

SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

30. Traitor of Dini Salam



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TRAITOR OF DINI SALAM

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SUMMARY

The narrative unfolds in the unforgiving Sahara, at Dini Salam, a crucial outpost of the French Foreign Legion. An aircraft lands bearing a significant passenger who delivers startling orders from the Legion's high command. These directives lure the garrison directly into an ambush. The opening scene is set in Algiers, where fifteen high-ranking Arabs, including a man named Private Oosterman clad in a captain's uniform of the Foreign Legion, devise a plan. Ebrahim Rama, the intelligent leader, reveals a scheme to conquer Dini Salam. Oosterman, now Captain Jerome Dreyfus, is tasked with delivering false orders to Colonel Le Clerq, the commander of Dini Salam, which will lead the garrison on a feigned maneuver, thus rendering the fortress vulnerable to external attacks.

Teuns Stegmann, a South African serving in the French Foreign Legion, plays a pivotal role in the unfolding drama. He is the one who spots the approaching aircraft and later, during seemingly routine guard duty, discovers the Arab horsemen and a traitor in the uniform of the Foreign Legion. His keen observation and swift action in shooting the traitor expose the entire conspiracy, but this also leads to his own capture by the Arabs. Teuns becomes a pawn in Ebrahim Rama's master plan and is compelled to lead a column of 300 Arabs, disguised as legionnaires, towards the fortress of Dini Salam.

The tension reaches a critical juncture as Teuns leads the treacherous column to the gates of Dini Salam. At that moment, he is forced to act, though he does not yet know what he will do. The words of Captain D'Arlan, "if we lose Dini Salam, then we lose the Sahara..." echo in his thoughts. The fate of the fortress, and possibly the entire Sahara, rests upon his shoulders. Will Teuns find a way to halt the Arabs, or will Dini Salam fall, and with it, all hope of rescue for the trapped garrison in the desert?

EXTRACT

As the assault commences, the marksmen sustain a withering fusillade upon the fortress parapets, whilst the horsemen, charging at great speed, dismount beneath the walls, hurl up their rope ladders, and begin to scramble aloft.

The small garrison returns fire as best they can, but their volleys are largely ineffective due to the riders' rapid movement.

This is because the men must shoot downwards from the parapets, and because they are so thoroughly pinned down by the Arab sharpshooters positioned out on the desert sands.

The consequence is that the Arabs ascend the outer walls of the fortress like red ants and swarm over the parapets.

Catroux is compelled to alter his tactics, instructing his men to wait until the attackers appear on the parapets and then shoot them down.

This complicates his task infinitely. It would be far preferable if he could mow down the attackers at a distance. Now, they must be shot only once they appear on the parapets.

They clamber up the rope ladders with such speed that the small handful of men have their hands full keeping the Arabs off the parapet platforms.

The Arabs' method of attack has also virtually nullified the effectiveness of the machine guns.

At this close range and amidst this chaotic mêlée, Catroux can scarcely employ the machine guns.

30. TRAITOR OF DINI SALAM

Chapter 1

FIFTEEN CONSPIRATORS

In a spacious room, deep within the Arab quarter of Algiers, fifteen high-ranking Arabs are seated around a horseshoe table.

In the centre of the table sits one man dressed in the uniform of a captain of the French Foreign Legion.

Private Oosterman feels somewhat out of place in this company, and he feels just as out of place in the captain's uniform, for in the French Foreign Legion he has never advanced beyond the rank of an ordinary soldier.

A profound silence reigns, and Private Oosterman feels a tightness around his heart. Here, seated now in the crescent of the horseshoe table, he wonders if he has indeed done the right thing. But before he can fret over it much, a tall and impressive Arab rises from the middle of the table's curve.

Oosterman has heard that this man is named Ebrahim Rama. He is clearly the leader of this gathering, for he appears to be an intelligent, alert fellow possessed of considerable perseverance and an iron will. His face is narrow. His nose resembles the beak of an eagle, and his eyes are lively, bright, and resolute.

"Members of the high command of the Arab liberation forces in the Sahara," says Ebrahim Rama, "we are gathered here to finalise an important matter."

Private Oosterman feels the Arabs looking at him curiously. He sees Rama looking at him, but Rama ignores him for the moment.

"We have devised a plan," says Ebrahim Rama, "which we wish to present to you. Before we implement it, we require your consent, as it

is an extremely momentous step. Because it is a great gamble, but also because, if successful, it will place the Arab forces in an almost unassailable position.”

