

TAMAR SERIES

1. Tamar of the Forest



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TAMAR OF THE FOREST

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SUMMARY

In the dense, untamed jungles bordering Uganda and the Belgian Congo, a covert expedition encounters a world far removed from civilization. Tasked with a mysterious mission cloaked in secrecy, the group's composed yet commanding leader, Sandra Voronej, must navigate tensions among her companions while contending with unseen dangers lurking in the wilderness.

Their journey takes an unexpected turn when they encounter Tamar, a formidable and enigmatic figure who appears both man and legend. His unmatched strength, connection to nature, and enigmatic origins spark intrigue and fear. As the team ventures deeper into the forbidden jungle, they are drawn into a clash between survival, loyalty, and hidden agendas.

When Sandra is taken by Tamar, she is thrust into his primal world, a realm governed by instincts, trust, and an unspoken bond with the wild. Through Tamar's eyes, she glimpses a unique perspective on humanity and nature, while her disappearance tests her companions' resolve and reveals the true extent of their mission's stakes.

In a story rich with peril, beauty, and mystery, "Tamar of the Forest" explores the clash between modernity and the primal, weaving a tale of survival, discovery, and the unexpected connections forged in the depths of the wilderness. As secrets unravel, the jungle reveals that the greatest challenges lie not in the wild, but in the hearts of those who tread its shadowed paths.

EXTRACT

Not an hour later, Tamar breaks through the edge of the forest and descends to the ground, where he immediately moves on a fast trot between the massive boulders, against the slopes of the mountains. Halfway between the ravines, he looks for a suitable place, and according to his judgment, it is on the road that Sandra and her companions will follow, if they are indeed on their way to the crater of his lost tribe.

His muscles bulge prominently on his back and arms as he moves a few large rocks closer to the edge of a cliff. Sweat streams down his body, but he doesn't rest until Skarnal warns him from the ravine that Sandra and her group are approaching. Then he lies flat on his stomach and waits patiently. He has positioned the rocks so that he can push them, one by one, with a light nudge onto the group below, as soon as they come within striking distance.

His blue eyes are expressionless. They are as calm as those of a predator who, with the wisdom and philosophy of the forest, lies in wait for its prey.

And yet, there is a turmoil in his mind. As far as the three men with Sandra are concerned, he will let them die without the slightest remorse. The same goes for the girl, at least that's what his logic tells him, a logic stemming from the codes and principles of the people among whom he grew up. People who made rules and laws and thus rose above the mental level of animals. Emotionally, however, he still feels drawn to her. She is something precious to him that he would like to claim for himself, to love and protect.

1. TAMAR OF THE FOREST

Chapter 1

ONE MUST DISAPPEAR

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s a foregone conclusion. The man must die.” Marko Steffen’s voice is edgy with impatience. Standing in front of the window in the small hotel room, he rubs his hand over his forehead and sweaty scalp, framed by sparse, black hair.

“I think you’re being too hasty with your conclusions, Marko.”

“Too hasty!” Marko whirls around. The wings of his sharp nose twitch with indignation. His gaze is dark and even slightly hostile as he glares at the girl who has answered him so coolly.

Sandra Voronej’s green eyes do not waver from his. Around her full lips is the subtle smile that lends an unfathomable expression to her beautiful features. Her copper-brown hair hangs over her cheek on one side, and the light summer dress reveals her bare neck, shoulders, and the perfect curves of her slender body. In the oppressive heat, she looks cool and at ease, as usual. Despite his irritation, her beauty makes the blood rush faster through the older man’s veins.

“Too hasty, yes,” she repeats, and her rich, slightly husky voice heightens the great mystery and total aloofness of her personality. It is as if her words incite the others to anger. “We’ve barely discussed the matter yet.”

“What is there to discuss?” Steffen exclaims. “Here we are, a million miles from nowhere, between heaven and earth and...!”

