

SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

24. Cave of Horrors



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CAVE OF HORRORS

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SUMMARY

In Algiers, Teuns Stegmann, a legionnaire, encounters the stunningly beautiful Danielle Aubert on the beach. She introduces him to her father, Colonel Philippe Aubert. They question him about the Sahara, later revealing that Teuns's expertise is the key to an important mission. They tell him a story about Aubert's son, Felix, a pilot who disappeared in the desert during the Second World War, and whose aircraft was recently found. They believe Felix is alive and that Teuns must help them find him. The colonel compels Teuns to cooperate, promising that he has informed Teuns's commanding officer.

Teuns provisionally plays along with their plans but is suspicious of the Auberts' true motives, especially when they reach a large Arab encampment in the desert instead of the expected aircraft wreckage. Colonel Aubert reveals a treacherous plan to sell a forgotten German weapons cache to the Arabs, led by Sheikh Hoedat, in exchange for a large sum of money. Teuns is forced to act as an interpreter but soon realises that neither Aubert nor the Arabs can afford for him to remain alive after witnessing this transaction. Consequently, he attempts to escape but is apprehended during his first effort.

In a climax of flames and violence, Teuns leads the Arabs to the hidden treasure trove of weapons. Danielle reveals that she is not Aubert's daughter and was misled by him just as Teuns was. Together, they plan a desperate attempt first to destroy the weapons and then to escape. Will this act of sabotage be enough to save them from certain death, or is there a deeper secret hidden behind the scenes that will cast everything in a new light?

EXTRACT

At various points amongst the weaponry, he sees stacks of petrol cans standing. The kind the Germans used on such a large scale in the desert. Oil drums are also there. Piles of landmines, carefully and neatly stacked upon one another. Crates of dynamite. In a word, an unbelievable variety. Weapons, fuel, explosives, everything to gladden the heart of the warmonger.

Speechless, Teuns stares at the rows of cannons. Enough cannons to level Fort Laval, the fortress of Dini Salam, and other strongpoints of the Foreign Legion within an hour. He looks at stacks of machine guns that have stood lost here through all the years. And it flashes through his mind what would happen to a detachment of the French Foreign Legion if they encountered a division of Arabs armed with those rapid-fire weapons.

He shudders, and although his body feels ice-cold, sweat runs into his eyes, for he knows he is witnessing the downfall of the Legion here. If the Arabs transport this mass of weapons from here unhindered and distribute them among their people, then one might as well declare Ichabod upon the French Foreign Legion. Suddenly, as if in a feverish trance, Teuns sees before him the laughing eyes of Fritz Mundt, the dark laughing eyes of Petacci, the large frame of Podolski, the pure white-blond head of Jack Ritchie. He sees the narrow, sallow face of Captain D'Arlan, the restless movements of Colonel Le Clerq's hands. He thinks of men in the Legion to whom he had never given particular thought before.

24. CAVE OF HORRORS

Chapter 1

BEAUTIFUL DANIELLE

Teuns Stegmann, the tall, blond South African in the French Foreign Legion, stretches his body pleurably on the damp sand of the beach near Algiers. He is almost the only one still left here. His few comrades, Fritz Mundt, Jack Ritchie, Petacci, and the Pole Podolski, who are spending their leave with him here in the large city, have already headed back to the hotel. But he had resolved to swim one more time in the cool, invigorating waters of the Mediterranean Sea before bidding farewell to this beach. He had resolved to let himself be caressed a little longer by the delightful sea breeze before returning to the hotel, because this afternoon is his last afternoon here.

It is as though the tall man has drifted through an incredible dream these past few days here in the soothing climate of the coast. It was a heavenly change after the torment and exhausting heat of the Sahara Desert. He and his few comrades had cherished almost every moment of their short vacation here by the sea like a joyous instant and tried to hold back time so that it would not pass so quickly. At night, they had revelled heartily in the nightclubs. The following morning, they had slept almost completely through, and then spent the afternoon on the beach. That was their routine.

But now it is over. Their escape to the sea has come to an end, just as all good things eventually conclude. Tomorrow morning, they will board the aircraft again that will carry them away to the punishing heat, to the flies, the loneliness and isolation, and the all-too-familiar faces of the fort in Dini Salam, lost deep in the Sahara. Then these joyous days by the coast will be merely a dream and a memory for them, something they can talk about day in and day out without being able to recapture the pleasure thereof until many gruelling months have passed.

