

# SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

## 34. Footprints of Betrayal



**MEIRING FOUCHE**

# FOOTPRINTS OF BETRAYAL

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## **FOOTPRINTS OF BETRAYAL**

by Meiring Fouche

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## SUMMARY

A solitary figure stumbling across the Sahara sand towards Fort Murat brings a dormant conflict to the secluded fortress. The fort, already plagued by the uncertainty surrounding the generals' rebellion in Tunisia, is a breeding ground for calamity. The French Foreign Legion soldier, Teuns Stegmann, a South African, harbours resentment towards the godforsaken surroundings and especially towards the commander, Captain Camus, and his second-in-command, Lieutenant Heidenfeldt. Both inspire revulsion in him, and he suspects something is seriously amiss. Patrols are not dispatched, discipline within the fort is lax, and Captain Camus is frequently intoxicated. A simple question from an Italian guard plants a seed of suspicion in Teuns's mind.

The arrival of a stranger, claiming to be Captain Camus's brother, is the spark that ignites the dry tinder of the fort. Teuns's instinct screams at him that the man is lying, and he begins a desperate race against time to uncover the truth. As the fort descends into total chaos, Teuns must employ his loyalty and resourcefulness to navigate a web of betrayal. He defies his commanders, questions motives, and searches for evidence in a fort where mistrust and danger lurk around every corner.

Teuns makes several secret and risky decisions to save the fort. He discovers various signs indicating that this desert is not as innocuous as it is made out to be. But can he expose the corruption and betrayal in time to prevent a catastrophe? What secrets lie hidden behind the secluded walls of Fort Murat, and what shocking truths will be revealed in the bloody Sahara sand?

## EXTRACT

And then, menacing and deadly, came the stutter of a machine gun in the courtyard.

Teuns closed his eyes for a moment and then looked again. The foremost men were all cut down, and as he opened his eyes, he saw Petacci also pitch forward.

A profound revulsion and consuming rage surged through Teuns and his three comrades standing bound there. A great sorrow also came over them. Through many years, through many battles, through many nights and days in the desert, they and Petacci had shared fortune and adversity. How many times had they stared death in the face together with the little Italian, yet they had always pulled through.

And now here, before their eyes, they saw Petacci die. Teuns shuddered as if from cold.

The charge out of the barracks immediately broke off. They heard the door being slammed shut. In the beam of the searchlight, they saw the wood of the heavy door glisten.

“Thank God!” Teuns said inwardly. “Thank God they came to their senses, for they would all have been mown down. Those who jumped out were but a dozen or so, and they died to a man.”

In the courtyard of Fort Murat, there was immediate consternation. The rebels stormed towards their weapons. Heidenfeldt, Rancoule, and Camus hurried towards the barracks. The searchlight was switched off for a few moments, apparently in an attempt to lure the men out of the barracks again. But the door remained closed. This, at least, was clear when the searchlight was switched on again shortly thereafter.

## **34. FOOTPRINTS OF BETRAYAL**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **MAN FROM NOWHERE**

Fort Murat in the south-eastern Sahara near the border of Libya is nothing less than a dump, or, at least, so thinks the tall soldier of the French Foreign Legion as he now paces back and forth with long, measured strides on the high walls of Fort Murat. Sweat repeatedly burns his eyes, and the heat is indescribable, although sunset is already approaching.

For the first time since joining the French Foreign Legion, this large blond soldier with his powerful physique feels resentment. It is because he and a few of his closest friends have been sent to this remote corner. He has extensive experience in the French Foreign Legion. He has served in all sorts of wretched places in the Sahara. He has been in Fort Laval so many times, which Legion soldiers consider the biggest dump in the entire Sahara.

But Fort Laval is tolerable compared to this. This Fort Murat is even worse. This place is like damnation. It is so remote that one feels utterly abandoned here, cut off from the outside world. You sit trapped here in the infinite expanses of sand near the borders of the Sahara and the endless western part of Libya.

As Teuns Stegmann, the South African, turned about and walked back along the wall, he wondered if it was truly necessary for them to send him and a few of his friends here to Fort Murat. They had never been here before, although they had all served in the French Foreign Legion for quite some time.

The reason given for why they had to be sent to Fort Murat was uncertainty regarding the loyalty of the garrison. This occurred following the rebellion of the generals in Algiers. When the rebellion broke out in Algiers, the order came that care must be taken to ensure

the garrisons in the southern Sahara remained loyal to the high command of the French Foreign Legion. Then the Commander of Dini Salam, Colonel Le Clerq, summoned Teuns and his few comrades and informed them that they must go to Fort Murat to bolster the morale of the loyal troops and to assist if trouble arose within the garrison.

