

The Lost Art

Simon Morden

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About the Book

Earth is in the grip of a perpetual Dark Age.

Science is taboo and technology is locked away - hidden by a Church determined to prevent a new Armageddon.

The most closely-guarded secret lays buried deep beneath the flagstones of a remote Siberian monastery. The power, lying dormant for centuries in that lead-lined tomb, may be beyond anyone's capacity to control.

But it's about to be unearthed . . .



SIMON MORDEN

THE
LOST ART

RHCP DIGITAL

For Sarah,
For ever



PART 1



CHAPTER 1

THE SMELL OF smoke woke him up, and Va realized he should never have been asleep in the first place. He got back onto his knees in the forest clearing, wiped the cold fragments of pine needles from his face and blew out a breath that condensed into a white cloud. Above him, snow-laden branches creaked and swayed against a pale southern sky.

He shut his eyes and tried to empty his mind of the concerns of the world. His fingers tightened around the cross in his hands. He ignored the coarseness of his habit, the steady drip of ice water from the firs that patted his bowed head. His lips might be blue, but they could still move in the trembling mouthing of rote prayers.

The drift of the wind brought the smoke back to him. As it entered his nose, it touched that part of his memory which he had thought locked away for ever.

Va stood. He turned slowly, letting his senses tell him which way to go. Then, with a feeling bordering on sickness, he started to run. The tears that streamed down his face never dared to blind him.

The closer he got, the stronger the stench of fire and oil and meat became. He knew what it meant even though he couldn't see through the forest. He hesitated only once, when he burst through the tree line and found that his world was on fire. Then he plunged through the swinging, smouldering gates of the monastery of Saint Samuil of

Arkady. There were so many dead that Va couldn't find anyone who could tell him what had happened.

The five-domed basilica glowed brightly from the inside. It didn't stop him from going in, again and again, calling out, listening above the roar of the flames and the cracking of timbers for any kind of answer. He only retreated when overwhelmed by the smoke and the heat. He reeled out, his black habit steaming, his lungs choked with soot and harsh vapours. He rolled in the last of the spring snows to extinguish any embers that might have fallen on him, coughed until he vomited, then raised himself up for another attempt.

The doors to the church had been barred from the inside, burst by force from outside. Most of his brothers had died there, by sword and spear and club, even as they knelt in prayer. The floor was thick with boiling blood. Va pressed himself to the wall, trying to get round to the north aisle.

'Brothers! Father! Can anyone hear me?'

The roof trusses started to snap, one by one, failing like falling dominoes. Va jumped for a window recess. Tiles rattled down in a shower, and the smoke whistled up through the hole. The sudden rush of air turned the blazing church into an inferno. The glass shattered, and he was alight. He fell backwards, outwards, through the window and into the mud.

Blessed mud: he twisted and turned, wallowing like a pig until all the flames were out. Then he crawled away on his hands and knees as the great central copper dome creaked and groaned, and plummeted into the nave. He was far enough away that the explosion of red-hot masonry only pattered the ground around him with smoking missiles.

He kept crawling until he was safe. Every building was burning. The dormitory, the workshops, the storehouses;

even the trees in the orchard were smoking, their new green leaves brown and curled.

A pair of brown leather boots walked across his line of sight. They stopped, and when he moved his hand, they moved closer.

‘Va?’

He tried to turn over. He was starting to feel the pain, and not just the pain but the loss. His world had just been torn in two.

‘Elenya?’

She bent down and looked at him. ‘Are you going to die?’

His hands were blistered and cut. His face felt stiff and wet, and he couldn’t tell whether he was caked in dried mud or melted flesh. His throat was burning and his chest felt crushed. If it hurt this much, it must mean he was going to live.

‘Die? Not today.’

‘Oh.’ She walked away again but not so far that she couldn’t watch him gasp and twitch like a stranded fish. After a while she sat down on a low wall.

Va lay there, listening to the life he knew consumed by fire. He had been almost happy here. The rituals, the order, the brotherhood, the closeness of his community; they all served to quieten the voices inside. Now it was all gone. If he concentrated, he could hear their whispering beginning.