He turns away from his chair and walks to the wall where a brightly lit map of Algeria and the Sahara desert region hangs.

“I would like to draw your attention to the situation as it currently exists,” says Ebrahim Rama. He picks up a thin measuring stick and points to a location on the map.

“Here lies Dini Salam,” says Ebrahim Rama. “As you all know, Dini Salam is the foremost garrison post of the French Foreign Legion in the southern Sahara. As you are furthermore surely all aware, Dini Salam is the most serious obstacle in the Arab struggle for freedom.

Over the years, Arab forces have repeatedly engaged the French Foreign Legion with incredible courage and unstoppable bravery. Often, we have been on the verge of success, but each time, we ultimately lost.

“If you examine the reasons why the Arabs have never succeeded in driving the Foreign Legion out of the desert, you will find that Dini Salam is one of the most crucial reasons for those failures.”

He walks over to a large sketch map hanging next to the geographical map on the wall. “Dini Salam,” says Ebrahim Rama, “is a sturdy, well-equipped fortress. The man who digs himself in there cannot easily be dislodged. The French realise this very well, which is why they always keep the fortress well-manned and well-supplied under all circumstances.

“Dini Salam lies on the major routes between the Atlas Mountains and the hinterland of the Sahara and the seacoast, towards Algiers and our major cities in these regions. That is precisely why the French built it there. Now you can well understand that if Dini Salam were to fall into the hands of the Arab liberation forces, it would signify a deadly blow

to the French Foreign Legion, and for our people, a great step on the path to freedom.”

Ebrahim Rama is not only a cunning militarist, he is also an actor and a diplomat. After making these announcements, he pauses dramatically and looks at his colleagues, who are now all attention. Ebrahim Rama’s next words cut sharply through the quiet room. “Comrades in the freedom struggle,” he says, “a few others and I have devised a plan to conquer Dini Salam.”

The Arab representatives around the horseshoe table glance fleetingly at each other, and then they look at Ebrahim Rama.

One old sheikh cannot contain his curiosity. “And how exactly do you intend to conquer Dini Salam?” he asks. “How many times have I and countless others here led overwhelming forces against Dini Salam, only to be thrown back in a bloodbath each time? Have you discovered a secret weapon now, Ebrahim Rama?” asks the old Arab. This is precisely what Rama has been waiting for. He smiles benignly. “No,” he says, “I do not have a secret weapon. It is merely a matter of common sense and the correct utilisation of the opportunities that exist.” Again, he turns to the map and points to a place some distance from Dini Salam. “We have taken the liberty,” says Rama, “of assembling a force of eight thousand Arab horsemen here. It is a strong assault force, comprising the finest warriors of the Doelak people, the Berbers, and the Touaregs. It took us a long time to raise this force. They are heavily armed. Their horses are well-fed, and they are ready for battle.”

“Eight thousand horsemen against Dini Salam?” asks another sheikh, astonished. “Do you wish to have them all annihilated? On one occasion, we attacked Dini Salam with twenty thousand horsemen, and it was futile.”

Ebrahim Rama laughs again. A little condescendingly, he says, “That is precisely our trouble. We fight too much with sabres and too little with intellect and ingenuity.” These words elicit an enthusiastic reaction

from the assembled Arabs. They grasp the truth of it immediately, for they all know how they have failed, even when hurling overwhelming odds against the French forts. If there is now another method, they would be only too eager.

“Well, what is the new plan?” asks a younger sheikh, somewhat impatiently.

Ebrahim Rama leans with his back against the large map. He looks them over, one by one. Then he looks at Private Oosterman in his captain’s uniform.

“It is utterly simple,” answers Ebrahim Rama.

“We must first empty the fortress of Dini Salam before we attack. If two thousand men of the French Foreign Legion man the fortress, that is one matter. But if a few hundred man it, then it becomes a horse of a different colour.”

“And how, pray tell, do you intend to empty the fortress?” asks the elderly sheikh, slightly irritated by Ebrahim Rama’s presumptuous self-assurance.

“Eldest of our people,” answers Rama, “it is once again the time for the annual maneuvers of the French Foreign Legion. During the time they conduct maneuvers, they leave only a small group of men behind in the fortress of Dini Salam. Men who must ensure that normal services are maintained, that the fortress is protected against intruders, and so forth.

