

SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

5. The Fort is Silent



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THE FORT IS SILENT

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SUMMARY

In the arid heart of the Sahara, a weary contingent of French Foreign Legion soldiers, including the South African Teuns Stegmann, trudges towards Fort Laval as punishment for a bar brawl. Their initial hope for respite rapidly diminishes as they approach the fort, finding it eerily silent, devoid of sentries, and ominously inhabited by vultures. The open gates and lack of any reception hint that something is dreadfully amiss.

Their arrival at the fort reveals an astonishing woman, Brigitte Bonnet, who declares herself the new commander of the fortress. She harbours a burning vendetta against the Legion, fuelled by the death of her sister, El Karima, at their hands. Stegmann immediately recognises a pendant around her neck, triggering unpleasant memories. Brigitte unveils a deceptive scheme to use the legionnaires as test subjects for a lethal gas while holding them captive in the isolated fort.

Teuns, implicated in El Karima's death, becomes a primary target. While his comrades succumb to despair, Teuns grapples with the mounting horror unfolding within the fort. He seizes every opportunity to find an escape route that could lead to their salvation, but the sinister activities escalate with each passing moment. With every life lost, the legionnaires are further confronted by a relentless adversary possessing seemingly limitless power. Will they all fall victim to Brigitte's vengeful plot, or does a hidden strength lie dormant somewhere within them? The answer lies buried beneath layers of betrayal, scientific terror, and the haunting echoes of a tragic past waiting to be uncovered.

EXTRACT

Juin grabs the doorknob and swiftly swings the door open. He stands there, legs astride, revolver ready in his hand, his eyes glowing. The other two move in behind him, positioning themselves on either side, their rifles parallel to the ground, poised to be shouldered.

But they are so astonished, so shocked, that their fingers lie limp on the triggers.

There, behind the desk belonging to the commander of Fort Laval, sits one of the most beautiful women they have ever seen. Her luxuriant hair is like newly polished copper. Her eyes, holding an amused glint, are as green as the deep ocean pools, and her mouth is soft, alluring, yet stern.

Her body appears very tranquil in the attire of a sheikh, though she does not wear their head covering. She is clad in the light purple robe of an Arab dignitary. Her skin has the colour of an olive, and a large red ruby glints on a ring on one of her fingers.

Teuns Stegmann stares at her with breathless astonishment, not only at her overwhelming beauty but also at something else.

5. THE FORT IS SILENT

Chapter 1

THE SILENT FORT

It looks exactly as if the sand dunes are swimming and floating in the heatwaves, as if the earth's crust is moving up and down, forming long, swaying folds like a boiling mass stirred by the heat.

And it is already late afternoon here in the south-eastern Sahara. But this has been a terrible day, surely one of the worst that even this hardened group of men marching through the sand has ever experienced here. It feels as though the soles of their feet are already cooked, for all day long the relentless heat of the sand has burned through their thick boots. Their backpacks feel like lead upon their backs, and they can no longer see clearly from their eyes, so much have the heat's glare tormented their vision and the sweat burned them. It seems to them as if they left Dini Salam months ago, though it has only been a few days. As they march onward now, it feels as though they have no future and no tomorrow. In this moment, they feel dead to the world, devoid of energy and interest.

"If a bunch of Arabs showed up now, they could knock me dead with a cow's tail," sighs Private Fritz Mundt, the biggest man in the French Foreign Legion. "They could do whatever they want with me, and I wouldn't offer any resistance."

"If I were to lie down now, I'd sleep for a whole blissful week," says Private Teuns Stegmann, the tall, blond South African walking beside Fritz. "I don't think I've ever been so utterly exhausted in my life. This is murder, this kind of marching in this dreadful heat. Looks like the Sahara wants to punish us too, as if the Legion isn't punishing us enough already."

"Give me a Wiener Schnitzel and a huge flask of Italian Chianti, straight off the ice," speaks Jack Ritchie, trudging along in the same row as

Stegmann and Mundt. "After that, you can bury me..."

The other two glance quickly and surprisedly at the blond Englishman as if he has committed an offense by uttering those words and conjuring that vision before them.

"I think you've got a screw loose, Englishman," snorts Teuns Stegmann, "otherwise you wouldn't talk such nonsense in these circumstances and at this moment."

