

The Bedouin

The novel By Nefertari (Nina Chipashvili)

Nina, a young Georgian woman, the niece of the Georgian ambassador to Egypt visits him. Her uncle is particularly protective, never leaving her alone, accompanying her to various museums in Cairo and the Giza pyramids. When he is busy, Vakho, Nina's friend and the embassy clerk, acts as her guide. One day he takes her to see one of the wonders, the Eye of the Sahara. Viewing the mysterious natural phenomenon from the sky impresses her to the extent that Nina decides to get better acquainted with the Sahara. She knows very well her uncle will never allow her into the desert because he considers it a dangerous yet attractively enigmatic place. That's why she leaves a letter for him and joins a group of a safari tour.

Soon it transpires that the tour is organized by traders in human organs. The guide of the group is a Polish doctor Milosh, a surgeon working in Cairo. He offers Nina to try hang gliding during which she spots trucks full of armed men hiding behind the hills near the tourists' base camp. She points to them but the reaction she gets from Milosh is a gunshot. She is wounded in the leg but has time to see how the armed group attacks the tourists, dragging them onto their trucks. Horrified, Nina escapes only to be caught by the violent wind that crashes her glider, leaving her in a rocky stretch of the desert.

Nina realizes how desperate her situation is: she is utterly unprepared for the extreme conditions of the desert and a slow death from thirst and hunger awaits her. She only has half a bottle of water, a watch with a compass which is her father's gift, a map of the tourist route and a pocket knife. Despite the severity of her hopeless state, she fights for her life: she takes out the bullet, dresses her wound and attempts to locate herself on the map, deciding which direction she has to choose. Her watch got damaged when she collided with the cliff so she checks if the compass still works by observing the Orion constellation and suddenly discovers that the tourist map is fake. Because she expects the thugs to be in the east, she opts for the west, moving towards the Hamad cliffs where she cannot be pursued on the heavy trucks.

For several days Nina walks in the scorching sun, sipping the precious water only when the heat becomes unbearable. She comes across a horse which takes her to its severely wounded owner. She takes out the bullet that nearly killed him, gives him the remaining water, thus saving his life.

The man is a Bedouin called Al-Kabir who promises to guide her through the desert and take her back to Cairo. They ride westward with the aim of reaching Farafra oasis from where Nina hopes to contact her uncle. Still chased by the thugs, they need to hurry because they have to reach the oasis before the hamasin, a violent sand storm of the Sahara. Al-Kabir decides to take a shortcut through the cliffs, but on the narrow path the sun blinds Nina and she falls from the horse. Holding on to the saddle, he catches her from falling into the gorge and Jadar, the horse, pulls them to safety.

On the downward slope Jadar senses danger ahead and stops abruptly. Their path is blocked by a huge ball of cobras closely entwined in their mating ritual. Nina feels they are in peril unless they get away from the poisonous snakes. The Bedouin and his loyal horse find a way out: as soon as the cobras near the edge, they leap over them and continue their way.

At night the pursuers catch up with Nina and the Bedouin. They demand that she shows her face, but Al-Kabir insists that she is a deaf and dumb slave he bought as his housemaid. Nina listens to the argument as the tension mounts and gets convinced that her chief adversary isn't among the group. In order to avoid fatal consequences, Al-Kabir agrees to let them see her face, so they give her some

water to drink, but as soon as she gets a chance, Nina jumps on Jadar's back and gallops away from the camp.

The weather is changeable in the desert. Jadar leads Nina to a cave where she finds a shelter from the sudden downpour and strong wind. Discovering her shoes in the saddle bag, she knows that Al-Kabir planned her escape. Also, he supplied a hand-drawn map showing the road to the Farafra oasis. However, the cave is a safe place for all kinds of creepy-crawly creatures and at the sunrise Nina rides on despite the burning sun.

The map brings Nina to another cave at the cliff in the shape of an eagle. It is Al-Kabir's hideout which can shelter her and the horse, but the pursuers also decide to camp at the mouth of the cave. Now Milosh, the doctor who shot at her, is among the thugs. He tells others about the conflict that triggered the animosity between him and Al-Kabir: apparently, the doctor insulted the Bedouin's family in Tidikelt many years ago. She also learns that it was Milosh who shot Al-Kabir the day before he organized capturing the tourists. He failed to find the wounded Bedouin because his horse had carried him away. Nina now knows that Al-Kabir is no ordinary nomad: he is a highly skilled geologist looking for precious metal ores in the desert.

