

SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

33. Signal from the Dunes



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SIGNAL FROM THE DUNES

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SUMMARY

The narrative commences in the bustling Arab café in Dini Salam, where we are introduced to Teuns Stegmann, a South African serving in the French Foreign Legion, and his close companions, Fritz, Jack, Petacci, and Podolski. Their evenings are characterized by card games and the amusement provided by the diverse crowd. One evening, their routine is disrupted by a slender Arab beggar who places a Second World War medal on their table. The mysterious man's peculiar eyes pique Teuns's interest. After the man vanishes, the group discovers a name on the medal. "Sidi Omar."

Teuns is now convinced that the medal represents more than they could have dreamed. The night takes a dark turn when the Arab beggar, seemingly more than he appeared, is found murdered in the street shortly after handing them the medal. His final words, "Go to Sidi Omar," penetrate deeply into everyone's thoughts. Colonel Le Clerq is persuaded that the men must uncover what lies behind the medal and the deceased Arab's message. Teuns, driven by the hope of finding his missing brother, volunteers, accompanied by the small Petacci and Legionnaire Paxos. Thus begins their clandestine mission into the heart of the hot and perilous desert, embarking on a journey fraught with dangers and unknown threats.

The journey grows increasingly ominous, confirming Teuns's suspicion that Sidi Omar is more than it initially appeared to him. Their trek is interrupted by fear when they confront an oasis plagued by death and a gruesome disease. Betrayal ensues when the attractive British lady, Joan Matthews, and the soldier Paxos turn back, depriving Teuns and Petacci of water and food. So begins a desperate struggle for survival that ultimately leads them to the enigmatic Sidi Omar oasis, where they discover the full extent of the danger. Are Teuns's plans and resolve sufficient to save the day, or will the secrets of the Sahara ensnare him and Petacci forever in the eternal sands?

EXTRACT

They had taken the camels, food, and water with them, fearing that fate might strike them in such a way that they would need the other camels and the extra provisions.

Petacci was the first to succumb.

It is near midday the following day when the little Italian falls for the last time. With supreme courage and incredible endurance, he had propelled his body across the Sahara sand.

Dune after dune, he had kept pace with Teuns.

They had moved slowly, with small pebbles under their tongues to elicit saliva and thereby somewhat tame the terrible thirst. They moved slowly to conserve their strength for as long as possible.

But now, here against the high dune, Petacci can go no further. Now his strength is spent.

With a soft gasp, he pitches forward. He falls face down into the hot sand. Teuns, himself barely able to see out of his own eyes, does not even hear his comrade fall.

Only when he reaches the top of the dune does he look back, and then he sees Petacci lying small and powerless below against the slope of the dune.

33. SIGNAL FROM THE DUNES

Chapter 1

STRANGE MESSENGER

In the large Arab café in Dini Salam, the garrison town of the French Foreign Legion in the Southern Sahara, there is a great throng tonight.

A considerable number of the men from the garrison have leave passes, and there is an extraordinary crowd of Arabs because a large camel caravan arrived from the desert this afternoon. There is a deafening babble, laughter, and conversation, and the syrupy sweet wine, so beloved by the Arabs, flows freely.

For the group of men from the Foreign Legion sitting in the café, it is just an evening like any other. They come here not because they enjoy it, but because, in one way or another, it provides a little diversion. Here amidst the flies and the heat, here amongst all the scents and colours, there is at least something different to see than in the sleeping quarters of the Dini Salam fortress.

Besides, the men occasionally encounter a bit of excitement here. Two Arabs might perhaps jump each other, or an Arab and a soldier of the legion, or quite possibly a group of Arabs and a group of men from the legion. In places like these, the enmity between Arab and soldier constantly smoulders.

At a table against the wall, not far from the entrance, sit a few men who are usually together. They have become close and intimate friends in the Foreign Legion. There is the large German, Fritz Mundt. There is the Englishman, Jack Ritchie, the little Italian, Petacci, the Pole, Podolski, and then there is the South African in the Foreign Legion, Teuns Stegmann.

