

ARRAKAN EXPRESS

They looked. Ahead of them, materialising like a chameleon out of a bush, was some sort of a settlement. As they came closer it turned into a dust-blown frontier town comprising of ten buildings, the largest of which was the mud and thatch police post, distinguishable from the rest by the flags flying in its courtyard and the landrover with the words POLISI.

A few dozen meters from the police post was the road block, a simple affair comprising of a pole barrier with a couple of sand bunkers on either side of the road.

Eddie picked up the microphone.

“Slow down, boys,” he said into the radio. “Road barrier ahead.”

As the convoy approached, a massive, black moustachioed officer stepped onto the road and raised his arm.

Noah's Ark slowed to a stop. Jack, Eddie and Gail stepped down to face the police officer. He was dressed in a neat khaki uniform and carried a small machine gun in addition to the pistol at his hip. The rest of his men, about two dozen in all, were armed with various automatic rifles.

“Good morning, officer,” said Jack Rivers.

The big man ignored him as he watched mouth open, amazed at the size and length of the convoy. It stretched back as far as the eye could see. Some of the trucks were only just beginning to stop, others still coming.

“What is this?” asked the officer seriously. “A circus?”

Eddie burst out laughing. Jack and Gail smiled. The man looked from Eddie to Jack, smiled at Gail, turned to the men and offered his hand to shake.

“Good morning,” he said. “I am Chief of Police in this place. Captain Hussein, they call me.”

“Nice to meet you, Captain,” said Eddie shaking hands. “Is there perhaps coffee in this place?”

“Coffee?” asked Hussein awed by the size of the convoy.

“Oh yes there is coffee, plenty of coffee. But first things first. Who are you? Where are you going and what do you carry?”

“Well, Captain,” said Jack Rivers. “That’s a long question.”

“Good,” said the Captain. “It is tiring being Chief of Police at this place where nothing happens.”

Turning to his men he said, “The papers, check the papers,”

His men hastened to do as ordered.

The captain turned to Jack.

“What do you carry?” he asked.

“Famine relief,” said Jack. “For Arrakan.”

The Captain nodded to himself then slowly walked down the line of trucks. Jack walked with him. Eddie and Gail tugged along.

“What’s this place?” she asked in a low voice.

“I don’t know,” said Eddie. “It isn’t on any of the maps we looked at.”

Captain Hussein glanced back at them, then at Jack and kept walking.

There is much blood in Arrakan,” he said. “Have you been there?”

“Yes,” said Jack.

At this pace, it would take them all day to get to the tail of the convoy.

The Captain stopped to look under a truck and on looking up stared Jack in the eye.

“So you know how far it is?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Jack.

“Why didn’t you go down from Adan?” he asked. “It is much nearer that way.”

“The port was jammed in Adan,” answered Jack carefully. “The ships could not off-load in time and these emergency supplies are urgently needed in Arrakan. Many people are dying there from hunger.”

The Captain nodded. “I have heard.”

He seemed to notice Gail. He scrutinised her and appeared impressed by her simple beauty.

“Who is she?” he asked. “Your wife?”

“No.”

“It is no place for a woman.”

“She is a doctor,” said Jack.

That seemed to settle that. He walked two more trucks down, peered under the third one and on looking up asked, “How many lorries?”

“One hundred.”

“One hundred!” he was genuinely impressed. “I have never seen so many before. Are you Red Cross?”

“No,” said Jack.

“Who are you?”

“Famine Busters,” said Eddie.

The Captain scrutinised Eddie.

“Another one?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Never heard of them,” he said as they approached Gibril’s truck.

Gibril ducked out of sight, but not fast enough to evade the eagle eyes of the Captain.

“And who is that?” he asked. “Gibril? When did you come out of jail?”

Gibril kept quiet.

“Gibril?” called the Captain.

“Soon,” said Gibril keeping out of sight.

The Captain turned to Jack Rivers.

“Now we go back to the post and wait,” he said. “You want to have coffee?”

Without waiting for an answer, he led the way back along the convoy to the roadblock. There he issued further orders to his men in Arabic before leading Jack, Eddie and Gail to the mud and thatch police post.

Once inside the simple office, he showed them to a bench against the wall.

“Sit,” he said as he sank into a simple high backed chair behind the table that served for a desk. “Idris!”

An orderly rushed in and stood at attention.

“Idris,” said the captain. “You tell Salimar to bring coffee for my visitors.”

Idris rushed out at speed.

