

THE BATTLE O'ER

BUZZING ... TICKLING, all over his face. He started to move his arm, but stopped with a groan. His hand felt like a club, and what was wrong with his shoulder?

He turned his face from the heat of the sun and tried to open his eyes. One was glued shut, but the other one opened, then gradually focused on something so close that he could just barely see it. A face? Or, rather, what had been a face, one eye socket smashed and the bloody mess black with flies. That poor fellow probably never knew what hit him.

What *had* hit him?

And what had hit *him*? Why was he lying on the ground next to a corpse?

He turned his head—slowly—the other way, and saw another body part, a knee that didn't look right. Somebody must have hit that guy pretty hard to bend his leg in the wrong direction. More flies.

He tried to raise his head, then decided that it hurt too much to move.

Why wouldn't his other eye open?

He reached to rub it with his left hand. The tickling stopped and with a loud buzz a swarm of flies appeared before his good eye. He rubbed the other eye until it finally opened, then realized that his hand was smeared and covered with flakes of dried blood.

"O God" he whispered, "I'm covered in blood! Am I dying? Where am I? And how did I get here? Was there a fight last night? Was there a party? Was I there?"

There were spots moving in front of his eyes, spots that blocked the sun, but he couldn't focus enough to figure out what they were.

He went to roll onto his right side, but his body wouldn't move quite right. His right shoulder was on fire, and he couldn't move the fingers of his right hand. They wouldn't move, but gripped something—something hard—and he couldn't loosen them. He sank back to the ground (if he had known, he sank back about one knuckle-width) and lay quietly with his eyes closed. It was about all that he could do at the moment.

As he lay there, exhausted with his exertions, footsteps slowly approached:

"This one's pretty clean."

"Yeah. Get his clothes too. That's good stuff."

"Put the gear together and the clothes over there."

"Not too much blood on him."

"Keep going—we don't have all day."

A shadow on his face.

"What should we do with him—he's still breathing."

"That runt? Just leave him. He started it, they'll be back, and there'll be hell to pay when they are."

"How many? A thousand?"

"Near enough, I'd say. Enough to keep us busy for a bit, and no fear—none of *them* will be back!"

A snort, a chuckle, voices and footsteps faded away.

Alone.

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He must have slept, because he woke up with a burning throat and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. This time he remembered to move cautiously, and managed to roll over onto his stomach to heave himself up onto his hands and knees. He looked around. The sun was still high in the sky, so not much time had passed. He was so thirsty that he could hardly think straight, and he could only hear the buzzing of flies, and an occasional croak. He got both eyes open and look around.

As far as he could see were nothing but dead bodies, all men and boys, most armed with spears or swords, sticks or clubs, some lying as if asleep, others twisted and contorted, many covered with black spots that moved and occasionally lifted to swarm and settle again as the flies laid eggs in the rotting flesh.

The croaking turned out to be from crowds of vultures—he himself was in the center of a small ring of about ten birds, all as tall as his head (he was still on his hands and knees), and all shuffling nervously, watchful and ready to flee at too much sign of life. More scavengers swarmed overhead, circling in the sun, spiraling down to land upon this banquet of death—the spots that he had seen when he first awoke.

All of this at a glance.

He ached to lie down again, to rest, but his outraged body suddenly screamed.

“Water”, he mumbled, and looked around again, still squinting against the harsh sun. “O God, water, or I die.”

There was no answer—no voice, no sound but the buzzing of the flies and the occasional croak of the vulture (they had nothing to fight over, nothing about which to complain; there was plenty of meat for all, and for days to come).

“Water,” he croaked again. “God, give me water or I’ll die.” He was too weary, too sore, too *dry*, to do more than mumble the words, and he was not even sure that he said them aloud.

“I ... can’t,” he thought, and slumped back to the ground.

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He awoke to a foreign sound, and the smell of something that was not blood, not rotting flesh, but rather sweet and clean and fresh. He opened his eyes again (the pain was not so great now, and the sun slightly lower) and saw, to his dazed astonishment, a tiny stream of water trickling down the face of a rock into a small pool, just a few feet away.

He crawled to it, unable to do more than let his head drop into the water so that he could drink. Then, with the temporary assuagement of his thirst, a sharp pain made him look down at his right hand. His fingers were clenched around a tooth-filled bone, covered with blood, bits of hair, and gore. He managed to pry his fingers loose and, gasped when he tried to flex them, saying, “With an ass’s jawbone, heaps on heaps; with an ass’s jawbone, I slew a thousand.”¹

Think you it a light thing to serve the true and living god?

fcj
Trinity MMIX

¹See Judges 15.15-19. I have reversed the last two events—his dropping of the jawbone and the naming of *En-hakkore* (“the spring of one-who-calls”).