

# A Phoenix Tale

*by Andy Zach*

I left the air-conditioned comfort of the taxi, and the sights, sounds, and smells of the old bazaar in Jeddah assailed me: a robe-clad man on camel plodded by, an adjacent fishmonger added his smell to the fresh dung in the street, and the hawkers yelled their wares.

I could only speak Arabic at a middle school level, but as I strolled through the bazaar, I heard "Fresh dates!"... "Highest quality rugs!"... "Finest gold jewelry!"... "Ancient books! The rarest in Saudi Arabia!"

My head snapped around. A bald, stumpy man in a white caftan saw me look and said, "Books? You want ancient books?"

"Yes." I spoke carefully, knowing my poor accent. "Can you speak English?" I didn't have much hope.

"Of course, my friend. Come into my shop."

It was just a nook in the wall but shielded by an awning, with four bookshelves covered in old books. In the back was a worn rug, and as he sat cross-legged, he gestured for me to sit on some cushions. I did, enjoying the classic ambiance of Arab hospitality. What a contrast from the hubbub of the US and the UK in the '80s!

"Muhammed al-Jeddah at your service." His English was excellent.

"Andy Zach, doctoral student and seeker of Arabic manuscripts on the phoenix."

"Ah. Let us enjoy some refreshments before we get to business."

"Thank you so much for your hospitality. I am weary with jet lag. I just arrived yesterday."

He murmured through a curtain in the back. A woman in a hajib came forward with a small silver coffeepot. She glanced at me. I saw almond eyes of darkest brown, shining with curiosity. A whiff of strong coffee from the pot and the scent of jasmine from the girl greeted my nose.

"My daughter, Myriam. She is my life since the death of my wife."

"My condolences on your loss. I understand one never gets over the death of a loved one."

"So true. Yet in my daughter, I see my wife as when I first married her twenty years ago. Allah has been good to me, leaving me a living memory."

I nodded and sipped my coffee. Magnificently hot, strong enough for coffee liquor, and sweet as an entire candy shop, the flavors and heat warred in my mouth.

Muhammed sipped his cup, sighed contentedly, and said, "There is nothing like fine coffee."

"It's quite remarkable. I've never had anything like it."

He smiled. "I'm glad you like it. Here. Enjoy these fresh dates and figs."

I bit a juicy fig and had to wipe my mouth. "Amazing! It's like I've never had a fig before!"

"Yes. Our tree produces the finest figs in Saudi Arabia."

"You are blessed indeed, Muhammed."

He sighed with a smile and looked off in the distance.

Trying to broach the subject of phoenix manuscripts tactfully, I said, "I have been studying phoenixes for many months already."

"You must be a diligent scholar to come all the way from America."

"I *do* have a one-track mind," I admitted. "I'm enrolled at Cambridge, College of Paranormal Animals, so I didn't come as far as that."

"I've never heard of the College of Paranormal Animals."

"I'm not surprised. My advisor, Dr. Edwina McDougal, created it to suit my doctoral interest."

"Did you see the copy of *Solomon and the Phoenix* in the British Library from the wondrous library of [Tipu Sultan](#), ruler of Mysore?"

Impressed by his knowledge, I said, "Yes, that was one the manuscripts I studied. In fact, that's why I'm here. I'm looking for another such manuscript to shed light on the phoenix. The historian Herodotus said the phoenix originated in Arabia."

"Ah yes," he said, as if just remembering my original request. "Have you read the *Kitab al-Bulhan*?"

*Kitab al-Bulhan*, which translated to *Book of Wonders*, was a fourteenth-century Arabic source on the phoenix. It included a discourse on the simurgh, or phoenix. "Yes indeed. It's well named."

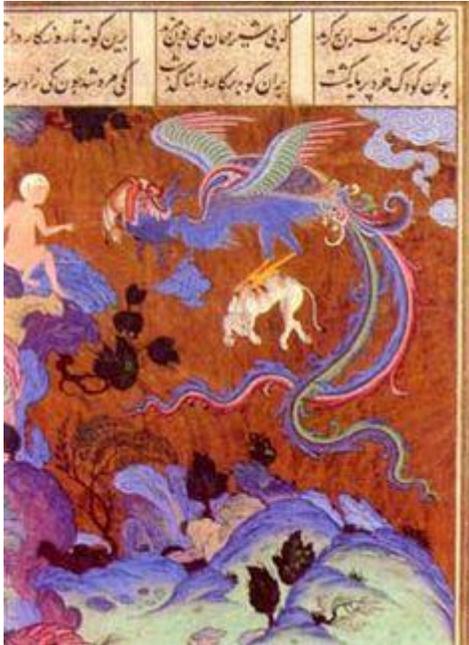
"I do not have a copy of *Kitab al-Bulhan*," he said with a sigh. "I do have a few pages that resemble it."

"Oh? May I see them?" I tried to keep my excitement out of my voice, but failed. So much for my negotiating skills. I had intended to negotiate fiercely for anything.

"I'm sorry, but they appear to be torn out of a book. That is why it was not worthy to be shown in my shop. You surely would not want to see such inferior merchandise, would you?"

Muhammed was in full negotiating mode. Disparage your merchandise to see how much the client wants it. "Ordinarily no, but my curiosity must be satisfied."

Without a word he got up and ducked through the curtain. He came back with a few dusty pages of parchment. The dust did not hide the brilliantly colored phoenix adorning one page.



I gasped. "This matches the *Book of Wonder* I saw in the British Museum!"

"Yet I fear it is not the same. For I too have seen that, and these pages do not match."

