

SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

27. The Treasures of Marabash



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THE TREASURES OF MARABASH

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SUMMARY

In Tunis, at the luxurious Hotel Europa, Teuns Stegmann, a member of the French Foreign Legion, encounters Dr. Heinz Frielingsdorf, his daughter Magdel, Dr. Klaus Bergh, and the French official Charles Bovary. Frielingsdorf, an antiquarian, unveils his lifelong quest for the lost temple of Marabash in the Sahara, where a vast treasure may lie hidden. Teuns has been appointed to lead the expedition, owing to his extensive desert expertise, although he remains skeptical about the temple's existence. Initial tension arises from the uncertainty surrounding the treasure's reality and the potential perils of the journey.

Teuns, now amidst the planned expedition, is confronted with the abduction of Dr. Frielingsdorf, the disappearance of the crucial map, and the discovery of Magdel's secret knowledge of the temple's location. Emotions run high as Teuns observes suspicious behaviour among the expedition members, particularly Charles Bovary. Teuns's attempts to procure essential supplies are interrupted by a violent kidnapping attempt, which exposes Bovary's true identity as a secret agent and results in his tragic death. The revelation of this betrayal and the escalating threat underscore Teuns's pivotal role in the search for the fabled treasure.

Teuns's plans, formulated with detective Emil Pascal, centre on using an aircraft and parachutes to reach the temple before the kidnappers. They locate the temple but discover they are not the first to arrive. Teuns must employ all his ingenuity and knowledge in an effort to rescue the other members from the temple of Marabash. Will Teuns succeed in unravelling the temple's secrets, and whom can he truly trust before it is too late? But how will he ever manage if he does not even know how to exit the temple? Deeper within the temple awaits a truth even more staggering than the treasures themselves.

EXTRACT

As if spurred to action by Teuns and Emil's words, the Dutchman suddenly leaps up and sprints across the open gateway towards where his Arab followers are sheltering. The other group rakes him with gunfire, but he manages to reach cover. Teuns and Emil Pascal watch the spectacle intently. The other band of Arabs holding Heinz Frielingsdorf captive fires so fiercely that dust and splinters of stone whistle through the air. They are apparently determined to trap their rivals here in the gateway or to eliminate them as swiftly as possible.

"I think we are about to witness an interesting little war here," says Pascal with a short laugh.

They watch as Klaus Bergh cautiously leads his few henchmen deeper into the temple behind the rubble. Apparently, he is now so obsessed with the idea of reaching those attackers that, for the moment, he has completely forgotten about Teuns, Pascal, and the girl. Therefore, Teuns says quickly, "Come, now is our chance!"

They jump up and move as rapidly as they can along the inner wall that runs parallel to the temple's outer wall. They do not know where they will end up, but what they do know is that, for the moment, they are free from the clutches of the Arabs.

They dig iron claws into the ground until they reach an opening in the wall. They slip through it and suddenly find themselves in one of the temple's numerous courtyards. It is a courtyard with pillars on two sides and dark chambers on the other two. They quickly search the chambers and find them completely deserted. Desert birds have indeed left their marks there in the cool, dark spaces, but otherwise, there is nothing. In the fine sand before the chambers, they deliberately make as many tracks as they can.

27. THE TREASURES OF MARABASH

Chapter 1

TREASURES OF THE AGES

Teuns Stegmann, the blond South African in the French Foreign Legion, felt conspicuously out of place as he ascended the luxurious spiral staircase in the opulent hotel in the city of Tunis, on the Mediterranean Sea. Everything glittered and sparkled in this hotel named the Europa. He had spent so many years in the Sahara desert that all this embellished opulence felt a bit overwhelming. Yet, it also evoked a pleasant sensation within him, for it was rare for a man of the Foreign Legion to be treated with such attention and dedication as in this hotel. About an hour ago, he had checked into the splendid room with the large window overlooking the sea. He had just bathed, shaved, and for the first time in several years, shed the uniform of the French Foreign Legion, exchanging it for a cool summer suit he had purchased in the city that afternoon. Not with his own money, but with funds provided by the Legion. He had also acquired a smart matching tie and a pair of shoes. Additionally, he had bought himself a cool khaki outfit to wear when not in uniform. When he had finished with that, he had returned to the hotel, tidied himself up, and then gone to eat. For the first time in a long while, he had seen a menu before him, and he had worked his way through it from top to bottom. And to round it all off splendidly, he had ordered a bottle of expensive French wine and drunk it.

It almost felt like a holiday, yet it was not a holiday. Here, ascending the stairs, he was acutely aware that he was still a member of the Foreign Legion and that he had received very clear orders before departing by plane from Dini Salam to Tunis. Colonel Le Clerq, commander in Dini Salam, had briefed him extensively on what he must do, what was expected of him, and how he should conduct himself.

He reached the top of the stairs and realised his heart was beating faster.

This was certainly a peculiar mission, and he wondered what the immediate future held for him. He walked down the corridor on the soft carpet, then stopped before room 340, glanced for a moment at the brightly shining copper number, and knocked on the door.

