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25. Echoes of the Past



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ECHOES OF THE PAST

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by Meiring Fouche

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SUMMARY

The narrative commences in Dini Salam, an outpost settlement of the French Foreign Legion. Colonel Le Clerq expresses concern regarding the disappearance of Sergeant O'Reiley and his patrol in the Sahara. He discusses the situation with Captain D'Arlan, a seasoned officer renowned as the "Houdini of the Sahara". D'Arlan suspects that the Arabs, despite their ostensible peacefulness, might be involved in O'Reiley's disappearance, possibly as part of a broader scheme. Le Clerq is reluctant to dispatch another patrol, fearing further losses. D'Arlan volunteers to personally lead a select team to search for O'Reiley and his men.

The story now primarily focuses on Teuns Stegmann, a South African legionnaire in D'Arlan's patrol. They follow the trail of a lost Arab, which leads them into an ambush. The Arabs, commanded by a sheikh, demand that Teuns be handed over to them. D'Arlan refuses, but the situation is complicated by the fact that O'Reiley and his men are also being held captive somewhere. Teuns feels a growing burden of responsibility, as his presence becomes the linchpin in a deadly game of chess. In an attempt to save his comrades, Teuns defies D'Arlan's command and proceeds alone to the Arab camp.

Teuns attempts to negotiate but is confronted with a shocking revelation and an unexpected turn of events. The Arabs seek a secret map, which they believe to be in Teuns's possession, and Danielle, a woman from Teuns's past, is brought in to exert further pressure on him. In the face of torture, betrayal, and the looming death of his friends, will Teuns succumb to the Arabs' demands, even while denying possession of the requisite information? The unveiling of an unforeseen truth lies concealed within the secrets of the past.

EXTRACT

D'Arlan feels the tension mounting within him. The moment of decision approaches rapidly, for Teuns is no longer far from that small, straight line of men moving towards him. "Hold yourselves ready, mes amis," he commands, glancing fleetingly again at the waiting Arabs, but they all resemble statues hewn from stone. Inwardly, he tells himself, "A few more moments, D'Arlan, then you shall know whether, this afternoon, you were cleverer than that child of the desert, the sheikh of the Oerdoe. A few more moments, then you shall know whether you succeeded or whether he succeeded."

Teuns Stegmann estimates the distance to the moving men. He thinks it is now time for him to issue the command that D'Arlan had articulated very clearly to him. The command is that when he, Teuns, comes level with the line of men, he is to turn and run. They must join him and also run as fast as they possibly can. Their flight back to where D'Arlan waits will be covered by intensive fire from the machine guns. In this way, D'Arlan hopes, he will not only secure the release of O'Reiley and his few men but will also retain Teuns Stegmann. And most importantly, he will then have eight extra fighters to teach the Arabs a harsh lesson.

Teuns decides that the men are now close enough to convey D'Arlan's command to them.

At the very moment he slows his pace to give them the order, he notices something, something that now strikes him like a hard blow. It astonishes him that he hadn't perceived it sooner, yet he is grateful that he has perceived it now.

With an icy pang coursing through his body, Teuns Stegmann realises that the few men casually strolling towards him are not legionnaires. They are Arabs. Arabs clad in the uniforms of O'Reiley and his few men.

25. ECHOES OF THE PAST

Chapter 1

LOST PATROL

The greying Colonel Le Clerq, commander of the French Foreign Legion garrison in the outpost town of Dini Salam, draws a circle with a furious movement on the map of the south-eastern Sahara hanging against his office wall. "It is in this area that O'Reiley's patrol must have gone missing," Le Clerq tells Captain D'Arlan, the small, pale Frenchman standing beside the agitated colonel, his hands clasped behind his back. "This is a damnable, wretched business," says Le Clerq impotently. "How am I to account to high command when a patrol from Dini Salam simply vanishes into thin air in the Sahara? Or do you think they might still return, D'Arlan?" he asks sharply, swinging around towards the captain and staring into his eyes. "Do you think there is still a faint possibility that O'Reiley and his men might come back?"

D'Arlan shakes his head slowly. "No, mon Colonel," D'Arlan says with a sigh. "I fear we must assume that O'Reiley and his men are not coming back. It has been more than two weeks now since they were due back."

"I just cannot understand it," says Le Clerq, striking the air furiously with his officer's baton. "What could possibly have become of them? Surely the vultures haven't devoured them. Surely they aren't foolish enough to perish in a sandstorm, or get lost, or die of thirst. They know well enough where every oasis in this area is. They know how to conduct themselves in a sandstorm. Now, what could have become of them? Surely they haven't deserted."

"And the Arabs?" asks D'Arlan, continuing to stare intently at the map.

"Arabs!" Le Clerq scoffs, his face flushing with indignation. "Don't be foolish, D'Arlan," says the colonel. "The Arabs are peaceful, as far as I know. What reason would they have at this stage to overpower a

Foreign Legion patrol? Besides, it would have taken more than an Arab patrol to overpower O'Reiley and his men. They are armed to the teeth, down to the last man. No, I think that's nonsense, D'Arlan."