He levered himself to his knees and shuffled like a penitent over to where Elenya sat.

‘You look like shit,’ she said. ‘Are you sure you’re not going to die?’

‘Shut up, woman. No, don’t. Tell me what happened.’

‘There were – I don’t know – thirty or so men, maybe more. I was gathering firewood when I heard them coming, and I was certain I didn’t want to meet them. So I hid.’

‘Then what?’

‘I waited until they’d all gone past. Every one of them was on horseback; it didn’t take long. They just stormed in,

killing as they found them. Some of the monks barricaded themselves in the church but that didn't hold much hope, really.' She shrugged. 'It was over very quickly. They came, slaughtered everyone and left. Not quite. There were two big thunderclaps. I don't know what they were. They didn't come from the sky.'

Va got to his feet, staggered, almost put out his hand to steady himself on Elenya's shoulder, but at the last moment managed to grab a gatepost instead. 'The scriptorium.'

'I don't think there'll be anything left of that.'

'No, you don't understand. The books.'

'Va, they'll be ash by now.'

'No they won't.' He started walking painfully towards the burning annexe to the dormitory. 'Don't think that we haven't tried.'

'What are you talking about?'

But he wouldn't answer. He kept on with his stiff gait until he stood under the wall of the scriptorium. All the books, all the inks and quills and gold leaf and leather and string and glue, all gone. The psalters and the gospels and books of the law, the prayers and the rules and the records of centuries, almost as back as far as the Reversal: destroyed. Yet all of this incidental to the reason for their destruction.

'You can't go in,' said Elenya. 'It might be days before you can go in.'

'God will provide a way,' said Va.

'And what do you expect to find when you do?'

'Nothing. Precisely nothing.'

'So why look?'

'So that I can tell the patriarch what I've seen.'

'Seen nothing? I can see him taking that seriously.'

'That's because you don't realize what it is that's not there.' He banged his blistered fist on the stonework. It was hot and hard against his hand. 'Enough!'

The scriptorium roof caved in. All the first-floor windows blew outwards, spilling shards of glass and twisted ribbons of lead across the ground, where they lay like diamonds and worms. Tongues of flame twisted out then pulled back.

Va picked his way back to the low wall. There had been pigs in the pen, a sow and six piglets, but they were dead too. Perhaps only the pigeons had escaped.

'Who were they, these men?'

'I was hiding,' said Elenya. With night falling and moving away from the fire, it was getting colder.

'Who were they?' he repeated. 'Were they Rus?'

'No. They didn't look like us. Northerners.'

'Yellowmen?'

'No. I've met Yakut, and the yellowmen look a bit like them. Further north still. Turks?'

'You were there.' Va realized that he needed to eat and drink. The raiders couldn't burn down the well, or steal all the snow, but the stores were up in flames. He took out his knife and swung his legs over the wall of the sty.

'They had darker skin than me, so they might have been Turkmen. They had a leader. I only saw him for a moment. He was dressed all in black.'

'Like me.'

'No. It wasn't a habit, more a shroud: black cloth wound around him, over his head. I didn't see his face, or anything of him.' She watched him slice the sow's belly into strips. 'I couldn't stop what happened, Va. Even you couldn't have.'

'Even me.' His voice was self-mocking. He concentrated on his bloody work.

'You're the one who surrendered himself to God. Made all those vows. Poverty, chastity, obedience.'

'And I will keep them till the day I die.'

'Which, as you've already said, won't be today.' She turned away. 'Perhaps the Turkmen came for you, only to find that you weren't here. Imagine, all that way. It might

even be that if they'd found you, they would have spared everyone else.'

Va stopped cutting for a moment. His hand tightened around the blood-slick bone handle of his knife, to get a better grip on it. 'You might deceive yourself as to my importance. I don't. I'm nothing. A nobody. A man of no consequence at all.'

'You're the man I love.'

'That counts for nothing.' Elenya did this periodically. She would provoke him, and he would have to be resilient, surrounding himself with the armour of God until she grew tired. 'It never did.'

