

SAHARA

ADVENTURE SERIES

36. Signal in the Dark



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SIGNAL IN THE DARK

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SUMMARY

The story commences in the remote Fort Petit, deep within the Sahara. Captain Pierre Bouquet, the commanding officer, has already retired for the night. The guards, bored and trapped in routine, are suddenly roused by the sound of a lone rider approaching the fort. Uncertain and anxious, the guards find themselves caught between duty and fear, as tales of a spectral horseman haunting the fort circulate. The sergeant of the guard is notified and proceeds to investigate the situation himself. The sole recourse in this unexpected situation is to awaken Captain Bouquet, as dictated by regulations. However, to everyone's shock, the rider hurls a hand grenade into the courtyard before vanishing as swiftly as he appeared.

The following day, Fort Petit is on high alert. Captain Bouquet dispatches a patrol under the command of Sergeant Frejus to investigate the previous night's events. Simultaneously, the radio operator, Wilhelm Janssens, is engrossed in his book in the radio room. He is suddenly confronted by a nefarious antagonist who compels him to transmit a false message to headquarters in Algiers, appealing for reinforcements due to a fabricated Arab attack.

Teuns Stegmann is also drawn into the drama, as is the villain, Hein Fuch, who will later play a pivotal role in the unfolding narrative. The consequences of the false message are far-reaching, symbolizing betrayal and escalating tension. Teuns's loyalty and courage are severely tested. Questions remain unanswered, and dangers lurk around every corner of the fort. Can a single sign in the night conceal the true extent of betrayal, or will it guide the hero towards an encounter with a darkness that engulfs even the desert?

EXTRACT

D'Arlan issues a swift command. Should the Arabs spring up again in this manner, only half the men are to fire.

But it appears Sheikh Narri Sadek reads D'Arlan's mind, for the next time he unveils yet another new tactic. The foremost Arabs leap up again as in the previous wave. Only every third man. But scarcely have the first ones begun to run when a full wave springs up from behind, charging with all their might.

When half of D'Arlan's men fire, the impact on the front line of Arabs is relatively minor. They are cut down in a line, but a considerable number manage to collapse fairly close to the aircraft, and the wave following them succeeds in dropping to the ground without a single shot being fired from the plane.

For a moment, D'Arlan imagines that the Arab Sheikh received his military training at the St. Cyr military academy. The timing is lethal. And the effect of the tactic is, to say the least, disconcerting. Despite the firepower from the aircraft, the Arabs have managed to get within striking distance, and in significant numbers. It is then that the Arabs begin firing upon the men. An Arab is not particularly adept with a rifle, but at such close range and with so many rifles available, they fatally strike three of D'Arlan's men beneath the aircraft with the first volley.

36. SIGNAL IN THE DARK

Chapter 1

A LONE RIDER

The night is still and warm around the walls of Fort Petit in the southwestern Sahara. Most of the time, it is very quiet around Fort Petit, for it lies lost like a marble in the vast immensity of the Sahara, and this, moreover, is one of the quietest and most remote corners of the desert. Almost nothing ever happens at Fort Petit.

Since its construction as one of the Foreign Legion's outposts, Fort Petit has been repeatedly attacked by Arabs, but between such attacks, long periods elapse without incident.

And yet, Fort Petit, with its small garrison of one hundred men, remains an important thorn in the side of rebellious and hostile Arabs. There is a stringent order that Fort Petit must be manned with the utmost vigilance at all times and under all circumstances, lest it be taken by surprise. This is precisely because it houses only a small garrison. It is a small fort, but a very sturdy one, capable of being well defended by a handful of men.

Tonight is an evening like any other in Fort Petit. The commander, Captain Pierre Bouquet, has already retired for the night. On the small battlements, the guards pace slowly back and forth, none of them expecting this night to yield anything out of the ordinary, anything stimulating, or anything dangerous. Here, day after day and night after night, it is a deadly routine, for one does nothing here except stand guard, sleep, eat, and occasionally perform drill exercises in the consuming sun.

Therefore, the guard near the gate of Fort Petit is instantly all ears when he hears a familiar sound approaching across the desert. He stops so suddenly and spins around so abruptly that he stumbles over his heavy boots. He tilts his head and listens.

Yes, he thinks, he heard correctly. Those are hoofbeats coming across the Sahara.

Hoofbeats? Surely that cannot be. For it is immediately clear to the guard that those are the hoofbeats of just one horse.

The guard moves to the edge of the battlement and listens intently. Actually, it is unnecessary to listen intently, for the rhythmic beat across the sand is undeniably the sound of a running horse. From where he stands, he can even occasionally hear the soft jingle of the bridle rings.

