

SAHARA

ADVENTURE SERIES

18. Vengeance is Mine



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VENGEANCE IS MINE

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SUMMARY

The narrative commences in the scorching Sahara desert, where an exhausted French Foreign Legion soldier, Teuns Stegmann, desperately strives for survival. He belongs to a small group left without food or water due to betrayal. Their sole hope lies in attempting to capture vultures for sustenance. The initial conflict rapidly becomes apparent, escalating into a fierce struggle against the elements and the looming threat of death hanging over them. Fritz Mundt and Jack Ritchie are trapped alongside Teuns Stegmann in a desolate temple. Teuns fails to catch a vulture, rendering the situation more critical and thwarting the plans they needed to execute.

Teuns plays a central role as the driving force behind the survival efforts. He leads the desperate attempt to capture a vulture and later, when they are “rescued” by a mysterious group led by Carlos Chanti, it is Teuns who questions Chanti’s true motives. Chanti seeks vengeance against Petacci, another Legion soldier and a friend of Teuns. Tension mounts as Chanti uses Teuns and his comrades as hostages to achieve his goal. Teuns devises a perilous plan to outwit Chanti, hoping to save Petacci’s life and spare their own.

Teuns contemplates various strategies as he races through the desert on horseback, heading back towards the main base. He attempts to outsmart his pursuers but later realises the only way to confront his adversaries is to attack them, hoping to seize their weapons. However, all he discovers is a dead body. These endeavours are marked by the ingenuity and courage of the valiant South African. Will Teuns’s final plan succeed, or is it too doomed to fail, leading to even greater tragedy? The story concludes beneath a shadow of uncertainty, owing to a secret yet to be unravelled.

EXTRACT

With a curse and a ghastly laugh upon his face, Carlos spurred the horse and charged down the plateau. He pursued D'Arlan before the latter reached the point of the dune. But D'Arlan saw him coming. While running, he had glanced back several times and saw Carlos approaching. D'Arlan turned his head slightly and kept running.

Then he saw the horse's two white forelegs just behind him. Then the horse's head was beside him, and it was then that Captain D'Arlan did something only a man trained for it could do. Agile as a cat, he swung closer to the horse, leaped upwards in mid-run, and grabbed Carlos by the shoulder. The next moment, the tall ruffian tumbled from the saddle, falling with D'Arlan, landing with a thud on the sand. Carlos was so utterly floored by this sudden development, which had overtaken him so unexpectedly, that for the first few moments, he was completely bewildered. He tried to wrap his arms around the fighting D'Arlan, attempting to overpower him with his strength and weight. But the small Frenchman was as slippery as a fish and as sturdy as an iron post, fighting with the finesse of a professional wrestler.

Carlos's large hands shot out, trying to seize D'Arlan by the throat. But that was when he saw stars. With his sharp knuckles, D'Arlan had struck him on the temple. It was merely a glancing blow, but it hurt Carlos, and the pain brought the scoundrel to his senses. It unleashed the fury within him. He broke free from D'Arlan, and the next instant, he grabbed him, jerked him upright, and flung the Frenchman away from him.

18. VENGEANCE IS MINE

Chapter 1

THE THIRSTY

A tall blonde man in the uniform of the French Foreign Legion staggers and falters across the hot Sahara sand like one intoxicated. At one point, he pitches forward, collapsing face-first into the sand. For a few moments, he lies there, arms outstretched, eyes closed against the blinding heat of the Sahara sun. Then, slowly, he struggles back onto his knees and hands, pauses for a few moments with his head bowed low, then scrambles upright again. He walks unsteadily, leaving two rows of tracks across the desert sand. His eyes are dull and somewhat dazed. His face is horribly swollen, like that of a man long exposed to the heat of the Sahara desert without water or food. His lips are thick, swollen, and cracked. Occasionally, blood seeps from the fissures, and he licks it almost greedily with his swollen tongue to capture the moisture.

Within the circle of the living, burning horizon, he halts. He appears small and insignificant here in the empty expanse. Just like his shadow, which is barely a shadow anymore because the sun is almost directly overhead. He is a strong man. One can see that from his physique. But standing here now, he possesses less strength than a child. He struggles to remain upright. Each time, he sways and then stumbles crookedly. But he stays erect, for he knows that if this expedition of his across the hot sand fails, he will die before another night passes, he and his few comrades.

He sees the black shadow glide across the sand. He looks up into the blinding sunlight that blankets the world. There are two of them circling him. Two of the hideous inhabitants from the far corners of the desert. Their wings are large and broad. Their necks long and bare. Their beaks gleam like sabres, and their eyes are cruel as they circle him. He sees those dangerous talons. He hears the sibilance of their wings as they

wait for him to die.