'Never? It's a sin to lie, Va.'

'I renounced the deeds of the flesh, and if I could, I would renounce the flesh itself. Be quiet and leave me alone.'

'I'll be quiet,' she said. 'I'll never leave you alone.'

He had to pray. The physical necessity of prostrating himself in humility before God was overwhelming. He finished his work and gathered up the belly strips. 'Quiet will do for the moment.'

There was a place where the east wall had fallen completely outwards. Stone and brick were piled with burning wood. He laid out the pork on a slab of masonry and pushed it into the heart of the fire. Then, facing east, he lay down, arms crucifix-wide, face in the mud, and began to recommend the souls of his brothers to the care of Heaven.

He was the only one left, and he should have died with them. Now he had to wrestle with the idea that his survival wasn't a quirk of random fate but served a higher purpose. He had been chosen to bear witness to this atrocity for certain. But what else? Did God want more from him?

'I am unworthy,' he groaned. 'Send another. Send anyone else but me, Lord God. I am a worm, a dog, a maggot. I am unclean. I am untrustworthy. I am weak and I

will fail. Don't spare me. Take me. The least of my brothers was better than me. Give life to one of them, please. Give them new life and destroy me.'

He was not struck down. After a while he got up, pulled back the stone with the charred meat on and ate slowly, resenting every mouthful.

'I'm surprised you can eat, with your brothers' bones cracking in the fire.'

'If I don't eat, I can't bury them.'

'Oh.' Elenya sat down next to him, put part of a rye loaf on the stone and exchanged it for a piece of meat. 'Isn't this just like old times, Va?'

'No. I wasn't a monk, and you weren't mad.'

'But here we are all the same, under the stars, firelight —'

'If you're going to eat, eat. I have work to do.'

'You can't do anything now. Everything is gone. Only we remain.'

'There's plenty I can do. Like pray for rain.'

'Rain?' She looked up into the clear night sky. The stars were brittle-bright, twinkling at them from above. 'There won't be rain for days.'

'Which is why I'm going to have to pray until I sweat blood.' Va pulled back his hood and ran a fat-smearred hand over his shaved head. 'God will hear me. He heard me before.'

'So you say.'

'He sent his angels.'

'And He saved you.'

'It is true.'

'And you have the nerve to call me mad. At least my madness is my own fault.'

'And mine is divine madness, one that I gratefully accept.' He took the hard black bread and bit into it. 'I wake up and my first thought is to thank God.'

'Mine is to curse Him for making me want you.'

'Each to their own. I won't fight with you.'

'You won't fight with anyone. Not any more.' She took another strip of meat and stood up. For a moment he looked up at her, her face lit by the same flames that consumed the bodies of his beloved brothers. She was still beautiful, and it made his rejection of her all the more pure. He had chosen the steepest road, simply because he had the furthest to climb.

'Goodnight, Elenya.'

'Goodnight, Va.'

When she had gone, but not too far, he went to the well. He drew up water and doused himself over and over again until he shivered with the cold. He stripped off his habit and washed it in the trough, abusing his blistered hands until he thought he would faint with dizziness. His body was scarred - more scarred than any man alive had a right to be. He'd picked up some more today, but he was proud of those, not like all the others: the burns to his forearms and thighs were gained trying to save life, not end it.

Finally his face. He had protected it instinctively by covering it with his cloaked arms. It was unmarked because his reactions were still that fast. If his features had been turned to bubbling ruin, would Elenya still adore him? He knew the answer was yes, and it was futile wishing otherwise. He would have disfigured himself long ago if it could have given her release.

He pulled on his sodden habit, which stole more heat from him. Now he was mortally cold. His lips were blue and his limbs spasming. His teeth chattered with a life of their own. To pray like this was not only his duty but his right. There was nothing to rely on, no earthly power, no inner strength. He had nothing. He had no status, no wealth to bribe the Almighty or position to lever influence. His name - even his name was not his own.

Va went back to where the east door had stood and looked down the ruined nave to the twisted remains of the

great green dome that was once raised over the basilica, now thrown down and smashed. Elenya was right. It would burn all tomorrow and into the night. It would stay hot until the Sabbath and precious time would be lost.

