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ADVENTURE SERIES

4. Revenge of the Desert



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REVENGE OF THE DESERT

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SUMMARY

The narrative commences in the heart of the French Foreign Legion's outpost, Dini Salam, where a sense of unease simmers. While on guard duty, Fritz and Jack lament the absence of their South African comrade, Teuns Stegmann, who is out on a crucial patrol. Their premonition of disaster is intensified by the delayed return of Sergeant Vermeer's unit. They experience an ominous feeling, exacerbated by the separation of their inseparable trio, namely Fritz, Jack, and Teuns. When the gruesomely mutilated bodies of the unit are discovered outside the fort, the men are confronted with the grisly reality of an ambush by El Karima and her Doelaks. Among the fallen is Sergeant Vermeer, but Teuns Stegmann is still alive, having been abducted during the battle and taken to the Doelaks.

Teuns Stegmann finds himself a captive in Doetra, sentenced to a gruesome death on the Hill of the Eagles. As the clock ticks down, the narrative shifts, focusing on Teuns's indomitable spirit and endurance. Despite his seemingly insurmountable odds, he executes a daring escape, demonstrating his exceptional combat skills and resourcefulness. Teuns encounters a sympathetic Arab, El Saoed, whom he has met before, and he assists Teuns in escaping his prison.

D'Arlan devises an even more audacious plan to try and stop El Karima, while Teuns concocts his own plan to steal the "Sword of Doetra". His plan demands immense courage and will compel him, Saoed, and the French Foreign Legion to test their resolve and skill against overwhelming enemy forces. The looming battle promises a clash of two formidable powers. The fate of the Legion, and perhaps the entire region, hangs precariously in the balance. Will Teuns find a way to stop El Karima and save the day, or will the sands of the Sahara claim another victim, burying a secret only the desert knows?

EXTRACT

In a sudden blind rage, Teuns runs down the fleeing Arab from behind, and at ten paces, he hurls the scimitar, just as they had learned to do in Dini Salam when they had nothing better to do.

The scimitar flies like a deadly sickle through the air and then embeds itself, quivering, between the Arab's shoulder blades. He pitches forward with a high scream, his whistle falls from his mouth, lying glinting there on the sand of the parade ground.

Teuns sees that he is being surrounded by the new guards. Several soldiers on horseback ride up from the direction of the stables. Teuns no longer runs. He stops short, and it feels to him as though his hatred has cooled somewhat. They approach and form a circle around him. A belligerent little officer approaches and grabs Teuns by the chest. He jerks the big man, or rather, attempts to spin him around – furious because he had apparently witnessed the carnage Teuns had wrought among the guards like a whirlwind.

Teuns's fist travels no more than a few centimetres. It catches the boastful Arab in the solar plexus, and he doubles over like an old hoop.

4. REVENGE OF THE DESERT

Chapter 1

DYING RIDERS

On the ramparts of the fortress Dini Salam of the French Foreign Legion, two guards walk towards each other in the night wind, and when they meet, they click their heels, as is proper for them to do.

They do not, however, turn about and march away from each other in opposite directions, as is also proper for them to do.

For one guard has spoken to the other, which is naturally completely improper and entirely contrary to the discipline of the Foreign Legion.

“Jack,” whispers the one guard, who, with the long Lebel rifle over his shoulder, appears large and strong in the faint moonlight.

“Yes?” whispers the other guard curiously.

The large one is Fritz Mundt, the colossal German, the biggest man in the entire garrison, indeed in the whole Foreign Legion. A man who could down a whole barrel of beer if only given the chance.

And Jack is Jack Ritchie, the blond Englishman from the nobility, who joined the Foreign Legion rather than disgrace his respectable country family in England over a minor transgression he committed there.

“What is it, Fritz?” whispers the Englishman softly, narrowing his eyes, trying to discern the expression on the German’s face.

“I tell you, something’s amiss, something’s definitely wrong. I can feel it.”

“You’ve said that a hundred times already, Marshal Von Boek,” teases Jack, although deep down he doesn’t feel at ease either.

“It doesn’t matter if I’ve said it a thousand times,” the German defends himself. “It remains true nonetheless.”

“This won’t be the first patrol to arrive late, Fritz,” Jack tries to console him whisperingly, but his own words do not convince him at all.

“They should have been back three days ago, and to this day, there’s been no word nor sign of them.”

“Perhaps run into some pretty Arab girls at some oasis or other, old giant,” Jack attempts to jest.