He waited quite a while and was just about to knock again when the door opened. Teuns looked, astonished and taken aback, at the beautiful young woman who had opened the door. She was delicate and refined, with a rosy hue to her cheeks, blonde, and so slender that she gave him the impression of a young child. But when he looked into her deep blue eyes, he realised she was no child. In those eyes, he saw the experience of several years. Yet she was like a porcelain doll, beautiful and fragile.

The appearance of this person had disconcerted him so much that he was tongue-tied for a few moments. He had expected to find only men here, and now she stood before him, her face turned up towards him questioningly.

“Yes, Monsieur?” she asked. “What can I do for you?” Those two eyes smiled so sweetly and profoundly that Teuns felt the warm blood rise in his neck.

“Excuse me,” he said, “I hope I haven’t come to the wrong room. I am looking for Dr. Heinz Frielingsdorf. They gave his room number as 340.”

“Perfectly correct, Monsieur,” said the young woman, her voice deep and sonorous. It was so strong that Teuns could hardly reconcile it with her small physique. “Entrez,” she requested, stepping aside and making a small welcoming gesture with her hand.

Teuns stepped inside and marvelled anew at the luxury of this hotel. This was apparently a suite, for he stood in a small foyer from which he could see the sitting room furnished with the most exquisite antique pieces.

“Please follow me, Monsieur,” invited the doll-like figure, leading him

into the sitting room.

In a circle before the window sat three men. Two were engaged in a game of chess, and the third was apparently just a spectator, for he merely sat nearby with a glass in his hand.

“Someone to see you, Father,” said the young woman, and when the impressive man with his stark white-grey hair looked up at Teuns, there was just the faintest hint of impatience in his eyes.

“But I am busy with a game of chess, my dearest,” said the elderly man.

“I am sorry, Father,” she replied. Then she looked at Teuns. “I am afraid, Teuns Stegmann, I do not know who you are.”

“I am Legionnaire Teuns Stegmann of the French Foreign Legion.” Teuns might as well have tossed a bomb under that chessboard. The three men were instantly on their feet, and the elderly one nearly knocked over the small table in his haste to reach Teuns first and greet him. He shook the tall man’s hand vigorously, gripped him by the shoulders, and with a cheerful laugh, he said, “Am I glad to see you, Legionnaire. We had almost begun to despair that the Foreign Legion would send someone, and now you have actually arrived. Let me introduce you. My daughter, Magdel Frielingsdorf. My colleague, Dr. Klaus Bergh, a Dutchman, and Monsieur Charles Bovary, a representative of the French Department of Africa.” He still held Teuns by the shoulder. “And this,” he said to the other three, “is our long-awaited legionnaire. I am sure you are just as grateful as I am.”

Teuns nodded to each of them in turn. “Oh yes,” said the elderly man, laughing heartily, “I completely forgot, I am Dr. Heinz Frielingsdorf.” He extended his hand and greeted Teuns warmly. “Come sit, my friend. Come sit. I cannot tell you how grateful we are that you have arrived. The Legion promised us we would have a man yesterday already, but never mind, I don’t want to complain, you have come now, and we are all happy.”

They sat down, and Dr. Heinz Frielingsdorf immediately cleared the chess pieces from the table. “So,” he said, “we shall play no more chess. Klaus, you can bring us something to drink.” Then he turned back to Teuns. “Tell me first, did you have a good flight? Do you find your room in the hotel satisfactory?”

“A wonderful flight, and the room is excellent, thank you, Doctor,” Teuns replied.

“You must be curious to know what is going on here, are you not?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” answered the South African. “I haven’t the faintest idea what the purpose of my mission is. All I know is that I received orders in Dini Salam to fly to Tunis, come to this hotel, and report to Dr. Heinz Frielingsdorf.”

“Very well,” said Dr. Frielingsdorf, “I shall tell you everything presently. We are just waiting for Klaus to bring us something to drink.”

Teuns looked at the man. It was clear he was a person of consequence. He had a high forehead, intense and intelligent blue eyes, and a neat shock of white-grey hair. The fellow Bovary was a typical Frenchman, dark, reserved, with a certain attractiveness about him, yet something brooding in his dark eyes that Teuns did not like. Klaus Bergh was a typical blond Dutchman, carefree, open-hearted, and brisk.

On a small trolley, Klaus Bergh wheeled a variety of drinks towards them. A single glance told Teuns that these were top-shelf liquors, the finest imported varieties.

“What will it be?” Klaus asked Teuns. “What can I pour for you?”

“I feel like a glass of whisky,” Teuns replied.

It seemed Frielingsdorf could hardly wait for Klaus to finish pouring the drinks. He sat fidgeting, fiddling with his hands, and watching attentively the activities of the Dutchman who was busy pouring something for everyone.