The books were gone. He knew it in his heart. The raiders hadn't picked at random. They hadn't come to steal the plate or the crosses, the grain stores or the livestock. This place, in all of Mother Russia, hidden away in the far south where there was nothing but trees and wolves, was the one place they'd come. If he waited until the fires died down of their own accord, they'd be back in the heathen north and nothing could be done.

But something *was* being done. Gritting his teeth, Va prostrated himself again in the direction of the rising sun.

'God, this is a test. I know it. A test of my faith. I won't fail. I need rain. I need such a quantity of rain that I might drown here in the dirt. I want a deluge, a flood. I want the vaults of Heaven opened and a cataract to pour down. I need to get into the scriptorium, to check on the books. I know they're not there, but the patriarch will ask me if I have checked and I cannot tell a lie to him. I have to look him in the eye and tell him that I have seen the place where they were and that the books are not there. If we're going to get them back, we have to start as soon as possible. So, please: I need rain, and I need it now.'



CHAPTER 2

ELENYA FOUND HIM at first light, still stretched out before the ruined church. She was already soaked to the skin.

'I suppose you think this is a sign,' she said. Va said nothing in reply. Instead he got up wearily and started over to the remains of one of the workshops. There would be a spade, or a pick - probably without a handle, but he was used to working with impossibilities.

He kicked at the smoking timbers, and moved aside the remains of a fallen wall. Underneath was an iron-shod shovel, scorched but intact. It would do. His gaze strayed to the scriptorium, sweating and creaking as the rain lashed down. Later. There would be time later. He had a solemn duty to fulfil.

Under the unwavering watch of Elenya, he marked out a patch of bare earth as close to the high altar as he could get, and began to dig into the frozen ground. The metal blade scratched and scraped against stones and ice, jarring his hands, bringing out blisters that soon rubbed raw and bled. They joined the fresh burns and stained the handle. Still he dug.

When he had gone as far as he could, though not as deep as he ought, he started to scour the monastery grounds for remains. The first few weren't so bad, hacked and bludgeoned to death as they'd run or knelt. It was those trapped in the buildings that wore him down, the endless sifting and lifting: a skull here, a ribcage there, a

thigh bone or a foot. Disarticulated or whole, they were glazed with the remnants of their skin and contorted with the heat of the fire.

He finally wept as he carried another charred bundle of bones over to the grave. He'd been backwards and forwards all morning, and he was sick of it.

Va couldn't recognize them any more. He thought that he could: a rosary of a certain style, a scrap of cloth. But they were just guesses. These men had been his brothers. They deserved better than this. They deserved full ritual: three days in an open coffin on the chancel steps, the air rich with incense and prayer.

Instead he was tipping bits and pieces of them in a hollow-sounding shower into a hole he'd carved from the ground.

'My friends. My family. Gone.' He had never felt so wretched, never less able to contend with the urge inside him to go out and take terrible revenge.

'I know,' said Elenya. 'I am genuinely sorry. They were good men; rough, but good. They treated me better than you did.' She watched him as he brushed a fragment of bone into the pit. 'Is that the last?'

'It's the last I can find.' He wiped his eyes with his filthy sleeve. 'They're all dead.'

'Except you.' She took the spade and started shovelling dirt back into the ground. 'Say your words, Brother Va. Commend the souls of the lost to the God who didn't care enough about them in the first place to stop this from happening. Then we can go.'

He stared at her for a long time, watching her as she attacked the mound of freshly dug earth with quiet violence.

'You don't have to do this,' he said.

'I honour them. Not you,' she grunted. The blade of the spade bit down hard.

He dropped the hem of his habit down from where he had tucked it into his waist cord, and raised his hand upwards, feeling the pat of raindrops on his palms. As he stood, he started to chant, using the ancient language of the Church that had not changed for two thousand years. Old Russian, heavy with meaning and mystery. The learned words rolled off his tongue and he was in another place.