Where one goes, the others follow. That is how it is with these few men. In the Sahara, they have already endured the most dangerous and

bloody experiences together. There is not one among this group who, in their career here in the desert, has not yet contributed to saving the life of one or the other.

Teuns Stegmann, the tall, lithely built man from South Africa, and his few comrades pay little heed tonight to what is happening around them. They drink the sweet Arab wine and the thick black coffee, and they play a hand of cards. That is why they scarcely hear the noise in the café, scarcely hear the monotonous Eastern music, and why they are not even aware of the throng around them. When a man plays cards for money here, and when a man loses heavily here, it can mean paying out several months' wages.

Because they are so engrossed in their game, they do not notice the man standing in the doorway, watching them intently. He is an Arab, slender and tall, with a prominent aquiline nose and two deep, sparkling eyes.

Indeed, little notice is taken of him, even by his compatriots, for he is a beggar. His shoulders are stooped, just like his back, and he stands there with cupped hands.

No one pays him any attention, because beggars are not an unusual sight in places like these. They know well enough that men who come here to spend a cheerful evening are often quite generous and will press a coin into your hand when you ask for it.

The café owners are generally strict with beggars who enter the cafés themselves, but there are others, like the owner of this café, who do not mind. To him, beggars are a part of life.

It is when Teuns glances up once from the card game that he spots the man.

Over the years, Teuns Stegmann's senses have been sharpened in the desert to such an extent that he often notices something that someone else might have let pass. Therefore, he watches the beggar there by the door intently for a moment. There is something about the man that holds

his attention captive.

The South African himself does not know why, but that beggar seems a little different to him than the usual beggar one encounters here.

Perhaps it is not the man's appearance so much as his eyes that captivate Teuns. It seems as if the man wants to convey something to the South African with his eyes, to communicate something to him.

As Teuns is still looking at the Arab, he comes walking through the crowd.

Slowly and with a sort of stealthy movement, but utterly deliberate. Teuns is immediately irritated. That is how beggars are. He will linger there in the background, but the moment he perceives that you take the slightest notice of him, he swoops down on you like a vulture that has spotted something.

As the man approached, Teuns felt a tingling through his body, a sensation that was alternately cold and hot. "We're getting a visitor," says Teuns, and then the others also look up.

"I'll just stab the scum with my knife," threatens Petacci. "They can never leave a person alone."

His words still echo as the Arab is beside them. Teuns pre-emptively takes out a coin and holds it ready. He knows this is the only way to quickly get rid of this creature. Press a coin into their hand, and they leave you in peace.

The beggar stops beside them in a characteristic posture. His eyes are fixed imploringly upon them, his body is stooped, his two hands are clasped together, and he makes a friendly little bow.

"Make yourself scarce," growls Fritz Mundt. "Get out of here immediately. We're playing cards, and we're not in the mood for beggars."

The man just bows low, nods once, and bows low again.

Fritz Mundt half rises to confront the beggar, but Teuns immediately restrains him.

“Hold on a moment, big fella,” he says. “Easy does it over the stones. Don’t always be in such a hurry, man.”

For a moment, he looks into the beggar’s eyes and sees something flash that greatly interests him.

He himself does not know what it is, but the man’s presence holds a particular significance for him.

Then the beggar does the extraordinary thing.

He darts between Teuns and Petacci, pretends to snatch a coin from the table, causing Podolski to quickly thrust out his hand to prevent it. On the table lies quite a sum of money with which the men are playing. Their first impression is that the man wants to scrape some of the money.

Some of these Arab beggars are incredibly brazen. They will steal the milk out of your coffee if you are not careful. They will steal the ears off your head.

But the next moment, the few men are bewildered.

The Arab had not grabbed a coin. He had not even tried to do so. Instead, he had placed something on the table. It happened so quickly, as inconspicuously as only an Arab can do it. He just made one movement with his hands so that it looked as if he were picking up money, but with that movement, he placed the object between them on the table.

Just for a moment, they look at it, and when Teuns looks up again, the Arab has vanished. Vanished like a shadow.

