

SAHARA

ADVENTURE SERIES

32. Flames across the Sands



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FLAMES ACROSS THE SANDS

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SUMMARY

The story unfolds amidst the stifling heat of the Sahara desert, at the fortress Dini Salam, where members of the French Foreign Legion are stationed. The garrison's routine is disrupted by the arrival of a perfumed letter, addressed to Teuns Stegmann, a South African legionnaire. The letter, originating from an unknown woman in Algiers named Elsa Moram, contains an urgent request for a meeting, promising information of cardinal importance to both Teuns and the entire Foreign Legion. Teuns's comrades, among them the German Fritz Mundt, the Englishman Jack Ritchie, the Pole Podolski, and the Italian Petacci, are curious and excited about the letter, speculating about the mysterious Elsa's identity and motives.

Teuns, plagued by a vague, unsettling memory associated with the name "Moram," decides to accept the invitation, driven partly by curiosity and partly by an inexplicable inner compulsion. His encounter with Elsa reveals a harrowing tale of betrayal, torture, and revenge. Elsa, a strikingly beautiful nightclub performer, reveals she is the twin sister of a legionnaire, Emil Moram, who was brutally murdered by Arabs years before. Elsa is determined to avenge her brother's death, a goal that resonates within Teuns's heart as well. She discloses disturbing information about secret caravans traversing the desert, presumably transporting materials for a top-secret rocket base. This information constitutes a deadly threat capable of shaking the Foreign Legion to its core. Teuns, initially sceptical but later convinced by Elsa's sincerity, agrees to help her. Shortly thereafter, Elsa is abducted. Following a terrifying escape from an Arab club, Teuns and his companions, with Elsa's financial backing, decide to investigate themselves.

The journey through the unforgiving desert is long and arduous. Tensions run high, not only due to the looming danger but also because of the uncertainty of their mission and the fact that they have undertaken this strange journey without leave from the Foreign Legion. They track

the mysterious caravans, determined to uncover the truth. Near the El Riza oasis, they acquire a camel carrying a suspicious cargo of electronic instruments, which confirms their suspicions. After a skirmish with a Russian officer, they discover the location of the rocket base in a remote wadi. They are captured but escape dramatically, aided by an unexpected ally. Armed with explosives and determination, they return to the base, this time resolute on thwarting the Arabs' plans. But will they be in time, or is there a traitor in their midst, someone who has been watching them from the very beginning? The key to the secret perhaps lies hidden within an unexpected, perfumed memory...

EXTRACT

Teuns remains behind beside Elsa Moram, and although she is running, he has great respect for the speed at which she moves.

While the guards behind the tent stamp and struggle in the matchlight to kill the venomous little snake, while they are still marvelling at the strange incident, the fugitives reach the fence.

From the outside, it is almost impossible to get over the fence because the top of the barbed-wire fence is bent outwards at an angle. But from the inside, getting over it is not much of a challenge. The men simply gather themselves, leap almost onto the top of the fence, and tumble over it. Teuns grabs Elsa and practically flings her onto the top of the fence. As she lands on the other side, he tumbles down beside her.

They run as far as they can across the plateau, straight towards the depression where they were so unpleasantly surprised earlier today. They immediately start digging, and in an instant, the crates are exposed. They break them open and retrieve assault rifles, hand grenades, dynamite, and a pair of pliers they brought from the jeep.

Without exchanging a word, they start moving again, for each knows his task. Teuns Stegmann and Fritz Mundt race back to the fence and hastily cut a hole through the wire with the pliers, then return on hands and knees to where the rocket gantry stands on its concrete base.

As Teuns and Fritz are already approaching the rocket, the guards think for the first time to check if anyone is still in the tent. And when they find no one there, they raise the alarm as quickly as they can.

32. FLAMES ACROSS THE DESERT

Chapter 1

A PERFUMED LETTER

In the large dormitory of the fortress Dini Salam in the Southern Sahara, there is palpable excitement this afternoon. The heat is intense, as always. The flies are a torment, as is the case every day, yet it seems as though the men do not feel the monotony of this part of the Sahara as acutely this afternoon as usual.

Actually, this is now the time for rest. Ordinarily, the men would now be lying half-naked on their cots, hands beneath their sweating heads, swatting and slapping at bothersome flies, grumbling about the heat. Some would be dozing, and others would have taken refuge in the showers.

