designs of vines and leaves. "What is your asking price?" she requested of the man.

"Eight thousand American dollars," he replied. "It is surely of museum quality."

Juliana carefully returned the blade to the scabbard and handed the scimitar back to the man saying, "I will have to think about that price for a while, even though I know you expect haggling and have raised the price above what you would actually accept." She and Olin left the shop and continued walking.

Juliana said, "It's clear that his scimitars are not old enough to be the one that Raka meant in his manuscript. We are looking for something that is over two thousand years old. Could it actually survive that long without rusting away to nothing but dust?"

"Actually, the oldest known swords and other metal objects date back several thousand years BC," Olin answered. "As long as they are kept dry they seem to last nearly forever. It is the water molecule that brings about rust and corrosion. Iron oxide, which is the true name of rust, is the natural state of iron. We expend vast amounts of energy to convert iron ore, rusty rock if you will, to pure iron by driving out the oxygen and immediately after that water works to recombine the iron with oxygen to reform rust."

They continued walking through the souk as behind them an Arab man entered the scimitar store that they had just departed. He greeted the vendor and held out a hundred Dinar note while asking, "What did the two Americans want?"

"Old scimitars," answered the vendor.

"How old?"

"I suspect they wanted one that was very old," replied the shop keeper.

"Did they say where they were going next?" asked the man.

"No. I probably have the oldest scimitars in Amman so I'm guessing that they will return here," said the vender in a confident tone of voice.

The man added four more hundred Dinar notes to the first and handed them to the man saying, "If they return send a boy with a message to Omar at the coffee shop on Alabad Street.

Juliana and Olin walked through the souk for another hour without incident. But as time passed Olin sensed that Juliana was becoming agitated. "Is something bothering you?" he asked solicitously as they stopped for a moment.

"Yes," she replied. "But I don't know what it is. If we walk in one direction, the feelings increase. As we walk in the opposite direction they decrease. They are similar to feelings of excited expectation. A sort of "butter flies in the stomach" sort of thing."

Olin smiled a little joke, "Are you anticipating a rerun of last night?"

"Shut up," she replied. "This is not a little thing, such as last night." She made her own little joke.

Olin took her comment in stride and asked, "Do you want to walk towards it or away from it?"

"Towards it, you idiot," she answered as she began walking again.

They walked slowly so that Juliana could evaluate her feelings as they went along. They made several turns into other souk lanes and finally she came to a stop.

"Do you feel something," asked Olin.

"Yes, but I have no idea why," replied Juliana. "We are in the section of hardware stores. And kitchen wares. Just general merchandise. There are not any scimitars sold here."

Olin looked about but concluded that Juliana's conclusion was correct.

Juliana turned towards the doorway of a general store. "It's in that store."

"What is in there?" asked Olin.

"Whatever it is that is causing my strange feelings," she answered as she stepped towards the store entrance.

The young store owner was standing behind a counter and recognizing that they were probably American he asked in English, "How may I help you this morning?"

Juliana approached the counter and stood silently in front of it for a few moments. Then she said to the man, "It's you. Why are you giving me such a strange feeling?" Then she held her hands with the palms upward and saw what appeared to be bruises on them.

The man behind the counter was unnerved. Would he be falsely accused of somehow assaulting a female tourist? "I assure you Madam, that I have done nothing to bother you."

Juliana asked him, "Do you have a scimitar?"

The man was startled by the question. He answered, "No. I don't deal in scimitars. There are other stores that do. I can give you directions if you like."

Juliana was in a state of high interest in the man. "What is your name?"

"My name is Ahmed," he answered.

"How long have you had this store?" she asked.

"I came to Amman in 2007 and worked here for several years before I bought the store in 2010," he answered.

Juliana asked, "What did you do before you came to Amman?"

"I was a goat herder," replied Ahmed.

"Where?" she asked.

"To the east," he answered. "Towards Petra. In the desert."

Juliana slapped her hand down onto the counter startling both Ahmed and Olin. "I ask you again! Do you have a scimitar?"

Ahmed stared wide-eyed at the agitated woman. His mouth was dry. He was completely in a state of confusion.

Juliana slapped her hand down hard again onto the counter. "Answer me! Do you have a scimitar?"

It was almost a whisper when he said, "Not here."

Juliana was silent for a few moments as the import of the man's words sunk in. In a more restrained voice she asked, "How did you get it and where is it?"

He answered, "Towards Petra. I found it in the desert. It was buried in the sand. Where I used to herd my goats. I hid it. It is in a deep crevice in some rocks. If no one has found it."

Juliana asked, "Why did you leave it there?"

Ahmed replied, "I am a Muslim. There was something about the scimitar that was not Muslim. At first I thought that I could sell it, as it was a fine scimitar. Very finely engraved. But after a while I felt uncomfortable with it. As if I shouldn't have it. I couldn't throw the beautiful thing away so I decided to hide it."

Juliana asked, "Did someone lose it? Why was it there to be found?"

Ahmed paled at the memory of the day that he discovered the scimitar. "There were many skulls and bones. I think that a large group of men died in a Khamsin, a huge long lasting dust storm. Those storms can blow suffocating dust for days on end. The bones looked very, very old. I think that the men died a very long time ago."

Olin turned toward Juliana and said excitedly, "Juliana, I think that you may have found out what happened to Alakinani!"

Ahmed blurted out, "That was the name!"

Juliana asked him with intensity, "Why do you know that name?"

"It was engraved on the scimitar blade," answered Ahmed. "Emir Alakinani."

Juliana instructed Ahmed, "Close and lock your shop door. We will pay you for any sales that you miss."

Ahmed was apprehensive. Did they plan to get him alone and hurt him?

Juliana sensed his anxiety. "Ahmed, we will not harm you. We will pay you a great amount of money if you take us to where you hid the scimitar. I want us to leave with you by your back door as I suspect that some people are following us."

Ahmed finally concluded that they did not mean to do him any harm. He locked the front door of the shop and ushered them through his back room and out the rear exit to his car.

Some minutes later the Arab man named Omar sauntered past the front of the store, sneaking a glance inside as he passed by. He stopped a short distance further along and pondered why he had not seen anyone in the store. Were they all in the backroom? He turned and walked back to the front door and tried to open it, but it was locked. In a panic he looked about for an alley that would let him get to the rear of the shop. Finding it, he ran down and arrived at the cross alley at the rear of the store. There was no one and no car at the back of Ahmed's shop. The man paled. "Praise Allah! Please save me! They will kill me for losing track of the Americans!" He was correct.

Chapter 11

The hired murderer, Herb used an encrypted phone service and dialed a number from memory. Curtis Ames answered with a simple, "Speak." Herb said, "We had to eliminate Omar in Amman. He lost track of the targets in the souk and he became so nervous that he became a possible security problem."

Ames responded, "I don't give a damn about some minion. But I do give a damn that you lost the targets. You lost them, do you hear me? It is your full responsibility to recover the situation. Believe me when I say that your lives depend upon that."

Herb's voice quavered slightly. "Yes sir. I understand. We will find the targets. We managed to implant a GPS devices into both the man's and the woman's clothes at the hotel while they were out in the souk. We know that they are moving south into the desert."

Ames cut off his connection and looked about at the other three men that were in the mahogany paneled boardroom with him. All four were multimillionaires and chief executives of major firms. He told them, "There has been a small glitch, but it seems that the situation will be recovered."

One of the men asked, "Any word regarding the Arma Christi?"

Ames shook his head. "No, but Engton and Colner are the best bet to find them if the objects still exist."