He stretches his hands out towards them. His trembling, sunburnt hands. “Come, you curses,” he yells. Tears burn in his eyes. Standing here, swaying, he knows he would even be capable of tearing one of these vile vultures apart with his bare hands and eating it raw, sucking its blood. That is what the Sahara does to you when it catches you without water and food, as it has caught this man and his few comrades.

The Sahara turns you into a crazed beast willing to eat and drink anything. It breaks everything within you except the unstoppable and destructive craving for food and water.

Water... when did they last have water?

He closes his eyes, and his arms hang limply at his sides.

Now he must begin to execute his plan. His plan to save himself and those who wait. He glances up again at the birds circling not far above his head. Then he stumbles forward a few more steps and collapses into the sand. He falls with his head turned askew so he can see across the sand. The vultures cry out above him. It is their song of victory. They are certain he will not rise again. They swoop lower and lower. He hears the soft swish of their wings, the flutter of their feathers. He watches the black shadows drawing a circle around him.

“Come, you angels,” he whispers, “come and attack me. That is why I came here. That is why I lie here in the open desert. Come, you angels, come attack me.”

He closes his eyes for a moment against the white rays of the sun. He feels the sweat burning down his neck and is amazed that he can still sweat. Is there truly any moisture left in his tortured body?

It is then, feeling the fine sand jump across his face, that he opens his eyes. The first vulture has landed. A few paces away from him. He opens his eyes only to slits, for he knows the cunning of the vulture. He peers at the airborne beast. Its wings are spread wide. Its breath comes

fast, its beak wide open. Those two flaming yellow eyes are fixed on him. Those two eyes search for the last sign of life in its victim. But the man lying there lies motionless. He does not stir a muscle. All that moves within him is the beat of his heart and his slow, even breathing, which he controls so that the bird should have no suspicion that he still lives.

“Come closer, you angel,” he says to the vile bird. But he does not utter it aloud. He says it only in his heart. “Come closer so I can break your neck and drink your blood. Come closer so I can kill you and eat your flesh.”

It is almost as if he gains a hypnotic hold over the vulture, for suddenly it hops a few steps nearer, its two wings still spread wide. The man lying there is aware that the other vultures have landed behind his back.

The moments pass slowly. The moments that will determine whether he lives or dies. The moments that will determine whether the Sahara conquers him or he the Sahara.

The sand burns his outstretched hands. It burns and scorches his cheek pressed against the ground. But pain must not exist for him now because the impending death, because the life you wish to possess, is more important than pain. Therefore, he endures it. Therefore, he does not even move his cheek, which feels as if pressed against a flame, or his large hands, which feel as if thrust into an oven. He just lies there, and through his slitted eyes, he watches that vulture slowly approaching. Cautiously. He is grateful for the expression in the bird’s eyes. It is not the expression of satisfaction. That bird has almost the same look in its eyes as he himself has in his.

The vulture is now about a pace from his hand. He can clearly see the scabs on those legs and those talons. He can clearly see where a small feather stands erect on the bird’s wing. He can see that scar on the bare neck where an enemy must have injured it.

“Come closer, you angel,” he says again inwardly. “What are you

waiting for? Why don't you come closer so I can fight you?" It is then that it feels as though a flame scorches his hand stretched out behind his back. It feels as though a hot blade has struck him there, and he knows what it means. A vulture he cannot see has begun to feed.

But he cannot risk moving. He closes his eyes tightly and awaits the next strike of that beak.

Instinctively, he grinds his teeth. He must remain motionless.

It will not help to try and grab that bird. He might miss.

But although his eyes are closed, he suddenly becomes aware of a movement, and when he looks again, he is just in time to see the vulture on this side of him rapidly trot closer. Its hideous bare neck thrust far forward, its beak open, its bill menacing.

Then he moves. He moves before the other bird can drive its beak into his left hand again. His right hand shoots out, and he grabs the charging bird he can see by the leg. The next moment, there is an explosion of movement and sound. Those large wings beat frantically. The beak drives into his shoulder blade, his shoulder, and behind his neck as the bird fights. The great wings flap up and down as it struggles to get away. But the large man holds on. He holds on, laughing and crying. Against his weakened strength, the power of this bird is like a hurricane. And when that beak, during the struggle and blinding pain, strikes his cheek, self-preservation is his first reaction. That unexpected new pain so close to his eye causes his concentration to lapse for an instant. The next moment, the bird has wrenched its leg from his grasp and, with a confused flapping of wings, makes its escape.

The tall, blonde man lies weeping there on the sand. Weeping from pain and disappointment and despair. As he hears the bird flutter away through the hot air, it feels to him as if it is his own life fluttering away, for now, there is no more hope for him. This was his last reserve of strength that he used, and even his last strength was no longer enough to subdue and conquer a bird, to break it and eat it. Now it is over. He

knows this. He will not be able to lie here on the sand again and try to catch a vulture.