No longer beside an open grave filled with the bodies of his brothers, no longer outside in the rain and the cold, no longer a wretched man smeared in mud and decay. He approached the holy throne of God Almighty, and he was oblivious to anything else. No pain, no hunger, no thirst, no loss, no rejection. He could smell Heaven, it was so close.

When he opened his eyes again, Elenya was dragging a burned crossbeam upright. She forced it into the ground and hammered it home with the flat of the spade. On the last blow, the handle finally broke with a crack.

She threw both halves away. 'That's that.'

He looked at the grave site. It was pitifully small for all that it contained. 'Now for the other thing.'

'Give it up, Va. There are no books left.' She caught his defiant expression and tried another tack. 'Aren't you tired? Don't you want to rest?'

'Rest, like they do? Or rest like the northerners who killed them?' There was mud in his mouth and he spat it out. He lowered his head and watched a dribble of rainwater run down the bridge of his nose, tremble for a moment, then fall. 'There'll be no rest from now on.'

They cleared the rubble on the floor of the scriptorium.

'We haven't seen so much as a whole page yet.'

'Dig, woman. The noise of work is the only thing I want to hear.'

'But of course. Brother Va prays for rain and look, it comes. Then he searches for books in the heart of a fire and expects them to be there. He takes the miraculous in his

stride these days. Once you would have been terrified.’ She heaved back a blackened timber with an iron bar still warm from the fire.

Va looked up at the remaining walls and judged his position. ‘It should be here. Go straight down.’

‘It would help if you told me what we’re not looking for.’

‘There’s a stone slab on the floor. Huge – too big for a dozen men to lift.’

‘And we’re going to lift it? How? Another miracle?’

‘Dig.’

Va did everything by hand, picking up, turning, throwing, and all the time the rain came down, turning the soot into black slurry. He worked not as if his life depended on it, but as if everyone else’s did. He never broke off to ease his screaming back or wipe the sweat mixed with rain from his eyes.

‘Va? Va. Stop.’

‘Not until we’re done.’

‘You’re lower than floor level. This,’ she said, banging the heel of her boot down, ‘is the floor.’

‘What?’ He peered around him. She was right. He was in a hole, which he tried immediately to widen, searching out the edges.

Elenya was content to watch him. She wiped a raindrop from the end of her nose and left a black smudge.

‘Look,’ he finally said. ‘This is the slab I was talking about. It’s cracked in two, at least.’ He dug under the remaining piece, opening up a gap between the debris and the stonework. Then he lay on his belly and started to slither into the void he’d made.

He pulled himself forward, down the face of the rubble slope. The air inside was rank, thick with the stench of smoke. He tried not to breathe deeply, but took fast, shallow sips. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he started to make out the corners of the hidden vault.

There should have been a chest, lined with lead inside, covered with lead without, sealed by heating it up and beating the join until it disappeared. A chest that he would have comfortably fitted in twice over.

It was gone, and now he could tell the patriarch that he'd seen the truth of it.

He turned himself round and dragged his aching body out again, out into the rain and the fresh air. He struggled onto his back and lay there, mouth wide open, drinking and breathing in great gasps.

'Are they there?'

'No. I have to go to Moskva now.'

'To tell the patriarch.'

'Yes.'

'And what makes you think he'll listen to a single word you say?'

'He'll listen,' said Va. He sat up, his feet still in the hole made by two parts of the shattered capstone. He had to get ready. The journey was going to be long, difficult, painful. 'He'll listen to me even if I have to write him a letter in my own blood.'

'That sounds like fun. If you dictate, I'll gladly be the scribe.'

'I need a horse. You still have a horse, don't you?'

Elenya threw down the iron bar. It clattered off the stonework and came to rest by Va's side. He looked at it, sensing its weight, judging its length, feeling the motion of it as it spun and twisted in his hands. What an excellent weapon.

'No,' he hissed, louder than he intended.

Elenya heard. 'No, what?'

'I won't. I won't . . .' He dropped his voice, muttering to himself under his breath. 'Not in my hands.' He got up and climbed out of the pit.

'I won't give you my horse,' she said.

