

## A Walk in the Desert



Jean-Paul and Akiiai stood together at the entrance to the plane, turning around one last time to stare at the blazing hot sands of the Sahara. Jean-Paul held his gym bag tightly, as though the desert itself might snatch it from him.

"It is extremely hot in Egypt in the summertime, and I hope you have realized that," Akiiai declared, as he handed Jean-Paul two canteens filled with water.

"Yes, I have noticed," Jean-Paul responded, as he placed his bag between his feet, took the canteens, and clipped them to his belt. He glanced at his bare legs and desert boots, wishing he had worn long pants to protect his skin, as opposed to the hiking shorts he had thrown on instead.

"I presume that you're ready for our adventure," Akiiai announced, making sure his own canteens were secure.

Jean-Paul picked up his gym bag, nervously adjusted his sunglasses, and pulled down the brim of his safari hat, before replying, "I don't think I have a choice in the matter."

Akiiai grinned. "My parents named me Akiiai, which means 'acts friendly and excited by adventure.' You are Jean-Paul, which must mean 'not so sure about things,' if I'm not mistaken."

Jean-Paul forced a slight chuckle, even though he wasn't amused. He wished he had a better sense of his companion's identity. Despite the pilot's friendliness, Jean-Paul felt like his every action was being closely watched.

The two had met only an hour earlier, at an airstrip in Bawiti. Jean-Paul had been asking the locals how best to get to Cairo, and a policeman had told him to go to the airstrip and ask for Akiiai.

"You are in luck today," Akiiai had said when Jean-Paul found him. He took out his wallet and showed Jean-Paul his pilot's certification. "I am the best pilot around. My two-seater is all fueled up and ready to go, so we can take off now and be in Cairo within an hour."

"That's perfect," said Jean-Paul, as he handed Akiiai five hundred Egyptian pounds, in 100-pound notes. "I hope this will be enough."

"It is more than enough," Akiiai smiled as he took the cash and motioned toward Jean-Paul's bag. "I'm relieved to see that a gym bag is your only piece of luggage for our trip, since there isn't much room on board."



"This is all I have, and I prefer to carry it," Jean-Paul said, guardedly.

"Then let's go," Akiiai gestured toward a rickety-looking single-engine plane at the end of the landing strip, and the two men walked to the plane.

Now that they had boarded and left the ground without incident, they soared into the clear summer sky. About ten minutes into the flight, Akiiai flipped a switch on the airplane's dash, and the plane responded with a loud, metallic *pop*!

"There may be a slight problem," said Akiiai.

"What was that?" Jean-Paul yelled, startled by both the sound and the now-sputtering engine.

"She has been acting up lately, I am afraid," Akiiai replied. "With the money from this flight, I was hoping to have her repaired in Cairo."

Jean-Paul panicked, "So this plane isn't running like it's supposed to?"

"I am going to have to land her," said Akiiai. "Do not worry, my friend. I have done this before."

That assurance did nothing to soothe Jean-Paul.

"This is completely unacceptable," he began.

"Please be quiet. I have to concentrate," Akiiai requested, politely.

As it turned out, Akiiai was indeed an ace pilot. The landing, though bumpy, was a safe one, and it was almost exhilarating, in a stomach-churning sort of way. They came to rest between two enormous sand dunes.

"You now have a story to tell your friends," Akiiai said.

"If I ever see them again," Jean-Paul said.

Akiiai left his seat and went to the back of the plane. By the time a shaky Jean-Paul joined him, the pilot had found a pocket compass and a map. After consulting those tools, Akiiai went to the plane door, opened it, and pointed.

"That way," he said.

"How far that way?" asked Jean-Paul, squinting at the brightness.

Akii ai shrugged. "Until we get someplace."

And now, off they trudged. Walking in desert sand was like walking in mud. It took a great deal of coordination and agility to keep from losing balance and falling.

After about an hour, Jean-Paul said, "I hope you don't plan to keep my money."

"Allow me to clarify that particular matter." Akii ai reached into his back pocket for his wallet. "I can give you the money back, and you can walk to Cairo by yourself. However, those canteens on your belt are mine, so you will have to give them back before you go."

Jean-Paul was momentarily speechless. He knew that without any water to drink, he'd die on his own in the incredible heat. As he considered his response, he heard a fluttering sound off in the distance.

"That sounds like a helicopter," he said, his mind off his money for the moment.

"Actually, my good man, it sounds like *several* of them," Akii ai replied, his tones suddenly clipped and precise. Jean-Paul was startled at the sound of the pilot's voice. Akii ai's Egyptian accent was gone, and it had been replaced by a British one.

"And we won't be needing to wave them down," Akii ai added. "They know we're here."

He laughed at Jean-Paul's puzzled look and again took out his wallet, but this time, he flipped it open to display a police badge.

"I'm Inspector Nigel Truffleberry from Scotland Yard," he said. "The British Museum doesn't take kindly to having its artifacts stolen, as your friend in Cairo no doubt knows by now. You, as well as he, are under arrest."

The helicopters landed, surrounding them with a cloud of hot sand.

"And I'll take that gym bag, if you don't mind," Inspector Truffleberry shouted over the sound of the copters. "Or even if you *do* mind, come to think of it."