The third man sipped a drink and said, "Those items could solidify our control of the masses. I have dreams of how we will be able to manipulate billions of them, because with those revered objects we would be the next thing to Jesus Christ. There would be God, then Jesus, and then us. We could push the Pope aside. People would ask why if he is so holy, God did not see fit to have him possess the Instruments of the Passion?"

The fourth man said, "And just think of the money. Someone paid \$28,000 for a partially eaten cheese sandwich that had an image of the Virgin Mary. When we ask for donations to build a cathedral to house and protect the Arma Christi we will end up with more than half the wealth of the free world, I am sure."

Ames relished his visions of things to come. "Once we have taken control here in the United States we will be able to create an Invincible Holy Army. We will then sweep through the Middle East like a swarm of locust, devastating everything in our path. Then we will move on to conquer all of Asia. Finally the world will have a single religion and it will be whatever we say that it is to be! We are four atheists and we will end up defining the world's religion!"

The third man cautioned them. "We must remember the fate of the American Liberty League during the 1930's. They had the plan, wealth and influence that would allow them to seize control of the United States Government. To eliminate the high rate of unemployment all idle men were to be placed into military barracks and then be used for forced labor. The plan was to follow the successful methods of Benito Mussolini. If only those giants of industry that attempted that glorious goal had succeeded!

It was a good plan but they were betrayed by General Smedley D. Butler who revealed all of their plans to the United States Congress. We must be very careful of who becomes aware of our plans."

The second man said, "Elected politicians will be the ruination of America. It seems that those traits that allow a man to run a successful election campaign are the same traits that leave him ill equipped to govern. And to think that their election is left in the hands of the ignorant and malleable masses is nauseating. It is the year 2012 and just look at the mess America is in after being given centuries to get it right. We must take matters into the hands of the giants such as ourselves."

In the meantime Juliana and Olin were travelling south from Amman with Ahmed in his Land Rover. After a drive of about twenty miles their first stop was at Madaba, where Ahmed had relatives.

Juliana spoke to Ahmed regarding his family. "Is there one man that you trust absolutely completely?"

Ahmed laughed slightly, "Out of a hundred, yes perhaps there is one. My cousin Jabbar is very trust worthy. Do you have a task for him?"

She answered, "Yes. But first take us to a store where we can buy all new clothes. Complete outfits, from the shoe soles upwards."

Olin laughed, "Just like a woman. Shopping first then everything else later."

Juliana said, "I'm sure that somewhere on us is a GPS device. But I don't want to destroy it. After we get brand new outfits, including all of our under garments, we will hand our present clothing and suitcases over to Jabbar. We will pay him to drive the articles to Bayir, which is some distance to the south east. It should take him about as long to get to Bayir as it will take us to get to the region of Petra. With any luck anybody that is trailing us will end up in Bayir."

Five miles north of Madaba was a vehicle being driven by Herb. His cohort, Stan was busily monitoring a GPS tracking device. Stan said, "They have stopped. From the map I would say that they are in Madaba. They might be gassing up or getting food. I think we should stop and wait to see if they remain in Madaba or if they move on after a while. If we go into the town they might spot us."

Herb pulled the vehicle over to the side of the road and stopped. "OK. We'll wait for an hour or so to see what they do next."

After a few minutes Stan reported, "They are driving around in Madaba but they are not leaving town. Maybe the items are in Madaba and they are getting them. Maybe we should drive into the town."

Shirley said, "Don't be an ass. If they get the items then they will most likely leave that small town in order to take them somewhere else. Probably back to Amman. We will just trail them wherever they go. I'm still trying to figure out what that shop keeper has to do with all this. Our contacts in Amman said that he was just a dumb ass goat herder that bought a dumb ass little shop a few years back. They could not discover any link from him to the Arma Christie. Or to Engton or Colner."

In Madaba over an hour later, Juliana and Olin finished procuring and donning new outfits. Juliana had selected loose fitting cargo pants with an elastic waist band that were comfortable for the long hours of driving ahead of them.

Ahmed's cousin Jabbar came to meet them. He was quite tall for a middle easterner and had thick black hair. His facial skin was quite smooth for a thirty-five year-old man and he took pride in shaving it closely each day with a straight edge razor, never nicking himself.

Juliana had noticed during their shopping that a number of men had been eyeing her with such attention that she felt comfortable. To Jabbar she said, "There is a special item of lingerie that I need to purchase and I hope that you know of a shop that carries such a thing." She discreetly whispered her request to Jabbar and he smiled slightly and knowingly, saying, "You would be surprised how often young ladies of the city procure such a thing." Within a half hour she and Jabbar returned from the side shopping trip to the waiting Olin and Ahmed.

After they had given all of their previous clothes and luggage to Jabbar she gave the man instructions. "Jabbar, wait about fifteen minutes after we leave and then start driving towards Bayir. Now, I need you to understand something. This is very important. If certain people catch you with our clothes they will not hesitate for a moment to torture you to get information about us and Ahmed. Then they will kill you. Believe me, they will kill you. So when you get to Bayir be sure to just throw the clothes out of your car and onto the side of the road.

Don't let anybody see you do that because then they could describe you to some very dangerous people." Jabbar indicated that he understood the instructions and Juliana's impression was that the man was quite capable of taking care of himself.

Juliana, Olin and Ahmed then started out on their drive to the south west and the town of Karak. Jabbar would be taking the road to the south east and the town of Bayir.

Fifteen minutes later in the vehicle to their north, Stan said, "They are on the move. But we'll have to wait a while to see if they take a road out of town." After another five minutes he said, "It's the road to the south east. On the map it shows a road through a lot of desert and finally to the town of Bayir. We had better gas up in Madaba if we have to make it to Bayir because it's over a hundred miles."

In Ahmed's vehicle Juliana kept rubbing her palms. Beside her on the back seat Olin asked solicitously, "Is it the stigmata?"

"Yes," she replied. "Whenever I get close to Ahmed I feel an irritation. It's not bad, just a sort of strange feeling."

After some moments of thought Olin asked, "Is 'C' your middle initial?"

"Yes," she replied.

Olin then asked, "Is 'Chanina' your middle name?"

She again replied, "Yes".

He asked, "Are you a descendent of the Chanina that is noted by Raka in his coded illustrations?"

Juliana said, "I am going to guess that I am. I am an only daughter. My mother was an only daughter. My grandmother was an only daughter. As far back as we can trace our ancestry, there were women that were their parents' only daughter. And every one of them had Chanina as a middle name. We never knew why. It just seemed somehow traditional. But now I see a deeper reason for it. We were all descended from the Chanina that saw the Crucifixion of Christ and who met Shamir."

Olin asked, "What about the appearance of stigmata when you get near Ahmed?"

She answered, "I'm going to guess it's because he has touched the scimitar and that it does contain the iron of the spikes that nailed Jesus to the cross."

Ahmed stiffened in surprise and glanced at them in the rear view mirror. "I touched what?" he asked in astonishment.

Olin sucked in a deep breath. "So maybe the Instruments of the Passion do exist after all."

Juliana glanced at him and asked, "Did you think that we were on a wild goose chase?"

Olin shook his head. "As a scientist I am aware that as long as iron and wood are kept absolutely dry that they can last for thousands of years. I just thought that it was a very long shot that someone had managed to do that."

Ahmed said over his shoulder to them in the back seat, "The scimitar was buried in the dry sand. When I dug it out it appeared to be in excellent condition. I put it into a rock crevice that seemed as if it would be a very dry place."

