

SAHARA

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20. Death in the Shadows



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DEATH IN THE SHADOWS

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SUMMARY

The story commences in the fort of Dini Salam, a fortress of the French Foreign Legion in the Sahara. Hoessein Nasab, an Arab freedom fighter, and his two comrades are detained in a prison cell, awaiting their execution for the murder of four legionnaires. Colonel Le Clerq, the commander, grapples with the decision, but Captain D’Arlan urges decisive action. Two Arabs request Le Clerq to transport a sick man, Radi, and his daughter to Algiers. Le Clerq consents, unaware of the impending threat.

The narrative centres around Teuns Stegmann, a blond South African legionnaire. Teuns, along with his comrades, including Fritz Mundt, is part of a group departing for Algiers on leave. Tension mounts sharply when the “sick” Radi and his “daughter” hijack the flight, aiming to use the passengers as hostages. Teuns’s attempts to resolve the situation lead to a fatal shootout and a desperate escape from the aircraft. The scene shifts to a cat-and-mouse game in the desert, where Teuns and his comrades attempt to capture Arab horses, while being pursued themselves.

Teuns’s resourcefulness and courage come to the fore as he outwits the Arabs and attempts to strike a deal with Sheikh Abdoella. The situation becomes increasingly dire, marked by treachery and deceit on both sides. The story concludes with the sudden appearance of Captain D’Arlan and a detachment of legionnaires on camels, just as Teuns and his comrades run out of ammunition. But what lies behind D’Arlan’s smile, and what secrets still lie hidden in the burning wreckage of the aircraft?

EXTRACT

The co-pilot sees this as he glances fleetingly at the instrument panel. Now there is no more room for error.

He strains again at the control wheel. With slow, sustained concentration he exerts pressure on it, but with the utmost caution, because he realises that if he is not careful, he will be utterly unable to pull them out of this disastrous dive.

He glances sideways again at the altimeter.

Now there is only 1,000 feet between them and the earth.

Once more, he pulls a little harder on the control wheel.

It seems they are no longer plummeting vertically towards the earth as it had seemed moments ago. It appears he has already lifted the nose slightly.

Five hundred feet.

Here, in the rear of the aircraft, Teuns Stegmann has closed his eyes. He lies helplessly pinned beneath the mass of bodies that had tumbled onto him and the other men up front. He is aware that they are still falling. Any moment now will bring that hard, crushing, grinding impact, and then they will know nothing more.

Some of the men scream in fear, for as they fall, they can see out of the windows and witness the earth rushing up towards them.

Three hundred feet.

With a final desperate exertion of strength, the pilot pulls at the control wheel, and then it is as if the great machine suddenly responds better to the force in the man's hands. Its nose lifts higher and its tail drops further, and when they are about a hundred feet above the earth, the aircraft levels out completely horizontally.

20. DEATH IN THE SHADOWS

Chapter 1

THE PATIENT

Hoessein Nasab, the large Arab with the bright, sparkling eyes, looks through the small barred window in the door of the prison cell within the fort of Dini Salam, in the great garrison fortress of the French Foreign Legion in the Southwestern Sahara. Hoessein grips the thick iron bars, and his eyes are narrowed as he sees the last gleam of sunlight on the high ramparts of the fortress. He watches intently and with longing, for all he knows, this might be the last time he sees the rays of the setting sun. It has been almost a week now that Hoessein and his two comrades have been detained here in the small punishment cell. It has been almost a week now that they have heard the rhythmic tread of the guards' boots on the flagstones before the cell. If they pay attention, they see, each time, how a bayonet flashes past the bars when the guard walks past. Hoessein sighs deeply, looks one last time at the sun's rays, then up at the blue sky where the day dies, and then he turns away from the window so that his comrades can undergo the same ritual as he.

"Look at the sunlight, children of Africa," says Hoessein. "It will perhaps be the last time that you can look upon the sunlight. Look at the blue sky of Africa, my comrades. Look long enough, and you will see Allah smile because He knows that we fought for freedom."

He sits down on the hard wooden bench against the wall and listens to the rhythmic crunch of boots outside the cell.

His two comrades also take turns looking through the bars, and then they come and sit uneasily beside Hoessein. One glances sideways at Hoessein.

"When will it be?" he asks.

"I have a feeling," says Hoessein, "that it will be tomorrow. I think they

will shoot us tomorrow morning. This afternoon I heard them shouting commands in the square. It sounded to me as if they were training the firing squad. Yes, my comrades, I think it will be tomorrow morning.”

“Why does the Arab nation not come to deliver us?” asks the third prisoner.

“How can they?” asks Hoessein. “How can they breach this fort?”

“I do not want to die,” says the second prisoner, a relatively young man whose lips tremble.