"Quite possibly, Colonel," D'Arlan replies calmly. "But all I know is that one can never trust the Arabs. They appear very peaceful now, but who is to say that something hasn't happened in the interim to get their hackles up again?"

Le Clerq again unconsciously traces a circle on the map. "This is where they must have disappeared," he says. "Because this is where I sent them. I merely sent them there because I was curious to know what was going on among the smaller tribes in that area. It's such a remote region, D'Arlan. No large tribes in that vicinity. And now they have vanished completely. How does one explain it? What must I do? Must I now send the entire garrison of Dini Salam after them? Just eight men, O'Reilly and seven troopers, have disappeared like mist before the sun." Suddenly the colonel falls silent and glances sideways, meaningfully, at D'Arlan. "Do you think they could have deserted, mon ami? Do you think such a possibility exists?"

"I think we can dismiss that idea immediately, Colonel," D'Arlan answers without the slightest hesitation. "If there is one man who would never desert the Legion, it is O'Reiley. And the seven fellows he has with him are all reliable men. No, I don't think there is such a possibility, Colonel. Behind the disappearance of these men lies something else, and I have a strange feeling that it is something larger than we imagine."

"An uprising of the Arabs?"

"I don't think so, Colonel," D'Arlan replies. "I believe the disappearance of this patrol of O'Reiley's has nothing to do with an Arab uprising."

"Well, what then?"

“I think it has to do with some sort of ruse. It could be related to the prelude to an attack, but not the attack itself. I cannot shake the idea that the Arabs captured this patrol for a specific purpose.”

“Well, I don’t know,” says Le Clerq, groaning. “I am at my wit’s end. I cannot simply abandon the men to oblivion. But on the other hand, what must I do to find out what has become of them?”

“There is only one way out, mon Colonel,” answers the slender, pale captain known as the Houdini of the Sahara because he has escaped from the clutches of the Arabs so many times in miraculous ways.

“And that is?” asks Le Clerq.

“Another patrol, mon officier...”

“Are you out of your mind, D’Arlan? Must I send another patrol into the desert after O’Reiley and his men, only to lose them too? What guarantee is there that if O’Reiley and his patrol disappeared, the patrol I send after them won’t disappear as well? Why do you suggest I should take such a risk? If something happens to this patrol, I will look doubly guilty and doubly incompetent. It would mean the end of my career in the Foreign Legion.”

“That may be so, Colonel,” answers D’Arlan. “But I can think of no other alternative. We can hardly send an entire garrison after O’Reiley. And besides, we cannot sit here with folded hands while eight men of the Foreign Legion have vanished like needles in a haystack in the Sahara. What do you think high command will say if it is discovered that we did nothing to try and find out what happened to O’Reiley and his men?”

“That is also true,” says Le Clerq vehemently. “That is entirely true. But I just cannot bring myself to decide to put another patrol in jeopardy. Can you understand that, D’Arlan? To lose one patrol is bad enough, but to lose two is unforgivable. Apart from everything else, it would ruin my career as commander of Dini Salam.”

“Not if you send the right kind of patrol, Colonel,” says D’Arlan. There is sudden relief in Le Clerq’s tense eyes. He turns his face questioningly towards the captain. “The right patrol?” he asks. “What exactly does a right patrol look like?”

“The right patrol,” says D’Arlan, “will consist of Captain D’Arlan and ten men handpicked by himself.”

Le Clerq snorts and stares somewhat absently at the large map. “And what, may I ask, would make such a patrol so special?” he asks. “Or are Captain D’Arlan and his ten men all going to don suits of steel armour? Or are they so good that they can withstand an Arab army? What makes them better than O’Reiley’s patrol?”

“My dear Colonel,” answers D’Arlan, “I do not wish to sound pushy or boastful. But there are people who understand the Sahara better than others. There are people who have more experience of the Sahara than others. And similarly, there are people who are more resourceful than others. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time I have embarked on a daring expedition. And if I have ten select men with me, I am confident I can tackle a great many things before falling into the hands of the Arabs.”

Le Clerq smiles into his fist, although his face remains completely expressionless. He had so hoped that D’Arlan would utter these words, for D’Arlan now relieves him of a great doubt and a gnawing crisis. He knows that what the small captain says is the truth. He knows that the little man beside him is peerlessly brave and peerlessly clever. The Arab who captures him and keeps him could be knighted by his own people, if such a thing exists among the Arabs.

But because he holds such respect, deep appreciation, and brotherly attachment for D’Arlan, he had still refused to suggest anything like this. Le Clerq had decided that such a proposal would not come from him. At the same time, he had secretly hoped the suggestion would come from D’Arlan. Therefore, he now says, “Mon ami, I appreciate

your proposal and your willingness to lead such a patrol. But I am not so sure that I am going to accept it. You know, of course, D’Arlan, that you are an extremely valuable man to the French Foreign Legion, without my having to tell you so. You know, of course, that on this expedition you will be dealing with unknown, unexplained, and dangerous factors. Therefore, I refuse to ask you to do it or to order you to do it.”