At the same time that Juliana, Olin and Ahmed were approaching the town of Karak, Herb, Stan and Shirley were about halfway to Bayir. Stan had been concentrating on the GPS system and he suddenly called out, "Hey! For some reason we have just passed the target. It is off to our left someplace." Glancing out the window he said, "Out there in the desert someplace."

Shirley said to Herb, "Turn around and we'll check to see if there are any tire tracks leaving the road and going into the desert."

Herb made a U-turn and drove slowly back up the road the way that they had come. There was no other traffic so he proceeded in first gear.

After back tracking for a half mile, Shirley exclaimed, "There. There are tracks going into the desert. Just a single vehicle."

Herb turned off the road as Stan and Shirley drew out their hand guns. In the distance there were only rolling low-lying sand dunes, skimpy cactus plants and some rocky outcrops. They proceeded slowly and cautiously. About ten minutes later they spied Jabbar's stationary vehicle. There wasn't anybody in it or in sight. Herb stopped their Land Rover and opened his door as he reached for his hand gun. The three of them then exited the vehicle and began to slowly approach Jabbar's vehicle.

The air thundered with automatic rifle gunfire as bullets hit the sand near their feet. They cowered down and fired off several random shots in the direction of the source of the gunfire but they knew that they were overwhelmingly outgunned and had no place to take cover.

The firing stopped and Jabbar called out to them. "Drop your guns or we will kill you!" Shirley, Stan and Herb concluded that they had no other choice so they tossed their weapons into the sand.

Jabbar and another man arose from the shelter of some large rocks and walked towards them. Jabbar instructed them. "Sit down in front of your Land Rover's front bumper." When the three defenseless people did so the younger and slightly built man with Jabbar produced three sets of handcuffs and proceeded to manacle each of them to the bumper. When they were securely restrained Jabbar lowered his assault rifle and smiled slightly. "My friend, Jamal is a police officer and the police have many pairs of handcuffs. They won't miss these. Now. It is question and answer time." Addressing Herb, he asked, "Who do you work for?"

Herb responded defiantly, "Go to hell."

Shooting from his hip, Jabbar fired off a single round and the slug split Herb's left shin bone into two pieces. Herb screamed in agony as a result of the wound. Jabbar swung the muzzle of the gun in Shirley's direction and she said immediately, "Curtis Ames."

"And who is Curtis Ames?" asked Jabbar in a pleasant tone of voice.

"He is a billionaire," answered Shirley.

"And what is Curtis Ames paying you to do?" asked Jabbar.

Shirley revealed, "He thinks that Engton and Colner might find the Arma Christi, the cross and other things used at the crucifixion of Christ. He wants those things for himself and is paying us to follow them."

Jabbar asked, "What has that to do with my cousin Ahmed?"

Shirley replied, "We honestly don't know. We can only guess that somehow he is going to help them find the objects."

Jabbar snorted a short sardonic laugh and said, "A Muslim on a hunt for Christian things. There is something new every day."

Stan asked nervously, "What are you going to do with us?"

Jabbar said, "You are free to go."

Stan was relieved, "Great. Get the handcuffs off of us."

Jabbar said, "You misunderstand. You are free to go just as you are. My friend has a good supply of handcuffs, but he has no supply of keys. All that you have to do is push your Land Rover back to the road. Then surely someone will stop and help you."

Shirley paled. "The main road is miles back there. And we can't steer the Rover. It could take us days." Herb was groaning in his misery.

Jabbar suggested, "Pull the Rover around in a half circle and then pull it back to the road. You should hurry as you could die of thirst out here. The sooner that you start the sooner you will get to the road."

Shirley slumped dejectedly. "Our chances are one in a million."

Jabbar said, "You are being overly optimistic. But hurry never-the-less." He pointed skyward where vultures were already circling. "Those vultures can be very aggressive and sometimes don't wait for their meal to die before tearing at the flesh. Especially at the soft and juicy eyes."

Jabbar and Jamal walked back to their vehicle. They threw out all of Juliana's and Olin's clothing and luggage onto the sand. They started the vehicle and pulled it around near the three unfortunates. Jabbar spoke from his open window. "If you ask politely I will shoot you now. That could save you a lot of grief." There was no response from Shirley or Stan. Jabbar said further, "There is, as you know, a GPS device somewhere in that pile of clothes and luggage. If you have friends that are also tracking its signal then they will end up here. The only question is when." The armed men then drove off.

Shirley and Stan pulled against their handcuffs to see if the Land Rover would move. Stan cursed, "Herb left the damn thing in gear when he turned off the ignition! We'll never be able to pull it back to the road."

About five minutes later the first vulture landed and eyed two men and the woman hungrily and aggressively. Then a second landed. And then a third. Within minutes eighteen vultures were making aggressive test advances toward the three handcuffed people. Herb was losing consciousness and the vultures sensed his distress.

Stan moaned anxiously, "We ain't dead so what are all these vultures doing here?"

Shirley answered, "They smell Herb's blood and they think that a carcass has been ripped open. They all want to get their share before the meat is gone."

One of the large birds advanced to Herb's bloody leg and nipped at it with its large and sharp beak. Herb moaned in pain. But the bird was not repulsed by the sound and nipped at the wound again. That encouraged the remaining vultures and they moved closer to the wounded man, squabbling noisily for position.

Chapter 12

When Ahmed, Juliana and Olin arrived in Karak, Ahmed pointed to an ancient castle upon a hill. He then told them a tale. "The castle was built by the Crusaders beginning in 1142. In the year 1183, Humphrey IV of Toron and Isabella of Jerusalem were married and ensconced in the castle when Saladin prepared to attack with siege engines and catapults. Out of chivalry Saladin ordered his forces not to bombard the wedding chambers, but to only assault other portions of the castle. His siege was unsuccessful.

A strange coincidence is that Saladin and Saddam Hussein were both born in Tikrit, Iraq. I'm not sure that it's possible to show any other commonality between the two of them."

Juliana asked, "What is our next stop?"

"Tafila," answered Ahmed. "And then we will turn east into the desert to the region where I used to herd my goats."

She asked, "Do you feel sure that you will be able to find your way back to the place where the scimitar is hidden?"

I am quite certain of it," he assured her. "It is my homeland. I walked through that part of the desert for years with my goats."

Olin said, "I'm hungry. Let's find a restaurant."

"There are several very good restaurants in Karak," said Ahmed. And fifteen minutes later they were seated in one of them.

While eating Olin remarked, "You know, there are at least seven locations where one or more of the nails of the Crucifixion are currently purported to be located. If we recover the scimitar then there will be eight."

Juliana said, "Well, some people think that three nails were used and some think that four nails were used. But I don't think anyone believes that eight were employed."

At the same moment the large stern fishing trawler TRITON arrived at its destination of latitude N 48° 55' 21" and longitude W 7° 1' 53" in the Atlantic Ocean off the western European coast. Captain Hauptstad turned to the young Arab man who was standing in the wheelhouse and said, "Confirm to them that we have arrived and that the "Dove" is secure."

The young man used a satellite link and a cell phone to contact his land based counterpart. He spoke in an obscure desert dialect that only his fellow villager at the other end of the communications link would understand. Even then he used code words. "We are on the mountain top. The dove rests on a branch. Confirm that an apple should drop from the tree."

There was a pause of tens of seconds at the other end of the line before there was a response. "It is a fine day in Paris for a walk."

The young man said to Captain Hauptstad, "We have approval."