“You must be strong, my comrade,” says Hoessein. “You must be strong, for we fought for the freedom of the Arab peoples. We did not succeed, but those who come after us will succeed, for they have our example, and they will have our blood to avenge.”

“What is it like,” asks the third prisoner, “when they shoot us? Is it quick? Is there pain?”

“It is quick, my friend,” says Hoessein. “You will feel only an impact, and then you will know nothing more. It is as swift as a lightning strike. You must be brave, my friend, for the sake of the Arab people. For the sake of Arab freedom, you must be brave.”

Then they fall silent, and all three look out through the small barred window as the last light dies over the Sahara. All they hear is the crunching of boots. They do not hear the sounds of the Arab city that lies beyond the gates of Dini Salam. Those sounds are too distant and indistinct for them.

In his office within the fortress, Colonel Le Clerq looks across his desk at Captain D’Arlan. Le Clerq regards the captain with intense concentration. “Is the firing squad ready?” asks Le Clerq.

“I had them practise again this afternoon, mon Colonel,” says D’Arlan. “I believe they are fully prepared. When do you expect the execution to take place?”

“I think we shall receive confirmation from Algiers tonight or tomorrow morning. I don’t know why they are delaying so much with this case. Do you think the sentence I passed on Hoessein Nasab is too severe, D’Arlan?”

D’Arlan shakes his head. “I do not think so at all, mon Colonel. This Hoessein is an instigator of the first order. He has already worked the local Arabs into such a state of agitation and unrest that we can expect anything. Had it remained mere incitement, it would not have been so bad, but the fact that he tried to hurl a bomb from the ramparts while almost the entire garrison was on parade – that is sufficient cause for him to die. Even if he had taken only one life of the Foreign Legion, he would have had to die, but now he has killed four men of the Foreign Legion. You know this yourself. No, for him, there is only one punishment, and that is death.”

“These things always have such a detrimental effect, D’Arlan,” says Le Clerq, rising and pacing a few steps through his office, his hands clasped behind his back. “Would it not be better to show mercy? Would that not have a much better influence? Would it not bring about a new reconciliation between the local Arabs and the Foreign Legion? You know how it is, D’Arlan. The fewer fires we can ignite, the better.”

D’Arlan looks frowningly at Le Clerq. “Show mercy to Hoessein so that he can continue with his agitation, mon Colonel?” he asks. “No, that is impossible. You know just as well as I do that they would see it as a sign of weakness. They would not appreciate it in any case. They regard him as a martyr and a hero. And I think the sooner he is dispatched, the better. He is practically the only leader they have here, and once we have dispatched Hoessein, we will once again have some peace and quiet in Dini Salam. He murdered four members of the Foreign Legion in cold blood. For that, he must pay, mon Colonel. It is the only language these people understand.”

Le Clerq sighs deeply where he stands. “Yes, I am afraid it is so, D’Arlan. It is as you say. It is a matter of two evils. If we do not execute

him, they will see it as a sign of weakness, and Hoessein will be able to continue with his subversive activities among the Arabs. If we do execute him, it will again cause great unpleasantness and hostility. But then at least they realise that we do not let wrongdoing go unpunished. And if there is one thing I fear, it is that the prestige and authority of the Foreign Legion will be undermined.”

“Precisely so, mon Colonel,” says D’Arlan. “If the confirmation comes through, when should the execution take place, Colonel?”

“As soon as possible thereafter, Capitaine,” says Le Clerq. “I think the sooner we conclude it, the better. I think you should arrange with the Arabs early tomorrow morning for the removal of the three bodies.”

The greying colonel turns suddenly to the pale D’Arlan, who is still sitting there. “D’Arlan,” he says, “how do you explain that people always make the same mistakes? Here you have a man who considers himself a freedom fighter for his people. I can honestly tell you that I have the greatest respect for a man who fights for what he considers right. But why choose this path now? Did he truly imagine that with that one homemade bomb he could eliminate the entire garrison of Dini Salam? Surely the man is not such a fool. And did he truly imagine that he would be left unpunished?”

“Extremists are always fools, Colonel,” D’Arlan answers calmly. “They are made that way. If it were not so, they would not be extremists.”

Le Clerq shrugs his shoulders with a sort of helpless gesture. “Well,” he says, “let it be as it may. In any case, I hope Algiers will confirm the sentence tonight or tomorrow morning, so that we can get it behind us. I do not like this delay.”

Just as Le Clerq is about to sit down, there is a knock on the door. The orderly enters, salutes briskly, and Le Clerq looks questioningly at the young soldier.

“Two Arabs to speak with you, mon Colonel,” says the orderly.

“Two Arabs?” asks Le Clerq.

