

SAHARA

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21. Deathtrap in the Desert



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DEATHTRAP IN THE DESERT

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SUMMARY

The story commences with Somala, a beautiful Arabian woman, journeying through the Sahara desert aboard a camel caravan. She is returning to her father, a respected sheik, after an extended holiday in Algiers. The caravan is suddenly assailed by a group of riders who resemble Arabs but whose conduct betrays their appearance. Three of the caravan drivers, along with several camels, are shot dead. Kemal, Somala's protector, attempts to intervene but is also shot. The assailants, led by a tall man with blue eyes, abduct Somala with the intention of selling her.

Teuns Stegmann, a member of the French Foreign Legion, is dispatched with Captain D'Arlan and a small contingent of soldiers to investigate the abduction. They follow the kidnappers' trail, discovering signs of a struggle and the remnants of Somala's caravan. A piece of green silk, tied to a vulture's leg, provides a crucial clue. D'Arlan's instincts and Teuns's keen powers of observation play a significant role. As the search progresses, the atmosphere becomes increasingly ominous. Tension mounts, dangers lurk around every corner, and unexpected events unfold.

The climax approaches rapidly. D'Arlan and his men, including Teuns, are led into an ambush, trapped in a ravine within the Atlas Mountains. The discovery of the kidnappers' hideout and the true extent of their brutal scheme, a slave-trading operation, heightens the tension to a breaking point. Teuns's resourcefulness and bravery, even in the face of death, prove decisive. Will he and his comrades escape, or will they fall victim to the ruthless slave traders?

EXTRACT

D'Arlan's voice cut sharply through the silence. "You fools!" he said to Fritz and Podolski. "What the devil possessed you to fire? We are likely being watched, but I don't want to proclaim to the entire world that we are here!" But then his expression changed abruptly. "Or perhaps it doesn't matter either," he said. "Our presence is known in any case. That is now perfectly clear. And Legionnaires Petacci and Ritter, remove the pack saddle from the dead horse's back."

While the other men kept watch on the cliffs above them, Petacci and Ritter transferred the load carried by the dead horse onto another packhorse.

"Let us get away from here," said D'Arlan. "Apparently, it is too dangerous here beneath the cliffs. It would be quite ironic if a member of the French Foreign Legion were to be killed by a falling rock, wouldn't it?"

At a brisk trot, D'Arlan led them away from the cliffs, straight towards the mouth of the ravine that veered south-westwards here and narrowed into the gorge through which they had spotted the tent.

Now these seven legionnaires were alert. They regarded the cliffs on either side of them with the utmost caution, and D'Arlan urged them to move faster, so they would not present such easy targets.

As they entered the narrow gorge, D'Arlan gave a curt command. "Legionnaires, watch the cliffs on both sides and above us. I will watch ahead. Keep your eyes open."

And with that, they moved into the gorge, passing through it swiftly. Here, the water seeped more strongly from the cliffs, and the ground they moved over was exceedingly damp.

This gorge was not long, and just as they were about to emerge from it, D'Arlan suddenly halted.

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Chapter 1

LOST CARAVAN

A dark Arabian beauty, her long, lustrous hair flowing, sat contentedly atop the swaying camel moving swiftly southwards across the Sahara sand in the middle of the caravan. A pleasant, languid feeling washed over her, for her memories were sweet. She thought back to the delightful days in Algiers where she had spent a long holiday. She sat reminiscing about the soft lights in the nightclub. She thought of the handsome men who had fallen over themselves to entertain her. She thought of all the honour bestowed upon her, of the wonderful Western music to whose rhythm she had danced in the arms of so many different charming men.

Her only regret was that this delightful interlude in her life could not have lasted longer. This is the life for a young girl, she thought. That was why she felt a little reluctant now to return to her father's camp, far in the southern Sahara, beyond the hills of the Atlas Mountains. She would have liked to stay permanently in Algiers. There, after all, was pleasure and excitement. And yet, she longed for the normal life with her people, far away at the southern Oasis. That is where she grew up. It is the world she loved, and therefore she was now in a hurry. Sometimes she wished the camels would move even faster. When they departed this morning, she had asked the leader of the caravan if they could not perhaps move quicker. He had promised to push the camels harder, but no matter how fast they travelled, it would still take several days before they covered the great distance through the Sahara to the dwelling place of her father, the respected and influential old sheik of a tribe of Berber-Arabs.