He can now do only one of two things. He can lie here until the sun has utterly burned him, until he falls into that terrible delirium the Sahara sun brings upon you if you are exposed to it long enough. He can lie here until he rises and screams, storms back and forth across the sand like a madman, his eyes lifted to the sun while imagining it is a pool of water he beholds. Run around until the red flashes of sunstroke appear before his tormented eyes, and he finally collapses with his hands thrown wide and his eyes wide open.

Or he can get up and go back to them who lie waiting. Those who know he went to fetch either death or life for them. Yes, he can get up here and struggle back to them, lie down beside them, and wait until the end comes. But now there is nothing further than waiting for the end.

At this moment, he feels like staying here and never moving again. Lying here and waiting until the Sahara claims him. Confused images of his youth flash through his mind. He thinks of a green valley in the wine country of the Western Province in South Africa. With his face pressed shuddering against one hand, he sees again, far against the high mountain, the white stream cascading downwards. He sees the coolness of large oak trees and the crowns of heavy pines. He sees the farm with a cellar where cool wine rests. He hears voices, and he sees people. People he has almost forgotten. His parents and friends. He sees the eyes of his brother who disappeared in this desert. The brother he came searching for when he joined the French Foreign Legion. He thinks of himself and realises with strange surprise that his name is Stegmann. Teuns Stegmann. Probably the only Afrikaner in the Foreign Legion. He thinks how many times he has already cheated death in this desert. Escaped bullets and sabres and spears, broken out of dungeons, and breached a fort through despair and fear only to conquer again.

But he knows that it is all over now. This time he knows who the victor will be between him and death.

He raises himself onto his elbows and looks at his injured hand. With a gasp, he lowers his head and licks almost furiously at the blood flowing from his own wound. From the hole where the vulture tore away a piece of flesh and skin. Then his broad shoulders begin to shake. He feels the tears burning in his eyes. "Water, water, water!" he says with a sob. "I don't want to die yet."

He struggles further upright until he is sitting. Through the dancing heat devils on the desert, he looks back at the old temple that resembles the white skeletal remains of an animal long exposed to the sun. The temple of death. It glitters in the sunlight. For a moment, it seems as if the old dilapidated doors swim and sway, as if they tilt and fall and then are rebuilt before his eyes. This makes him breathe deeper, for he knows that these are the premonitions of death that make one see thus. He has heard of men who turned back from death here in the desert. They related that when things first start to tilt and spin before you, then you must know that death is no longer far off.

Suddenly Teuns Stegmann, the tall blonde South African, feels a trembling wave of fear shock through him. No, he does not want to die. No, not here where he is alone. He would rather die there where others are with him. Even here, hearing death's wing brush past him, he wonders if he can still do something for the others. Perhaps take one of them out of the sun into the shade. Perhaps fan one of them cool with his kepi as he dies. Perhaps offer words of encouragement to one.

He struggles for a long time before he is on his feet. He is like a child learning to walk for the first time. He stands there for just a moment in his heavy boots, then falls backward onto his back, but he struggles upright again. Carefully, he places one foot before the other, for it feels as if he is walking on air. The level surface of the sand tilts and sways with him. It feels like hours before he stumbles into the old gateway of the deserted temple. In the coolness of an old wall, he stops, pressing his face against the warm stone. He turns and looks out over the desert. He sees two vultures circling, but high up where no one can reach them.

It seems as if they are taunting him in the freedom where they move. It is as if they are laughing at him from that great height just below the sun. He clenches his jaws and balls his fists, for at that moment, he knows how powerless he is.

He stumbles into the old temple towards the weathered old colonnade, already partially collapsed. He walks like a guilty man towards it, for he knows he has not succeeded. One of them there in the coolness also struggles upright, stands swaying there, and clutches one of the pillars. His large face is thrust forward. It is the big German, Fritz Mundt. The man reputed to be the strongest in the Foreign Legion. But at this moment, he too is so powerless that he must support his body against the pillar to stay upright.

When he comes within a few paces of them, Teuns Stegmann stops short, throws his hands up helplessly. He does not speak, but that single gesture is enough to testify to his failure.

“You have failed,” he heard Fritz Mundt say. “Now we will have to die.”

Teuns struggles a few steps closer into the shade. “Yes, I have failed,” he whispers and lowers his large head. “I have no more strength. I tell you, I have no more strength.”

Jack Ritchie, the blonde Englishman, sits there with his legs stretched far out, his back leaning against the wall, his head askew. Limp and askew as if his neck were broken.

“You brought nothing,” he murmurs like a child who expected a gift and now realises he is disappointed.

“I tell you, I have no more strength!” Teuns cries out, struggles up the two steps, and collapses against the wall in the coolness. “I had one,” he says. He says it vehemently. His voice trembling. “I had one in my hand, but then it pecked me in the face, and the pain was so great that my hand remained open. But I couldn’t have held onto it anyway, I