The captain gave orders to his chief engineer, Guido who was in the wheelhouse awaiting instructions. "Prepare the Dove. In the meantime I will steer a course that a fishing trawler would normally cover in these waters. That way we will not raise any suspicions at coastal radar stations. When you are ready to launch the Dove I will order all engines stopped for ten minutes. So be fully prepared and don't make any mistakes. You will have only ten minutes. Then we will depart the area so that no one focuses upon it."

Guido nodded and exited the wheelhouse. He walked towards the stern of the trawler where a team of six men awaited him. He used the ship's non-broadcasting telephone system to contact the radar operator. "Are there any ships or aircraft in the area?"

The response was, "Nothing within twenty miles, and none heading in our direction."

Guido turned to the crew leader and instructed him, "George, have the men uncover the Dove."

A large object rested beneath a covering canvas tarp. George supervised his men, using several languages, to use mechanical hoists to raise the heavy canvas. The tarp was raised in a spread out mode, shielding the object beneath it from satellite view. The object that was revealed to the men on the deck was a remote-controlled submersible vessel. Guido approached a deck mounted control console and initiated an automated checkout of the vessel. The tests required several minutes because of the technical complexity of the submersible. Finally the tests were completed and the vessel was ready for launch.

Guido telephoned to the captain. "We are ready. Bring the ship to a full stop."

The engine vibrations that had been felt by the men standing on the deck ceased and the ship slowed to a stop in the calm seas.

Guido instructed George. "Have the men hoist the Dove with the cover above it and then lower it off the stern. It will have no buoyancy so it will sink into the water as they lower it. When it is fully submerged wait for my command to release the hoist clamps and allow it to sink into the depths."

George again used several languages to instruct his crew. The Dove was slowly hoisted, still covered by the large canvas tarp, and very carefully swung out past the stern bulkhead of the trawler. George took control of the hoist mechanism and slowly lowered the vessel into the calm seawater. Then he awaited the command to release the hoist clamps by electrical control.

Guido used the ship's telephone system to communicate with Captain Hauptstad. "The Dove is ready for release after completing all tests satisfactorily."

Hauptstad turned to the young Arab man and said, "Inform them that all checks are complete and that it is ready for launch."

The young man said into the cell phone, "The recipe was followed exactly and the fried fish are ready for eating."

The voice at the other end said only, "Wait." The Arab said to Hauptstad, "They said we should wait."

Hauptstad said to no one in particular, "I hope they hurry because that thing makes me nervous."

Finally the Arab man said, "They agree."

Captain Hauptstad told Guido, "Launch the Dove." He then hung up the telephone. To his helmsman he said, "Ian, duly record the latitude and longitude."

At the stern Guido instructed George, "Release the hoist clamps."

George pressed a control button and the hoist separated from the Dove. It slowly slipped beneath the surface as Guido monitored a depth gauge on the control console. When the submersible sank past the thousand foot mark he telephoned the captain and said, "We are clear of the dove and you may proceed." The ship's engines restarted and the men felt the vibrations through the deck plates as the trawler moved off from the drop point.

In the Karak restaurant Juliana, Olin and Ahmed were enjoying a roast lamb dinner. Ahmed said, "We will drive south from here to Tafila. About fifteen miles south of Tafila we will turn east into the desert. We will then travel cross-country for about ten miles and then we will be where I hid the scimitar."

Olin asked, "Are you sure that you can still find your way to the rocks where you hid it?"

Ahmed smiled. "To an Arab a desert has as many landmarks as a big city does to people like you. You would not get lost in your hometown and I will not get lost in my desert."

About twenty minutes later they were on the road toward Tafila. As they drove along the monotonous landscape caused both Juliana and Olin to become drowsy. Juliana was riding in the passenger front seat and squinting through drooping eyelids she saw a person standing beside the road some distance ahead of them. She asked Ahmed, "What would a monk be doing standing by the road in the middle of nowhere?"

Ahmed scanned the road ahead and then asked, "What are you talking about? I don't see anyone."

Juliana sat up straighter in her seat and peered ahead but she no longer saw the man. "There was a bearded man in gray colored robes. They were the robes of a monk. He appeared elderly. I swear that I saw him but I don't know where he went to."

Ahmed laughed a little. "In the desert there are mirages. Often people think that they see water. An oasis. Sometimes they think that they see entire cities. Perhaps you have seen a mirage."

Olin said from the back seat, "Layers of air at different temperatures can bend light rays over the horizon. Sometimes people actually do see a city that they could not normally yet see at that distance. They are seeing over the horizon. Over the curvature of the earth. Perhaps you saw a man that is beyond the horizon."

Juliana shook her head. "No. He was perfectly clear to me. And the very strange thing is that I felt as if I knew who he was, like an old friend. But I don't know any monks."

They drove on in silence until they arrived at Tafila. Ahmed said, "On the other side of this city we will turn east into the desert." After they had passed through the city Ahmed kept studying the terrain to their left, as if looking for a familiar landmark. About fifteen miles south of Tafila he slowed the vehicle and turned left into the unmarked desert.

Juliana asked him, "Does it seem familiar to you?"

"Yes," he responded. "We must drive some miles more." They bumped along in silence for the better part of an hour until finally Ahmed stopped the vehicle in a barren sandy expanse. There seemed not to be any landmark of note. He turned off the ignition and said, "Get out of the car and kick the sand. When I was here last there was a sand dune nearby. But over the years entire sand dunes can be moved by the wind. But not usually things that are close to the ground."

The three of them stepped out onto the hot sand and following Ahmed's lead they began to kick about in the sand. Olin was the first to strike a hard object. He knelt down and began to clear sand off of it as Juliana and Ahmed stepped over to watch. When they saw the first square inch of the white object they all knew that it was the top of a human skull. Olin kept digging until he could free it entirely from the hot sand. Speaking to no one in particular he asked, "Is it really possible that I am holding a two thousand year old skull?"

Juliana and Ahmed helped Olin dig further down into the sand that now became cooler to the touch as the excavation deepened. A foot and a half further down they encountered an iron object. Once they had it out and could examine it, Olin declared, "It is the forge tongs of a blacksmith. We have found Lavi."

Juliana sat down onto the sand and marveled at the discovery. "Some years ago two Italian archeologists in Egypt reported that they had found the remains of Cambyses' Persian Army in the desert. There were human bones and silver and bronze objects that are believed to date to 500BC. So yes, we may have found a two thousand year old blacksmith."

Ahmed laughed from some embarrassment. "I remember how scared I was when I found a skull and it got stuck on my finger. My goats had to calm me down."

When Juliana looked up she stiffened in surprise. About twenty feet away was the figure of a monk dressed in slate gray robes. She stood up, and not sensing any danger she approached the elderly man. "Good day," she said.

"Good day to you, Chanina," he said in a soft toned voice.

She asked, "Why are you here?"

He answered, "Two thousand years ago Shamir placed an obligation upon my sect. We were to assure the safety of Chanina and any of her descendants."

"Am I in danger now?" she asked.

He answered, "I believe that is so. You drew attention in Tafila while at the restaurant. All of your clothes, and those of Olin, are brand new. It is possible that a man is following your tracks in the sand in the hopes that you are well-to-do tourists that he can rob. If he gets his chance he would most probably kill Ahmed and Olin before he rapes and kills you. I can't do anything more to help you as I cannot physically assault him"

Juliana smiled, "You have done enough and I thank you."

The monk turned around and walked back into the desert. Juliana turned to look at Olin and he said, "We heard."

She said, "Let's get a move on to where the scimitar is hidden. Perhaps we can simply outrun the bad guy."