“We are on the border between Uganda and the Belgian Congo,” she interrupts him calmly. “Which one is heaven?”

“It is undoubtedly hell that awaits us in the Congo!” Her light mockery has not escaped him.

“I must remind you, Marko,” she says coolly, “that we are not actually encouraged to use Biblical words excessively.”

“You must be kidding!” he bursts out. “Here we’re dealing with matters of vital importance and you...”

“And I refuse to discuss it until you have calmed down. In your current agitated state, you cannot reason logically.”

Marko Steffen clenches his fists in a shudder of frustration. He turns to

the window as if he wants to seek help from outside.

“What possessed them to send a woman with us, I don’t know,” he grumbles sourly and in a martyred tone, like one who has already endured more than he can bear.

“That is a matter no one asked you to contemplate,” she remarks reprovingly. “I have not yet questioned your qualifications as an atomic expert, let alone Dan’s as an engineer, or...”

“I’m not questioning anything,” Steffen interrupts her hastily but dejectedly. “I just want us to resolve this matter. No one could have made more thorough preparations than we have. We are an innocent group of vacationers who want to come and hunt big game in the Congo. But hardly do we arrive this morning in this desolate corner of civilization than the damned fellow also shows up. Now you still doubt whether he is following us...”

“I have already told you that nothing has been proven yet, Marko.”

“But Sarkof saw him the day before yesterday...”

“You just expressed uncertainty about the purpose of my presence, Marko,” she cuts him off sharply. “But you will begin to see the wisdom of my inclusion in the expedition when I point out that you just called Sam, Sarkof.”

“But what does it matter? We’re alone here in a room. No one can hear us...”

“I’ll decide that, Marko,” she says coldly. “Nowhere and for no moment will we relax our roles. Sarkof remains Sam until I decide otherwise.”

Steffen’s nails dig into his palms. His pent-up feelings threaten to overwhelm him, but he controls himself. For all practical purposes, she is their leader, and no matter how far they are from their own country and how isolated they are, here on the edge of the wilderness she still represents the inexorable authority of the government they serve and which has the power of life and death over them. It sticks in his craw, and every masculine instinct in him rebels against the fact that he must obey the orders of a woman, a young girl. But it is a condition that civilization has brought about with equal rights for women, and it will do him no good to want to resist it now.

As if seeking support, he turns his gaze to the two men sitting on the edge of the bed, diagonally behind Sandra. But he finds nothing

encouraging there.

Danos Forrenski's face is expressionless. He is much younger than Steffen, and his glowing eyes are fixed on Sandra Voronej. His lithe body looks comfortable and relaxed, and it irritates Steffen that the young engineer is so attractive.

Next to him sits Sarkof Marx. His large body is slightly bent forward, which accentuates his gorilla-like appearance. His long, massive arms hang past his thighs, and under his flat forehead two small eyes glare at Steffen. What Sarkof is actually doing in the company, Steffen can only guess. The man has the strength of a couple of oxen, but not the intelligence of a mouse. And yet, Steffen has more than once noticed a look of loyalty in Sarkof when he looks at Sandra. A dumb kind of look, like that of a dog. If he is her bodyguard, it was a good choice. At this moment, it is quite clear to Steffen that Sarkof will also protect Sandra against him.

Marko Steffen makes a helpless gesture with his hands. He has to clear his throat before he speaks again.

"As I said," he begins, in an attempt to be calm. "Sam," with sarcastic emphasis, "saw the fellow the day before yesterday as well. Today he arrives here, and in a place where there are probably no more than one white man seen per year on average. We dare not take a chance. He must be removed swiftly."

"And suppose he is completely innocent, Marko?" Sandra asks.

"Then that's too bad. Then we simply made a mistake."

"Such a disappearance may attract attention," she insists. "Maybe we'll just stir up a hornets' nest of an investigation if we meddle with him."