Although I was poor at listening to and speaking Arabic, my hours of study enabled me to read the two accompanying pages. They were different from the standard *Book of Wonder*. The writer spoke of studying the phoenix in Western Arabia. He said it nested in the hills above the Pishon river. I knew from my studies on the Garden of Eden that the biblical river Pishon had dried up in the millennia since and now corresponded to the Wadi al-Batin. That was quite close to Jeddah, less than a hundred miles away!

"Oh my! This is a dream come true!" All thoughts of negotiating evaporated as I saw my goal within reach. Imagine if I could get a blood sample of the phoenix! I might be able to isolate its regeneration gene! All my undergraduate biological studies would bear fruit! I would achieve my PhD in animal revivification at the Cambridge College of Paranormal Animals!

Rereading the pages carefully, I noted the anonymous author said the nest was two or three days' journey from the origin of the Pishon, near Medina. That'd be sixty miles by foot or ninety to a hundred and twenty by camel or horse.

"This seems to be a copy of *Katib al-Bulhan* with additional notes."

"Perhaps. The illustration is definitely a copy. I believe the notes are a copy of a yet older manuscript."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"The Arabic style is very old, pre-Mohammed, may his name be praised." He paused. "Is this something you want for yourself?" asked Muhammed.

"I'd love to own it, but I doubt I have the money to buy something so valuable. You'd be better off selling it to a museum or holding an auction."

"Money! I have enough. I delight in seeing someone who appreciates the beauty of this manuscript. What can you afford?"

"I can't really say. You see, I have to go on an expedition looking for the phoenix mentioned here. That was my purpose for coming to your land. After that, I don't know how much money I'll have left."

"To the Pishon river? Isn't that the Wadi al-Batin today?"

Once again Muhammed impressed me. I'd thought that was a rather obscure fact. "Yes, you're correct."

"How far must you travel along the wadi?"

"Probably a hundred and fifty miles from Medina, to be sure."

"I believe my cousin's husband can help. He takes people on tours. May I call him to check?"

"Of course."

Muhammed called through the curtain to Myriam. She brought an antique French phone on a long cord. He dialed and talked rapidly on it. After he hung up, he said, "Good news! My cousin Hassan will gladly take you to search for the simurgh."

"That's wonderful! But will I be able to afford him?"

"Do not worry about money. If you find the phoenix, that will be payment enough for me." He smiled.

Of course. If I found the phoenix using his manuscript, that would multiply the value of his document!

"When can we leave?"

"Tomorrow evening would be best. In the desert, you should travel by night. I assume you are prepared for desert travel?"

"Yes, my clothing covers both the cool nights and the hot days."

"Good."

The following evening I met Hassan and Muhammed in the souk by the bookshop. They led me to a battered Land Rover. I could barely see the dark-green paint through the scrapes, sand, and mud.

I had checked out of the hotel and held my only bag. I had my detailed map of Saudi Arabia with me, a canteen of water, pemmican, beef jerky, and dried fruit for several days.

"My cousin al-Hassan." Muhammed introduced us.

"Salam Alaikum," the cousin said formally, with his hands together.

"Wa-Alaikum-Salaam." I replied properly to his greeting of peace with, "And peace to you. I am Andy Zach."

"Welcome to my adventure tour. Muhammed has told me of your plan to explore Wadi al-Batin's source."

"Indeed yes. I have it charted on my map"—I gestured to it—"but I have no idea of the best way to get there."

"There is no best way in the desert. There is only the way you find."

That didn't give me much confidence. But what choice did I have? I had to find out if a phoenix was a mere mythological creature or an actual source of revivification for animals. I showed Hassan my map of the ancient Pishon river and the various wadis composing it.

"Wadi al-Batin is at the mouth of the Pishon, indicated by the ancient alluvial fan. Then there is Wadi Rimah, which leads to Wadi al-Batin. Proceeding upstream, that wadi splits into Wadi Qahd on the northwest and the Wadi al Jarir on the southwest. Which one should we investigate the source of the Pishon? Wadi al Jarir goes further uphill to the Mahd adh Dhahab gold mine, exactly as the Bible says: 'The River Pishon encompasses the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold.' So can you get us to the beginning of Wadi al Jarir?" I concluded.

"Yes. We'll go along the coast and then take the old mining road. Once we're there, we'll go to the Wadi al Jarir." He smiled. "Then you'll have to take over, young man."

I nodded more assuredly than I felt. Could I find the source of a river that hadn't flowed for over thirty-five hundred years? Could I find the nest of a bird that hadn't been seen in over two thousand?

Meanwhile, Hassan introduced me to his aide, Omar.

A skinny youth with curly hair grinned at me, showing crooked teeth. "I only speak Arabic," he said.

"I speak a little," I replied as we shook hands. I towered over him.

"Good! We'll get along fine!"

"Omar will help with the driving," Hassan said. "I'm no good driving at night. Too old. But not as old as my cousin!" He looked at Muhammed.

"True, true. We can't all be as young as you are, Hassan or Omar." Muhammed stared at Omar with a frown, as if something was wrong. "What happened to your regular driver, Abdullah?"

"Ah, he fell sick. He recommended his friend Omar."

"Inshallah," Muhammed said, like a prayer.

"Inshallah," agreed Hassan and Omar. "God's will be done" was a rough translation.

I wasn't Islamic, but I said, "Amen!"

We left by ten and traveled through the dark night. First, we followed the Red Sea north, and then we took the road into the mountain highlands to Mahd adh Dhahab. Hassan soon fell asleep in the backseat, but Omar chattered in Arabic the whole way as I sat next to him.

"So what do you seek in Mahd adh Dhahab?"

"The origin of the old river Pishon." I didn't know the word for "ancient" in Arabic.

"Ah! I have heard of that river! It began in the mountains and flowed to the gulf many years ago."

Surprised, I asked, "How did you hear?"

"I read—a lot." Here he lapsed into English and gave me his big grin.