From the outset, immediately after the generals' rebellion began, it was clear that large parts of the French Foreign Legion sympathised with the three generals who sought to overthrow French rule in Algeria.

That is all well and good, thinks Teuns, pacing here now, but the generals' rebellion failed long ago. It was quashed almost immediately. The three generals have already appeared before the court and have been sentenced. Yet he and his comrades are still here in Fort Murat. A wave of nausea washes over him at the thought that they might possibly be kept here for months longer. His entire spirit rebels against the possibility of having to stay longer in Fort Murat.

He does not like these godforsaken surroundings, he does not like the isolation here, he simply dislikes most of the men in the garrison, and especially, he dislikes the fort's commander. He dislikes the second-in-command even less.

He doesn't know what it is, but the men have inspired revulsion in him. It is as if something is wrong with them. To him, they are not typical of men of the French Foreign Legion. He is accustomed to men like Colonel Le Clerq and Captain D'Arlan. Two outstanding fellows in the Foreign Legion. Perhaps it is because he is accustomed to the personality and methods of D'Arlan that the customs and conduct of Captain Rene Camus, commander of Fort Murat, grate on him so much. And perhaps it is because he is so accustomed to the conduct of their old Sergeant Catroux that he has so little regard for the local second-in-command, Lieutenant Heidenfeldt, a tall, thin, and arrogant German.

Teuns Stegmann cannot help but smile here on the walls of Fort Murat as he thinks about what would happen if a truly serious attack by the

Arabs were to be launched here. In this fortress, there is such a spirit of apathy. There are even signs of a lack of discipline. Lack of order. Lack of authority. Sometimes one doesn't know who the commander is, whether it is Captain Camus or Lieutenant Heidenfeldt. This is also easy to understand, as Captain Camus is in a state of perpetual intoxication most of the time. Then it is Lieutenant Heidenfeldt who takes matters onto his shoulders.

It has already struck Teuns that, in the time since he and his comrades arrived here, not a single patrol has been sent out into the desert. Le Clerq considers patrols the eyes and ears of any French fortress. But apparently, Captain Camus does not view it in that light.

It was as Teuns Stegmann neared the next guard walking towards him that he saw the man staring out across the desert. The guard moving towards Teuns here is a short Italian whose name he does not even know and in whom he has not the slightest interest. The Italian looks like a rogue to him. Possibly that is why he ended up here in the garrison of Fort Murat.

This truly is the end of the line in the Sahara. One cannot go further than Fort Murat. It must surely be the last hiding place for all sorts of scum and criminals from most countries in Europe.

Teuns sees the Italian shield his eyes with his hand and stare out across the sand. Fort Murat is situated on a vast sandy plain. For defensive purposes, the fort is very well located, as there are no high dunes near the fortress. One can see for miles across the open sandy plains, making surprise attacks by hostile forces practically impossible, that is, if the guards on the walls of Fort Murat are vigilant enough.

The tall blond South African turns and also looks in the direction the Italian is staring. A cold prickle runs through his warm body, for he feels it is high time he found some distraction in Fort Murat. The men are so bored, their tempers so frayed, that just last night there was a savage brawl in the barracks. Men can no longer look at each other



without wanting to fight. There has almost been a shooting here in the fortress square. It is high time the men received some diversion from the outside.

Teuns looks out over the sand towards where the sun is setting. The western sky is deep red like the blood of many cattle. And far beyond the plain lies the flat horizon.

Teuns immediately sees what the other guard has spotted. It is a person approaching there across the level sandy waste that stretches westward and northward from Fort Murat into the heart of the Sahara.

The man approaching comes roughly from the northwest. That is a peculiar direction, Teuns thinks. The next fortress from Fort Murat lies somewhat north-eastward. From the direction the man is now coming, there is scarcely even a caravan route.

He rests his rifle before him, his hands instinctively tightening around the bayonet. What he sees before him is a simple phenomenon, yet an astonishing one, he realises full well. It is just one person approaching across the sand.

From here, it is clear that the man is weaving back and forth across the sand, that he is stumbling forward with difficulty, and that he must evidently be near death already. He stumbles and falls once, struggles up again, and lurches onward in the direction of the fort.

“Looks like we’re getting a visitor,” says the Italian guard cynically and without the slightest feeling.

“Yes, a peculiar visitor,” says Teuns. “One man out of the desert... How do you explain that? And from the northwest, no less. Surely the most inhospitable part here in the vicinity of Fort Murat.”

The Italian’s two wine-brown eyes laugh at the tall South African. “I stopped trying to explain the secrets of the Sahara long ago,” says the Italian.