“Now, my friend,” Frielingsdorf finally said excitedly, once everyone had their glass in hand. “Now we can talk. Look, I am an antiquarian attached to the University of Frankfurt. My friend Klaus here is a colleague, although he is not affiliated with the same University. In my spare time over the years, I have made an extremely meticulous study of the prehistory of the Sahara. I have made some interesting discoveries.” With a teasing smile, he looked up at Teuns. “Have you ever heard of the treasures of Marabash?”

“No, I’m afraid I have never heard of them,” said Teuns.

“Splendid,” said Frielingsdorf. “Then this could be a completely interesting journey for you, my friend. In the archives in Cairo, as well as in Paris and in the British Museum, I unearthed certain data indicating that somewhere in the Sahara, there must stand a lost temple, many thousands of years old and completely abandoned.”

Teuns smiled cynically. “Oh, so,” he said, “this journey has to do with a lost temple? With all due respect, I must tell you that most of these so-called temples in the Sahara are mere legends, pure fabrications. You must forgive me if I sound cynical, but truly, there is probably no part of the Sahara that has not yet been visited, either by patrols of the Foreign Legion or by wandering Arabs.”

“My friend,” said Frielingsdorf quite openly, “I can completely understand your cynicism, because I know how many charlatans there are who want to convince the world that there are all sorts of lost temples and even cities in the Sahara. However, I can assure you that I haven’t the slightest doubt that this is no legend. Look, Marabash was, in ancient times, the great metropolis of the great Arab people who were then concentrated there. There was a large oasis at that time, much larger than anything that still exists in the Sahara today. You can take my word for it that this is the gospel truth. From old, forgotten descriptions, I have determined that this city was eventually lost under the onslaught of two things. For some reason, the oasis diminished. Coupled with this, there was a war with the adjacent hostile tribes who

apparently succeeded in overwhelming the inhabitants of Marabash in a cruel and inhuman manner.”

“In their treasure chambers, the people of Marabash possessed unbelievable treasures. There appears to have been extensive trade between them and the peoples of the Near East and even the peoples of Europe, and it seems that the people of Marabash considered jewels and precious stones the best means of payment. Hence, they amassed such immense treasures. Now, I know this sounds like the usual treasure story. The only difference is that this story appears to be true. When they were overrun, they apparently managed to hide the unparalleled treasures in subterranean chambers where they have remained preserved to this day.” Teuns slowly shook his head, filled with disbelief and suspicion. “I really don’t know,” he said. “If something like that existed, surely it would have become known by now.”

“You mustn’t forget, my friend,” replied Frielingsdorf, “that this city has lain in ruins for many centuries. The oasis dried up. The temple, I assume, is today an inconspicuous ruin, like so many one finds in the Sahara. Surely you yourself have seen such ruins.”

“Yes, that is true,” Teuns had to concede. “I know of one old temple before the Atlas Mountains where there is, for example, a large ruby treasure. I saw it myself.”

“Then why do you consider the temple of Marabash so utterly improbable? Why do you think the treasure of Marabash is merely a figment of the imagination?”

“You must excuse me,” said Teuns, taking his glass and drinking a sip. “I am just very cynical regarding these matters, because we have had so many cases where there are supposedly hidden treasures, and then upon investigation, we find there is nothing to it. May I ask where this alleged temple is located?”

“Certainly,” answered Frielingsdorf. “Klaus, bring us the map.”

Klaus Bergh fetched a map and spread it open on the small table. They all leaned over it, and Teuns felt uncomfortable as he sensed Magdel Frielingsdorf glancing at him surreptitiously. As if she were sizing him up. Before him on the map, he saw what looked like a route marked in red ink. Then there was a round red circle. Klaus Bergh pointed to it with his finger. "The temple must be located within that circle," he said, and he mentioned a longitude and latitude to indicate the place.

"Yes," said Teuns finally, "I must say that is a rather remote corner of the Sahara. It is an unforgiving wasteland, which is why it is so sparsely inhabited. As far as I know, one only finds wandering bands of Touaregs there, who have no home or hearth and just roam the desert from day to day."

Frielingsdorf smiled at the tall South African. "Bravo!" exclaimed the German scholar. "I must say you know your Sahara, my friend."

"If I don't know it by now," Teuns replied good-naturedly, "I suppose I never will. And you reckon the temple is located there?"

"Klaus and I are absolutely convinced of it," answered Frielingsdorf. "If we do not find a lost temple there, then I intend to abandon my studies on the prehistory of the Sahara. Tracking down this old temple has been almost a life's work for me. I have been working on it for many, many years, and now that I have, in my opinion, gathered all the correct data, now that I know precisely where the temple is located, and now that I have an idea of the unbelievable treasures that must rest there, I intend to leave no stone unturned until I have established whether the temple of Marabash truly exists or if it is merely a product of the imagination."

"May I now ask how I fit into the picture?"

"That is a fair question, Legionnaire," Frielingsdorf answered immediately. "Look, we are utter novices as far as a journey through the Sahara is concerned. We have indeed read much in books, yet we feel we are not up to speed with all the requirements one must meet