"How much English do you speak?"

"Just a little. But I understand a lot!"

So we continued, me in my broken Arabic and he in his occasional English phrase. The five hours went quickly, and when we reached Mahd adh Dhahab, Omar drove to the outskirts and pulled off the road. Hassan awoke.

"Here we are. We're in the Wadi al Jarir. Now where do we go, Mr. Zach?"

I slid out of the Rover and stretched my legs. In the moonlight, I could see the mountains to the north of the wadi. "How far can we get into the mountains from here?"

"As far as you dare," Hassan said with equanimity.

I laughed. "You'll find I dare a great deal. How much danger is there driving off road in the dark?" It felt good to be talking in English again.

"Only from hidden rocks and ruts. We'll avoid them, inshallah."

"Let us go then!"

We followed the bottom of the wadi up to the foothills. I picked a valley leading up to the highest point. The jostling got much worse. Several times I thought we broke something, but Hassan said, "No problem! Do not worry!"

We had just climbed a steep slope and had been headed slightly downhill, before another, steeper slope.

Crash! The front left wheel slid into a hole, and I felt the bottom of the car bottom out.

"No problem!" In Arabic, Hassam said to Omar, "Back us up."

The wheels spun uselessly.

"No problem! Omar, you push. I'll drive."

"Let me help." I hopped out of the Rover.

It felt odd to be paired with a five-foot Arab boy who probably didn't weigh more than a hundred pounds, half my weight. We pushed and pulled gamely as Hassan rocked the car forward and back. The front wheel wouldn't edge out of the hole. I couldn't see how deep it was in the dark, but the wheel seemed to be hanging in the air.

The Land Rover teetered on the rocky berm, and neither the front nor rear wheels achieved good traction.

"We need a lever to pry us out of the hole," I said.

"Dawn is coming," Hassan said, pointing to the lightening eastern horizon. "That will help. Let us make coffee and drink it until then."

"Good idea."

We sipped our small cups of strong, sweet coffee made from the electric coffeepot Hassan plugged into the cigarette lighter as we sat watching the sunrise. We discussed where we could get a lever. No trees were in sight. It was six miles back to Mahd adh Dhahab, which we could see in the distance.

"Hassan, you seem very calm, with your car stranded here."

"Inshallah. We'll go back to Mahd adh Dhahab, or we'll find a way out."

"Hey, look at this!" Omar called. He had been examining the hole in which we were stuck, trying to find the bottom. We ran around to the front wheel, and next to it was Omar's head. He had wriggled his body into the hole and was standing upright.

"I hope the car doesn't fall!" I switched to Arabic again to match him.

"Ha! Inshallah! The hole is much deeper than I am. Watch!" His head disappeared, and then he called from underground, "It gets bigger! It's a cave! Get a light!"

I shone my flashlight down. I could see perhaps ten feet down, but no Omar, only rocks.

"Hand me the light!" He popped back up from under the wheel.

I handed it to him.

I really wanted to follow him, but there was no way I could fit. Unless... "Hassan! If I take off the wheel, I could go down there too!"

He peered at the hole and the wheel. "I am curious too. Let's do it."

With the wheel off, both Hassan and I wriggled past the axle and down the hole. It descended at a forty-five-degree angle for fifteen feet and leveled out. It was almost high enough for me to stand.

"Look!" Omar cried. "Water!"

Far in the back of the cave was a small pool in a depression in the rock. I studied the walls of the cave. Everything was smooth and weathered, but there were no stalactites or stalagmites, as I would expect to see in caves in the United States.

"I wonder if this is the Pishon source? Everything is eroded like the bottom of a river."

"Perhaps so," Hassan agreed with caution.

Looking upward from the water pool, I saw a high, domed ceiling. The water erosion continued upward for ten feet, and then the rocks were jagged and rough.

"We've gotten this far. I might as well explore a little further." With a leap, I grabbed a ledge about nine feet above and pulled myself up. I enjoyed rock climbing, and this was easy compared to some cliffs I had scaled.

From the ledge, I surveyed the upper portion of the dome. Opposite me, twenty-five feet away, was a dark opening. I shone the flashlight on it but couldn't see much. Studying the adjacent rock walls, I plotted a path to the recess.

Clipping my flashlight to my belt, I traversed along the vertical walls to the recess. With a final jump, I plopped onto the lip that hid the recess from below. In the recess, I found a circle of stones four feet in diameter. The stones were all weathered smooth and round like the river stones below. How had they gotten up here? And who had placed them? And when?

"What is it? What do you see?" Omar cried in Arabic.

"A circle. Someone has placed stones here in a circle."

"Oho! Maybe it's the simurgh!"

The phoenix? I hadn't thought of that. But this could have been the source of the Pishon, and the circle of stones was like a nest. I stirred the dirt in the middle of the stones. It was darker than the rest of the dust, but it was just dirt.

"Here. Take my camera. You must take pictures." Hassan held up the camera.

"Let me help!" Omar grabbed the camera and then, like a monkey, climbed the wall to the ledge.

"My! You'd do well in rock climbing!"

"I love to climb." He handed me the camera, complete with flashbulbs. I took as many pictures as I had flashbulbs, eight.

"Take one of the stones as well," Hassan called from below.

I selected the largest and smoothest. It didn't weigh as much as I'd expected. I studied the light-gray surface carefully. It was smooth, with tiny pockmarks. It didn't weigh as much as stone, but perhaps as much as a dense wood. I checked the other stones. They were all heavier but smaller and just like worn river rocks. They were also a darker gray.

"Hassan, can you catch this? It weighs maybe five pounds."

He caught it.

We climbed our way back to the surface after refilling our canteens. The sun was just over the horizon.