He couldn't just take the animal. If he'd been a different man, he would have done. If he'd been a man who fought. So he had to persuade her instead. 'This is a matter of the utmost importance. The books must not leave Mother Russia.'

'All the books are gone, Va. Even the ones that were buried beneath the floor of the scriptorium. The heat would have destroyed them.'

'They took the books before they set the fire. You said there were two great noises? Black powder, I'd swear on it. And in any event, these books would survive an iron forge.'

She tilted her head just so. 'Yes, of course they would.' She started to pick her way out from the ruins.

He called after her. 'We tried. We tried everything to get rid of them. We burned them. We turned them red-hot and pounded them on an anvil. We scratched at them with diamonds. Nothing. Not a mark. Rather than taking them to sea where there was always the chance of them washing ashore somewhere, they were kept here. Safe. Safe for seven centuries. Now they've gone.' He shouted at her back: 'Disaster waits for us all.'

She stopped and looked over her shoulder. 'Va, what the hell are you talking about?'

He clambered over the rubble, his feet slipping on the wet stones in his haste. 'I can't tell you. It's a secret. But we have to get those books back.'

'We?' She arched an eyebrow.

'Stop it. I mean us, the Church, and anyone who'll help us. Clearly that doesn't include you because all you do is hang around and wait for me to die. So either give me your horse or leave me alone.' He sat down on what remained of the scriptorium wall and pressed his palms hard against his temples. 'Why now? Why not in fifty years' time when this wouldn't be my problem?'

'Because all the people you ever killed are crying out from beyond the grave, and God wants to dispense justice

by giving you a really shitty time.'

He sighed. 'There may be something in that.'

'And while you're speaking to the Almighty, you can tell Him we've had enough rain. A light shower would have done, but this is beyond a joke.' Elenya picked up the hem of her coat and wrung it out on the ground in front of Va. The water formed a puddle, where more rain added to it.

'The Lord is nothing if not bountiful.'

'Shut up, you sanctimonious shit.' Her shoulders sagged. 'I'll get the horse.'

He raised his head, and the rain dripped off his nose. 'Thank you.'

She wagged her finger at him. 'You misunderstand me. You're going to Moskva. I'm going to Moskva. You can argue all you like, but you know as well as I do that you're desperate to get there quickly. You'll have to travel with me.'

'No. *You'll* be travelling with *me*.'

'And whose horse is it?'

'Yours,' he admitted.

'So I'll be letting you come along. Remember that.' She walked away, through the ruined courtyard and out into the woods beyond.

Va went over to the well to douse himself in bucket after bucket of freezing water, scraping his skin with stones to remove some of the dirt. More water after that. A memory: his baptism in a river, still frozen at the edges, surrounded by awed villagers, held under for longer than necessary by the priest, who needed to know that the sacrament would genuinely take.

'You look like a rat. A wet rat.'

'I no longer care what I look like - that's not how my worth is judged.'

She was leading a horse, a shaggy-haired beast, snorting and stamping. 'I take it you remember how to ride.'

'I cannot ride with you.'

'And you can't take my horse.' She wiped her hands on her hips. 'You're not leaving my sight, and you've run out of options. You have to ride with me, or not at all.'

'Then,' said Va, 'I choose not to ride at all. I can't share a saddle with you, Elenya. It would be too cruel to you. If you did not love me so, then I would say yes, let us ride, no matter how unseemly it looked, a monk and a woman so close together. But you do. Five years, and you've sat outside these walls, with the wolves and the bears and howling wind and biting cold, the snow in winter and the flies in summer.'

'Don't flatter yourself.'

'I don't. But neither of us is stupid. You stayed, and you still say you love me. I say you're in the grip of some intractable madness. Whichever: I can't share a saddle with you because it would send you out of your mind with longing. I haven't touched you for all this time, praying that your passion for me would die. My prayers are unanswered. I don't know why.'

'Perhaps because I'm praying that you'll throw off your habit and take me, even now. My prayers also remain unanswered. Isn't God cruel?' She bit at her lip. 'So how are you going to get to Moskva? Walk?'

