

# SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

## 10. Mademoiselle Julie



**MEIRING FOUCHE**

# MADemoiselle Julie

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## SUMMARY

The narrative commences at Fort Laval, a remote French Foreign Legion outpost in the Sahara. Captain Gaston Lefevre, the commander, finds himself in profound despair as his daughter, Julie, is missing. He is confined within the fort, constrained by his superiors' orders, and consumed by alcohol and anxiety. The conflict arises when a peculiar 'rider', bearing a doll dressed in Julie's clothes, arrives at the fort with a crucial message. The Doelaks, led by Sheikh Feisan, have abducted Julie and demand the fort's surrender in exchange for her life. Lefevre, torn between his duty as a legionnaire and his love for his daughter, initially concedes.

The narrative then centres on Teuns Stegmann, a South African legionnaire, who volunteers to attempt Julie's rescue. Tension steadily escalates as the story progresses. The fort is ostensibly evacuated, but Sergeant Zhakof stages a mutiny and assumes command, suspecting a trap. Teuns is sent back and captured, while the Doelaks reveal their true colours of treachery and cruelty. Employing his sharp intellect and courage, Teuns attempts to escape and resolve the situation. Meanwhile, Lefevre, also a captive, undergoes an intense emotional struggle, willing to sacrifice everything for his daughter, even if it means betraying his own men.

Amidst the escalating chaos, with the fort now deserted and the Doelaks in control, Teuns and Captain Lefevre endeavour to execute a plan to save Julie. The tension escalates, and betrayal and violence become the order of the day. Amidst all the violence, there is also another, unseen peril threatening everyone's lives. Can they, amidst betrayal and the overwhelming enemy superiority, find a way to save not only Julie's life but also their own? The answer lies hidden in the heart of the desert, where a deeper secret lurks.

## EXTRACT

He lets them approach to within seven paces before suddenly opening fire. The rage surges within him again. He leaps up, stands his ground, and fires almost point-blank into the Doelaks. The foremost fall dead or recoil, but from behind, a new horde rounds the corner. He empties one magazine clip, ducks swiftly, inserts a second, and fires again. This time, it proves too much for the Doelaks. For the umpteenth time, the last few attackers retreat, leaping and stumbling over the bodies of their brethren strewn across the corridor. They quickly disappear around the corner.

Teuns snatches up the remaining magazine clip and leaps into the office. This is the end now. What use is it to keep firing? They will come again, and again, and again. He knows the Arabs. They will persist in their attacks until they achieve their objective. They know full well that his ammunition is not limitless.

He walks through to the room and pauses in the doorway. A wild plan suddenly takes root in his mind. If he could return to the armoury and fetch ammunition. But he immediately dismisses the thought. He can never leave the girl and her wounded father alone here. Besides, he is certain it would mean certain death for him if he attempted to return alone. He lacks sufficient ammunition to shoot his way clear.

# 10. MADEMOISELLE JULIE

## Chapter 1

### STRANGE RIDER

Captain Gaston Lefevre, the middle-aged Frenchman with greying temples and weary eyes, once again pulls the bottle of cognac across the surface of his writing desk, pours a drinking glass half full, and downs it in two swift draughts. Then he slumps forward, rubs his eyes hard, and shakes his head in powerless, desperate tension. As he has for the past four days, he listens subconsciously every moment, waiting for the office door to open, for the orderly perhaps to enter with a new message.

Then he straightens up and, in a surge of fury, slams his fist onto the table. But he doesn't even feel the hard wood injure his fist, for the drink has rendered him numb to almost everything.

Except for the deep, dull ache of his daughter being lost.

Captain Lefevre again pulls the radio communication message closer, which he must have read over and over several hundred times in the past few days.

Commander Dini Salam to Lefevre Fort Laval. Your daughter Julie missing from Hotel Europa. Comprehensive investigation initiated. Will be kept constantly informed. Le Clerq, Colonel.

Just that. Nothing more. And every day since, they had merely sent a radio message stating that the search for Julie Lefevre was ongoing.

And here he sat, trapped in this hornet's nest of a Fort Laval, hundreds of kilometres from Dini Salam, with a paltry garrison of some thirty men. He, a captain in the French Foreign Legion.

But that is what the bottle does to a man. When your superiors deem you drink too much, you are dispatched to a pit like this to command

thirty men. In this remote corner of the Sahara, this foremost outpost of French authority in this immeasurable, inhospitable, and perilous wasteland of sand.