Somala, for that was her name, was not exposed to the scorching rays of the Sahara sun. She sat in the coolness of a large canopy fitted onto the camel's back. It was a beautiful construction with a framework of

light cane over which hung the soft folds of expensive Oriental silk. Somala was completely hidden within this canopy on the camel's back. She felt secluded and free where she sat. She glanced again with pleasure at the folds of the soft green silk that shimmered and swayed with the camel's movement.

Then she extended her slender hand, pushed aside the folds of the costly fabric, and peered out over the vast, shimmering expanse of sand they were traversing. She gazed far ahead, and beyond the horizon, she saw the Atlas Mountains rising from the haze, reaching towards the heavens. Before her, she saw the other camels. She noticed the drivers urging them on swiftly, and she was grateful, for this long journey through the Sahara always bored her. Every year, her father sent her to Algiers for a time to expose her to civilisation. In his kind heart, he realised that life at his oasis must sometimes bore her, for it was simple and often monotonous, especially for a beautiful young woman like her, Somala.

Somala shifted her body within the cushions on the camel's back, settled more comfortably, and closed her eyes to try and doze a little.

Somala was just on the verge of slumber when a single gunshot echoed, harsh and cruel, across the desert. She started so violently that she sat bolt upright, feeling her heart pound in her throat.

The next moment, her shock deepened as another shot rang out. Another, and another.

The caravan had abruptly come to a standstill, and she heard loud shouts exchanged back and forth.

She ripped away the folds of the silk partition and looked out. There was confusion. With profound shock, Somala witnessed two or three of the drivers lying dead on the sand. A few camels also lay bleeding on the sand.

Kemal, her father's confidant who accompanied her on this journey to protect her with his life, came running from the front, grabbing her

camel by the muzzle. He made the animal lie down immediately.

“What is happening, Kemal?” Somala asked, bewildered. “Who is firing at us?”

“I do not understand it at all, Your Highness,” Kemal replied. “It happened so suddenly that at first, I did not know what was going on. But now I see riders approaching across the sand.”

“Riders?”

“Yes, riders, Your Highness. I cannot comprehend it. The men look like Arabs to me.”

“But why would they shoot at us then?”

“Allah alone knows that, Your Highness.”

“How many have been shot dead?”

“Three drivers and two camels, Your Highness.”

“But this is incomprehensible,” said Somala. “Why would Arabs fire upon our caravan?”

“That is what I cannot understand, Your Highness,” answered Kemal. “There they come,” he said, gesturing with his hand. She looked in the direction he indicated and then saw the long line of riders advancing straight towards them. They rode three abreast, and yet they were Arabs.

“Why do they ride like that?” Somala asked Kemal.

“That is what I cannot understand, Your Highness,” said Kemal, “because Arabs do not ride three abreast like that.”

He immediately moved away again, issued a few swift commands, and then walked a few paces across the sand towards the approaching column. There he stopped, his hand on the hilt of his scimitar, for he was Somala’s protector. Anyone who touched her would have to do so

over his dead body.

Standing there, Kemal could see that these riders were all mounted on large, strong horses. The animals were well-fed and in good condition. He stood there frowning, partly because the reflection of the Sahara sun was so strong, partly because he was trying to determine what peculiar column this was, riding down upon them.

Behind Kemal, the few remaining drivers of the caravan also stood with their hands on their scimitars. They wisely kept their old Arab rifles out of sight, for Kemal realised it would be futile for their small number to open fire on this column with their antiquated weapons.

When the foremost pair of riders in the column were a few paces from Kemal, he raised his scimitar high and signalled for them to halt. One of the lead riders also raised his hand in the air, signalling those following him to stop.

“I am Kemal, guardian of Somala, the daughter of my sheik. Why have you shot at me and killed my men? This is a peaceful caravan.”

“Where are you travelling, Kemal?” asked one of the three men who had stopped at the very front. He spoke Arabic, but there was something in his voice that Kemal did not quite understand. And the man’s face was also strange. Not only his face, but the faces of all three men at the front. They were dressed like Arabs. Beneath their cloaks, even the tips of scimitars protruded, but little could be seen of their faces. A covering extended over the mouth and nose, up to just below the eyes. This was not overly unusual to Kemal. He knew that Arabs often did this to protect their faces when a strong wind blew or when the sun was extremely hot, but at that moment, there was no wind, and the sun was no hotter than usual. And yet these three men wore those face coverings that left practically only the eyes exposed.