"If we're going to Mahd adh Dhahab, we'd better go before it gets hotter," I commented.

"It'll take two hours there and two hours back," Hassan said. "Be prepared for heat and sun. Drink all your water there, refill your canteen, and drink it all on the way back. You can't have too much water in the desert."

"That makes sense. I think if I jog, I can make it in half the time." I actually thought I could make it in less than an hour, but I wasn't sure about the terrain.

"Be very careful. If you break a leg, you could die."

"I know."

"Go to the service station in town and see if they have a big pry bar."

"I will go too," Omar said in English.

"What?" said Hassan and I simultaneously, me in English, Hassan in Arabic.

"I like to run. And I can translate," Omar said in Arabic.

"You said you didn't speak English."

"I don't speak it very much. But I understand it enough to understand you."

"OK, let's go."

The terrain was rough. I could only run half the time. Omar had no trouble keeping up with my long legs. He ran lightly, like a bird or a fawn. We made it there in an hour.

The service station had a six-foot pry bar. They gladly let us borrow it. They were willing to drive us to our car in their truck. We all crammed in the cab, and the ancient four-wheeler climbed up the slope. The driver, Nasri, began grumbling about the rough terrain soon after we left the road, and when he saw the final climb to our Land Rover, he refused to go farther.

"You can carry it from here," he said.

And we did. He had still saved us half an hour.

Hassan was not visible in the blazing sun. Unsurprisingly, he had gone into the cool cave.

The surprise was the thread of smoke coming from the cave entrance.

*Why would Hassan build a fire?* I wondered.

I went below, with Oman following me through the smoky air.

At the bottom, Hassan sat with a wet cloth across his face and a small kerosene stove he had carried down. The big stone was on the burner, heating up.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm curious like you are. This stone is not stone at all. Yet it's not wood either. I've been heating this for an hour, and it hasn't charred at all."

"Perhaps it's volcanic. Those rocks are porous. Do you have a hammer?"

"Back in the car."

I was willing to try and crack this rock. I climbed back out and retrieved the hammer. Just as I was about to descend, I heard an audible *crack*, and Hassan and Omar both yelled.

"Are you OK?" I called into the hole. Then rushing past my head came a brilliant red, yellow, and blue bird. A phoenix!

"AH!" I yelled as it zoomed by me.

"Ka-eee!" it called, climbing rapidly, circling around, and then heading east and out of sight.