They got into Ahmed's Land Rover and he started driving further into the desert from memory. Minutes later Ahmed drew their attention to an outcropping of rocks. "There. Over there. I put the scimitar in a crevice among those rocks." He drove as close as he could to the base of the rock formation and then stopped. The three of them got out and began climbing upwards, Ahmed taking the lead. Finally Ahmed stopped and studied the nooks and crevices of the huge stone conglomeration. "I see the crevice," he informed them. As he approached it he stooped down and picked up several stones. At the entrance of the crevice he took aim and threw a stone into the opening. Then another. And another. "There are very venomous snakes in this region and sometimes they get into such openings in rocks as this one." About ten seconds later a large dark colored snake slithered out of the crevice opening as Ahmed jumped backwards. "It is a Palestine viper! Don't get in its way as they will strike at the slightest threat." The three people waited as the reptile slithered off to their right and then disappeared between some smaller boulders.

The sound of an approaching vehicle startled them. When they turned to look they saw a pickup truck stop near Ahmed's. A large swarthy man got out and they could clearly see that he was holding a revolver in his right hand. The man started climbing up to their location. When he neared them he said, "I suspect that you are looking for something up here. What is it?"

Juliana answered immediately, much to the surprise of Olin and Ahmed. "There is a scimitar in that crevice. It is probably valuable. You can have it if you let us go."

The man laughed. "I'll decide if you can go." Aiming his pistol at Ahmed he commanded, "Reach in and get it. Just in case there are some fangs in there."

Ahmed moved to the crevice opening, reached in and then withdrew the scimitar. The man took it from him. As he did so he holstered his gun in order to wield the blade with both hands.

Juliana said, with some distress in her voice, "I think I ate something bad in that restaurant. I have stomach pains." She slipped her hands down inside the front of her elastic banded and loose fitting cargo pants in order to massage her tummy.

The man paid no attention to her plight as he smiled evilly at Olin and said, "Now Infidel, you will feel the steel of a Muslim blade upon your neck!" He took a wide legged stance and then swung the scimitar out to the right, as Alakinani had done two thousand years before, and then swept it back towards Olin's neck. Olin moved backwards but found himself up against a large boulder as the keen blade approached his neck. To Juliana's perception everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. The blade was nearing Olin's vulnerable throat when, as it had two thousand years before, it swept up and over the target without causing him a scratch.

The vicious man had no idea as to what had occurred but he was not through attempting to kill Olin. With a widespread legs stance, he gripped the scimitar hilt with both hands and raised the blade high above his head in preparation to slicing it downward onto Olin. He revealed his gruesome intention when he said, "Infidel, I'm going to cut you into two pieces, from the top of your head down to your balls!"

Juliana pulled her hands back out of her pants and in her right hand was a two shot derringer .32 caliber pistol that had been in her special lingerie ;a leg garter holster. She aimed it at the man's head and her finger tensed on the trigger. She had never shot a person before and her stomach churned at the thought of doing such a thing, but it was to be him or them.

Due to a fighting reflex Olin stepped toward the man and swung his right leg up viciously to hammer his foot against the man's scrotum. The pain of it was so severe and sudden that the man choked on his scream, as he released the scimitar and cupped both hands on his crotch. Olin reached around and removed the immobilized man's revolver from its holster. His assailant sank to his knees in agony. Juliana was stunned by the sight and eased up on the trigger slightly

Ahmed quickly picked up the scimitar and started down towards his car. Olin and Juliana followed him down. When they stood near the man's truck Olin used the revolver to fire a bullet into the left front tire. They then climbed into Ahmed's vehicle and drove off in the direction that they had come from.

All three were breathing deeply and rapidly due to the emotional stress of the past few minutes. Finally Olin said to Juliana, "I never expected that you would have a pistol in your panties. I hate to think of what would have happened to you if one of these bumps in the dirt had set it off. But I must say that you showed great bravery when you aimed that gun at the arsehole's head."

Juliana said, "Very often necessity is mistaken for courage. If you hadn't kicked him I would have had to kill him."

Olin smiled slightly, "Well, I thank you for your good intentions."

Juliana said, "My palms are bleeding a lot because the scimitar is in here with us."

Olin smiled and said, "I'm sorry that you are uncomfortable but we seem to be making great progress. Our next problem is how to locate Shamir and the crosses, if they still exist.

Juliana said, "I know exactly how to find Shamir."

Chapter 13

At a CIA electronic transmission listening station in a rugged mountainous region of the Middle East an interpreter reported to her supervisor. "When one thing is odd about a transmission, then that is just an odd thing. But when two things are odd, they I think that we should look into it further."

"What was the transmission in regard to?" asked the supervisor.

She answered, "We don't have the slightest idea. We only know with certainty the location of the origin, which was latitude N 48° 55' 21" and longitude W 7° 1' 53". That puts it out in the Atlantic Ocean south of England and west of the European coast."

Her supervisor asked, "Why don't you know the content of the transmission?"

She replied, "It was in a dialect that we could not translate. Most probably it was a dialect peculiar to a single isolated village out there in the remote desert. That would not be so odd. During the Second World War Navajo soldiers passed messages in a dialect that only they could translate. So it could be a play on that."

The supervisor said, "That would be the first odd thing. What was the second odd thing?"

She answered, "It wasn't a running conversation like two guys yapping about this and that. There were a number of lengthily pauses, as if one side was waiting for an answer to something and the other side had to get the answer somewhere."

The supervisor asked, "What do the satellite images of the location of origin show?"

She responded, "The fishing trawler Triton dead in the water. Can't catch much fish that way. And there was a large covering canvas at the stern. No way to tell what it might have concealed."

"And when the Triton reached port?"

She said, "They had a normal load of caught fish. And the large canvas was not in sight."

The supervisor sighed and said, "Maybe you're just seeing the Devil on the wall."

"Begging your pardon," said the translator, "but what the hell does that mean anyway?"

The supervisor answers her question. "The old tale is that a woman in an isolated village is walking alongside of a stone wall. Suddenly a dark shadow moves across the surface of the wall. The woman looks about but there is nothing nearby that could have caused the shadow. A superstition is that while the Devil is invisible, he still casts a shadow. So the woman believes that she has seen the devil's shadow on the wall."

The translator waited a few moments for the supervisor to continue and finally asks, "So what in hell caused the shadow?"

The supervisor explained, "A bird flew overhead and cast a fleeting shadow on the wall. She hadn't looked up, she had only looked around. The morale here is that maybe there is nothing really suspicious regarding the Triton."

At that moment a timer in the submersible, that the trawler Triton had deployed, released a small flotation device that trailed a sensing wire as it rose toward the ocean surface due to buoyancy. When it reached air it floated on the water, rising and falling on the modest sized waves.

Seventeen-hundred and fifty miles away a country's president was meeting with his government ministers in a magnificent palace. The participants were seated around a huge mahogany conference table and their mood was strained by disagreements.

The telephone beside President Malium beeped and he picked it up and listened for several seconds to the person at the other end of the connection. Ending the telephone connection he announced, "The Dove's antenna has arisen. Contact has been established with the Dove by our satellite. It is functioning perfectly." Several of the meeting participants smiled broadly but a few wore dour expressions.

One of the ministers spoke in a worried voice. "If we activate the Dove it could bring the wrath of many nations down upon our heads. We should not so quickly forget the fate of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden."