"Are you stark raving mad, Englishman?" bursts out Fritz. "Don't you know we're heading to Fort Laval? Don't you know we'll be living there for three months on dry biscuits, tinned meat, and dried fruit? They should make a law against you fellows talking about food and cold wine when a man is dying of hunger and thirst."

"They should put them against the wall and shoot them," opines Teuns.

"I was just dreaming out loud," says Jack apologetically. "If a man can't eat and drink, he can at least dream, right?"

"Next time, dream your dreams so that we can't notice them," grumbles Fritz, spitting an old quid of tobacco into the sand. Then he takes down his water flask and holds it to his mouth, but it is futile, for not a drop remains.

"You don't have to make that gesture every time you want to drink, Fritz Mundt," Jack Ritchie chides him. "Why don't you ask for water if you're thirsty?"

The big German smiles at Jack, who holds out his water flask to him. "You might as well finish this little bit of water too, since you've already drunk all of mine," says the Englishman.

"You have such a good heart, they ought to give you the Croix de Guerre," teases Fritz, taking the water flask and drinking one mouthful. "Anyway, we should be at the fort by dusk. Then we can drink water again and eat our delicious, nutritious biscuits and crackers."

“There’s only one solution for you, Field Marshal Rommel,” Teuns says to the German, “and that’s for them to bring along a pack mule with two barrels of water every time you accompany a patrol. You always drink all our water, and still, you haven’t had enough.”

“Or two barrels of beer,” says Jack Ritchie.

Fritz kicks the Englishman on his calf. “Stop it!” he orders, wiping the sweat from his large face. “Talking about wine is bad enough, but beer! If you mention beer again, I’ll smash your skull in.”

“It’s all your fault that the three of us are walking here, Fritz Mundt,” concludes Teuns, adjusting the straps of his backpack because they feel like they are cutting his shoulder blades in half. “If you hadn’t beaten that filthy yellow-belly to a pulp the other night, we wouldn’t be on this patrol heading to Fort Laval now.”

“Yes, he’s always out of line,” Jack Ritchie adds condemningly. “Can’t keep his paws off the Arabs.”

“That was my business,” roars Fritz. “I didn’t ask you two to help.”

“If we hadn’t helped you, that mob in the wine tavern would have torn you limb from limb,” Teuns reminds the big German.

“And now we’re facing the music,” Jack continues. “Three months in this pestilential little fort, at the ends of the earth and dozens of kilometres from Dini Salam.”

“Someone has to relieve the garrison,” Fritz tries to defend himself, although he feels guilty that the three of them are also being sent to Fort Laval as punishment for getting into a fight with the Arabs and beating the lot of them.

“Yes, but it didn’t have to be us,” Teuns insists. “There are enough scoundrels in Dini Salam who could have come to relieve the garrison here.”

“We’ll get you yet, Fritz Mundt,” threatens Jack. “Even if we have to

put magic potion in your food one day.”

“Ho-ho-ho,” Fritz laughs hoarsely, wiping his face again. “What are you worrying about? We can rest here for three months, because there’s bugger all to do here. I’ve been here before. Here, you just swat flies and crush sand fleas. Otherwise, you just sleep and dream of the wonderful world out there passing by while you sit here dying of misery.”

“What does one do for three months in this godforsaken place?” Teuns wants to know.

“Nothing,” the German replies. “I’m telling you, nothing. That’s why they send us here for our little sins. In the Sahara, boredom is the greatest punishment, my brothers. That’s why they send us here.”

“I don’t like this mess,” groans Jack Ritchie. “This little place is too isolated. What can a small garrison of thirty men do if the Arabs get uppity here?”

“Nothing,” interjects Fritz. “You can just die for folk and fatherland, and the moment the Arabs are done with you, the vultures come peck at your stomach. But don’t you worry, Englishman, with the white liver. Nothing will happen while we’re here. We’ll just play with our toes and get on each other’s nerves, because the Arabs are quiet.”

“I’m not so sure,” says Teuns. “They’ve been quiet for too long for my liking. I think something’s brewing again.”

“If they come bother us, at least we’ll have something to do,” says Fritz.

“And what exactly are we going to do if the mob attacks us here? We’re a miserable thirty men,” complains Jack Ritchie.

“We’ll catch them with birdlime,” teases Fritz, and then they halt, because Lieutenant Juin, the young French officer with the pale face and bright eyes, has raised his hand.

They stand on the edge of a high sandy plateau that slopes gradually

down before them to an infinite sandy plain, stretching as far as the eye can see.