But this afternoon, there is an excited, almost enthusiastic hum in the dormitory. The reason is that it is mail day. Most men in the garrison of Dini Salam hardly ever receive a letter, because the men in the Foreign Legion are mostly exiles, fugitives from civilisation, and criminals who have thoroughly severed their ties with civilisation. But among them, there are still a number who receive a letter from time to time, or perhaps a newspaper forwarded by a family relation or a well-wisher.

The fact that it is mail day is not the sole reason for the subdued excitement prevailing there. Actually, the main reason for it is the fact that quite a number of the men will soon be departing for the coast on their annual leave. Then, most of them will go to Algiers, the large, bustling, and somewhat dangerous city on the Mediterranean Sea. Although it is still a good two weeks before the men depart, most of them have already packed their few personal belongings. There is always the greatest excitement when the men get a chance to escape from this perdition of heat and flies, from this inhospitable desert where they must sit year in and year out. There is particular excitement around

the black cot of the tall, strongly built, blond Legionnaire with the heavy shoulders and the clear blue eyes. He is the South African Teuns Stegmann. Teuns is lying on his back on his cot, his tanned and muscular torso bare, his two boots conspicuously resting on the lower rail of the cot.

Probably a good eight or ten legionnaires are standing around Teuns's cot, because Teuns Stegmann received a letter today.

This in itself is a noteworthy event because the South African has been in the Legion for so long that he has somewhat grown distant from his people in South Africa. They no longer write to him very often.

Yet today he received a letter. An extraordinary, inexplicable, and delightful letter.

The letter does not come from distant South Africa. Nor does it come from Europe.

The letter that Teuns Stegmann has now read through repeatedly comes from Algiers!

It is not a letter from an acquaintance or a family relation. It is not a letter from a man.

It is a letter from an unknown woman!

Hence the men crowd so around Teuns, his good friends, the German Fritz Mundt, the blond Englishman Jack Ritchie, the large Pole Podolski, and the small Italian Petacci, besides quite a number of curious onlookers.

It is quite a spectacle here around Teuns's bed. Petacci, the harlequin, leans over and smells the letter. Then he closes his eyes, makes a little circle with his fingers, steps back, and executes a polka turn. "Perfume!" exclaims the Italian, looking as if he is in ecstasy. "Feminine perfume!"

Those standing around are also aware of the sharp, almost irresistible

delightfulness of the perfume emanating from the letter.

They stare at it as if it were something they had not seen in years. Because this is a fine letter. Not only does it exude the delightful scent of feminine perfume, but it is so neat and delicate. It is written on the most beautiful purple writing paper. Thin, almost translucent. The envelope is likewise small and feminine, and the handwriting on it is firm and clear. It shows evidence of purposefulness and strength of character.

Even the large Fritz Mundt, known as the bull of the French Foreign Legion, cannot resist the romance of the letter. He takes it delicately from Teuns's long, strong fingers, looks at it, smells it, and closes his eyes as if he has just begun to drink from a large tankard of frothy Munchener beer.

Then Fritz places the letter just as solemnly back into Teuns's outstretched hand. But scarcely has Teuns got the letter back when Jack Ritchie takes it again. He glances quickly at the beautiful handwriting, then turns it over and looks at the signature.

The blond Englishman glares meaningfully at Teuns. "And where do you know her from?" he asks.

Teuns shakes his blond head. "I don't know her," he says with a short laugh.

"Come now, come now, mon ami," says Podolski. "Don't try to tell us that lemons are figs! You must know her, otherwise she wouldn't have written to you."

Teuns suddenly sits upright, his bare shoulders against the headboard of his cot. "I tell you I don't know her," he says. "This is the first time I've heard the name."

"Delightful prospect," observes Jack Ritchie. "Now you don't even have to search for names and addresses when we leave for Algiers in two weeks."

“Lucky devil,” says Petacci. “It seems the gods arrange everything for you in advance. If her handwriting looks like this, what must she look like!”