Fritz Mundt, as serious as the nation to which he belongs, pays no heed to this frivolity. “Didn’t I tell you it would bring misfortune if they separated the two of us from the South African, Teuns Stegmann? Haven’t I always told you that? And here we have it now. I tell you, disaster has struck that patrol precisely because the three of us were separated. It’s not good. It’s completely wrong. I’ve always had that feeling. And now that sense of foreboding has been realised. I can feel it in my bones. I don’t know what possessed D’Arlan to separate us three this time. Why didn’t he send us out together on this patrol?”

“I think D’Arlan has a plan to promote the South African to the rank of corporal. That’s why he was sent with Vermeer’s patrol. Nothing else.”

“Jack, can you recall a single occasion when the three of us were not together, me, you, and Teuns Stegmann? Can you?”

“Not once have we been separated,” Jack Ritchie concedes, and suddenly this realization sends a shock through him. He, the big German, and the South African Stegmann, had become inseparable friends, and they had always contrived to be together, even in the greatest danger. If they drank too much wine, they were always together to help each other. If they had leave and took out women, they were together. If a fight broke out among the men, the three of them were together. In the desert, they had often shared each other’s last water and smoked each other’s last cigarette butts. And the two of them are more than just companions to the tall, blond South African, who joined the Foreign Legion because Arabs murdered his brother in the Second World War. They harbour for him a tacit admiration, for he is the

bravest man they have ever seen. Neither of them has forgotten how Teuns Stegmann once saved an entire column of the Foreign Legion in Doetra, the capital of the rebellious Doelaks, led by that white sorceress, El Karima.

“That is precisely where the crux lies,” says Fritz Mundt. “This time we are separated, and that means trouble. I tell you, something has happened.”

“Do you think, do you mean, that the patrol might have been ambushed?” Jack asks hesitantly.

“What else? Those damned Doelaks have been quiet long enough now. It’s high time they resumed their schemes. I tell you, something is seriously wrong.”

“I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that Teuns Stegmann, that these men, have been killed.”

“I prefer not to think about it,” says Fritz, suddenly shaking his broad shoulders with a shudder. “But it is just as well that we consider the possibility. Where can they be? They should have been back three days ago. I think D’Arlan is just as worried as we are. This afternoon he sent a few men to the caravan drivers, to find out if they hadn’t spotted Sergeant Vermeer’s patrol.”

“And?”

“The drivers saw nothing, not even a track. And Vermeer’s patrol was supposed to follow the main caravan route to the Atlas Mountains. They should have encountered Vermeer and his men. They should have!”

“Who says they’re telling the truth, these drivers? You know, they...”

“Shush!” whispers Fritz urgently.

“What is it?”

“Didn’t you hear anything? You’re so hard of hearing too, Englishman,

that the Arabs could scalp you without you knowing it.”

“Listen! There it is again. Can you hear?”

“This time I heard it,” Jack Ritchie admits, almost proudly. “Sounds like a horse neighing.”

There they hear it again. Yes, it is a horse neighing there, softly and faintly, as if the animal were on the verge of death. It is not the neigh of a fresh horse.

But there is also another sound they vaguely hear, a deep, moaning sound like that of a dying man in terrible distress, like a sigh born of deep torture. And that sound sends cold shivers down the spines of these two hardened men of the Foreign Legion. It is not the first time they have heard that moaning-groaning. They know only too well what it means.

Mundt and Ritchie hurry to the rampart and peer through two embrasures between the short crenellations of the rampart.

Fritz Mundt’s hands tremble on the cool concrete of the rampart’s crenellation, and Jack Ritchie feels how his mouth had suddenly gone dry and how his ears burned.

“What the devil?” Mundt asks whisperingly, as they stare through the faint moonlight at what can be seen below the fort walls.

“Riders,” says Ritchie. “But there’s blood. I can see it even from here.”

“What did I tell you?” whispers the German urgently, spitting his quid of tobacco aside. “What did I tell you?” He almost shouts it.

“Who and what is it?” the Englishman enquires.

Again that terrible groaning, that sighing lament that feels as if it cuts through marrow and bone. And again a horse neighing faintly.

“Vermeer’s patrol has returned,” says Fritz Mundt, and there is a strange timbre in his voice. With these words, he turns and hurries down

the steps to the guardroom. Fritz Mundt's eyes are wide and glistening as he bursts in there.