“That is correct, mon Colonel.”

“Ask the officer of the guard to search them for weapons and bring them in,” commands Le Clerq.

“They have already been searched, mon Colonel,” says the orderly.

Le Clerq makes a small gesture, and the orderly disappears again through the door, and the next moment two Arabs enter, flanked by two guards. D’Arlan has risen, stepped aside somewhat, and now stands beneath the windows of the office.

D’Arlan recognises one of the Arabs as one of the local leaders and therefore gestures for the two to sit. They decline the invitation.

Even before either of the two Arabs speaks, Le Clerq speaks. “I hope you haven’t come to ask me to alter the sentence on Hoessein Nasab and his two comrades,” says the colonel, “because that is impossible. They have shed blood, and with blood they shall pay. That is the law, and so shall I carry it out.”

“We have not come to speak about Hoessein Nasab,” says the older Arab on the left. “The sentence on Hoessein Nasab has been passed, and it must be carried out. We can understand that the French Foreign Legion will punish Nasab and his two comrades. We Arabs would have done the same.”

“I am grateful that you see it this way,” says Le Clerq, and he is genuinely grateful to encounter, in this delicate position, at least two Arabs who understand. “What, then, brings you to me?” asks Le Clerq.

“We have come with an important request,” says the Arab who spoke first. “We hope you will find it possible to comply with the request. If you can do so, we shall regard you as a humane and just man.”

“What is the request?” asks Le Clerq, looking intently from one Arab to the other. Le Clerq knows Arabs. He knows well enough that their requests are usually either unreasonable or impossible.

“We understand,” says the Arab, “that a number of your men are departing for Algiers by aircraft tomorrow.”

Le Clerq suddenly leans forward over the desk and looks frowningly at his two visitors. “And where, indeed, did you get this information?” asks Le Clerq.

“You know how it is, Colonel,” says the second Arab. “Soldiers talk, you know. We suppose that a number of them are leaving on leave tomorrow. It is such an event for them,” he says with a candid smile, “that they cannot keep it to themselves in the cafés.”

“In any case, Colonel,” says the first Arab quite calmly, “we do not intend to try and shoot down the aircraft or anything of that sort. As I said, we have merely come to make a request of you.”

“I would be grateful if I could hear the request now,” says Le Clerq, slightly irritable.

The elderly Arab takes a step closer to the desk. D’Arlan’s hand moves slowly closer to the revolver in his pocket. The two guards grip their automatic rifles tighter, but when the Arab speaks, it comes as an anti-climax, and all the tension that had suddenly arisen deflates like a punctured balloon.

“One of the most beloved residents of Dini Salam,” says the Arab, “is gravely ill. He is a middle-aged man named Radi. We wished to ask if you would not permit Radi to be transported to Algiers by the aircraft tomorrow.”

“Radi?” asks Le Clerq. “Radi is one of your important men, is he not?”

“That is so, Colonel,” say the two Arabs, virtually simultaneously.

“And now he is ill?”

“That is correct, Colonel. The Arab doctor here feels that Radi should be transported to Algiers where he will likely require hospital treatment. We have come to ask you to permit this, Colonel, for then you will confer a benefit not only upon Radi but also upon the Arab people. The inhabitants of Dini Salam will be grateful. All we ask of you is that you allow Radi to fly along, and to take his daughter along with him.”

The thought flashes quickly through Le Clerq’s mind. This is the kind of situation where a man must think quickly and thoroughly. He glances covertly at D’Arlan standing there before the window, and in the eyes of the small, pale captain, Le Clerq sees a clear warning.

Le Clerq attempts evasion. “How do I know that this Radi is truly ill?” he says. “How do I know that you are not up to something again?”

“You are too suspicious, Colonel,” says the Arab.

“Do you blame me for being suspicious after what Hoessein Nasab perpetrated?”

“Perhaps we cannot blame you,” says the Arab quickly. “All I can tell you is that you must trust us, and secondly, I have brought proof for you that Radi is indeed ill, because I deduced that you would not accept it on hearsay. I have therefore brought you a doctor’s certificate.” He reaches his hand beneath his robe, pulls out the piece of paper, and lays it open before Le Clerq on his desk.

Le Clerq takes the pince-nez from his pocket and sets it on his nose. It is indeed a medical certificate. His suspicion and uncertainty are unnecessary. The certificate states that Radi is suffering from a severe bout of jaundice and that hospital treatment is essential for him. Because effective hospital facilities are not available here in Dini Salam, it is recommended that Radi be taken to Algiers. It is recommended that his daughter, who has some knowledge of nursing, should accompany him. The certificate is signed by a physician whose name Le Clerq had definitely heard before. An Arab physician who had on occasion also treated men from the garrison.