

SAHARA

ADVENTURE SERIES

17. Guests of Death



MEIRING FOUCHE

GUESTS OF DEATH

by

MEIRING FOUCHE

and

translated, proof-read and edited by
PIETER HAASBROEK

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by Meiring Fouche

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SUMMARY

In the scorching Sahara, at Dini Salam, an outpost of the French Foreign Legion, Teuns Stegmann, a tall, blond South African, along with four fellow legionnaires, Fritz Mundt (the German), Petacci (the Italian), Jack Ritchie (the Englishman), and Podolski (the Pole), are compelled to lie daily, unclothed, upon the ramparts. They protest, yet remain unaware of the purpose behind this. Colonel Le Clerq and Captain D'Arlan reveal to them a secret, oblong wooden chest. Doctor Bretan examines the five men and discusses dyeing their hair and beards. The colonel subsequently unveils a secret French weapon, one that fires not bullets, but small rockets.

Teuns Stegmann plays a central role in the mission, having been appointed its leader. He, together with his comrades, becomes the linchpin of a desperate attempt to gather intelligence on the Doelak people's military preparations. They must disguise themselves as Arab traders and, using the new weapon as their passport, infiltrate the Doelak capital, Doetra. Tension mounts as Teuns grapples with the dangers, especially the fear of being recognised by the cruel white princess, Brigitte Bonnet. Teuns and his companions experience several setbacks in pursuit of their objective, such as the loss of the secret weapon and an unexpected skirmish.

Teuns plans to use the disguise of a shepherd to enter a sheikh's tent and retrieve the stolen weapon. He also intends to escape and warn the Foreign Legion about the imminent danger they have discovered. Will Teuns, with his ingenuity and the help of his comrades, succeed in completing the perilous mission, or will they fall victim to the growing conflict in the Sahara? A dark secret, like a serpent in the sand, awaits discovery.

EXTRACT

A faint tremor coursed through Teuns's body as a heavily ornate curtain just beside the dais was drawn aside, and the tall, slender woman with her copper-brown hair and soft green eyes suddenly made her appearance, taking her seat upon the throne. This is not the first time Teuns has seen her. This is not the first time Teuns Stegmann has beheld the ineffable beauty of this French woman. Her luxuriant hair, hanging low over her shoulders, gleamed and seemed alive in the soft light. Her bosom was full, her neck white and alluring, and her hands delicate.

Madame Brigitte Bonnet seated herself upon the Doelak throne, and with renewed admiration, Teuns marvelled how it was possible for a woman, and a foreign woman at that, to become sovereign over the Doelaks. A number of her advisors had entered with her, and they took their places in a crescent around her throne on the dais.

Teuns pulled the hood of his head covering further across his face, for she stared at him with such concentration that for a moment, he imagined she had recognised him. And he knew that if she recognised him, it would be fatal...

She made a small gesture with her right hand, without speaking, and Teuns instantly sensed the overwhelming authority the woman commanded.

"The stranger from Casablanca," announced the palace guard, "has brought a new weapon for the Doelak people, Your Highness," he said to Madame Bonnet. "He has come to show it to you."

"What is the nature of the weapon?" she asked, her voice sweet and melodious, yet also strong.

17. GUESTS OF DEATH

Chapter 1

DANGEROUS MISSION

Fritz Mundt, the big German from the French Foreign Legion, turned onto his back, once again exposing his stomach to the setting Sahara sun. To him, it felt as if the sun had already burned the skin clean off his back. Here on the high ramparts of the fortress in Dini Salam, the Legion's forward garrison town, it felt as hot as perdition itself. Fritz glared at the guard who walked past him, glancing his way somewhat mockingly.

"I wish I knew what foolishness this is, making us lie here in the consuming sun every blessed day, and without a stitch on at that," Fritz protested. He closed his eyes against the sun and scratched at his long and luxuriant red beard. "I've just about had enough of this nonsense," Fritz announced.

Beside him, the small Petacci, the little Italian, rolled onto his stomach. "I'll tell you, old Big One," said Petacci. "They probably want to send us to the French Riviera so the people there can see what splendid specimens of manhood and physical prowess exist in the Foreign Legion."

"No, I'll tell you," announced Jack Ritchie, the Englishman, from the side. "They probably want to send us to Hollywood to act in some film or other."

Teuns Stegmann, the tall, blond South African with his bushy beard, turned onto his side and looked at the ludicrous scene beside him, at his few mates all lying here on the planks of the ramparts with not a stitch of clothing on. "I'll tell you what the plan is," said Teuns. "The film people are probably looking for a new Tarzan, so they're letting us tan here in the sun to see which of us will look best."

“Whatever the purpose may be,” murmured Podolski, the Pole, “I wish to heaven they would tell us what it is now. Lying in this sun, we’ll all get sunstroke. And I feel as if I’m already cooked through.”