Unaware they are overheard by Nina hiding in the cave, her pursuers keep talking and she learns another shocking fact: Milosh is the ringleader of a human organ trafficking gang, carrying out transplant operations in his Cairo clinic. A cobra bites one of the thugs who dies at night, while the snake crawls into the cave where Nina and Jadar try to stay unnoticed. Looking for a place to bury their mate, the men soon discover the entrance which is blocked by the cobra. They throw a burning torch at it and the serpent crawls deeper inside. A vicious struggle ensues between it and horrified Nina, who manages to cut its head with her pocket knife. This becomes the first hazard she overcomes on her own and as soon as she gets a chance, she leaves a message on the cave wall for Al-Kabir, gets a water supply and rides away.

On the way they find themselves in the middle of a sand storm and their water supply dwindles at an alarming speed. Though she faces severe dehydration, Nina saves the precious liquid for the horse. She uses the temperature difference so typical of the desert: she collects dew in a camel skin she found along the road. The next hint on Al-Kabir's map is a cracked stretch of ground. She hears water under her feet and decides to dig a hole with her knife. It's a grueling job but she is able to collect some water. Quite unexpectedly, the sand mixed with wet clay sucks her in. Sensing imminent danger, Jadar dashes to get some help. Nina is left alone and remembers all the stories she read about such treacherous holes. She knows all too well that if she doesn't get out till night, the cold will trap her inside as concrete would do, while the midday heat will burn her alive. Half-buried in the sand, she manages to free herself inch by inch. She has water but not Jadar. Moreover, five pieces of coal, some food and spare clothes were tied to the saddle. Ignoring hunger, sleeplessness and tiredness, she follows Jadar's tracks that lead south.

While Nina treads across the night desert, she comes across broken antelope bones. She guesses there are hyenas nearby and that they usually stay near human settlements. She is happy to find locals but fears hyenas might attack her before she reaches them. Nina needs fire to scare the predators but has nothing but dry bones. Then she remembers Herodotus' narrative about the Scythians burning bones to cook their food. She collects the bones, uses her lighter to ignite them and that's when she hears the approaching hyenas. They circle Nina and she guesses her pocket knife is useless against the howling beasts. She grabs a long antelope bone because she doesn't want to allow them closer. One of the hyenas leaps over the fire but Nina manages to slit its belly with the bone and the other retreats in fear.

At dawn Nina sees Jadar with a rider clad in blue. On the one hand she is glad to see the loyal horse but is scared as well because blue is the colour worn by the Tuareg people. Infamous for being thugs and robbers, these people can be more dangerous for her than falling into the hands of her pursuers. On the other hand, because Jadar brought the rider, she believes he can be trusted. He gives her some water and takes her to the village where Nina hopes to get some rest.

The Tuareg people greet them warmly but are soon disappointed because they expected Al-Kabir instead of Adrar and an unknown woman smeared with blood.

Amenoklia Hilale, the Tuareg queen, eyes Nina with suspicion believing she killed Al-Kabir, stole his gold and tried to run away but the Bedouin's horse threw her out of the saddle somewhere in the desert. The queen announces that if Al-Kabir isn't found alive, Nina will be hanged. At Amenoklia's orders Nina is tied to a palm tree near the sacrificial rock.

Sadly, Nina's ordeal has just begun. At nightfall her pursuers are granted Amenoklia's permission to camp near the village. Nina's only hope is to flee but her knife hidden in her shoe isn't of much help. She plans to somehow cut the ropes and escape with the help of the faithful Jadar. However, Al-Kabir creeps unnoticed from behind the rock and convinces her to wait a bit longer. He promises to be back in two days together with the Tuaregs that are sent to find him. He gives her his knife and vanishes in the darkness.