The president slapped the palm of his right hand down hard onto the table startling the other men. "They won't dare. We will make them believe that there is more than a single Dove and that if they attack us then we will use them like the first one. Remember, they knew that Saddam didn't have weapons of mass destruction. They would never have taken the chance of his using them on the advancing American troops. And bin Laden only had a terrorist method that he could employ just once. After that America was on high alert for such things."

Another minister changed the direction of the conversation. "We must not discount Curtis Ames and his group. Religion is the most powerful weapon. If he manages to acquire the Arma Christie he could build a religious following that we would have great difficulty in overcoming."

The president's voice increased in angry volume. "Then we must make sure that Ames does not get his hands on the Arma Christie, if they do still exist. We must build a new religion as soon as we use the Dove. We must suppress the Christians, the Muslims, the Jews, the Hindus, and all the others. They all must be made to worship our God and no other, upon pain of death!"

He cast his glance at the Minister of Religion and said, "Remember my instructions! There must never be the equivalent of a Bible or a Koran. The source of all religious tenets must be us. We alone will decide all religious questions. We don't want anybody interpreting the writings in a document."

The minister nodded agreement saying, "And beyond that we must destroy their principle places of worship. Their churches, synagogues, temples and mosques must be razed to the ground. Certain places must be sealed off from the world. The Vatican, Mecca, the Wailing wall and other places."

The president smiled. "Yes, and we must have a list of the heretics. I would suggest that they be burned at the stake. We will have our national television stations broadcast heretic eliminations on a daily basis. We remember that the common people of Rome adored Nero's circus in the coliseum. We will mesmerize our people the same way that Nero did his."

The diminutive Minister of Education was becoming aroused by the mental images that flooded his mind. "I offer the advice that we should have some variety during the elimination of the heretics. Some might be whipped until they expire. That is an ages old religiously acceptable method of dealing with heretics, warlocks and witches."

The Minister of War added his thoughts. "Mister President, we must have them swear an oath of allegiance to you. Along the same lines as when Hitler had his armies swear an oath to him as their supreme leader. They found that even if they grew to detest Hitler personally, they could not break their oath to him. That is a truly strange human phenomena but one that has great value.

And we must have a cleansing list. There are some that will not swear such an oath and they must be eliminated before the others are required to swear it. There must not be any dissenters to set a bad example. We remember that Hitler had his "Nacht der langen Messer", the "Night of the long knives." He did not hesitate to clear the field of dissenters in one clean sweep.

And we should show the devout making the oath of allegiance to you with the whippings and other remedies for heretics taking place in the background. The message would be very clear. Taking the oath would save a person from the pains of elimination."

The president sat back in his chair and surveyed the cabinet members. "We need ideas and methods of creating an army that cannot be beaten. We need every man in the country enlisted in that army. I propose that when a man and woman are seen together in public that the authorities can stop and question them with the purpose being to ascertain if the man is enlisted

in the army. If he is not, then the woman should be arrested, given ten lashes and imprisoned for three days.”

The Minister of Education had a look of confusion. “Mr. President, didn’t you mean that the man should be lashed and imprisoned?”

The president sneered, “Your question answers the question of why I am the president and you are only a minister. We must always be able to say that our army consists of only volunteers. My method will make sure that the women get the men to sign up for service.”

The Minister of War said, “It follows then that we must take for our own the wealth of other nations. That is the only way to pay the armed forces that will not be working at production or farming. So, once we use the Dove we must extract tribute from other nations, using the threat of the use of additional Doves.”

The Minister of Technology asked, “How can we be so confident that the other nations won’t simply annihilate us with nuclear weapons in order to prevent us from using more Doves?”

President Malium responded, “We will make them believe that the control of the Doves is outside of our nation. So if they attempted to destroy our country it would not save them from destruction also.

Now all of you must get back to work. I am eager to set all of our plans into motion by using the Dove. I can just imagine the worldwide consternation when I trigger it!”

President Malium retired to his private quarters and as was usual when Shamir appeared it did not alarm the person being visited. Malium simply asked, “Who are you?”

“I am Shamir of Jerusalem.”

“Jerusalem? It is good for you that you are from there because I intend to destroy that place.”

“Why?” asked Shamir.

“Because I must erase all current religions and put into place the religion of Malium,” replied the president.

“And just what is the religion of Malium?” asked Shamir.

Malium snorted confidently, “It is whatever I say that it is.”

Shamir stated, “I believe that you plan to detonate a nuclear bomb off the west coast of Europe, south of England.”

Malium smiled broadly. “Yes! It will trigger a huge tsunami. With any luck perhaps a million people will perish. Who else in history will have taken such a toll in one fell swoop?”

“You would apparently view that as an achievement,” noted Shamir. “It would actually be mass murder.”

Malium shook his head. “No. It would merely be a step in the right direction. An achievement would be to destroy at one time as many millions as Hitler destroyed in the entire Holocaust.”

Shamir asked, “Why destroy anyone?”

Malium sank leisurely into a soft leather chair and said, “History is the story of destruction more than any other single thing. And my goal is to destroy my enemies before they destroy me.”

Shamir asked, “How were you unleashed to commit such heinous a crime?”

Malium laughed. “I was never leashed in the first place. The world leaders that destroyed millions before me also were never leashed. Hitler was never leashed in any real sense. The population voted him into power initially, and then they simply allowed him to rule unrestrained subsequent to that. If they had leashed him then millions would have lived.

A great American President said in recent times that in a fair and free democratic election the populace will sooner vote for the candidate that is “wrong but strong” before they ever will vote for the one that is “right but weak”. He could have added that many young women choose the father of their children using the same criteria. That explains the high divorce rates.”

Shamir asked, "So you blame not the tyrant but instead the voting public?"

Malium responded, "Of course. If it were not for the acquiescence of the public tyrants could never take their nations into war. The population of my country is well aware that I had a program to create nuclear bombs. Since they vastly outnumber me, they could have stopped me at any time. If a rabid dog is running loose and biting and infecting people, and the people do nothing to stop the dog, is it then the dog's fault that harm is being done unrestrainedly?"

Shamir said, "So, you blame not the murderer, but instead those that don't restrain the murderer."

Malium waved his hand in a dismissive gesture and said, "The Americans put on their money the words "In God we trust". They would be well advised to add the words "and stop the tyrants". I am a tyrant and I am going to detonate an atomic bomb because no one is stopping me. The people didn't stop me from getting such a weapon because they wanted their nation to possess nuclear bombs. They just didn't bother to think far enough ahead and ask what comes after that. It's as if the bomb has a gunpowder fuse and they handed out matches to everyone."

Shamir asked, "Could anything cause you to change your mind and decide not to detonate the bomb that you have control over?"

"No," replied Malium. "The reason is that I have no idea who else might have a nuclear bomb set for detonation against us. If I have one, then why not someone else? I have seen films of tarantula spiders facing snakes, each one wishing to devour the other. In such confrontations in nature the winner is simply the one that strikes first. I could do that this instant by going into the control room and pressing a single button.

Shamir said, "False arguments have often sent nations off to needless war. The analogy of the spider and the reptile really don't have anything to do with humankind's international relations. Just because two nations face each other doesn't mean that one or both of them actually plan to strike. But the national leaders use the propaganda of false analogies that work their evil magic upon the minds of the public and then there are calls for attacks. The dire consequences of such malicious actions are apparent for example in the harm that resulted to Japan for its sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. And they were no less real for Germany after its sneak attack upon Russia in Operation Barbarossa. History often proves that the first to attack is the one destined to be destroyed. You know these things yet you still plan to detonate the Dove."