“The old Big One has tanned nicely,” teased Teuns, gesturing towards Fritz. “He looks just like a wine cask painted light brown.”

Fritz Mundt merely snorted his disapproval. “It’s a foolish, mad, and senseless affair,” he said. “Why can’t they tell us what they have in mind for us?”

“Perhaps it’s a major military secret, old Big One,” said Petacci. “Perhaps they want to use us to conquer the entire Arab world. From here all the way to Colonel Nasser’s republic.”

“Yes,” affirmed Jack Ritchie. “They wouldn’t expose us to the Sahara sun if they didn’t have a grand purpose for us.”

“Perhaps we’re cut out to change history, old Big One,” said Teuns from the side. “Who knows, perhaps we can strike a blow for the Western nations.”

“Your chatter makes me sick,” said Fritz, rolling the plug of tobacco in his cheek.

“You look just like an Arab sheikh already, old Big One,” announced Podolski, peering sideways at the big German. “If they dyed your beard black now, you’d be a ready-made Arab sheikh.”

“How romantic,” piped up Petacci in his high-pitched voice. “Perhaps you could even snag one of those beautiful Arab delicacies here in one of the cafes.”

Fritz Mundt lay perfectly still, pretending not to hear them. And just as they were about to tease him further, the orderly appeared beside them on the platform. “Men Stegmann, Mundt, Podolski, Petacci, and Ritchie,” said the orderly, looking as though he could barely contain his laughter, “the colonel wants to see you immediately.”

“Thank you for the joyful tidings,” said Fritz quickly, and the next moment he was on his feet.

The five tanned men, who for quite some time now had been forced to lie stark naked here on the ramparts for a while each day, just as if they were sunbathing on a beach, gratefully trotted down the stairs, quickly got dressed in the barracks, and then hurried to the office of Colonel Le Clerq, commander of the garrison post, Dini Salam.

Less than ten minutes later, the five men stood stiffly at attention before the greyish man behind the gleaming desk.

“At ease, mes amis,” said the colonel. The men immediately stood at ease. And then they all looked with interest at the peculiar, oblong, pale yellow wooden box on Colonel Le Clerq’s desk. He noticed it, but said nothing. He let them look at that box for quite some time before speaking again. Beside him sat Captain D’Arlan. Both officers looked at the five men before them with a smile of interest and apparent satisfaction.

Le Clerq leaned back in his swivel chair. Then he thoughtfully tugged at the ends of his moustache for a moment. “Aha,” said the colonel, “I see the five men have tanned splendidly. Just as we wanted it. Excellent! Excellent, mes amis.”

And then suddenly, the garrison physician appeared as if from nowhere in the office. He was a small, sallow little man with a bald head and two fiery little eyes. He saluted briskly and then also looked at the five standing in a row before the desk.

“Mes amis,” said Colonel Le Clerq, “I regret this, but I must ask you to undress. You must take everything off. I want to see you stark naked.”

For a moment, the men stared, completely taken aback, at the commanding officer. Then they looked at Captain D’Arlan, who sat there expressionlessly, and then uncertainly at each other. But the next moment they hesitantly began removing their clothes, and when

Colonel Le Clerq urged them to hurry, they wasted no further time. In an instant, the five stood stark naked there in the commanding officer's office.

"What do you think, Dr. Bretan?" asked Colonel Le Clerq.

Dr. Bretan looked attentively at the five. Examined them up and down. Even walked around them, scrutinizing and observing them from head to toe. Even lifted their arms and looked underneath. Examined the insides of their legs.

"Excellent," said Bretan when he had finished his strange examination. "They have tanned excellently. Actually, they are more black than brown, and that is what we want, is it not, mon Colonel?"

"Precisely," answered D'Arlan from the side. "That is exactly what we want."

"The hair and beards are nothing," said Bretan. "Those I will dye as they should be. Dyeing hair and beards jet black, there's nothing to it."

"Splendid," exclaimed Le Clerq. Then he motioned for the men to get dressed again.

Completely bewildered, they dressed again, and while wondering what on earth was going on, they kept stealing glances at that oblong yellow wooden box on the desk. What strange task did Le Clerq have up his sleeve for them now?

Le Clerq had risen from his chair and walked to the wall where the large map of the Sahara territories hung unrolled against the wall. He stood there with his hands behind his back, looking intently at the map. Then he stood balancing his body on his toes, then touched his cheek, then traced a direction on the map with his forefinger, and then began pacing aimlessly through the room.

Afterwards, the colonel returned to sit in his swivel chair. "Bretan," he addressed the doctor, "are you absolutely certain you can dye these

men's hair and beards, and even their eyelashes, satisfactorily? Can you do it so that there isn't the slightest doubt?"