'No. It would take too long. Those who stole the books would be gone, and the traces of their passing gone as well. It's a week's walk. The ice is melting, and boats can't navigate the rivers.'

'So?'

'I'll run.' He adjusted his waist cord.

'All the way?' She was incredulous. 'Just because you won't ride with me?'

'All the way. It's kinder for you if I do.' He turned round and judged the weather, the wind.

'I'll be right behind you. On the horse. When you get tired of running, I can give you a lift.'

'My mind's made up. Wish me Godspeed.' He shook his arms out, rolled his neck this way and that. Then he set off, taking an easy pace, hands loose by his side. His bare feet scarcely touched the ground.

'Men. Stupid, stubborn men. They get one idea in their heads and it's the only thing they can think of.' She shouted after him: 'You haven't even got any shoes!'

He was gone, out of the gate. There was a track of sorts that led into the forest of close-packed pines. It headed north, towards the city of Moskva. If there had been no track, Va would have made one.

Five years of isolation was over. He was back in the world.



CHAPTER 3

THERE WAS A body floating in the sea. It was caught at the surf line: as the waves broke and rushed in, spilling foam up the white beach, the body turned and dragged itself towards the shore. But as the water sank through the sand and the sea retreated, the pale, bloated corpse slipped away again.

Benzamir watched from the strand line. He held a selection of objects he'd combed from the beach - a shell, a translucent stone of sea-worn glass, a red crab carapace, a worm-bored piece of driftwood - and occasionally glanced down at his treasures, feeling the smoothness of the pebble, the roughness of the wood. He was barefoot, and scrunched the soft, dry sand between his brown toes.

Everything was amazing to Benzamir. The sky was huge, stretching from horizon to horizon, the sea filled his vision, the warmth of the sand and the heat of the sun: he couldn't stop grinning. He even relished the bead of sweat that was working its way down his spine, the sand flies circumnavigating his ankles, the blinding glitter of sun on sea.

Not so far away, to the north of where he stood, his ancestors had lived in little mud-brick houses and kept goats. Then they had gone away on the greatest adventure imaginable: Benzamir had heard all the stories as a young boy and been thrilled by them. They had changed his life, directed his choices, inspired his very soul. Now he was

here, finally home, and it felt fantastic yet slightly unreal. All that way for a dream.

He carefully put down what he was carrying and waded out into the sea. The hem of his robe caught against the water, pushing up waves of its own. As he strode out, he listened intently to the swoosh of his legs, the feel of the cool, shallow sea against his skin.

The beach dipped gently away. He was up to his knees when he reached the body, still bobbing up and down, pulled towards the coast and thrust away with each cycle of waves. The water was clear enough to see the problem. The man's hands were shackled together with a length of heavy iron chain that acted like an anchor. Little brilliantly coloured fish darted in and out of the body's shadow, scared of Benzamir but interested in scavenging.

Benzamir dipped his arm into the sea, took up the chain and started to haul the body behind him back towards the beach. It was easy while there was enough draught to float the man, much more difficult once he'd grounded. Benzamir was young and strong, and the dead man thin and pale, like a ghost. The limp feet dragged in the sand, making two parallel furrows. They were bound, like the hands, but on a much shorter length of chain.

The body hadn't been in the water long. Long enough to drown, for certain, but not long enough for the little sea creatures to make much of a mess. Benzamir rolled him over. The blue eyes were wide and staring, the mouth open in a great fish gulp. The man's pale skin had gone blue-white, making the thinness of his chest all the more obvious. He could count his ribs, and see his pelvic bones stand out like axe blades over the top of the thin loincloth he still wore.

Benzamir closed the dead man's eyelids with his thumbs, and examined the shackles to see how they'd been closed. While he was running his fingers over the crude

hinge and single hot rivet, two more men came up behind him.

Both were in white desert robes and riding horses. Benzamir had heard of this practice, of how you could use a bit and bridle to control a horse, use a saddle and girth strap to provide a seat, a pair of stirrups to give a better ride. He'd never seen it before, let alone seen it so casually done. The air was suddenly filled with the sharp perfume of hot beast.