As is his duty, the guard calls down towards the guardroom where the officer of the watch is currently located. And as he calls, a few other guards call out simultaneously. They too hear the sound approaching across the desert.

“A rider approaches the fort,” shouts the first guard. He has to repeat it three times before there is any sign of life in the guardroom, and the officer of the watch, a reluctant sergeant, makes his appearance.

“A rider approaches the gate,” shouts another guard.

“A rider?” calls the sergeant of the guards from below. “You’re out of your mind. You scoundrels, are you trying to make a fool of me?”

“It is undeniably a rider approaching,” calls the first guard again, for the clatter of horse hooves is now not far from the gate at all.

The sergeant of the guards hesitates for a moment, then climbs the stairs to the battlement to see and hear for himself what is happening.

There on the walls of Fort Petit, the hardened guards of the French Foreign Legion experience the strangest sensation. They cannot believe that one rider, just a single rider, is approaching the gate of Fort Petit across the desert. Such a thing is almost unthinkable. No man would dare move like a lone finger in this part of the Sahara. This world is too inhospitable and too dangerous for that. In truth, Fort Petit is the only water point in a vast area stretching around it. The nearest oasis is very

far from Fort Petit. The small fort has a well in its courtyard which serves as its sole water supply.

Could it possibly be a haunting? That is the question most of the guards ask themselves without voicing it. Are they perhaps dealing with a supernatural phenomenon? All sorts of talk circulate in Fort Petit that this part of the Sahara is notorious for being haunted. And especially here in Fort Petit.

Time and again, the stories have been told of a headless Arab, who fell here in the fort, making his appearance from time to time, and that his arrival is always accompanied by the strangest wailing sound. Almost like that of a desert animal. There are some men who swear it is true that this headless Arab simply charges through the iron gate of Fort Petit, horse and all. They say he then races through the courtyard, straight towards the rear wall of the square, and before you know it, he has passed through the solid wall and then speeds away westward across the desert towards the Atlas Mountains.

This legend has been repeated so often and is corroborated with such certainty by various men, that most men serving or having served in Fort Petit firmly believe that the headless Arab makes his appearance at the small fortress from time to time.

And just to make it all seem much more realistic, the men usually recount that you can hear him approaching far across the desert. They say he rides at a comfortable gallop, and you can clearly hear the jingle of his bridle rings. That is why the guards on the walls of Fort Petit now feel a little cold, even though it is a sweltering evening.

In the darkness, the men have frozen. Not one lifts a finger. They can feel their hackles rise. They imagine their hair is standing on end. They grip their long Lebel rifles tighter, as if that would avail against the antics of a ghost. They peer with great concentration through the darkness, waiting for the man to make his appearance. They all watch the gate, for that is where he will enter.

The sergeant of the guards considers the phenomenon so important that he immediately sends a guard to the commander of Fort Petit, Captain Pierre Bouquet.

The sergeant moves closer to the gate. He comes to stand beside the guard who first heard the rider. The two stand close together, peering at each other in the dark. Then the sergeant says, "This is a peculiar phenomenon. What man would come racing towards the fort utterly alone?"

"He isn't racing, Sergeant," says the guard. "He's riding at a comfortable gallop."

"Just like the spectral rider, isn't that so," says the sergeant contemptuously. "The story goes that a headless man rides out of the night towards the fort at a comfortable gallop. Do you believe that story, mon ami?"

"I no longer know what to believe," says the guard, finding his body has turned ice-cold and rigid. Something prickles at the back of his neck.

The man is now close to the gate. The hoofbeats are very clear. And as the sergeant and the guard stand even closer to the battlement, they can see him coming.

"Mon Dieu!" says the sergeant under his breath. It is an exclamation of dismay and fright.

In the darkness, they see him approach. Apparently, he rides a black horse, just like the headless Arab of the legend. Consequently, it looks as though the man is floating through the air. And even from the battlement, they can see his cloak billowing as he rides. And they could swear that the man has no head.

"It is he. It is the headless man," says the guard, bewildered and terrified. "It is not a legend! It is the truth. Look at him. Look how he comes!"

And it is then that the guard's nerve fails him. He spins around and runs back along the battlement. For the sergeant, this business also becomes too much. He turns and joins the other guards. He notices to his surprise that the men are standing in a huddle. He can sense their fear. At first, he wants to fly into them because this is a serious dereliction, not only of discipline but also of vigilance. Instead of being at their posts, they are all standing here in a cluster, leaving the horseshoe-shaped battlements almost entirely unguarded.