Through the window, Jack could see the police continue their inspection of the convoy. They went about it with excited energy, not at all discouraged by the size of the task ahead of them.

The Captain looked up and caught Jack’s worried expression.

To check everything you will have to take two weeks,” he informed.

“With due respect, Captain, we haven’t got two weeks.”

“I know,” nodded the Captain. “We don’t do it unless I suspect smuggled guns. Do you carry guns?”

“No.”

“Not even a pocket one?”

“No.”

“Well then, you have nothing to worry about. We shoot gun-runners.”

A woman in flowing dress and light leather sandals came in with a huge black kettle steaming from the spout. She passed small china cups around, poured the coffee and went out without uttering a word.

“My wife,” said the Captain. “Your passports, please!”

For the next hour or so, the captain sat at the desk, cup of coffee in front of him, and went through the passports. He read them as though they were engrossing novels. From time to time, he gave a shout for Idris to go tell Salimar to bring coffee for the visitors. Salimar came in with her steaming soot-blackened kettle, dutifully refilled the cups and went out. The Americans sipped the sweet, spiced coffee, watched and waited.

“You have been everywhere,” said the Captain as he studied the various visas. Jack nodded, “Yes.” “Except Bore,” said the Captain.

“Never heard of the place,” admitted Jack. “Where is that?”

“Bore?” he looked up, smiled. “Bore is here”.

“It is not on our maps, Captain,” said Jack.

“No,” nodded the Captain. “Bore is not on your maps. But it is a real place all the same. You will be surprised how many smugglers I have caught trying to sneak through Bore because it is not on their maps.”

They thought about that. It was impossible to figure Captain Hussein, a wind that blew cold and hot, hard and gentle, and from all directions at the same time. He was a thoroughly perplexing proposition. Gail spoke up. “May I smoke?”

“Outside,” said the captain. “Better still why don’t we all go out and see what my men have found?”

They drained their coffee cups and followed the Captain into the hot mid-morning sun. They stopped and watched as about thirty of their Sudanese crew were herded into the police compound lined up.

Hussein turned to Jack, a very faint smile on his face. "It seems that my men have arrested your men," he said.

"What for?"

"What for?" the Captain finally laughed. "Come with me."

Jack followed. Gail lit her cigarette and tugged along. Eddie pondered the situation a moment before following.

"Where would you like to start?" asked the Captain as they came up to the prisoners. "Does it matter? Look, this one here is a thief. This one too, a smuggler, a camel thief, a house-breaker . . ."

He paused to look at Jack.

"For nine years I was CID in Port Sudan," he said. "Ask them, they know me. This one here is also a thief. Another thief, a thief, a thief and another. But this one here is an incurable rapist."

He glanced at Gail she stared back at him, refused to let her reaction show.

"We castrated him," he said to her. "But I don't think it did much good."

The rapist shook his head in agreement and the Captain moved on down the line.

"This big one is a smuggler," he said. "Gold, I remember. This one is a thief, another thief, a drunkard, a smuggler, a bicycle thief... I have arrested them all before. Ask them."

There was no doubt in Jack's mind. The Captain moved on.

"This one I do not know," he said. "But Shariff here is an assassin. They want to hang him in Khartoum, in Port Sudan and even in Adan."

He stopped, looked over his herd of worried prisoners and asked "Gibril? Where is Gibril?"

No one answered. His men pretended not to know who he was talking about. He turned to Jack Rivers and said, "Maybe I should arrest all of you."

"What for?" asked Jack.

"You employ thieves," he said. "And killers and smugglers and who knows what else!"

"Captain," Eddie spoke up. "We did not hire these men. They came with the trucks."

"From where?"

"Port Sudan."

"Who hired them for you? Jamar?"

"You know him?" asked Jack.

"The biggest gun-runner in all of the Sudan?" said the Captain. "Yes, I know Jamar. I shot him once, but he did not die."

Eddie and Gail glanced at one another.

"We didn't know," said Eddie.

"The trucks are probably stolen," said Captain Hussein. "Where are the papers?"

At this point, Shariff the assassin decided to run for it. He splinted for the open bush zigzagging expertly, someone who had dodged bullets before. There was a shouted

warning, half a dozen policemen raised their automatic rifles and took deliberate aim. He had almost made it to the nearest thorn brush when they fired. The bullets caught him in mid-air, lifted him higher and propelled him halfway up a thorn bush where he hang like a rugged marionette, the tattered body twitching and dripping blood into the scorched earth.

Those who might have had a similar idea down.