One man threw himself off his saddle with practised nonchalance, despite the height. His horse, rather than running off, shook its mane and made a staccato sound in its throat. Its bridle jingled. The man pushed past Benzamir to kick the corpse rudely in the kidneys and give a rough grunt of frustration.

'*Salam alaykum,*' said Benzamir. He rather hoped it was the right thing to say. He had nothing else to go on but what he'd been told.

The man turned sharply, his head cloth falling away from his face to reveal a mouth more used to being twisted in a sneer than raised in a smile. He had dark, pin-bright eyes, and he looked Benzamir up and down.

When he spoke, it was difficult for Benzamir to tell what he was saying. His ancestors had left this part of the world many, many years before, and the language had changed: vowels shifted, tenses reordered, pronouns subtly different. He realized he must look a complete idiot, standing there in a soaking wet jellaba, no sandals, and smiling all the time, squinting into the sun and nodding. The horseman was jabbing his finger at the body by their feet and speaking increasingly quickly.

From what Benzamir could glean, the dead man was a slave from a ship. He'd jumped overboard and drowned. The horseman was complaining that his investment had been rendered worthless.

'Yes, I see.' If Benzamir had had any money, he would have recompensed the man for his dead slave. If the poor soul hadn't been free in life, at least he could be in death. As it was, he had no currency, local or exotic, with which to redeem anyone.

The horseman was still gesturing, and Benzamir started to get the feeling that he was being blamed for the man's troubles. He was starting to catch more of what was being said.

'Who will take his place at the oar? Who will move my family's cargo? Are we to be ruined for the want of one pathetic slave? Are my wives to be thrown out into the street, my children to beg for scraps? You could not wish this on any man!'

Benzamir might have been a stranger, but he was no fool. He chose his words carefully.

'If it were my family, I would consider it both my duty and my honour to row myself.'

The second man stifled a laugh behind his white head cloth, but the first was furious. His hand went to his belt, where he had a great curved sword sheathed. Benzamir had thought it for show, or that it held some ceremonial function. He could see when it was brandished that he had misjudged. The length of the blade was notched, and the way it was held told him that it was balanced for fighting. That was all right, because Benzamir knew about fighting.

The sword being shaken in his face was both functional and highly decorated. There were patterns cut into the flat, and the hilt was made of rich red leather, topped with a faceted jewel. He thought it quite beautiful, and he wanted to examine it closely: perhaps later, when it wasn't trying to cut him in two.

'You are not from around here, are you?'

'No,' said Benzamir, taking a step back but still smiling. 'You could say that.'

'You lack the protection of your family and clan?'

'So it seems.'

'Good. Then I will take you as a slave, or I will kill you. Which do you prefer?' The man completed a series of finely executed practice swings. The sun flashed off the blade, which sung as it moved.

Benzamir was enormously impressed. 'You're very good with that,' he said, and he meant it.

The second man had sized up the two opponents and was already fetching rope from his saddlebags. Clearly he fancied slight, lithe Benzamir's chances not at all.

'Kneel,' said the man.

'I am Benzamir Michael Mahmood, and I kneel only to God.'

For his pains, he was slashed at. He danced out of the way. It had been a long time since he'd fought anyone quite like this. His body relaxed into the moves he had learned: he barely had to think at all.

He turned, once, twice, slipped effortlessly round the singing-edged blade and grounded his right foot at the point where the man's ribs met his belly. He didn't wait for him to fall, but was suddenly behind him, chopping with an open hand at the base of the stiff neck.

Never forgetting that he had two enemies, he stepped lightly across the sand, barely disturbing it as he loped. When he was in range, he leaped and spun, catching the second man across the throat with his fist. He cleared the horse completely, landed on the ground shoulder first, rolled, stood and waited.

The angry sword-wielding horseman was still upright, but motionless. Then he fell face first onto the beach like a felled tree. His rope-holding colleague was clawing at his chest in a vain attempt to stimulate breathing. After a few moments he too was unconscious, face down in the soft sand.

'That was fantastic,' said a grinning Benzamir to the bemused horses. 'I'm really home.' He did a little jig,