But the sergeant instinctively feels that he can do nothing against this fear. He knows well enough that the fear of the supernatural is far worse and much more terrible than the fear of the living, the tangible.

Here where they stand, they suddenly see a rider appear before the gate of Fort Petit. With anxious hearts, they expect him at any moment to glide through the gate, across the square, through the western wall, and then float away over the desert towards the distant Atlas Mountains.

Yet, the men there on the battlement are surprised by the rider in a peculiar way. Not just surprised, but also grievously shocked.

For the solitary rider who emerged from the pitch-black darkness of the Sahara towards Fort Petit does not glide through the gate as they expected. For a moment they see him there, and then it feels as though all hell has suddenly broken loose in the square of Fort Petit.

A red flash erupts from the darkness, blooms, and then vanishes. They feel the battlement shudder beneath them from the loud, shattering explosion down in the square. They hear pieces of steel sing past them. They become aware of the cloud of dust drifting upwards.

The effect of this phenomenon is like that of a thunderclap. If there had been clouds in the sky, they would have thought lightning had struck right before them in the courtyard of the fortress.

But now there are no clouds in the sky, and in this part of the Sahara, one rarely sees lightning. And when the men recover from the loud blast

of the explosion, they see that the rider has vanished.

The gate is empty. The sergeant runs back to the point of the battlement right next to the gate. There he stops short, his hand on his revolver holster. And then he hears it again. The rhythmic, even beat of hooves across the desert. They hear it slowly but surely grow fainter until it disappears. And when he stopped here, he had vaguely seen, in the distance, the floating white figure.

Captain Pierre Bouquet was furious when the guard came to wake him. He curtly told the guard off for daring to wake him over the so-called rider approaching the fort. For a moment, the captain thought of the legend of the headless rider, but then he quickly swung out of bed, pulled on his boots, and sprang out just like that with the guard. Just at the moment the captain appeared at the edge of the square, intending to go up to the battlement to see what was happening with the rider, the explosion occurred. A blinding red blast actually hurled the captain and the guard back into the shelter of the fortress walls.

Now Captain Bouquet, utterly bewildered and terrified, climbs the stairs to the battlement. The sergeant has hastily sent the guards back to their posts and awaits the captain as he ascends the stairs and reaches the battlement.

Captain Bouquet is rather short of breath when he appears before the sergeant.

“What is going on here, Frejus?” he demands harshly of the sergeant. “Who the devil threw a hand grenade here?”

Sergeant Frejus salutes quickly and speaks even faster. There is clear anxiety and consternation in his words. “Heaven knows what’s going on, mon Capitaine,” answers Frejus. “A strange rider appeared here. He threw the hand grenade that exploded here in the courtyard.”

Captain Bouquet remains silent in the darkness. “I assume it’s the headless rider, isn’t it, Frejus,” he says dismissively. “Don’t tell me this

nonsense about a rider. What rider would dare approach Fort Petit alone and then throw a hand grenade into the gate?”

“It was indeed a rider, mon Capitaine,” says Sergeant Frejus subserviently but firmly. “All the guards on this side of the fortress saw him approach the gate. I saw him myself. We heard him coming from far across the desert. Several guards and I myself saw him appear before the gate. Apparently, he is an Arab. And after the explosion, mon Capitaine, I clearly heard him riding away from the gate.”

Captain Bouquet looks around in the darkness. This unexpected explosion in the square of his fortress is not his only problem. This worn-out legend about a headless Arab rider has already caused him enough worry and annoyance. He has discovered, to his disillusionment, that a large part of his garrison firmly believes in the existence of the headless rider. He has tried everything to eradicate this story, but in vain. Time and again, he discovers new signs that his men apparently believe in the headless rider. It affects discipline because it has already led him to punish men very severely for becoming victims of a senseless fear of this phenomenon. And now, on top of everything, a hand grenade explodes inside Fort Petit.

The captain feels bewildered standing here. About the explosion, there can be no doubt whatsoever. But the identity of the rider, that is actually his problem. He is certain that a large part of the garrison already believes it was the headless Arab rider who hurled the hand grenade there. From time to time, the captain has had reason to be astonished by the fact that brave, intrepid, and hardened soldiers of the French Foreign Legion lend their ears to something like this legend.

“Order your guards to be alert, Frejus,” says the captain, “and then follow me. I am going to the gate. Bring us a light and bring six armed men to accompany us.”

Bouquet is hurried and impatient. He wants to know everything that happened here in the shortest possible time. These sorts of things are