And something else struck Kemal, stirring something deep within him. Those three pairs of eyes he saw there were not the eyes of Arabs. The eyes of two of the men were bright blue, and those of the third, light

brown. These were not the dark, fiery eyes of the Arabs.

“I asked you a question, Kemal,” the tall man on the left said again.

“I am taking Her Highness, Somala, back to the dwelling place of her father, the sheik of the Berber tribe who lives far southwards from here at the oasis.”

“Where have you come from now, Kemal?” the man asked.

“We come from Algiers,” the faithful servant replied. “I ask again. Who are you, and why did you shoot my men? We have done nothing to you.”

“You ask many questions, Kemal,” said the tall rider with his piercing blue eyes.

“Any man would ask such a question,” Kemal answered, for Kemal was a fearless Arab. He took his duty seriously and did not possess a single cowardly hair on his head.

He saw the tall man now looking past him, and he knew what the man was looking at. He was looking at Somala’s canopy. Suddenly, he spurred his horse with his hands and tried to move forward, but it was then that Kemal raised his scimitar again and quickly jumped in front of the rider. “I do not know who you are, tall traveller,” said Kemal, “but I will not permit you to approach Her Highness Somala. If you wish to speak with her, you may speak through me, but you shall not go closer.”

Kemal saw something flash in the man’s eyes, something like hatred or anger, he himself did not know what.

“As I have already said, you talk a great deal, Kemal. I wish to speak with Her Highness Somala, but now you stand before my horse.”

He said it calmly, and in his blue eyes, there was even a smile.

“And as I have already said,” replied Kemal, “I am the protector of Her

Highness, Somala. Do not attempt to approach her, for I will not allow it. I want to know why you shot some of my men. We are innocent. We have done nothing.”

The tall stranger did not respond but spurred his horse again with his heels.

Kemal seized the riding horse by the bit.

One of the two strangers at the very front, next to the tall man, drew his revolver like lightning from beneath his robe.

And it was then that the high female voice came clear and commanding through the silence.

“Kemal!” called Somala. “Let the stranger approach me. It is an order.”

Kemal immediately released the horse’s bit and swung around. He saw that Somala had dismounted from the resting camel. She stood there on the sand, an incredible vision of beauty. Her lush black hair glistened in the sun, and her almost translucent gown clung to every curve of her body. It seemed as though the large earrings shot fire as the sunlight caught them. Her eyes were narrowed and fixed intently on the tall stranger.

“Let him approach, Kemal,” she commanded again, for she had seen how the middle stranger at the front had drawn a revolver. And Kemal, the faithful, brave, intrepid Kemal, was the last man she wanted to lose, for if she lost him, she too would be lost, she knew that very well.

Kemal stood aside, bewildered, and the tall rider spurred his horse with his heels, riding immediately up to Somala.

With his sabre still in hand, Kemal also stepped closer.

“Who are you and where do you come from?” Somala asked defiantly as the rider halted beside her. “Why did you have innocent people shot dead? And some of our camels too. We are here in the middle of the desert. How can we manage without our camels?”

“We merely wanted to bring you to a halt,” said the tall stranger with a short, cynical, indifferent laugh.

“If my father hears of this, you will pay,” said Somala.

“No, your father will not hear of this, fair Somala,” he answered.

“Father will know,” she said courageously. “One day is one day, then he will know. I asked you who you are. Who are you who looks like an Arab, but is not an Arab?”

“I,” said the tall stranger, “am the terror of the Sahara. Everyone fears me, but no one knows who I am. And those who follow me are the bravest of the brave.”

Kemal had been observing who followed the stranger. Their horses were large, sturdy, and fully grown. Their saddles were not the usual Arab saddles, they were expensive military saddles. Yet the men riding the horses were Arabs, except for these three at the very front. That was what he could not fathom. What sort of Arabs were these who rode such large horses and used such expensive saddles?

“You are a beautiful woman, Somala,” said the tall stranger. “Such beauty as yours does not belong in the Sahara desert. You belong in a palace of princes. You belong in the harem of the King.”

“And what do you want, and what have you come to do?” asked Somala, fury glittering in her eyes. “Our journey is long, and I cannot stand talking to you all day.”

He laughed again. Then he said, “We have come to fetch you, Somala.”

“Come to fetch me?”

“Yes, we have come to fetch you, Somala. We have heard much of your beauty, and now I can understand that I heard the truth when they said you are the most beautiful woman in the southern Sahara. That is why we came to fetch you.”