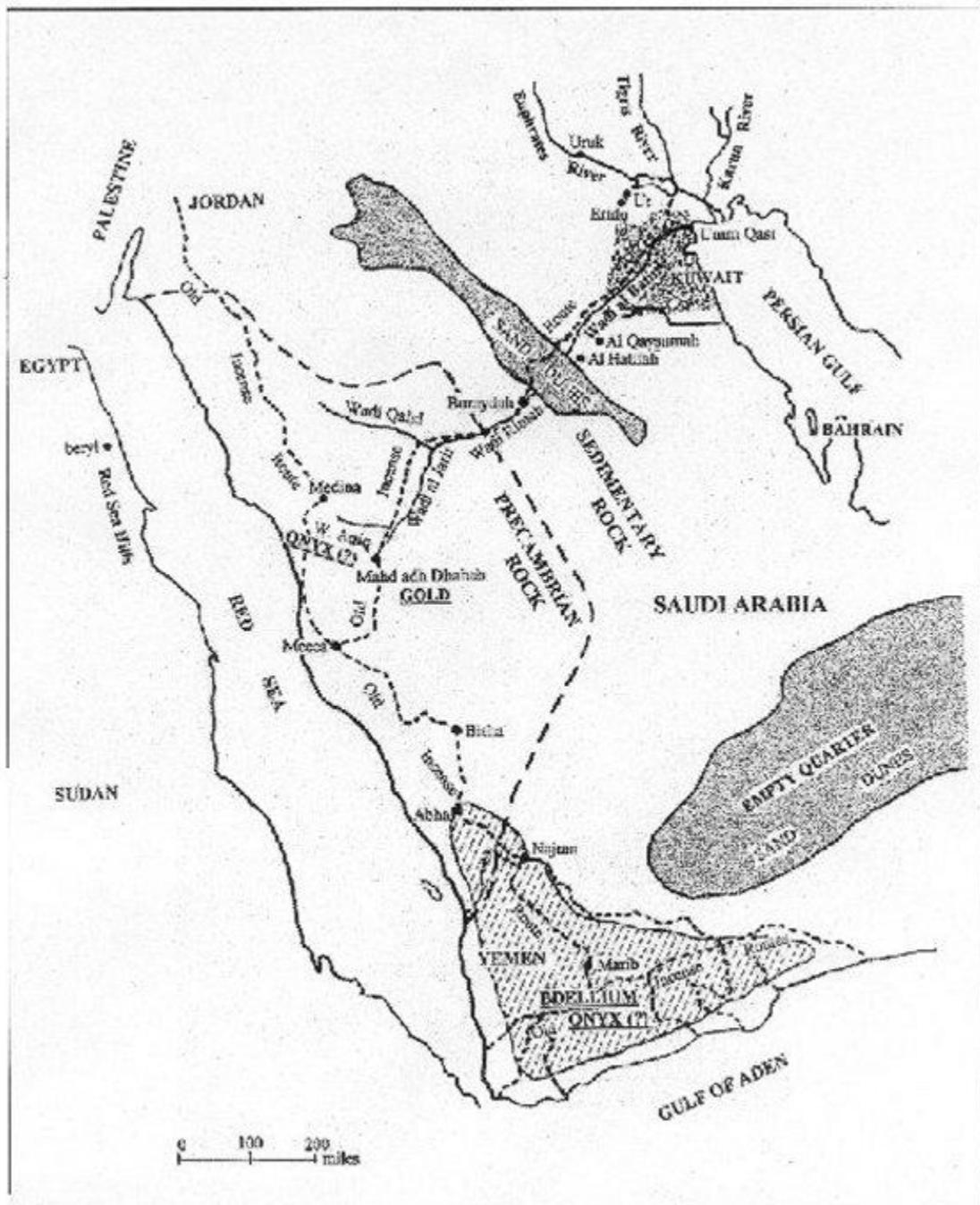


Fig. 1. Map of the "land of Hovilar" (Saudi Arabia and Yemen) showing the location of the old incense routes (short dashes);<sup>1</sup> the area where bdellium was grown (diagonal hatching);<sup>2</sup> Precambrian and sedimentary rock (long dashes between the two areas);<sup>3</sup> the gravel fan deposited by the Pishan River (gravel symbol);<sup>4</sup> and other places mentioned in the text.

I sat down gasping, staring at the eastern horizon, where it had disappeared. So. The manuscript was true. The phoenix did nest at the source of the Pishon, now dried. Why hadn't the egg hatched, possibly for thousands of years?

Normally the phoenix builds its nest, sets the nest and itself on fire, and out of the ashes comes the egg, which hatches. Obviously, the egg needs heat to hatch, which Hassan thoughtfully supplied through his kerosene stove. If it didn't hatch, then the blaze didn't create enough heat or didn't last long enough.

Regardless, the phoenix disappeared from history, except for the lingering records in Greece, Egypt, the Middle East, and Asia. To have come so close to capturing the fabled bird and have it fly away! Where would it have gone?

According to legend, the phoenix flew from Arabia to Egypt after it hatched. That must be why it flew east. But...it also carried the ashes of its nest and deposited them in a temple by the Nile. The eagle-sized bird I saw carried nothing. Perhaps it would come back?

While I ruminated on the dusty hillside, Hassan and Omar climbed from the cave.

"Was that...the simurgh?" Hassan gasped.

"Yes."

"It burst from the egg with a blaze of flame. I could feel its heat as it flew by me. Where did it go?"

"To the east. I think it'll come back."

"Why do you say so?"

"I believe it needs to gather the ashes of its nest. That seems to be instinctual."

"What will you do next, Andy?"

"Try to capture it."

"The simurgh is a large and powerful bird."

"I brought sedative doses suitable for shooting from my tranquilizer pistol."

"Will you shoot it as it enters the cave?"

"No, I'll wait inside the cave, hidden, while it seeks its nest. Could you take pictures, Hassan?"

"Yes."

"Could I help?" Omar asked.

"Yes. Let's get the car repaired and get some date palm branches."

"Why?"

"One of the traditions about the phoenix is that it builds its nest from the branches of the date palm. Thus, it would look for ashes of the date palm by its nest. Let's burn some and give it the ashes it needs."

Together, Omar and I levered the car out of the hole. Hassan and I left Omar with the tranquilizer pistol while we drove to the nearest oasis, back in the city. Returning with the palm branches, we built a fire of them, then gathered the ashes and carried them into the midst of the stone circle where we'd found the phoenix egg.

The setting sun provided only lurid light into the cave. I huddled in an alcove above and across from the phoenix's nest with my pistol. Hassan hid with his camera beneath a dark tarp on the floor.

My legs cramped, and I shifted back and forth to stretch my muscles. I'd been waiting for hours now. I'd give up after sunset.

Whoosh! Click. A flash of red, yellow, and blue landed in the nest. It carried a ball of something. I caught a scent. Myrrh! Myrrh resin was what the phoenix used to gather its ashes for the trip to Egypt.

I aimed carefully for the phoenix's breast. I was a capable shot, having been in the NRA since my Boy Scout years. The last thing I wanted was to harm the bird after it had survived thousands of years. I figured a shot in the breast was least likely to cause injury.

Crack! The gun sounded louder in the enclosed dome. The phoenix exploded into action! It leapt into the air and flew away even faster than it had come.

I was sure I'd hit it. It should collapse soon. I scrambled down and raced past Hassan and out of the cave.

Omar was there holding the other camera, his eyes wide with amazement.

"What happened when the phoenix came out?" I asked.

"Lightning. It flew like lightning," he said in Arabic.

"Flew where? You get pictures?" I spoke more quickly than I ever had in Arabic.

"There." He pointed to the purpling eastern horizon. "I have two pictures."

"And..." He stooped to the ground. "This fell from the phoenix."

It was the tranquilizing dart. I studied it. It was empty; the bird had gotten the full dose. It shouldn't have been able to fly more than a dozen feet. But it had flown out of sight to the east.

I shouldn't have expected normal drugs to work on paranormal birds.

"Have we lost the simurgh?" Hassan asked quietly.

"For now. My tranquilizer didn't work."

"Will simurgh return?"

"Let's see if it took the myrrh egg."

I climbed back into the cave and up to the phoenix's nest and saw the discarded egg. The phoenix had hollowed it out and filled it half full of ashes.

"The phoenix will probably come back!" I called down to Hassan and Omar. "It'll want its egg and ashes."

Later, as we ate around the kerosene stove, I asked my companions, "Normal drugs didn't work on the phoenix. What can I use?"

"The phoenix can heal itself. It would have to be something very powerful."

Omar laughed. "I have some hashish!"

I laughed too. "Why do you have that?"

He shrugged. "For injuries. It is good for pain."

"True. I'm willing to try anything. Perhaps even a poison."

"I saw some wormwood on the way to town."

"Really? That's what they use for absinthe. That's very powerful. Any other ideas? I think we'll only get one more chance at this bird. I can't believe how fast it flies!"

Hassan barked a laugh. "I have a quart of 'sid' in the car." Keeping a straight face, he said, "It's for disinfecting wounds."