D’Arlan laughs softly at his leader’s clumsy diplomacy. “Neither will be necessary, mon Colonel,” he says. “You need not order or ask me to lead this patrol, because I offered it myself. Let us put it this way. Volunteers under my leadership have offered to search for the lost patrol.”

Le Clerq stares at him with a meaningful smile.

“You see, Colonel,” says D’Arlan, “if you permit this, no one can later point a finger at you if something should perhaps happen. We are merely volunteers who offered our services, and you accepted those services.”

Le Clerq turns and walks towards his desk. With the officer’s baton, he takes a careful swing at the neck of the cognac bottle, just barely missing. He sits down in his swivel chair while D’Arlan comes to stand before the desk. “If you had to say what became of O’Reiley, what would you say, D’Arlan?” asks Le Clerq.

“I am afraid, mon Colonel, I cannot answer that. So many things could have happened to O’Reiley and his men. Although you seem not to think so, they could have gotten lost. Their food and water could have run out. They might perhaps have been unexpectedly overwhelmed by the Arabs. Many other things could have happened to them. No, I do not intend nor am I prepared to hazard a guess here. I think it would be much better if a patrol went out immediately to ascertain what became of O’Reiley and his small guard.”

“Thank you for the offer, mon ami,” says Le Clerq formally, his eyes

serious. "It is accepted."

"Thank you, mon Colonel," says D'Arlan. "I wish to depart tonight. Am I then free to select the ten men?"

"You may take whomever you wish, mon ami. You will ensure that every man is armed to the best possible standard. And that is an order."

"Thank you, mon Colonel, I shall see to sufficient weaponry. Although I have a feeling that it will not be necessary for us to do much shooting. As I have already told you, I have a feeling that we are not dealing with war here, but rather with a cunning ruse intended to lead to something larger."

Le Clerq pulls open his desk drawer, takes out a copy of the clear and circumspect order he had handed to Sergeant O'Reiley, the redhead of the Foreign Legion, before this seemingly fateful patrol set out. "Read this carefully," says Le Clerq. "It indicates in detail the area to which I sent O'Reiley. If you wish, you may have a copy made."

But D'Arlan is so absorbed in the order that he barely hears what Le Clerq says. He reads it through once, then stands up and walks to the map. With the piece of paper in one hand and a pencil in the other, he examines the area mentioned in the order. This deepens his interest and astonishment. What Le Clerq said earlier is entirely correct. The region is miles away from the nearest large Arab tribe. The small specks on the map indicate small, peaceful Arab tribes, mostly splinter groups that broke away from some main tribe and now lead a quiet, calm existence at some small oasis or some hamlet that has existed for ages. These are not fighters who live here, just peaceful people tending their camels and goats and caring for their horses, visited only occasionally by an enterprising caravaner. Years ago, he himself was in that region, but he remembers it well. It is a region where the Sahara is not as fierce as elsewhere. Dry and hot it certainly is there, but one finds fewer of the mountainous giant dunes with their crests lying like sharp blades against the evening sky. This is a flatter world, dotted with seemingly

immeasurable sandy plains and here and there the rounded back of a flatter dune formed by the hand of nature. He simply cannot accept that O'Reiley and his men could have gotten lost here.

With the eye of an expert, D'Arlan works out the relationship of this region to the other areas where the large tribes reside. This is not Doelak territory either, as it is situated relatively far from the Atlas Mountains. Nor is it the region of the Berbers. It lies off the path of the cruel Touaregs.

It is located nearest to the region of the Oerdoe Arabs. And even the Oerdoe are a relatively peaceful tribe situated quite far to the South-West. The Oerdoe have caused little trouble in recent years. But standing here before the map now, D'Arlan wonders if the war bug hasn't perhaps bitten them. He knows the Oerdoe as a relatively civilized tribe that in the past proved highly receptive to the ideas and methods of the civilized world. They are horsemen par excellence, and as fighters, they are peerless. Their hatred for the Foreign Legion is surely no less than that of any other Arab, but they have restrained themselves in the past because they harbour suspicion towards the Doelaks, the largest and strongest tribe.

However, D'Arlan does not let these facts lead him astray, for he knows that the Oerdoe, owing to their blind nationalism, are just as susceptible to the slightest spark as any other tribe, and he also knows that once the lust for war ignites within them, they will not let their jealousy of the Doelaks deter them. When war breaks out in earnest, D'Arlan knows, the Oerdoe will not hesitate to fight alongside the Doelaks or any other tribe.

"What is the latest information you have on the Oerdoes, mon Colonel?" asks D'Arlan.

"Our information on the Oerdoe is relatively old," answers the colonel. "When I last heard of them, they were living quite peacefully by their oases. Apparently completely content, without the slightest intention of