“We have ascertained that the usual maneuvers for the Dini Salam garrison are scheduled to take place in two weeks. However, the command there has not yet received notification. What we are going to do now is give them notification.” He smiles and tugs at his flamboyant moustache.

“The only difference is that we are going to notify the garrison of Dini Salam a week too early.”

It becomes so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Private Oosterman feels a ringing in his ears.

“We are going to notify them?” someone asks, completely dumbfounded. “We are going to notify them!” he repeats. “Do you think the French are such sheep-heads that they won’t notice?”

“No,” says Ebrahim Rama, walking back to his chair. “The French military command is as sharp as a tack. They are alert and cunning. But then, we too are alert and cunning.”

He gestures with his hand towards Private Oosterman. “Most of you have probably been wondering what this captain of the French Foreign Legion is doing here?”

“Yes, and I don’t like his presence here one bit,” says a rebellious young sheikh. “We all assumed he was just some decoy or something, but I think it’s time his presence was explained.”

Ebrahim Rama sits down, picks up his briefcase, and places it on the table. “The man you see before you,” he says, “is Private Oosterman of the French Foreign Legion. We have temporarily granted him the rank of captain and dressed him in a captain’s uniform because it is necessary. You see, Private Oosterman has grown weary of the French Foreign Legion. He wishes to leave. I have personally guaranteed that if he undertakes a certain task for us, we will grant him safe passage to Egypt and assist him in settling there. You can trust Private Oosterman. He will do his part.”

Rama signals for Oosterman to stand up. “As you see, Private Oosterman is wearing the uniform of a captain of the French Foreign Legion. I invite you to scrutinize him carefully and see if you can find any flaws in the uniform.”

They examine Oosterman as if he were an animal placed on display at an exhibition. But each must admit to himself that the uniform is perfect and irreproachable.

Then Rama has Oosterman speak French. He invites the members of the meeting to pose impromptu questions to Oosterman, which he must answer in French. Oosterman does this masterfully. Although he is a Flemish Belgian, he speaks French as if he were a native Frenchman.

The representatives seem satisfied. Only one remains suspicious.

“What guarantee do we have that he will not betray us?” he asks.

“We have a very good guarantee,” says Rama. “Our guarantee is that Private Oosterman wants to flee the Foreign Legion. That is about the best guarantee one can have. I might add that Private Oosterman has a particular motive for wanting to flee the Legion. You see, he murdered a fellow private. The body has not yet been found, but when it is, Private Oosterman will most certainly face the consequences.”

This too, they confirm. Rama looks them over. Then he opens his briefcase and produces several interesting documents. He lays these carefully on the table.

Once again, he looks over his comrades. “And now,” says Rama, “I am going to tell you how we intend to use Private Oosterman. Here is the complete plan. But before I proceed, just this. From this moment on, Private Oosterman disappears from our conversations and from our thoughts. From this moment on, Private Oosterman is named Captain Jerome Dreyfus.”

Chapter 2

A STRANGE ORDER

On the parapet of the fortress Dini Salam, a tall, blond private of the French Foreign Legion is the first to spot the small aircraft. Interest lights up his clear blue eyes as he first faintly hears the drone, looks up, and perceives the black speck on the north-eastern horizon. He clicks his heels, steps back towards the other sentry who is walking back in his direction.

“We’re getting visitors,” says Teuns Stegmann, the South African in the French Foreign Legion, as he and the other sentry meet.

“So I see,” replies the sentry as they again click their heels, turn about, and walk away from each other in opposite directions. Teuns Stegmann walks as a sentry should walk. Erect, shoulders back, alert, the Lebel rifle held neatly over his shoulder. But his eyes are averted. He glances in the direction where he saw the aircraft approaching. It grows larger and larger out of the distance, circles once over the village of Dini Salam where a crowd of Arabs look up at it, for it is quite rare for an aircraft to appear here.

The men not on duty stream out of the living quarters and swarm into the fortress courtyard, where, shielding their eyes with their hands, they watch the circling aircraft just as curiously as the Arabs.

Here on the parapet, Teuns can see that it is a French military aircraft. It is a smallish plane, but very fast. It circles the fortress twice, then points its nose into the Sahara wind and touches down in a large cloud of dust on the landing strip outside Dini Salam. On his return walk, Teuns bumps into his old comrade, the German Fritz Mundt.

“Did you see the plane?” asks Fritz when they are a few paces apart.

“Yes, I’m not deaf and blind, old fellow,” says Teuns.

“I wonder what it means.”