"Mon Sergeant," Mundt bursts out to Sergeant Renan, the officer of the guard, "here, there are riders outside the walls, wounded riders."

"Riders, what riders?" asks the sergeant, frowning.

"They are wearing the uniforms of the Legion, mon Sergeant..."

"What are you talking about, Legionnaire Mundt?" asks the sergeant, astonished, leaps up, claps his kepi onto his head, and storms out of the guardroom. The few fellows who were sitting there waiting to relieve the guards on the ramparts run after him, Mundt, and Jack Ritchie. They dash towards the gate, and four fellows jump onto the heavy pulley wheel used to open and close the heavy gates.

Then they are outside and run along beside the walls towards the western side of the fort.

What they see there in the faint moonlight makes the men halt involuntarily. They gasp for breath and murmur their shock and disgust.

"Good, merciful heaven!" whispers Sergeant Renan, and then he approaches hesitantly. "Such pernicious barbarians."

Fritz Mundt and Jack Ritchie break the awful paralysis of the men. They suddenly spring away and run closer to the group of horses standing huddled together here. "Pernicious Doelak dogs," says Fritz Mundt softly and hissing as he hastily examines the bloodied "riders".

But these are not riders. These are horribly mutilated men tied onto the horses in grotesque postures. Limp men lying moaning and bleeding upon the horses.

"Bring the horses inside the fort," Renan orders quickly, and then the animals are hastily led inside.

"Go wake Capitaine D'Arlan and the medical orderly immediately,"

Renan commands two fellows who have now also run onto the scene.

A few minutes later, the men lie in the hospital room. Sergeant Vermeer, leader of the patrol sent out just over a week ago, is already dead. His greyish head lies limply back, for the Doelak knives had severed his main artery. Of the handful of men, only about four are still alive. The others have already died from blood loss or from the horrific torture to which the Doelaks subjected them. Renan looks just once at the terrible wounds and then says.

“This is the work of the Doelaks. This is the work of El Karima and her rabble. Only they are so barbaric. Only they can abuse people as if they were animals.”

The Legionnaires stand staring with horrible revulsion at this new atrocity, this grisly inhumanity of the Doelak Arabs under their white leader. There are men standing wringing their hands. Other men turn their faces away. Still others have preferred to walk out rather than stand and watch this appalling spectacle.

Here a hand severed at the wrist, there a nose missing, there two ears, and there simply a wrist’s artery cut.

Captain D’Arlan, who has entered quietly, kneels beside the bed of a young soldier. This was his first patrol, and perhaps it is because he is still so young that he is able to speak.

“Can you tell me, mon ami? Can you tell me what happened?” asks D’Arlan with infinite sympathy in his voice. “What happened, mon ami?”

The young man’s lips move convulsively, and tears lie large and glistening in his tortured eyes. He breathes very softly, for his life is ebbing away through the two gaping wounds on his wrists.

“Can you speak, mon ami?” D’Arlan prompts him again.

“It is them. It is the Doelaks.”

“The Doelaks...?”

He nods. “They ambushed us, the day before yesterday. The white woman, she...”

“What about the white woman, mon ami?”

He pushes his swollen tongue over his lips, which are cracked to shreds.

“The white woman, she was present, she was there.”

“That wretched sorceress,” whispers D’Arlan gratingly.

“We, we couldn’t fight. There were a hundred of them.”

“What happened then, mon ami?” asks D’Arlan, again pressing a small glass of cognac to the dying man’s lips.

“They, they brought us closer. Some went back to their place. The others brought us.”

He falls silent then, and his eyes close painfully.

D’Arlan brings the cognac to his lips again.

The young man, a blond Swede who had come to the Foreign Legion seeking adventure, slowly shakes his head and finally opens his tear-filled eyes again. “Late yesterday afternoon, they tortured us relentlessly.” He screams the last word out and tries to leap up as if the memory has become too terrible for him, overwhelming him. His eyes suddenly glaze over with fear, and D’Arlan and Fritz Mundt slowly push him back onto the bed. The medical orderly, sweating as he works on the few living men, quickly comes closer and gives the young Swede an injection.

D’Arlan slowly rises. He looks urgently at the medical orderly. He just shakes his head slowly and meaningfully. “I am afraid, mon Capitaine,” says the greyish medical orderly who had seen death so many times, but surely never before in these horrific forms. “All I can do for them is inject them so they can die unconscious. I can only relieve them of the