I laughed too. "Sid" or "siddiq" was Arabic for "my friend." Siddiq was home-brewed alcohol, like moonshine in the States—and just as illegal in Saudi Arabia, a supposedly "dry" country.

"Cut or uncut?" I asked. Normally siddiq is diluted two to one prior to drinking with a mixer.

"Uncut."

"Whew! That makes it one-hundred-fifty- to one-hundred-eighty-proof alcohol. Kissing cousin to paint stripper." I thought a moment. "OK, let's do this. I'll take the hashish and let it soak in the sid overnight. Then we'll collect the wormwood tomorrow, grind it up, and add that to the mixture. Then I'll put it into the trunk capsule and give it a try on the phoenix. If this doesn't work, I'll have to try a net."

"Supposedly the simurgh is impossible to catch," Hassan said with audible doubt.

"Yes. It's Hobson's choice. When you have one alternative, you try it. I doubt anyone in all history has tried this concoction. It'd definitely be poisonous to a human. For a paranormal bird with supernatural recuperative powers, who knows what'll happen?"

Hassan and Omar contributed their drugs, and I blended them in Hassan's mason jar labeled in Arabic: *Disinfectant: do not drink*.

I got dizzy just from breathing the fumes. I was pretty sure the opioids in hashish were soluble in alcohol, as was absinthe. I sealed the jar tightly.

"I won't have any trouble sleeping tonight."

"When should we go for the wormwood? What if the phoenix comes with the dawn tomorrow?" Omar asked.

"I hadn't thought of that," I admitted. "It makes sense too. The phoenix is highly intelligent, and it may try to slip into the cave the first thing tomorrow morning, even before dawn." There! I'd said a whole sentence in Arabic without translating it first.

"Can we get it tonight?" Omar asked.

"In the dark?" Aside from the small town, there was no light in the desert.

"There'll be a little moon, and I know exactly where it is. We walked right by the bush."

"It's worth a try."

"You boys enjoy your search in the dark. I'll sit here and drink tea and read," Hassan said, turning a page in his book.

I recognized it—an old Arabic edition of *The Tales of Sinbad*, a late addition to *One Thousand and One Nights*

Driving carefully, I retraced our path from this morning. Even driving slowly, we went twice as fast as we could walk.

"Slow! Here it is, to the left," Omar said suddenly.

I could see nothing, but he stepped out confidently. I followed.

"Here." In a gully I saw a small bush perhaps three feet high. Examining the leaves with my flashlight, I saw they were gray green on top, white below.

"How much do you think we need, Omar?"

He shrugged. "My mother only used a few branches to make medicine."

I took a bundle of fresh and a bundle of old branches. I didn't know which would have the essence more strongly.

We made it back, where we discovered Hassan sound asleep. I also saw the jar of sid and hashish had leaked! It tipped on its side, and only about half the liquid was still there.

"Crap!"

"Perhaps this is good," Omar said.

"How?"

"Perhaps it will make the hashish more concentrated."

"Hmmm. Good idea. Let me try something." I mashed the wormwood branches and leaves into a paste and then put them in the jar. I took a cooking pot and poured water from my canteen into it. Then I placed the pot on the cookstove. Once it was boiling, I put the sid-hashish-

wormwood mixture into the boiling water. I knew alcohol boiled at a lower temperature than water. Soon it was boiling vigorously.

I watched the mixture carefully, and when it was less than a cup, I took it out.

"I'll let this steep overnight. Let's get some sleep. We'll have to get up well before light." I set my small, leather-covered traveler alarm clock and left the world of waking like a falling plinth.

I dreamed of a fire-alarm drill in my high school. Everyone was yelling, "Get out! Get out!"

"Get up!" Omar yelled, shaking me.

"Ah!" I rubbed my sleep-filled eyes and saw the eastern horizon was slightly light, while the stars blazed above in the indigo desert sky. Hassan snored, oblivious to all.

As I filled a tranquilizer dart with the hashish and absinthe tincture, I said, "I'd better use the tarp for cover. I don't want the phoenix to see me and fly away."

"I will hide by the pool and take pictures," Omar said.

We quickly moved into position. Less than an hour later, *whoosh*, and a dazzling yellow-and-scarlet bird lighted in the nest. It had two long blue feathers in its tail. It quickly packed the egg with ashes and then began to seal the myrrh ball with its beak and clawed foot. I shot it from under the tarp.

It screamed "Kee-ah!" and flew away, as Omar had said, like lightning. I blinked, trying to process what I had seen. One instant it had been there with the dart sticking out of its scarlet breast. Then with a flicker of movement, it and the egg vanished up the tunnel. The only comparable acceleration I had ever seen was a hummingbird zipping out of sight from a

standstill at a feeder in an eye blink. The dart fell off during that sudden movement and clicked on the stone below.

I sighed. We'd lost it for good. It had simply ignored the dart's effect. It had no reason to return for five hundred years. According to the phoenix legend, it builds a pyre every five hundred years, burns itself, and leaves an egg behind. The egg then hatches. In this cave, it looked like the egg hadn't hatched after the fire. Perhaps a flood had quenched the fire?

"I got some good pictures," Omar said. "Did you shoot it?"

"Yes. It didn't seem to do any good."

"Inshallah. Perhaps it is for the best."

Coming out of the cave, Hassan greeted us. "Good news, Mr. Zach! I got some good pictures of the phoenix as it left the cave."

"I'm surprised. It moved faster than my eye could track."

"Perhaps it was slowed by the drug. It moved no faster than a normal eagle or heron. It vanished over that ridge to the east."

"Was it climbing?"

"No, it was level."

"Hmmm. I've come this far. Let me see if it came down in the wadi over the ridge."

