

ANDREA FRANCO

# Shalim

translated from Italian by Carlo Santulli



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ANDREA FRANCO was born in 1977 in Ostia Lido (Rome). Composer and songwriter, he's the author of over seventy songs. He loves reading: his favorite writers are Asimov, Follett, Smith, Eco, Simmons, McBain, Baricco, Tolkien, Eddings and many others. In 2008, after publishing a lot of short stories in various anthologies, he has published the novel *The Bull* (Giraldi). 2009 is the year for *The Lord of Song* (Delos Books). For Mondadori has written several articles as appendix to *Classici del Giallo Mondadori* and a series of articles about writing Fantasy on Writers Magazine Italia. Recently he has published some tales in anthologies: *Delitto Capitale* (Hobbies & Work), *365 Racconti horror per un anno* (Delos Books), *Il Magazzino dei Mondi* (Delos Books). For *eTales* series (Graphe.it Editions) he has published the tale *The Mask*. His personal website is [www.andreafranco.net](http://www.andreafranco.net)

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Andrea Franco

## Korti, Sudan, 1888

“Can we really dare crossing all that desert?”

Sean McLean was upright on the camel’s hump and observed the Arabian man a few meters further down. Zahli was seating with his legs crossed on his long woven mat, which he had laid out on the cold morning sand. Even if the man did not immediately answer to this question, Sean was sure enough he was pondering over it, to offer precise information.

The morning hadn’t ripped all the fragments of obscurity from sand dunes yet and behind them, the small town of Korti was only a black mass piled against the opaque glow of the sky. The placid Nile was flowing, around a hundred steps to their left and Sean was able to feel the breeze calmly blowing through the reeds that surrounded the great river’s bank: the last remain of vegetation in dozens of miles.

Sean would have preferred to border the bank of the great *Bahr el-Gebel*, the indigenous name of the Nile, but the battle taking place more South between Mahdi’s men and English troops made that route too dangerous. The most recent news spoke about backup troops ready to head towards Khartoum, besieged by the men of the Islamic preacher, the Mahdi.

Sean was a proud citizen of the glorious British empire, but crossing the Imperial army would surely create some problems to him and his journey would have been compromised. He needed to move rapidly and avoid as much as possible the effects of that war. In that case, being speedy could be readily transformed in gold and he didn’t want to give up even a gram of their reward.

He will have reached Khartoum of course, but following “the death’s route”, through the dreadful *serir*, the boulder desert. He would

have come closer to Mahdi's town, Omdurman, to be able then to cross the Nile only at the last moment.

"It will be a difficult and fatal journey, my lord" the wise man finally said.

Zahli raised his head, intensely looking at Sean. "But we can manage" he concluded, with an uneven grin.

In spite of the turban covering part of his face, Sean could notice the long scar, which slashed Zahli's lineaments. That man had gone through dozens of battles and fought with cunning and dangerous enemies, but had always survived. His tortured body brought clear and visible the scars of all these battles, but the heated spark of the fighter was always lighted in his eyes. Nobody was able to survive in this arid desert, like Zahli was, and Sean trusted with blinded eyes of the Nubian's opinion.

Sean nodded and diverted his eyes away from the body of his comrade, who was meanwhile standing up. He let his gaze travel along the whole horizon, towards South. He had lived many years in those inhospitable and wild places, but he would not have survived a day without an expert and trustworthy guide.

"Wake up the old man" he ordered finally, pointing with his head to men waiting fifty steps behind, just beyond Korti's border. "He wants to travel, but he needs to do it our way". With a smile, he incited Zahli. "Don't you feel the gold's smell already, my good friend?"

## **Roma, Italy, 1997**

"So, you were born in Great Los Angeles".

Nadia was leaning on the handrail of the small balcony overlooking the main garden of the house. The night was cool and the nice blue dress she was wearing gently moved, caressed by a light breeze blowing from the sea, two kilometres west. Robert was at half step distance, arms crossed on his chest, and with his eyes pointing in the opposite direction, to the half-shaded room they had just crossed.

"Yes, Los Angeles, LA" he confirmed, turning on his side to look at her profile.

Nadia was carrying on looking around in the garden below them, where some couples of guests were walking hand in hand, making the