Malium said, "I find it irresistible. All I have to do is press a button. That would command a signal from our satellite to the floating antenna of the Dove. And the satellite will continuously transmit that signal once the button has been pushed by me. So even by some odd circumstance there were a ship near the floating antenna that blocks the signal, or if the weather was extremely bad and huge waves shielded the antenna, once the vessel moves or the weather clears, the Dove will detonate."

Shamir said, "That means that even if you died at the moment you commanded the detonation and something caused a delay, the explosion would still transpire later when you are dead. Just so long as the satellite continued to function."

Malium smiled maliciously. "Yes. A legacy from me to the world."

"You intend to birth a new religion subsequent to the disaster, do I understand correctly?" asked Shamir.

Yes," answered Malium. "There is nothing stronger than the imagination. Facts fall aside easily when we cause people to imagine the basic elements of a religion. Firstly, to have God on our side, all that we need do is say that God is on our side. It is as simple as that."

Shamir held his hands with the palms upward as a gesture of the futility of the discussion and said, "God must feel tugged and pulled from every direction as all religions claim God as their own. They are like arguing siblings with each claiming that the parent loves them the most."

Shamir said, "I will go now. I have learned nothing new from the discussion with you." When Malium next looked around he found that he was alone.

Two weeks later a telephone call was received by Curtis Ames. When he clicked on the line a voice said, "You should have deployed us to Jordan sooner. We found Shirley, Herb and Stan by following the GPS signal. Actually, we found their skeletons. They had been handcuffed to the bumper of a Land Rover. We don't know if they were killed or died of thirst before the vultures picked their bones clean. Or if they were eaten alive. Because there is no longer a tracking signal to follow we need new instructions."

Ames instructed the caller, "Go to Jerusalem."

A few days earlier Juliana and Olin had arrived in Jerusalem with the scimitar. Ahmed had been paid and remained in Amman. Juliana and Olin made contact with a physician whose name had been provided to them by Livingston. He also provided six body guards and an armored limousine. Four of the body guard accompanied Olin with the scimitar to the doctor's office. Because of her stigmata when she was in the vicinity of the scimitar Juliana remained at their hotel with two body guards.

In the doctor's office Olin opened a suitcase and took out the scimitar. The doctor carried it to the x-ray lab and subjected it to examination. When the images were developed he took them and the scimitar back to his office and gave them to Olin.

When he examined the images on a light board he breathed deeply with excitement and said to himself, "They are in the pommel. The three iron spikes are intact. They were used by Lavi to counter weight the scimitar blade and balance it. They are most probably immersed in hard pitch. A kind of early form of tar that set solidly and that was used in the hilt of many swords to form the pommel shapes. We can retrieve those spikes if we want."

He and the body guards then drove to a bank where Olin placed the scimitar and the x-ray films into a large safety deposit box. Upon his return to the hotel he gave the news to Juliana that the three spikes that had nailed Jesus to the cross were in the pommel of the scimitar, where they had remained protected for more than two thousand years.

"Now, all we have to do is find the crosses," he said.

Juliana said, "We will have the body guards drive us on all the streets of Jerusalem. If we pass by the location where the crosses are located then my bleeding palms will alert us."

Chapter 14

During the course of a number of days the body guards had driven Juliana and Olin through many streets of Jerusalem in the hopes of detecting the presence of Shamir's villa through the means of Juliana's stigmata. While riding in the northern part of Jerusalem Juliana had an idea. They saw an elderly woman walking alone the roadway and Juliana instructed the driver to pull up beside her.

Juliana got out of the limousine and approached the woman. "Pardon me madam, but have you ever heard of a person named, Shamir?"

"Of course," answered the woman.

"Do you know where his villa is located?" asked Juliana.

"Of course," answered the woman.

"Where is it?" asked a now encouraged Juliana.

"Are you dimwitted?" asked the woman.

Juliana was taken aback by the question. "Why do you ask such a thing?"

The woman said with a little exasperation, "Because you are standing at the front gate of Shamir's villa." The woman turned and continued on her walk.

Juliana turned her hands with the palm upwards and observed that there was absolutely no indication of stigmata. To herself she said, "Perhaps this is not the correct Shamir."

As she approached the structure she noted that it was within a walled compound and was a building of some magnificence situated upon a hill. The large villa and grounds had an aura of elegance. The structure was cream-colored stucco with light blue ceramic tile inlays around the door and windows. The gardens were lush with brilliantly colored flowers. The pomegranate trees were heavy with fruit ready to be harvested.

At the closed metal entry gate there was a hanging rope attached to the cradle of a bell. She tugged upon the rope and the bell rocked in its cradle as it pealed a mellow tone with a long resonant after hum.

A manservant came to the gate and swung it open. "What is your wish?" he asked.

Juliana informed him, "I wish to meet with Shamir."

She was surprised when the servant responded, "Certainly. And why don't you also invite Olin to join you? Shamir had been expecting the both of you for some time now."

Juliana waved to Olin who was seated in the limousine to indicate that he should join her. Then she asked the servant, "How long have you been in the household of Shamir?"

The servant responded, "All of my life. The same for my father before me. And his father before him. I believe that the records of my family's service to Shamir go back more than two thousand years."

He closed the gate behind them and then they climbed marble steps to the large ornate bronze front door. He pushed to swing it open. Before him was a marble floored great hall with elegant embellishments. He pointed to a door at the far end. "Just open the door and enter. Shamir is waiting for you."

Juliana and Olin walked to the door and pushed it open. Shamir was standing on the other side of a great table and as they entered he said, "Welcome to you, Juliana and Olin. You are nearing the end of your quest for the Arma Christie."

Juliana scanned her palms for blood but there was none. "Shamir, I conclude that the Arma Christie are not nearby."

Shamir said, "The scimitar and the three spikes that nailed Jesus to the cross are already in your possession. The last time that I touched them was when I sold them to Lavi for a few silver drachmas. How quickly two thousand years pass us by."

Juliana commented, "You were lthykant at the time. In his illustrated manuscripts Raka encoded the information that he had killed you, but that you arose again alive as Shamir. Was that truly due to the fact that you had pricked your finger upon a thorn of hawthorn that was wet with the blood of Christ?"

Shamir nodded. "Yes."

Juliana asked, "Why do you think that you were given eternal life? And Singevor also."

Shamir answered, "I felt compelled to carry on a discourse with the murderous tyrants of the world. The purpose was to discover why nations so very easily march off to war. From that knowledge perhaps there would be found some means to prevent war and ensure peace."

Olin asked, "And your conclusions?"

Shamir answered, "I spent two thousand years in an attempt to discover the answer to the question. And I found it. Nations go to war because their populations want them to go to war."

Juliana asked, "And the tyrants share no blame for war?"

Shamir responded, "A person cannot become the tyrannical ruler of a nation without the express permission of the population."

In some cases the people grow tired of a tyrant and attempt to overthrow the despotic ruler. In these current years some extremely naive people have termed that "Democracy on the March" in the Middle East. In those revolts the cause is more correctly described as demands for better living conditions, than any desire for democracy. People can't eat democracy. And the first indications are that democracies will not emerge in the region.

The failing of the tyrants was not that they were tyrannical in their actions, but simply that they neglected the basic welfare of their people. Nero may have been mad, but he understood that the populace wants both their circus and food. The new tyrants that emerge from the current turmoil need only improve the living conditions of the populace in order to remain safely in power.

Hitler rose to immense power because he so greatly improved the living conditions of the population after the First World War. If he had resisted his unhealthy urge to murder his opponents and for conquering for the sake of conquering, he would have gone down in history as one of the world's great leaders."

