

What a Camel's Life is Worth

By: Matthew

As Sven took a small sip of the cool, refreshing water, he longed for more than anything else to drink all the water in the canteen. Despite this, he had been in this business for years, and he knew he must not. The Sahara could be brutal, and today was no exception, to say the least. 123° and bundled up in layers of clothes to prevent sunburn, it was all Sven could do to not douse the water over his head. He had been a merchant for a while now, taking goods between the villages Jakrah and Abaru with just him and his camel Orion. The thirty-mile journey between the two places was an all-day journey, so there was little room for breaks. It was also brutally monotonous, with nothing but looming sand dunes for as long as Sven could see. The pattern of the sand was so reminiscent of the waves in the middle of a vast, endless sea that it reminded him of an ocean frozen in time.

So there was Sven, riding Orion lost in his thoughts and enjoying the signature smell of the Sahara desert, which Sven could describe as an earthy, dry dustiness that he loved when suddenly, he felt a sharp jerk to his right. He came tumbling off the camel like a projectile fired from a catapult and landed on his side, popping the lid off one of two of his precious water canteens. As the water seeped into the sand, Sven quickly grabbed the empty bottle and salvaged a little bit of the water. But the damage was done and from experience, he knew he didn't have enough water to finish the rest of the journey. Cursing Orion for tripping, he turned to look at the camel and as quickly as his rage had come, it left him. Sven knew he couldn't stay mad at Orion, his closest companion, their close bond forged over the years. However, the anger that had vanished did not take his panic with it. There was

a saying he had once heard, which was that the only thing that would keep a man alive in this desert was his water and will to survive. Well, he had only one now.

Sven realized he had to look for more water, but he could see no hope of that in this barren, hopeless desert. He believed that there was only one option, which was to drink the potentially lethal, contaminated water he had just spilled and hope for the best. He took a glance at the disgusting water, sitting in the canteen, an ugly shade of murky brown. It looked so polluted to the point of swamp water, and it reeked of dirt and grit. Pushing worries aside, he continued his ride. Thirty minutes in, it was time for a sip of water. He uncapped the canteen, the dirty one, and gingerly drank one mouthful. As soon as the water went down his throat though, he knew he had made a huge mistake. His stomach immediately started to ache, sending a dull throbbing sensation to his head. Each pulse brought with it a wave of dizziness that would make one's head reel. The blistering heat from above did nothing but exacerbate the situation. Sven knew it was only going to get worse from there, his stomach already now feeling like it was on fire. There was one last hope.

He recalled that water could be found underground, but it was a matter of how far deep that mattered. With a healthy dose of luck, you could go just one foot down and reach water. Then again, it could be thousands of feet before you even saw a single drop of it as well. Sven immediately started digging like a mole, shoveling the yellowish-brown grainy sand everywhere with his hands. The high temperature fatigued him, quickly making it feel as if his arms were made of rocks. Every action brought pain with it, and after each futile digging motion, he prayed to any God that would listen to spare his life. After only about twenty minutes, Sven was forced to stop because night had begun to fall and the unbearable heat had sped up his dehydration. His mouth, parched and dry, longed for

moisture spit could not satisfy. To Sven, however, the physical torment was nothing compared to the intangible emotions he felt. There was nothing he could do now and he knew it, but he was determined to save every last drop of the water in the remaining canister. As he looked at it, shining from the reflection of the sun like a blinding light, he realized how frustrated he was, knowing just a little bit more water would be enough for Sven and Orion to make the journey. Now, all hope for his own survival was lost, but not for Orion.

Camels are a remarkable animal, sometimes able to go six to seven months without water in the right conditions. Beckoning Orion to him, he unclipped the canteen, still full of freshwater, and fed Orion all of it. Sven could smell the stink of his breath and even see the cavities on his yellow teeth as the precious water was emptied. There was only one thing left to do. "Abu," Sven ordered Orion. The camel was confused, wondering in its primitive brain why any man would tell his companion to continue without them. Sven repeated himself three times until finally, Orion obeyed and reluctantly left on his way. Watching Orion until he was only a speck in the middle of a desert, Sven thought he would feel indescribably sad, his only comfort now gone, but he only felt relief, blanketing all other emotions like a curtain. He lay down, looking at the sky where the last sliver of sun was disappearing behind the distant horizon. The purple sunset was tainted with a shade of light blue and orange, making it the most beautiful thing Sven had seen. Until he could bear his dehydration and the heat no longer, he closed his eyes, his only comfort knowing Orion would be safe, and drifted off to sleep, fully knowing he would not wake up.