"What law and order exists here anyway!" Steffen exclaims, "even if it is a small community. And there are hundreds of ways I can get rid of him, without a soul hearing about it. I'm telling you, Sandra, as far as I understand, there are enough dangers ahead of us. I don't want a bunch of other dogs on my heels as well."

"And suppose he is on our trail, Marko?" she resumes, unperturbed.

"Who's to say he wasn't already in contact with his people! Who says he's alone in this area?"

"Then we must find that out quickly!" Steffen snaps at her. "We have to do something. This afternoon I'm going to talk to our guide, and I

want to make final arrangements. We must be gone by tomorrow morning.”

“Now you’re talking sense,” she coolly admits. “I’ll go and strike up a conversation with our mysterious friend. I’m glad that you came to that conclusion yourself. Marko, just remember, if there is to be a shooting, I’ll start it.” Without giving him a chance to answer, she turns to Sarkof. “Take a little walk around this luxurious establishment and see where he is at the moment,” she requests calmly. Sarkof jumps up as if obeying a strict order and with heavy tread leaves the room. “If you don’t mind,” she continues, “I want to freshen up a bit first. It would perhaps be best, Marko, to go for a walk along the lake and cool off.”

He knows she’s referring to his volatile temper. With a last annoyed glance, he and Danos leave the room.

Sandra Voronej smiles quietly. She is used to men obeying her. She received her training alongside men, and she excelled above them all. Apart from that, her power is reinforced by the position of her father, an influential minister who has held his position in a government of constantly changing officials for years. This is her first major task. It is also the first time that she has come out from behind the Iron Curtain. It is her intention to ensure that it will be crowned with complete success.

She cannot blame Marko for his outburst. He is a scientist. He and Danos did not receive the strict training to control their emotions. And the four of them have now been in each other’s company almost day and night for some time. It’s getting on everyone’s nerves.

She must ensure that they safely reach their destination, so that they can make their recordings and observations. She will sacrifice everything for that.

She adjusts her hair in front of the mirror. Her face is still calm, and she is fully aware of the perfection of her figure. But she views it objectively, as if it is just a weapon she can use in certain respects. She has too thorough a proof that she is men’s equal to possibly be attracted to them.

With a light knock, Sarkof comes in. He steps just over the threshold and then stands patiently as usual, to wait until she gives him permission to speak.

“Where is he, Sam?”

“In the small lounge next to the bar.”

“Thank you. You can go for a little walk.”

It is stifling hot in the small trading post, on the shore of Lake Albert. In fact, the border between the Congo and Uganda runs through the lake and they are now on the Congo side. But as always, Sandra looks cool as she steps into the stuffy little lounge.

Close to the window, overlooking the single dusty street, sits the man who, according to their opinion, might be following them. He is fairly young, and his high cheekbones and slightly narrow eyes give an Eastern cast to his face. He looks up when he hears Sandra arriving, and his gaze rests on her for a moment, as is always the case when men are unexpectedly surprised by her beauty.

She walks almost to his table. He politely stands up. She smiles at him.

“Is there a cool place in this town?” she remarks, half embarrassed.

“In this room, it’s the coolest by the window,” he assures her and pulls out a chair for her. His gesture is quite natural. In the lounge of a hotel in a big city, it would have been different. “May I perhaps order you something cool to drink?”

“A cold beer would taste wonderful, thank you.” He walks out and returns a moment later. “How do you exist in this oven?” she inquires conversationally.

“I am a stranger here myself, miss...?”

“Sandra Steffen,” she answers easily.

“Kurt Wiener,” he introduces himself. “I am a geologist and on vacation.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Yes. I want to go and poke around in the mountains here for a while. May I inquire why you are visiting such a remote part of the world?”

“It’s my father,” she says with a sigh. “He’s tired of civilization. We’re on a safari for big game hunting.”

“How wonderful. Which direction are you heading in?”

“Westward over the mountains, towards the Congo side. We are going through to Stanley, and from there by river to the West Coast, and then back to England.”