"I will stay behind and prepare tea," Hassan said.

"I will come with you," Omar said.

"Thank you, both."

To the top of the hill I trudged, carrying my binoculars.

"Do you think the phoenix will be there?" Omar said.

"I hope so, but I also don't want to hope too much."

"I think it will. I think the hashish got to it. What will you do when you get it?"

"I plan to take a blood sample and let it go. If it's there."

"I'm sure you'll get it. Inshallah."

We got to the top and looked into the next wadi. Dry, gray stone greeted us. I scanned up the wadi to the peak of the mountain and down to the base. No sign of the phoenix.

"Should we climb the next ridge too?" Omar asked.

"Let's do it."

Down into the wadi we clambered. Back up the next, steeper ridge, crawling on our hands and knees in the sliding scree. I paused to tug my leather gloves on to protect my palms from the sharp rocks.

At the top, the dazzling rising sun greeted us. There was no wadi, just a broad, sloping shoulder of the mountain. Looking down the slope, I saw nothing. Looking up, I saw nothing.

"What's that?" Omar asked, pointing toward the top of the mountain.

"What's what?" I said in English, too tired and discouraged to translate in my head. I looked where he pointed but saw nothing.

"I see something!" He ran up the slope like a goat.

I followed him clumsily, feeling like a draft horse chasing a thoroughbred Arabian.

Near the peak, Omar knelt by a bush of myrrh. I saw it had its top branches broken off. That must have been what he saw. In a dark, sharp shadow, in a gully at the base, lay the phoenix.

"Is it alive?" I panted.

"Yes, but soundly asleep."

Even in repose, in the shade, the plumage dazzled. Iridescent scarlet, metallic gold, and shimmery blue feathers clothed a bird nobler than an eagle. I took an empty tranquilizer dart and stuck the bird in the breast. I had an eyedropper from my medicine kit, which I used to coax drops of that precious blood from the world's only phoenix into my capsule, through the hollow dart.

It took over ten minutes to fill it. I noticed the phoenix was exceedingly hot blooded—enough that the blood's heat hurt my fingers through the capsule. I wrapped my shirt around it to protect them.

"There. I'm done. Let's take it back to the cave and place it and its egg in its nest."

As we climbed down, we took turns carrying the phoenix in our arms. It was too hot to hold for long.

"Omar, you'd better take it now. It's burning me."

He wrapped it in the bottom of his robe. Then turning his midnight-brown eyes to me, he said in perfect English, "I haven't been honest with you."

"Ah. I see. Why did you hide your beautiful English?"

"To disguise me from Hassan."

"Why would you do that?"

"If he knew who I was, he'd return me home, and I wouldn't get to go on this adventure."

"So who are you?"

"Do you promise not to tell?"

"Have you committed a crime?"

He laughed. "No, except in running from my father."

"It's good for a teenaged boy to have adventures. I won't tell your secret."

"How about a teenaged girl?"

"Them too. What are you saying?" A suspicion arose in my thoughts.

"I am a girl," he—no—she said simply.

"Oh! I see the issue."

"You only see part of it. My father is Muhammed al-Jeddah. I am Myriam."

Rocked by this revelation, I stared frankly at her. Was this dirty little urchin the dark-eyed girl smelling of jasmine? "Won't he worry about you?"

"Extremely. He worries all the time as it is. He needs to see I am growing and need freedom and that he can trust me."

"He may try to marry you off."

"I hope so. I have someone in mind."

"Doesn't he select your husband?"

"Theoretically, yes. Practically, he'll be so relieved to have me back, I believe he'll go along with my idea."

"I hope he does, for your sake. I've grown to like you, Omar or Myriam, dirty or clean."

She laughed and skipped away down the slope to our camp, while I trudged on, carrying the hot and heavy phoenix.

We placed the phoenix and its egg carefully in its nest in the cave. We packed our Land Rover and headed home with our precious cargo. I stopped in Mahd adh Dhahab and bought a cooler and dry ice and packed the blood capsule.

"Omar" slipped away as soon as we returned to Jeddah. "I must go and see how Abdullah is feeling." I smiled at him/her.

After checking back into my hotel and cleaning up, I went to Muhammed's stall in the bazaar. It was closed. I knocked on the door to his home at the back of the stall.

"Who is it?" came a weary voice.

"Andy Zach."

"I'm sorry, Andy. I cannot see you today. I am in grief over my daughter, Myriam. She has disappeared, and I cannot find her."

"I have good news for you, my friend! I saw her when I returned to Jeddah. She should be home soon!" There. That skirted the truth very nicely.

Muhammed's tear-stained face brightened. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely! I last saw her near my hotel, and she waved at me!" Again, true.

"Oh, now you must come in. I must prepare for her!"

"Allow me to help you, my friend. And I have more good news."

"I cannot be any happier than to see my daughter again. I can't imagine what happened to her. She disappeared the day you and Hassan left."

"I'm sure she'll have an interesting story. The other good news is, we captured the phoenix, the simurgh!"

"Wonder upon wonder! Still, it pales to nothing compared to my daughter coming home. But tell me anyway."

As we cleaned the house, I told him the tale of the phoenix, its nest, its egg hatching, and its escape. I told him of it shrugging off the tranquilizer and then succumbing to the hashish, absinthe, and siddiq mixture.

"Siddiq! Of the three drugs, that is the most potent!" He smiled. "Not that I've ever tasted it."

"Perhaps you used some for disinfecting a wound?"

"The very thing! How prescient you are! Yes, I cleaned my wound and grew dizzy from the fumes. How wise is Mohammed to forbid it!"

"Inshallah," I said piously.

After he bathed, Muhammed dressed in his finest white thob, or robe, with his red-and-white keffiyeh.