Here where he now lies, Teuns Stegmann is thinking of nothing in particular. Lately, he had indeed often thought of his missing brother, his younger brother who was a pilot in the western desert during the Second World War. His brother who, one day, vanished without a trace, aircraft and all. This is, after all, the reason why Teuns Stegmann joined the French Foreign Legion. Within him, the vague hope had always persisted that in the Legion, he would find some indication of what had happened to his brother. After all these years, he still firmly believes that his brother is alive and being held captive somewhere by the Arabs. He has followed one lead after another, but thus far, he has been unable to discover any trace of his brother. But at this moment, even the tantalising secret of his vanished brother is not on his mind. He wants to enjoy these last moments on the beach without even thinking. He just wants to listen to the murmur of the sea and relax under the nurturing touch of the gentle sea breeze. He just wants to be alone, completely left to himself without even hearing the voices of his comrades. From tomorrow onwards, he will constantly be in their company again, and when they are back in Dini Salam, they will have to face the same men again, interact with the same men, and go through every little routine with the same men, as is the case day after day in that fortress of the French Foreign Legion in the southern Sahara.

Although Teuns is lying on his stomach, with his head on his hands and his eyes closed, he suddenly becomes aware of movement near him. He slowly opens his eyes, and the next moment, reality overwhelms him in the form of one of the most beautiful women he has ever beheld in his life. She is standing barely a pace away from him. She is slender and relatively tall. Her body is nigh perfect in the bright yellow swimsuit, her bosom full and alluring, her skin olive-brown, and her long, lush hair jet-black. It reaches her shoulders. But the most beautiful feature about her is her eyes.

They are slightly elongated like almonds, yet they possess a peculiar charm and an almost indescribable shape that makes her look quite different from an Oriental woman. Her eyes are dark, but not as dark as

her hair, for they are suffused with the soft glow of violet. They are piercing, intelligent, and yet so exceptionally tender. For a moment, Teuns is not quite sure whether he sees little devils or angels hiding in those beautiful eyes. Her body glistens in the late light, and for a moment, the Legionnaire imagines she is a nymph who has stepped forth from his dream. She looks too beautiful to be true.

He shakes his head vigorously, widens his eyes, but his doubt as to whether she is real is dispelled the next moment when she speaks with a tingling, melodious voice. A voice in which joy and excitement reside, the voice of a carefree child running through the flat breakers on the beach, her hair swinging.

“I am so sorry to disturb you, Monsieur,” she says, “but the unfortunate thing is that I am terribly keen to smoke, yet I don't have a match at the moment.”

With an elegant movement, she settles herself on the sand beside Teuns. He pulls his smoking things closer, quickly sits up, strikes a match for her, and lights her cigarette. Then she snaps open her golden cigarette holder and offers him one.

“Do smoke one with me,” she invites. And as Teuns takes out the cigarette with fingers that tremble slightly, he notices that the cigarette is of a particularly expensive Turkish kind.

“Merci,” he says as he blows out the first smoke, for she had addressed him in French. “Are you vacationing here or do you live here?” he asks.

“No,” answers the beauty, “I am here with my father. He is here on important business. You are from the French Foreign Legion, are you not?”

“Correct,” answers Teuns, and his blue eyes laugh into hers. “I am here on leave. The only pity is that the free time is over tomorrow. Early tomorrow morning, we depart back to Dini Salam.”

“How interesting,” she exclaims delightedly. Teuns Stegmann feels the

light blush on his ears and neck as he sees the undisguised admiration in her eyes. “The Foreign Legion always seems so romantic to me,” she says. “If I were a man, I would surely have joined it too.”

Teuns gives a dismissive laugh. “You would quickly change your opinion, mademoiselle,” says the South African, “once you gained more experience of the Legion. I cannot imagine anything to which less romance is attached than the Foreign Legion.”

“Please do not disillusion me,” she says with a tingling laugh that brings little creases beside her nose. “I want to remember the Legion as I have imagined it for myself since childhood.”

“Very well,” answers Teuns, “since you offered me such a tasty cigarette, and since you honour me with your fair presence, I shall not disillusion you about the Foreign Legion.”

“Please call me Danielle,” she says with heartfelt intimacy. “I don’t think we need to be so formal.”

“Thank you for the permission,” answers Teuns charmingly. “In that case, I would be pleased if you would call me Teuns.”

“Teuns?” She pronounces the name completely incorrectly, as its Afrikaans sound utterly stumps her.

“I am a South African.”

“A South African? How exceptionally interesting! And you are in the Foreign Legion?”

“I am in the Foreign Legion,” he answers, as if it were necessary to say so.

“Have you been in the Legion long?”

“I have been in the Legion for years.”

“Then you are a veteran?” She leans closer to him. The soft fragrance of her hair stimulates him, and the genuine interest in her eyes caresses

him.