“It’s an untamed world here behind the mountains,” he remarks. “It

does rain there every now and then. The jungle should be beautiful this time of year.”

“I understand so.” She waits until the waiter has placed the beer in front of her, and after taking a sip of it, she continues. “And you are going to do some research here in the mountains, Mr. Wiener?”

“That’s the plan,” he confirms with a light shrug.

Just for a moment, there is a flicker in her eyes. If Wiener is not what he pretends to be, it will be difficult to ascertain. His whole attitude is natural and genuine. Suddenly, the solution to the problem strikes her.

“Why don’t you come with us, Mr. Wiener, or do you perhaps have other company?”

“I am completely alone.” He looked up quickly. Then he lowers his head as if he is lost in thought. “That’s a surprising proposal of yours, Miss Steffen.”

“But why not?” she resumes, as if she’s only now seriously thinking about the possibility of it. “Where are you from?”

“Leiden. Professor in geology.”

“Excellent. I will talk to father about it.”

“We will have to discuss it first,” he replies, however.

“I will tell father about it and then you can discuss it.” She laughs softly.

“There will be no objections from father’s side,” she assures him like a daughter who always gets her way.

However, in her room shortly after lunch, there are indeed objections. Marko Steffen’s face turns bright red with rage when she tells him what she has decided.

“Are you completely crazy, Sandra! We’ve already decided to get rid of the man.”

“There are several ways, Marko,” she answers coolly. “If he is indeed our enemy, it is best to lure him into our camp and keep him there. We can watch him closely there, then he is quite harmless.”

“So, we’re taking him with us!” he retorts sarcastically. “We’re going to show him what we’re planning to do. We’re taking him with us and telling him. A large nuclear power station will be built here. From here, we will be able to control all of Africa with our rockets, and what then?”

“Long before that, he will have died in the jungle, Marko,” she says calmly. “I want you to go and talk to him now. After that, you must

make final arrangements with the guide, Van Doorn. We must leave early tomorrow morning.”

“I know that!” he snaps at her. “But I refuse to drag this Wiener fellow along with us. We can deal with him easily and quickly here.”

She just smiles and walks out of the room.

The next morning at the crack of dawn, the long safari moves out of the village. At the front walks the six-foot-tall Jan van Doorn, sun-tanned and muscular. He is one of the best-known guides for tourist safaris in Uganda. Behind him follow Sandra and her company, and next to her walks Kurt Wiener.

Twenty or so Barodi’s form the rearguard. They walk comfortably under the heavy packs they carry, and their sinewy muscles roll under their shiny, black skins.

It is as if the wilderness and the greatness of nature that speaks from the mighty mountains in front of them, create a mood of tranquility in the company. Jan van Doorn knows the area well. It is not the first time that he has undertaken the journey to Stanley. Without any setbacks, they reach a pass in the highest mountains a week later.

Before them unfolds a green landscape, a balm for their eyes. Behind them, in the haze, stretch the arid grasslands. The drought has driven the game over the mountains to this green paradise. Big game will be plentiful. Below them also lie the cool, white clouds that cause the rain to fall over the jungle. The grandeur of it all makes Sandra feel like running down the slopes and jumping into the lush vegetation, like someone running into the cool breakers over the warm, white beach. But as always, it is just a passing emotion, because she never allows feelings to overcome her. For too long she has already learned to control and suppress them.

In high spirits, the days pass quickly. On the fourth day, they set up camp next to a clear stream, just as the sun begins to set in the west. They have become used to the night sounds of the forest, the roar of the lions, and the sudden harsh screech of long-necked birds. The laughter of the hyenas no longer bothers them either. The few tents are pitched and large fires are quickly lit. A little way from them, the Barodi’s laugh and chat around their own fires. During the day, Van Doorn shot a buck. They eat the ribs, fragrantly grilled, straight from the coals.