The following day is a local festival celebrating love: unmarried young people are to find a partner to spend a passionate night in the desert. The main feature of the ritual is that young women are free to choose their partners while young men cannot ignore their choice. When the young people of the village scatter in the desert, at the queen's orders a young man tries to strangle Nina. She manages to wound him in the stomach and he escapes in the palm grove.

In the morning Al-Kabir comes to the village together with Hilale's people. He offers her a valuable present and asks her to free the captive. At that very moment the villagers bring in the young man supposedly wounded by Nina. His parents demand her punishment, which is supported by her pursuer Milosh who blames Nina for attacking him at night and stealing his clothes in order to flee. However, the Tuaregs discover that the young man is wounded from the back with a much longer blade, something a doctor would possess.

Al-Kabir insists that Milosh is punished but Hilale doesn't agree, which causes a violent disagreement in the village. In the ensuing commotion exacerbated by an earthquake, Milosh tries to kill Al-Kabir. Nina wants to stop the doctor but she only has the Bedouin's knife against his gun. Besides, she doesn't know how to throw it, but she recalls everything she had learnt in her physics lessons. She calculates the trajectory of the fling and as Milosh prepares to shoot Al-Kabir, she wounds him in the shoulder. As the Bedouin and Nina bolt from the village, their escape route is blocked by the Tuaregs but Jadar manages to take them to safety.

Now they face a wide crack left after the earthquake. Al-Kabir knows Jadar cannot leap carrying two of them, so he tosses Nina and then sends his horse across the gap. He grabs fallen Nina and they disappear in the vast desert.

Although the pursuers are temporarily shaken off, the Bedouin knows all too well that furious Hilale will send more of her people to chase them. Their pursuers are more dangerous than ever because the Tuaregs are the best hunters in the desert: they can read even old tracks and can walk day and night, without getting tired, regardless of extreme temperature differences. Amenoklia's orders are now their life aim and nothing is going to stop them until they kill Nina.

The problems mount: when Nina fell, she dislocated her shoulder joint and twisted her ankle, so it's hard for her to ride. Al-Kabir asks for her permission to touch her because he needs to tend to her painful joints.

As they rest, they begin to know each other better. The Bedouin tells her that he was orphaned as a child when thugs killed his parents in the desert. The passing caravan drivers buried them and one of them adopted Al-Kabir. He was raised in the Algerian Sahara, in the Tidikelt region. Then he asks Nina to tell him a fairy tale or a legend of her country, so she narrates about Amiran. The story goes like this: Amiran is God's chosen, born with the sun and moon signs on his forehead. The sun symbolizes gold or the lion, while the moon stands for silver or the wolf. Amiran is the symbol of perfection and power, somewhat like the Egyptian god Thoth. He saves mankind by giving them back light and warmth. But after many heroic deeds he decides to challenge God, for which he is punished: he is chained in a cave of the highest peak in the Caucasian mountains but his loyal dog keep licking the chain in the hope of freeing him. To make things worse, a vulture is pecking at his liver. Every year, when the chain is about to snap, it gets whole again by the will of God. The legend says that once every seven years the cave opens up and it's possible to see the suffering Amiran.

Al-Kabir listens very attentively to the Georgian legend, amazed at the hero who had the courage to rebel against God and was doomed to eternal torture. He asks Nina to tell him how the legend affected the lives of her people. This time she tells him about King Vakhtang Gorgasali whose helmet featured a lion and a wolf to symbolize perfection and power.

The Bedouin is greatly impressed by her narrative and feels he understands the character of the Georgian people much better as well as Nina – he sees in her a combination of free will, love of freedom, courage and generosity. These features attract him because he senses how different she is from the women of his own culture, those who obey their men without any contradiction.

The fugitives continue their way but are caught in a yellow sandy rain. Al-Kabir puts up a tent where Nina has a half for her own while he takes his horse and camels in the other. A desert fox with her kits finds shelter next to her and Nina feeds the little ones with camel milk. Soon the fennec fox leaves and she wakes Al-Kabir because the animal might have sensed a worse danger than the rain.

Despite the violent wind, Al-Kabir sends Nina and Jadar to the west while he tries to find the pursuers' tracks. Soon he discovers that now their adversaries are the Devil's Dogs, the Sahara nomadic tribe that Hilale sent to chase them.