Gaston Lefevre rises quickly, walks unsteadily to the window, and stares out across the desert. If only he could do something to search for her, he thinks, while the shimmering heatwaves dancing over the sand dunes cause his eyes to narrow. If only he could have done something. But what can he do from this godforsaken corner of the earth? With thirty men, and while he hasn't even the faintest notion where his Julie is!

He grips the iron bars in the window, and for a moment, it feels as though he could tear them from the stone walls. In a few days, he and his garrison were due to be relieved here and would have returned to Dini Salam. There he would have met his only daughter, who had flown specially from Algiers to see him. After the death of his wife last year, Julie is all he has left.

The greying captain lets his head droop forward, and he feels the tears burn in his eyes again.

“What have I done to deserve this?” he says with a short gasp, tugging helplessly at the iron bars. Then he swings around, staggers back to his writing desk, sinks onto the chair, and pulls the cognac closer again. Cognac – that is all that offers him solace and courage in this consuming crisis in which he now finds himself.

Yesterday, he had requested leave via radio to lead a search party from Fort Laval. He knew full well it was practically futile, as he hadn't the faintest idea where his daughter might be, but later it felt as though he would go mad from the waiting, hour after hour, day after day. The uncertainty and fear gnaw at him constantly.

The response to his request was a brief and blunt refusal from the commander of the main garrison in Dini Salam, Col. Paul Le Clerq. It included a strict order. He was under no circumstances to leave Fort

Laval.

That is why Gaston Lefevre now yanks the cognac bottle closer again and simply puts it to his mouth, without bothering to use a glass.

“Orderly!” he bellows in a most unbecoming manner, and when the startled orderly pokes his head around the door, Lefevre roars. “Go to that wretched Marconi operator and find out if there isn’t any news yet!”

The orderly trots off to the radio room, reminding himself that this must be the hundredth time he has had to walk there so needlessly, because every time a message comes through, the Marconi operator forwards it immediately to the commander.

A few moments later, the orderly stands apprehensively in the doorway of Lefevre’s office and salutes briskly. “No further news, mon Capitaine,” he announces submissively.

Lefevre starts to laugh, and it is an ugly, cynical laugh. A drunkard’s laugh that echoes through the small office, reverberates off the walls, and then drifts away through the heat. He struggles upright, sweeps the cognac bottle off the top of the writing desk, yanks out his revolver, and fires a wild shot through the barred window.

The terrified orderly slams the door shut without ceremony and stands trembling, awaiting the captain’s next outburst.

“Orderly, cognac!” he hears the captain shout from within, and he heads towards the officers’ mess to fetch a new bottle of liquor. When he returns with it, Lefevre is sitting with his head on his arms on the table, his head swaying slowly back and forth, while he ceaselessly murmurs his daughter’s name.

When he looks up and sees the orderly standing before him, he says very softly, “Julie... my Julie... she is all I have left.”

“Oui, mon Capitaine,” is all the orderly can think of, and he cannot



comprehend how this can be the same man under whom he once fought his way out of an ambush the Arabs had laid for them. That day, this very Captain Lefevre had set an example of death-defying bravery for them, one that surely none of them would easily forget.

And now he sits here like a child, his eyes red and listless, his hands trembling.

But the orderly understands it well. Therefore, he merely salutes respectfully and exits.

Private Zoelak is a Russian who once, in the Ukraine, caved in the neck of a Communist commissar with a shovel. Afterwards, he decided the Foreign Legion would be the safest place for him.

But at this moment, pacing back and forth in the consuming sun here on the watch platform of Fort Laval, he is not thinking of that distant day beside the wheat fields of the Ukraine. At this moment, he walks and ponders by what twisted miracle the Sahara was created – this wilderness of heat, solitude, flies, and hardship.

He glances askance at the sun. It cannot be much longer before he is relieved. He sighs gratefully, and his heavy boots continue their rhythmic tread across the weathered planks of the platform, here behind the battlements of Fort Laval. He is not even aware that he carries a Lebel rifle over his right shoulder, nor that he is supposed to be standing guard. All he can think about at this moment is the pile of money he owes Private Petacci, the little Italian. This afternoon, when his watch is over, he will go play cards again. A full three months of his pay are already pledged to this cunning little gambler, but this afternoon Zoelak intends to turn the tables and win back some of that money. He's certainly not going to fatten Petacci on his pay!

Zoelak reaches the southern corner of the battlement, clicks his heels, and turns about. For a moment he stands still and gazes westward, more out of habit than anything else. It is the discipline rising deep from his subconscious. The discipline that teaches you to remain vigilant here in

the Sahara, because danger always lies hidden here, like the sand adder you do not easily see, but which strikes your ankle when you are not on your guard.