"I am quite certain of it, mon Colonel," said Bretan.

"What... what about these two with the blue eyes?" asked Le Clerq, gesturing towards Teuns Stegmann and Fritz Mundt.

"Blue eyes make no difference," said Bretan. "I have seen many Arabs with the clearest blue eyes one can imagine. You need not worry about that, mon Colonel. I will even dye the hair under their arms. Nothing will be overlooked, mon officier. We will keep the slightest details in mind."

"Merci, Bretan," said the colonel, "that will be all for now." Bretan saluted and then walked out of the office.

Le Clerq looked at the five men before him. Then he reached out his hands, took that oblong box, and pulled it closer towards him.

But he did not open it. Instead of opening the wooden box, he made a gesture with his hand towards D'Arlan. "Capitaine," Le Clerq said to D'Arlan, "would you be so good as to explain to these legionnaires what is going on?"

D'Arlan stood up and took a turn around the office. Then he came to stand by the men and looked at them intently. D'Arlan had a very strong feeling for these five men. They had endured many dangers together, and more times than he could remember, they had tasted death together. Therefore, there was a sensitive expression in the captain's eyes when he spoke. "Mes amis," he addressed them. "You must surely have wondered greatly in recent times why you are being subjected to the ordeal of lying in the Sahara sun to tan. We understand that it was not an easy task for you. No man willingly exposes himself to the Sahara sun. You must also be wondering about the little scene that just played out here when Dr. Bretan examined you so. When he spoke of dyeing your hair and your beards. Now the time has come for us to inform you

about what is happening and what our intentions are for you.”

D’Arlan looked at Le Clerq, and it was then that Le Clerq opened that box.

And when he pulled back that lid, it was as if the five men there gasped with astonishment and excitement.

In that oblong, pale yellow wooden box lay the most beautiful and striking weapon they had probably ever beheld. It gleamed menacingly where it lay, and compared to the Lebel rifles they were accustomed to, and even to the modern light machine guns they sometimes handled, this little weapon with its short muzzle looked like an infant among firearms.

They could deduce that it must be some kind of rifle, for it had a short barrel and at the back, something resembling a stock. But it was the strangest firearm they had ever laid eyes on.

Le Clerq smiled when he saw their amazement. He lifted the peculiar little rifle out of the box and held it in his hands. It glittered there, it looked so formidable, and it was as if a damning death lurked within that short-muzzled weapon.

“Legionnaire Stegmann,” said Le Clerq, “have you ever seen such a weapon in your life?”

“Never, mon Colonel,” said Teuns, his face alight with interest.

“And you fellows?” Le Clerq asked the other men.

They all shook their heads. Not one of them had ever seen such a weapon in his life.

“I thought that none of you had seen it before,” said Le Clerq. “This is just about the most modern piece of firearm there is. It is a French product, mes amis, and it is secret. It was sent to us for inspection. We must say what we think of it. Capitaine D’Arlan and I conducted tests with this a few days ago, far out in the desert, and the results were

simply astonishing. This weapon,” said Le Clerq, “fires not bullets. It fires small rockets that can wreak deadly havoc. The effect of one of these rockets is equivalent to the effect of about ten hand grenades thrown simultaneously. It is a deadly weapon, mes amis.”

Le Clerq placed the little rifle back in the box and then gestured again towards D’Arlan. The captain continued speaking. There was gravity in his eyes as he addressed the few Legion men. “Legionnaires,” said D’Arlan, “in connection with this little weapon, you five must undertake perhaps the most important mission you have ever undertaken since joining the Foreign Legion. We chose you five because we know you are loyal enough to one another to die for each other. We chose you because we know that your loyalty to the Foreign Legion cannot be surpassed. We chose you because you are fearless, because you have often acted as a unit, and because we consider you the five most resourceful men in the entire garrison of Dini Salam. We had you tan in the sun because this time we have a very definite and specific purpose for you.”

The five men listened wordlessly to D’Arlan. In his mind, each one wondered what the next thing he would tell them would be. What mission was this upon which the five of them were now to be sent?

D’Arlan paused for a moment and looked very intently at the five men. First at Teuns Stegmann, then Fritz Mundt, then Podolski, and then Jack Ritchie and Petacci. It was as if D’Arlan hesitated before uttering the next words. “And there is also, above all, a very important reason why we chose you, mes amis,” said the captain. “And that is because you are familiar with the capital of the Doelaks, Doetra.”

D’Arlan’s last words jolted the men. They could not hide the astonishment and shock on their faces.

It was then that Colonel Le Clerq spoke further. “What the capitaine says is correct,” said Le Clerq. “We chose you especially because you are familiar with Doetra. I am sending you to Doetra, mes amis.”