“You may call me a veteran.”

“Then, I assume, you know the Sahara well?”

“That particular part of the Sahara where I am stationed, I know like the palm of my hand,” he answers without any pride or arrogance in his voice. “You must know the Sahara,” says Teuns, “or else it destroys you. You must know it down to the finest detail, otherwise you become its victim. The Sahara does not allow you to take risks with it, or to fool it, or to take it lightly.”

He notices the peculiar glint in her eyes, the glint of something more than interest, something like intense concentration, something like gratitude.

Danielle sighs. “I could never have dreamed,” she says, “that I would one day meet a member of the Foreign Legion in the flesh. And yet... now I have met you.”

“Just a pity,” says Teuns, “that we met so late. Tomorrow I must be off again already.”

“Yes,” says Danielle, “it is terribly unfortunate. I would have so liked to spend my idle hours with you, if you would not consider it intrusive.”

Her reserve surprises him. Her refined manners fill him with admiration, and her stimulating beauty makes him realise again that he is a man.

His time is short, and therefore he cannot afford to let this golden opportunity pass. His voice is a little hoarse when he says, “I hope you won’t think it presumptuous on my part, but wouldn’t you feel like going to the nightclub tonight?”

“I said my name is Danielle,” she chides him good-naturedly. “Why so formal?” There is a slight frown between her beautiful eyes. She shakes her hair, and for a moment, Teuns feels the almost irresistible desire to

grab her right there on the spot and kiss her until she lies almost breathless in his arms. A thrill courses through his body at the prospect of being able to spend at least a few hours in the presence of this beautiful creature.

“I have a better plan,” says Danielle. “Wouldn’t you like to come with me to my hotel? It’s the Hotel Foch.”

The most luxurious place in Algiers, Teuns thinks quickly.

“Then I will introduce you to my father, you will dine with us, and afterwards, we will dance a little. They have a ball every evening at the Hotel Foch. How does that sound? To be completely honest,” she says softly and confidentially, leaning towards him again, “I am not a very great lover of nightclubs. Too stuffy, too crowded, and there are too many people who overindulge in drink.”

“You are exceptionally kind,” says Teuns.

“It will be a pleasure,” answers Danielle. “And please don’t say ‘You’ to me again.”

“I will try to remember.”

“Very well,” says Danielle. “In that case, we two must go and get ready.” She stands up and shakes the damp sand from her swimsuit. “I will wait for you in an hour.”

“I will be there in an hour,” answers Teuns, and to his surprise, he feels short of breath. “I am quickly going to dive in just one more time, and then I will go and get ready.”

“By the way,” says Danielle, “you haven’t told me your surname yet.” “Stegmann... Teuns Stegmann, that is the name.”

“Danielle Aubert.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” says Teuns, giving a slight bow.

“See you in an hour then?”

“I’ll be there in an hour,” says Teuns.

“Au revoir...” With that, she trips away across the sand, and Teuns stands staring after her for a long time before he gets as far as running into the breakers and flinging himself into the cool sea for the last time.

Excited as a boy taking out his first date, Teuns hurries back to the perfectly ordinary hotel where he and the others are staying. Amidst much teasing and banter, he tells them what happened. All he tells them is that he is going to dine and dance with a stunningly beautiful girl. But because he knows them, he doesn’t say who she is or where they are going to dance. He knows well enough that they are capable of following him to the Hotel Foch and later in the evening, when the champagne and cognac have made them merry, insisting on sharing his joy.

Teuns puts on his spare uniform, which he had specially cleaned, brushes his blond hair neatly, puts on his kepi, and then takes his leave of them like a general. Salutes smartly, and bows.

“Goodbye, Casanova,” says Jack Ritchie. “Just make sure you’re not late for the plane tomorrow,” Fritz Mundt throws in.

“Bring us a lock of her hair,” teases Petacci.

“Uphold the honour of the Legion,” is Podolski’s advice.

When Teuns steps into the foyer of the opulent Hotel Foch, she is waiting there for him. Her long hair is glossy like silk, her eyes are bright and cheerful, and her supple body is a dream in the close-fitting, soft red evening gown. She immediately links her arm in his, and her perfume is a heavenly experience for him. She leads him up the stairs and takes him into a luxurious suite. Teuns suddenly finds himself in a large, neatly furnished room. From one of the old-fashioned, gilded chairs, a rather short, impressive man with grey hair suddenly rises.

“Father,” says Danielle, “this is Legionnaire Stegmann. And, Legionnaire, this is my father, Colonel Philippe Aubert.”