And Petacci’s utterance immediately gives rise to large-scale speculation and conjecture. They come and sit here with Teuns on the bed, and each gives his impression of what this girl, who wrote a letter to an unknown soldier in the French Foreign Legion, must look like. Fritz Mundt imagines her as a blonde with glowing cheeks and bright blue eyes. Petacci opines that she is dark and striking, with jet-black hair and burning eyes. Jack Ritchie, in turn, imagines her looking like an Irish beauty, with blackish hair and deep blue eyes.

But Teuns, Teuns has his own image of the girl. He imagines her having reddish hair, with greenish eyes.

And as he thinks about it, he marvels anew at this letter. He has taken it from Jack Ritchie and is reading it for the umpteenth time. He looks at the clear address which is apparently in one of the prominent and affluent residential areas of Algiers. Then he reads the salutation, and then the letter.

It begins somewhat formally.

Dear Legionnaire Stegmann.

Then it continues. “You will surely be surprised to receive a letter from a stranger like me. However, I am writing to you because I have a very special request to make of you. I wish to ask that when you next come to Algiers, you would certainly pay me a visit at the above address.

“I am sure you will be surprised by the request and will surely wonder why I ask this. The reason cannot be provided in this letter, except to say that it is a matter of urgent importance. Not only for you personally, but also for the entire French Foreign Legion.

“You will surely also wonder why I am writing specifically to you and where I obtained your name and address. I will provide you with that

information when I see you, and I hope that will be in the near future.

“May I say that this matter is of such importance that it will be worth your while perhaps to obtain special leave.

“I hope you do not disappoint me, Legionnaire. I address this request to you in great earnestness and also with deep urgency.

“With best regards, Elsa Moram.”

Elsa Moram? Teuns thinks. Has he seen her before, or has he never seen her? No, he hasn't, he decides. Where on earth would she have got his name, and how does she know he is stationed at Dini Salam? And this matter she wants to discuss with him, what on earth could it be?

Moram? He frowns and delves into the past. For a moment, he imagines he has touched upon something, something related to the name Moram. But the vague memory immediately evaporates, and he cannot grasp it, although he is certain that the name Moram has piqued his interest in a peculiar way.

He takes the letter, moves it slowly past his nose, once more savouring the beneficial, pure, fresh perfume, folds it up, and puts it back in the envelope.

“Are you going to look her up, mon ami?” asks Petacci.

“Of course, I'm going to look her up,” answers Teuns. “Do you think I'm out of my mind?”

“And if you don't get along with her, will you give us a chance?” asks Fritz Mundt.

Teuns just smiles and does not answer. He is preoccupied with this peculiar thing, this letter from a complete stranger who has directed such a particular request to him.

He stands up and goes to place the letter in the inner pocket of his uniform jacket. There he pauses again, and for a moment, he tries to

conjure an image of the woman. Elsa Moram. Is she young or is she old? Is she attractive or perhaps repulsively ugly?

He feels a slight chill run down his spine. Could something be lurking behind this? He, Teuns, must always be on his guard when in Algiers, because there are certain Arabs who have already become acquainted with his name, who know of him, and who would take his life at the slightest provocation. Would it be wise for him to go to this woman?

In the desert, he has already learned that a woman can often be the most dangerous enemy. Far more cunning, far more refined than a man. She can conquer you gently and then destroy you. He has seen it so often.

He becomes aware that someone is standing just behind him, and when he turns around, he looks straight into the face of Jack Ritchie.

“I wouldn’t take it all at face value if I were you, mon ami,” says Jack. “Especially knowing what you know, it could be a trap. Don’t you find it peculiar that you receive this letter just two weeks before we leave on leave?”

“Yes, rather,” says Teuns. “That is one aspect of the matter that doesn’t sit well with me. It fits too neatly.”

“I would think twice before visiting this woman, if I were you,” warns Jack. “In any case, I don’t think you should go alone, and I also don’t think you should go unarmed.” Teuns leans his elbow against the wall. There is a deep frown on his handsome forehead. “Moram?” he says again. Then he looks sideways at Jack. “Moram. Doesn’t that remind you of something? Of an incident or a person or something of that nature?”

Jack Ritchie rubs his neck. “Yes, it reminds me of something,” he says. “But I don’t know what. It’s as if the name rings a bell somewhere in my brain. But as soon as I try to grasp it, it disappears again.”

“It’s exactly the same with me,” says Teuns. “I’ve heard the name somewhere before. Something happened to someone bearing that name,