“Hooray!” says Fritz Mundt. “Here before us lies our tranquil destination, the oasis at the end of our eventful journey, Fort Laval, outpost of the French Foreign Legion! Look there, fellows, so you can regain your courage.”

Far below on the flat expanse of the sandy plain, they see the small fort, looking more like an anthill from this distance than an outpost of the French Foreign Legion.

“Beautiful landscape, isn’t it?” says Fritz as he observes Teuns and Jack Ritchie, who are staring with apparent interest at the desolate world before them.

“What a dump!” mutters Teuns. “I thought there was an oasis or something near Fort Laval?”

Fritz laughs deeply from his belly. “You were sorely mistaken, mon ami,” he says to the South African. “There isn’t a blade of grass within 150 kilometres of Fort Laval, let alone an oasis with water and trees.”

“Where do they get their water from then?” asks the Englishman.

“There’s a seepage well inside the fort,” answers Fritz. “A peculiar business, but it’s there. That’s why the fort was built on that particular spot, although from a military perspective, it’s hardly the best location. Here where we stand now, on the edge of the plateau, is the most suitable place. But of course, there’s no water here.”

“We will rest for ten minutes,” Lieutenant Juin’s clear voice cuts through the silence. “Then we march the final stretch to Fort Laval. I see the Tricolour is still flying from the flagpole, mes amis,” he says to the thirty men with him, as if trying to encourage them.

“If the Tricolour is still flying there, it means the garrison is at least still there,” grumbles Teuns Stegmann.

“Why do you say that?” asks Jack Ritchie. “What could have happened to the garrison?”

“Don’t know,” answers the South African. “This is such a dreary world that it seems almost strange to me that we’ll soon be seeing other members of the French Foreign Legion. I’m already imagining that there’s no one left here who’s still breathing.”

Fritz looks at the South African with a strange expression on his face, but he doesn’t speak. However, he too has a peculiar feeling within him. He doesn’t know why himself. But in his long career in this desert, he has faced so many setbacks that he is hardly ever at ease. He always expects some misfortune or other to befall them, as if some disaster lies just around the corner.

Fritz squints his eyes against the glare of the desert light and vaguely sees the white and red of the French Tricolour as it flutters there on the fort’s tall pole.

Then they sit down in the warm sand and drink their last water.

* * *

It is deep dusk when the small column finally approaches the fort. Fort Laval is small and built round, from sandstone brought by the French from somewhere in bygone years. It is one of the smallest forts of the Foreign Legion and also one of the most remote. It can accommodate fifty men at most, but in peacetime, the French never keep more than thirty men, a lieutenant, and a sergeant here, who are relieved every three months. Because the fort is so small and so remote, really not much more than an outpost, it is built particularly sturdy and particularly high, making it extremely difficult to conquer from the outside, even though the garrison is very small. The intention is for the small garrison here to hold out until it can be relieved. It does have radio communication with Dini Salam.

It is a veritable hellhole. The garrison is relieved every three months

precisely because the loneliness here is so immense, the men quickly become irritable, and because the heat here is so intense. Due to the high walls, Fort Laval is baked like an oven early in the morning by the Sahara's deadly sun.

Although the men know what awaits them in Fort Laval, there is now a slight uplift among them. Where for the past four days they had merely trudged head down through the hot sand, they now whisper amongst themselves. They even make jokes, because however unpleasant Fort Laval may be, it cannot be worse than the torment of the barren desert. In the fort, they can at least drink enough water again.

Suddenly, Juin brings the small group of men to a halt again.

He looks intently at the fort.

"There's a big screw loose here," says Fritz Mundt, for his eagle eyes have also spotted what Juin has seen.

"What's wrong now, old Father Job?" asks Teuns mockingly.

"The Tricolour is flying, what more do you want? Or do you expect them to roll out a red carpet for us?" Jack Ritchie wants to know.

Fritz gestures in the rapidly increasing dusk towards the high battlements of the fort. "Do you see what I see?" he asks his two comrades.

"What do you see that's strange?" asks Teuns teasingly.

"There are no guards on the battlements, just a few vultures..."

"So help me!" says Teuns, now also staring intently through the dim light.

"They're preening their feathers for us," says Jack Ritchie.

"Hmm!" comes from Fritz. "That is devilishly peculiar. Could they be keeping vultures as pets?"