The men look at each other in dismay. There between them, in the middle of the table, lies a small object in a leather pouch. A small, neat leather pouch.

Petacci is the first to reach for the object.

“You’d better be careful,” says Fritz Mundt.

“For all you know, it’s a sand viper he has in that pouch. The scum don’t shy away from anything they do.”

“Perhaps it’s a small atomic bomb,” remarks Jack.

But although they sit there joking about it, the small object holds their attention captive, and they all feel a little apprehensive about touching it. They all know the cunning and slyness of the Arab.

The fact that the beggar vanished so quickly fills them with deep suspicion. They look around, but there is now no sign of him.

Just like a wisp of smoke, he simply disappeared from beside them.

“Well now, fellows,” Teuns says finally.

“It doesn’t help for us to sit here looking at the thing. It seems to me we’re afraid it’s going to bite us. What do you think it is, big fella?” he asks Fritz Mundt.

“Heaven knows,” says the big German, who throughout the little episode had shown but scant interest. He is much more interested in the fact that he is slightly ahead in the card game.

“If it were up to me, I’d take the thing and fling it through the window.”

He also moves to suit the action to the word, reaching out his hand, but Teuns grabs his large fist.

“No, wait a bit,” says Teuns.

“We’re curious to know what it is.”

“Perhaps,” says Petacci mockingly, “it’s a beautiful ruby.”

“Or perhaps a superb diamond,” Podolski interjects.

Teuns Stegmann is not a man who likes to hesitate, to dither, or to

waver. Therefore, he deliberately reaches out his large hand and picks up the pouch. He feels it, and a faraway look comes into his clear blue eyes.

He becomes aware of how the others are watching him with interest.

“How does it feel? What is it?” says Podolski.

Teuns frowns and fiddles with the pouch between his fingers. “The gods know,” he says.

“It feels like a coin to me. Like a half-crown or something. A peculiar affair.”

“But my good heavens,” says Jack Ritchie. “Open the thing, man, so we can see what it is. Get it over with so we can continue with this hand of cards.”

“I’ll second that,” says Fritz Mundt. “Now that I’m winning, you interrupt the game again!”

Teuns examines the pouch more closely. It is a small work of art in itself. It is made from the soft hide of the desert rat. It is semi-circular, and the opening of the pouch is cleverly drawn shut with a thin leather thong threaded through it.

Slowly and carefully, Teuns loosens the opening of the pouch. The others sit gazing at the movement of his hands.

Teuns widens the opening of the pouch slightly and looks long and utterly bewildered at the contents.

“Come now, fellow,” says Fritz Mundt impatiently.

“What do you see?”

But although Fritz sounds so disinterested, he too cranes his neck to see what it is. He cranes his neck just like Petacci and all the others.

“Well, I’ll be,” says Teuns Stegmann.

With trembling fingers, he pulls the object out of the small leather pouch, turns it over and over in his hand, and then lays it down between them in the middle of the table.

There it lies, glittering and shining. It shines so brightly as if it holds a special message for them.

“A medal,” Petacci snorts.

“A medal! What’s the meaning of this?”

“It’s not just any medal,” Teuns tells the little Italian.

“It’s a special medal.”

“Yes, that’s true,” says Jack Ritchie, picking it up and looking at it.

“This is a high British decoration from the Second World War.”

“What?” says Fritz Mundt and grabs the medal. He turns it over and over between his fingers, his head bowed low.

The card game is suddenly forgotten.

For the men, there is now only the medal. It is beautifully shiny. It is well-preserved. It looks to them like a treasure that belonged to someone.

And attached to the medal is still the medal ribbon. It looks as new as if it came from the shop yesterday.

“What on earth is the meaning of this?” asks Podolski.

“Why did an Arab come and hand it over to us here? How did he get hold of it? And why did he come and give it to us?”

Teuns again takes the medal from Fritz Mundt’s hands and contemplates it intently. Examines it from the front, examines it from the back. Then he speaks softly.

“Fellows,” he says, “I think there’s more attached to this medal than we