Teuns barely hears what the man says as something extraordinary has struck him. A moment ago, he did not know who that man could be. Even if he had known, it could have been an Arab, or a white wanderer who had lost his way in the desert, or possibly another Algerian rebel who had somehow become lost in the Sahara. His thoughts reached out in all directions, trying to form an idea of who it could be approaching the remote Fort Murat from this direction, out of the endlessness of the Sahara.

But now he knows who that man is.

When the man fell again, the sunlight struck him in a particular way. And it revealed something to Teuns that hits him so hard that he quickly steps to the side of the parapet, just as if he could see better from there. But he knows that what he saw is the truth, or, at least, that his eyes did not deceive him.

The wretched creature struggling along there is a member of the French Foreign Legion.

Teuns can make out the white kepi on his head. He can make out the whitish trousers and the dark blue military jacket. Yes, that is a Legionnaire.

The Italian guard has also noticed it. He appears silently beside Teuns.

“It’s a Legionnaire,” says Teuns.

“So I see,” says the Italian. “Perhaps another one of the rebels.”

Teuns looks sharply and sideways at the Italian, but the Italian’s dark face is completely expressionless. “Perhaps he’s a fugitive from the forces of the rebel generals,” says the Italian mockingly.

“Quite possibly,” says Teuns evasively. “Quite possibly.”

Then he turns quickly and walks to the inner side of the parapet from where he can look down onto the courtyard of Fort Murat. The courtyard is deserted. The heat down there is almost unbearable, so that

all living things are under cover. He looks down at the door of the guardroom, then cups his hands to his mouth and calls for Sergeant Rancoule, officer of the guards. Teuns has to call three times before the reluctant Sergeant Rancoule appears in the doorway of the guardroom.

“What is it, you little beast?” shouts Rancoule from below. Because Rancoule believes there is only one way to maintain authority, and that is to insult and trample your subordinates.

Teuns glares venomously for a moment at the sergeant standing there wide-legged, his head tilted, his eyes narrowed against the last light of the sun.

Then he calls down. “There is a man in the desert. He is approaching from the northwest. He is apparently very exhausted, and he is a member of the French Foreign Legion.”

Rancoule starts laughing. “I think you’ve got sunstroke,” he shouts up at Teuns. “You’re seeing things and dreaming drunk. Look again, fellow. Perhaps it’s the shadow of a vulture you saw.”

“I am just saying there is a man in the desert,” answers Teuns, and this time there is anger in his words. “And I am saying it is a member of the French Foreign Legion.”

Rancoule turns, shaking his head, enters the guardroom, and after a while, he appears on the wall with binoculars in his hand. He sits on the edge of the parapet and looks out over the plain.

“Mon Dieu!” he says finally. “It truly is a man, and it is a member of the Foreign Legion, as you say. Where on earth could he have come from?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” says Teuns.

“Possibly one of the rebels,” says the Italian guard again. “Perhaps he belongs to the three generals.” Teuns notices how Rancoule looks long and attentively at the Italian. Longer than necessary. In his eyes, there

is something the South African cannot quite grasp, something significant, something not entirely revealed.

Rancoule turns without a word, descends the stairs to the square, and the next thing Teuns sees, two members of the garrison, fully armed, stride out of the open gate of Fort Murat. This is another thing that bothers Teuns. The gate of Fort Murat is almost always open.

He watches as the two men hurry across the sand, how they reach the stumbling stranger, and how they help him and practically drag him towards the fort.

It is already growing quite dark when they finally enter the gate with the man. Teuns watches him attentively. He is a tall and impressive man in the full uniform of a lieutenant of the French Foreign Legion. He looks exhausted to the point of death. It seems as if he is intensely afflicted by thirst. His legs keep wanting to buckle under him, but he rests on the shoulders of the two men supporting him.

Teuns stands watching the man until they enter a door with him, apparently heading towards the commander's quarters. Sergeant Rancoule now accompanies the man.

The whole phenomenon is a deep mystery to Teuns. A lieutenant of the Foreign Legion alone in this part of the desert? And how did he reach Fort Murat?

As if the desert itself must provide the explanation, he looks away again in the direction from which the man came.

It is still light enough to see far. But as far as the eye can reach, he perceives nothing. That part of the Sahara where the man first made his appearance is now deathly still again, without the faintest hint of movement. It seems as if a great veil has descended over the desert, erasing everything once more. All that is visible is the dark line of tracks left by the stranger and the two men who brought him to the fort.

Evening descends upon Fort Murat. Two vultures seeking a roost circle