Juliana concluded from Shamir's words, "Nothing has really changed in two thousand years."

Shamir disagreed and said, "Osama bin Laden was nullified by a small military team, as opposed to an entire war in Afghanistan. Saddam Hussein could have been nullified by dropping a cruise missile on his head, as opposed to an entire Iraq War."

So you see, things have changed over the past two thousand years. They have become worse. We now fight entire wars where a small scale attack would suffice."

Juliana asked, "Why does Singevor have eternal life?"

Shamir replied, "He exists to prove a point. He is a vampire that cannot bring himself to kill anyone in order to obtain the human blood that he must have. Otherwise he will suffer agonizing thirst. But he has no problem in the least because blood is always flowing from the wounds of the mortally injured somewhere in the world. Iraq, Afghanistan, the entire Middle East, Africa and many other places."

Juliana commented, "He is aptly named. In the Romanian language "singe" means blood and "vor" means drinker."

Shamir seemed saddened. "Two thousand years he and I have existed. But it seems not for any good reason."

Juliana brought the discussion back to the present by asking, "Are the Glory Boxes here that Raka mentioned in his manuscript?"

Shamir answered, "Yes. They are in the hall beyond that door."

“May we see them as Chanina did two thousand years ago?” she requested.

Shamir stepped to the door and it opened. “Come this way.”

Juliana and Olin entered the hall and further down it she saw three ornately carved Glory Boxes. A large one and two smaller ones. She walked down the hall to the large one and placed her hand upon it. She felt nothing and her palm did not bleed. She said, “These are not made of the wood of the crosses. Why then did Chanina experience stigmata near them?”

Shamir answered, “The crosses were on the other side of the wall, in a room. I had them moved to a sealed cave in the desert.”

“A sealed cave,” remarked Juliana. “Just as Christ’s body was placed in a sealed cave. How fitting.”

Shamir said, President Malium plans to detonate a nuclear bomb under the Atlantic Ocean. The bomb will probably be “dirty” and the prevailing winds will blow the radioactive debris in this direction. It would be best if we moved all things of interest to a location far to the west of the bomb explosion. To avoid tsunamis as well, perhaps a location near the geographic middle of the United States would be best.”

Within days Livingston had arranged for a cargo ship named “ARK” to transport the crosses and the scimitar to America. A new steel cargo container was made absolutely sterile by a medical crew and then the scimitar and the crosses were loaded into it for the trip.

The ship possessed all of the modern communications systems and had two helicopter pads and two large helicopters. The ARK sailed out of the Mediterranean Ocean without incident but upon entering the Atlantic Ocean the weather reports became worrisome. A huge storm was forming off the northwest coast of Africa. To avoid it the ARK turned north. The captain hoped that at an appropriate point off the west coast of Europe the ship could bear to the west and cross the Atlantic, with the storm to the south of their course.

In a large ship’s cabin Olin, Juliana and Shamir assessed the situation. Juliana said, “If we change course to the west at the point recommended by the captain our line of travel will be over the location of the Dove.”

Olin remarked, “Over it, or within a hundred miles of it will pretty much have the same result. And, what are the chances that President Malium will detonate the Dove just when we would least want him to do so?”

The winds and waves were becoming more bothersome with each passing moment and the ARK was rolling extensively from side to side in the stormy sea. As further weather reports were received the situation went from bad to worse. The captain entered the cabin, staggering over the tilting floor plates. He reported, “We are taking on water through some damaged hatch covers. Before the situation gets any worse I recommend that you all evacuate by helicopter. Their range is great enough to get you to landfall on the English coast.”

Juliana asked, “What of the shipping container?”

The captain replied, “If the ARK goes down the container will go with it to the bottom.”

Shamir said, “I will stay in the container.” Then he said to Juliana “At the crucifixion of Christ, Judas told me that the Lamb had whispered something to him. I will now whisper to you the words that he revealed to me.” Shamir stepped closer to Juliana and she turned so that her right ear was towards him. He whispered the revelation. She was frozen momentarily in shock. He turned away and left the cabin to go to the container that safely housed the Arma Christie.

The captain returned to the bridge and commanded the helmsman, “Turn hard to port. Take up a heading of due west.” Coincidentally they were on latitude N 48° 55’ 21”. Such is fate.

The storm intensified and the helicopter pilots advised Olin and Juliana, “It is now or never. We will be barely able to take off in this weather and if it becomes worse we will not be able to fly. So we are going to lift off with as many of the crew that wishes to abandon ship. We recommend that you come with us. Otherwise you are going to perish.”

As the ARK struggled west in the howling and violent storm it was approaching longitude W 7° 1' 53". The captain instructed the helmsman to quit his post and report to the helicopters for departure. The helicopter pilots powered up their engines and the departing crew members climbed aboard. At the last moment Juliana and Olin knew that there was no other choice and they climbed aboard also. The helicopters lifted off just seconds later. In less than a minute the raging storm caused them to lose sight of the floundering ARK.

In the wheelhouse the captain struggled to keep the ARK facing into the wind. A few minutes later the engines quit with a final shudder.

Many miles away President Malium had been monitoring the course of the storm in his military control room. His level of excitement kept rising with each passing moment and finally he said to his Minister of War, "Now is the time to detonate the Dove. We can also claim credit for the huge storm as well as the explosion! What a glorious thing this is!" To the war room technician he commanded, "Arm the Dove command button." Within a few seconds a button labeled DOVE illuminated with a red light.

President Malium held his right hand index finger just above the button. "Get some photographers in here!" he yelled to the staff. Within a short time three photographers had him focused in their view finders. "Snap my picture just as I press the button that will change the fate of the entire world. This wonderful thing must be recorded for history."

Out in the Atlantic Ocean the Ark was sinking due to the water that it had taken on, and was still taking on. The port side hull of the ship brushed up against the floating antenna of the Dove and the sensing cable that extended down to the submersible snagged on the rusty head of a large rivet. As the powerless ship rolled in the heavy seas the Dove's antenna was sometimes above the water and sometimes below it. The stormy clouds above the roiling seas attenuated the signals from the overhead satellite.

President Malium pressed the Dove's detonation command button as the Ark rolled onto its port side and began to sink beneath the waves, taking the submersible's antenna with it. In his control room President Malium awaited confirmation that the Dove had detonated but was disappointed. A lab technician reported, "Our satellite images show the storm as usual but no other event."

The president cursed. "This is 2012 and we have vast technical miracles that bring senseless TV programs to every home in the world, and trillions of babbling telephone conversations at any one time, but we can't detonate a single nuclear bomb! Where the hell have we gone wrong?"

In the churning water about the sinking ship the antenna sensing line became free of the rusted rivet head and began to rise towards the sea's surface and the continuing detonation signal from the overhead satellite.

On the bridge water was surging in and the captain knew that he was about to meet his fate. In the hold of the ship Shamir remained inside the water tight storage container with the scimitar and the crosses.

The signal line from the submersible again snagged a rusted rivet head and once again the antenna of the Dove began sinking with the ARK. The ship finally impacted the slope of a trench 9,000 feet beneath the surface. Huge amounts of silt roiled up over and around it. When the silt would finally resettle the ARK and the dove would be completely hidden from view.

Nineteen months later the antenna with its signal line was suspended about six hundred feet above the ARK. The antenna attracted the attention of various sea creatures on the hunt for any possible prey. Every time they nudged the buoyant antenna inquisitively the signal line slipped a few feet over the rusty rivet head and the antenna rose closer to the ocean surface.

The End.