Al-Kabir quickly catches up with Nina only to find her on the sand, weak and feverish. She cannot ride, so he digs a hole in the sand, puts her inside and covers it with a camel he killed for the purpose. He hopes to throw the dogs off her scent while he prepares to repel their attack.

When Nina regains consciousness, she is horrified to find herself in a grave. She hopes to be saved by Al-Kabir but days pass and he doesn't return. She tries to get out of the hole and suddenly feels something moving very close to her. First she thinks it's a rat and prepares to fight it but then finds out it's the fennec fox she fed in the tent. Now she digs in the direction of its den, hoping to get more air. For five days Nina digs using her shoe, pressing the soil in the bottom of her makeshift grave and widening the fox's tunnel. On the sixth day she crawls out into the blazing sunshine.

Nina decides she cannot trust Al-Kabir anymore and continues her journey alone. She is caught up by the Devil's Dogs but the Bedouin arrives just in time to buy her out of her captivity. From the conversation between the tribe chief and Al-Kabir she learns that he is the descendant of Mansa Musa and belongs to the oldest Mali royal dynasty. Nina is so enraged at being buried alive that she verbally assaults the Bedouin. In the heat of their argument Adrar arrives saying Hilale's gang is just a day away

from them. The only way out is to go through the Shaitan Passage which will shorten their journey by at least three days.

The Passage poses a new peril to the fugitives because they are surrounded by hungry caracals. They fight them off with flaming rods, while the unusually smart Jadar once again dashes them to safety.

Believing they are finally safe, Nina and Al-Kabir are chased by their pursuers near the Farafra oasis. Hilale offers the Bedouin to lead the Tuareg revolt which aims at establishing the Azawad state. He can even become their king if he marries Hilale. He will have the best army familiar with the desert conditions and will be able to control the entire Sahara. In turn, Hilale promises to free Nina and even guarantees her safe passage to Cairo. Al-Kabir declines the offer, which leads to a new conflict. Yet again, Adrar helps him and Nina to escape.

In order to deceive the thugs lying in ambush at the oasis, Al-Kabir dons Tuareg attire, while Nina is dressed like Hilale. The trick works but he knows that the thugs will try to attack the oasis and rob him. He sends Nina ahead so that she can alert the inhabitants and stays behind to ward off the possible assault. Jadar takes Nina into the oasis and she warns the locals. They are ultimately helped by the military contingent and all the pursuers are detained. The military chief notifies the Georgian embassy about Nina's whereabouts and soon a helicopter sent from Cairo lands in the oasis. Nina is overjoyed at seeing her brother spring towards her. As he lifts her up and runs back to the helicopter, a Tuareg dressed like a doctor shoots her from the roof of the adjacent house.

Surrounded by her whole family, Nina regains consciousness in a Cairo hospital. Having survived the entire ordeal, she now knows what true happiness is and safely returns to Georgia together with her loved ones.

Her life takes a peaceful turn. Five years lapse since her harrowing Sahara adventure.

Early one morning in late autumn Nina gets a visitor – her friend Vakho who worked in Cairo and a young lawyer she remembers defended her interests in the trial called by the Egyptian Tourist Police. She feels some bad news are about to be broken to her. She learns that Al-Kabir has died and the lawyer has arrived to Georgia to read his will and pass the items left for her. He says Al-Kabir perished during the geological expedition that studied the pyroclastic shield of the Emi Koussi volcano. His body wasn't recovered but as five years passed, he was announced dead.

Vakho reads Al-Kabir's will that ends in strange words: 'If the wish is very strong, in the dimension where everything ends, it is possible for something new to begin if a point of departure is identified.' Nina opens the package only to find a pair of gold earrings with emeralds, as well as a blue stone bracelet with an engraved Arabic saying: 'True love has no happy ending because it never ends.'

Having heard the will and seen the items, Nina is convinced that these are no mere gifts but clues she has to solve. They are supposed to point at the place where Al-Kabir is because he is still alive and now everything depends on her. Nina knows that love is most powerful, so she will find the point of departure mentioned in the will, even if it's beyond time and space.