"Now I will open my shop in my finest garb so I may watch for my daughter."

I helped him roll the bookshelves from the storage closet and set up the canopy. He beamed and called at passersby in the bazaar and soon attracted considerable business. Even when he was seated at coffee with customers, his eyes roamed the crowded alley outside the store.

Muhammed had just made a big sale when his neck jerked around. Following his gaze, I saw a woman in a black hajib approaching.

"Myriam!" he yelled. Heedless of his dignity and formal wear, he ran to her.

They embraced, and he lifted her off her feet and then practically carried her to his shop.

"I will close for the rest of the day. I must celebrate my daughter's return!"

I closed up the shop, and then Muhammed called from the door, "Andy! You must celebrate with me! You brought me the news and my daughter!"

I came into their home. The caterers had arrived, and they had laid out a feast of goat, lamb, rice, dates, ripe figs from Muhammed's own tree, and freshly baked pita bread.

"Sit! Sit!" Muhammed insisted. "My joy overflows, and I must spill it on you. I will serve you and my daughter today. For too many years she has served me, an old man, with no thanks."

Myriam removed her hajib, showing her sparkling eyes. "Father, thank you. I have a great story to tell you."

"Please, let it wait. First, let us feast and rejoice!"

A group of musicians began playing softly.

After the feast, Muhammed turned to me and said, "First, let Andy tell the tale of the phoenix. Leave out no detail, for Myriam has not heard it, and I know you only gave me a cursory account."

I spent the next hour recounting the whole story, interrupted by questions from both Muhammed and Myriam. She usually queried about Omar, asking me for my opinion and view of him, and usually with a sly smile.

Muhammed commented, "I had not met this Omar before and was doubtful of him. But from your account, he seems to be a fine young man."

"I am so jealous of him, to be able to go on such an adventure!" Myriam complained.

"You have been on your own adventure. It is time for you to tell of it."

"Thank you, Father. I am eager to speak of it. But I must have your promise that you will not punish me for running away without telling you."

"Myriam, I am hurt that you would think I would punish you when I am full of joy at your return. If I intended to punish you, would I throw a feast?"

"No."

"Would I run in the marketplace in my best clothing to carry you to our home?"

"No."

"There is your promise."

"Very well. I will tell you my story. It began the night you and Andy contacted Hassan to take Andy to the source of the Pishon. My heart burned within me to go on that adventure with the young American student. But I knew you would never permit it, Father.

"That night, after you went to bed, I cut my hair like a boy. I dressed in the clothing of a serving boy. I had a dental prosthetic I had previously made for just this type of occasion, to give me crooked teeth. I smudged my face with dirt. And I got Abdullah to let me go in his place."

Myriam then related the whole of the phoenix story from her point of view. She concluded, "I left Andy at his hotel, went back to Abdullah, got my clothing, washed up, and walked home. I have never been so happy in my life, since mother died, to be on this adventure. Now what do you say, Father?"

Muhammed's face had been blank since Myriam began her story. He looked somberly at her, and slowly a tear trickled from his eye.

"My heart is at war with itself. I am proud of your character and accomplishments, and ashamed. Not ashamed of you, but of me. I should have found a husband for you this year. You are now the age your mother was when she married me."

"Have you considered Abdullah?"

"Have you?" Muhammed's teary eyes sharpened. He now looked like the skilled negotiator and salesman he was.

"Y-yes," she said. "He said he would ask you."

"He has. Both today and before today. I hesitated because he seemed so young and inexperienced. Yet today I remember. I remember I was no older or more experienced when I married your mother. Bring the phone! I must call him and tell him I grant him the greatest gift of all—the hand of my daughter."

"Ullu! Ullu! Ullu!" Myriam trilled in joy.

Muhammed and Myriam insisted I stay until the wedding. I did, giving them the finest camera I could find. *Take a picture of the phoenix, if you can*, I wrote on the card.

After the joy of the wedding and the tears of departure, I flew back to London with my precious frozen blood sample in my carry-on luggage. I did not wish to waste a single drop. I would plan how to use it to revive animals.

After I got my PhD at Cambridge, I returned to study cloning at Case Western Reserve. I realized that I could clone the phoenix from the blood sample. I learned how to isolate the phoenix DNA from its blood and place it into an eagle's egg.

I worried as I warmed the phoenix/eagle egg. I was not sure of the temperature it could take. The eggshell was not rock hard like the phoenix egg. I attached a thermocouple and used a laser beam to candle the egg. The embryo was quiescent. I slowly heated the egg. One twenty. One thirty. One forty. One fifty. The embryo began to move. I kept it at one fifty for a day. Then it burst forth in scarlet-and-gold glory.

I feared it would instinctively fly away. I gathered myrrh and palm ashes for its hatching. The chick was already as large as a macaw as it emerged. It looked at me with intelligent curiosity, but no fear. It ate a hole in the ball of myrrh. It flew to the myrrh bush I kept in a pot, gathered more, and ate it. It doubled in size, to that of a young eagle.

The next day it gathered the eggshell pieces, not the ashes, and put them in the hole it had eaten in the ball of myrrh. It closed up the hole, picked up the ball, and placed it in the potted myrrh bush. The bird flew to the door in the lab, pecked on it, and then looked at me. I opened it.

The phoenix flew down the hall to the nearest window. It pecked at it and looked at me. I opened the exit door with a sigh.

"This is the way out if you wish."

It flew to my shoulder, rubbed its head on my cheek, and then flew out. I watched it fly around the university, then return and land on my shoulder.

This was my first phoenix. I named it Scheherazade. Later, I cloned the second phoenix and bred the two. But that is another story.

*This was my first short story. I planned for more stories from my early years in this volume, but they just didn't come to fruition.*