And as Private Zoelak looks out to the west, he freezes.

His eyes narrow suddenly, and a jolt runs through his heart. Instinctively, he grips his Lebel rifle tighter.

He swings around and runs towards the side of the platform, but then stops short and turns back towards the battlement first. He observes the object before him. What on earth? He has never seen such a thing in his life.

And yet, it is a rider. It must be. The figure just looks so odd. It seems as if that rider sits so stiffly in the saddle, almost like a wooden doll.

Besides, from here it looks like a woman. But a woman in this part of the Sahara? That is utterly impossible.

He walks right up to the battlement and narrows his eyes further. He peers through the shimmering heat haze across the plain, which stretches from here to the distant circle of dunes that surround Fort Laval, cutting it off even further from the rest of the world.

Good heavens! What kind of rider is this? It makes no sense to him.

Zoelak swings around and trots to the edge of the platform. "Attention! Attention! Attention!" he shouts in French towards the guardroom, there on the opposite side of the square within the fort. "Rider due west... rider due west... Looks like a woman."

The sergeant of the guard bursts out of the guardroom with binoculars in his right hand. He runs towards the stairs leading up to the battlement.

The other guards, who had been just as asleep as Zoelak, now also stand staring at the phenomenon. Just like Zoelak, they cannot make out what is happening here.

Sometimes it seems as if the apparition floats on the heatwaves, yet it is quite clear that it is a horse approaching. And it is perfectly clear that someone is sitting on that horse's back. And it also seems reasonably clear that it is a woman.

The horse also moves so strangely. It is not approaching the fort purposefully. It wanders this way, then that way, and then stops again. The horse looks around once, then nibbles here and there at the sparse camel thorn bushes that grow here in the desert.

Then it ambles closer again, quite unconcernedly.

Sergeant Zhakof, the big Russian and officer of the guard, comes to stand wide-legged beside his countryman Zoelak. He raises the binoculars to his eyes and observes the phenomenon carefully.

“Mon Dieu!” he says finally. “That is the strangest rider I have ever seen. From here it looks like a female rider, but it is so rigid that I am convinced it is not a living rider.”

“Is it, is it perhaps not the Capitaine's daughter, mon Sergent?” inquires Zoelak.

Out of sheer shock, Zhakof jerks the binoculars away from his eyes. Sweat suddenly glistens on his sunburnt face, and he has turned noticeably pale. He stares uncertainly at Zoelak and then looks again at the apparition out in the desert.

“Mon Dieu!” he whispers, “I hope not.”

Zhakof is an impulsive man. He grabs Zoelak by the shoulder. “Go fetch that horse, Zoelak,” he commands. “And you must run!”

Zoelak looks at the sergeant, surprised and uncertain. “Don't worry, we will protect you,” Zhakof assures him. “You need not be afraid, devil's spawn and murderer of a commissar.” Zhakof's eyes blaze, and Zoelak waits no longer. He knows the temper of this giant of a man, who thinks nothing of striking you over the head with a Lebel when he loses his

temper.

Zoelak trots down the stairs, runs out of the fort, and quickly makes tracks across the desert, his eyes constantly fixed on the horizon.

But the horizon is empty. Only the heat devils dance and frolic there.

Zoelak catches the horse easily. The animal is clearly thirsty. Probably why it headed for the Fort. The Russian's heart lurches with astonishment when he sees the strange 'rider'. He grabs the horse by the bit and leads it back towards the fort at a quick trot, constantly glancing over his shoulders to see if anything might appear on the horizon. When Zoelak enters the fort with the horse, Zhakof is waiting for him. The sergeant runs towards the horse in surprise, also grabs it by the bit, and stares bewildered at the 'rider' on the animal's back.

It is not a living rider. It is a doll cobbled together from cushions and canvas, fastened into the saddle.

The doll is dressed in women's clothes, the clothes of an adult woman. No, rather the clothes of a young girl. A cold wave of shock and revulsion passes through the hardened Zhakof. He closes his eyes for a moment and then lowers his head.

It is then that Zoelak draws Zhakof's attention to the note pinned to the front of the doll's chest.

The Russian quickly snatches it off. On the outside of the note is written in clear script. "The Commander, Fort Laval. Urgent."

Zhakof trots off, crunching across the sand of the courtyard, towards Captain Gaston Lefevre's office. He jerks the door open and salutes the limp figure lying face down on the writing desk's surface.

"A message for you, mon Capitaine," Zhakof says hoarsely.

Lefevre lifts his grey head unsteadily and stares dazedly at Zhakof. "Attention, Zhakof!" Lefevre calls out. "Where is your discipline?"