

## Chapter 18 – Guts or Glory

There was a buzz in the air. It was day one of the academic year. News of John's fight was out. Some wag had pinned a colourful poster on the notice board. Under the heading, 'Dust-up in Darkest Africa,' were details of the fight, billed as 'The Prince versus The Impudent Shrimp.' In small print underneath was a notice of a preliminary bout between two second formers, Blake and Knowles.

'No one will think worse of you if you pull out,' said Parker. 'Adewale is a big guy. He'll kill you if you go ahead with it.'

'No, I must fight him,' said John.

'If you don't fag for him, some sixth former will come along and claim you, anyway. So what's the difference? Some sixth formers are just as mean as him.'

'It's a matter of principle. We don't have to fag for fourth formers.'

'Oh well! It's your funeral.'

Housekeeping took up the first part of the morning, with the class master preparing an attendance register, allocating class timetables, and so forth. Class work was not uppermost in the boys' minds. When the morning-break bell rang, the students rushed to the gym to secure a good vantage point for the fight. John hurried to change into his sports shorts, vest, and plimsolls before joining them in the hall.

His classmates patted him on the back with comments such as, 'Nice to have known you, Ziyambi. A pity your stay here was so short. Do you have any special message we can give to your mother?'

A noisy crowd of boys of all ages packed the gym hall, and a few masters stood in the rear. No one had ever seen a form-one boy fight a fourth former, and one as menacing as Adewale.

The preliminary fight between Blake and Knowles was a frantic affair, with flailing arms at high speed. Few solid punches landed, and there was no clear winner with both boys looking flushed from their exertion.

Soon it was John's turn. Mr Symes, the gym master, welcomed him and Adewale to the ring. He laced up the boys' boxing gloves, and advised them the fight would be three, three-minute rounds.

He first addressed the prince. 'Are you sure about this, Adewale? You are so much bigger than him. It's hardly a fair fight. You'd look gracious if you called it off. Perhaps he would apologise for his impudence.'

'The boy deserves a damned good thrashing, Sir, and I'm going to give it to him.'

Mr Symes turned to John. 'You needn't go through with this. Everyone will understand if you want to pull out of the fight.'

'No, Sir. I want to fight.'

The gym master shrugged and rang the bell for the first round.

Adewale came charging out of his corner and swung a huge right fist aimed at John's head. John leant back, and the fist whistled past his chin. He felt the wind from the wayward punch, and he realised he'd need to be careful. A round-arm swing from Adewale's left fist brushed his hair as he ducked. A contact from one of those punches would floor him.

Now the punches came faster as Adewale swung his arms, right, left, right again. John swayed, ducked, and weaved. At one point, Adewale backed him into a corner, but as Adewale swung his enormous fist, John ducked under his arm and skipped out of the corner. Adewale kept punching, and John kept on presenting him a tantalising target always within reach, but never there when the bunched fists whistled past.

John hadn't attempted to hit Adewale once. The crowd of boys became restless and booed, yet the dance of the two fighters continued. The bell for the end of round one sounded without a single blow landed, but Adewale was puffed.

Round two saw Adewale leave his corner more slowly than the first round. The determined look on his face suggested a change of plan. He copied John's weaving and swaying, producing a sudden lightning jab. But John was equal to the task, leaning back as Adewale's reach was an inch short of its target. More jabs accompanied by more misses were making Adewale's arms sore.

Soon Adewale was back trying to score with round-arm hooks. But now, each time Adewale's swing missed its target, John would respond with a blow to his stomach, just under the ribs. The crowd of boys cheered with each strike, getting more involved by the minute. By the end of round two, Adewale had landed no meaningful blow, but his ribs and stomach had taken a pounding from John's counterpunches.

The bell rang for round three. Adewale's advance was even slower than round two. He was now cautious, putting out his longer reach to keep John at bay. He followed each of his attempted punches by lowering his hands to protect his stomach. It was a mistake because John changed his attack from Adewale's stomach to his face. Now Adewale was flummoxed as John peppered both his face and stomach with rapid blows.

John didn't want to bring the larger boy down with one or two heavy blows. Rather, his aim was a punishing accumulation of blows. He wanted the fight to go the full distance, making it an uncomfortable humiliation for the bully. After one flurry of John's punches, in his haste to back away, Adewale tripped over his own feet and fell on his back. Loud cheers erupted as the boys hoped for a knockout.

But Adewale got up, still trying to land a killer blow. The fight continued, with the boys' cheers turning into a deafening roar. Now, Adewale was using all his strength and remaining energy, swinging massive blows through the empty air. One huge swing was so strong, it pulled Adewale off his feet and he crashed to the canvas. Just then, the bell rang, ending the fight.

John raised his arms in triumph as Adewale struggled to get up off the floor. The crowd roared. Adewale tried to leave the ring, but Mr Symes, the gym master, called him back and made him shake hands with John.

'Well boys, I hope that's the end of your disagreement. A good fight, Ziyambi.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

The crowd soon melted as the boys hurried to get back to their classes. John raced back to his dormitory to shower and change into his school uniform.

The boys were all talking about his momentous victory, but it didn't save him from his impatient class master when he arrived five minutes late.

'Ziyambi, why are you late for class?'

‘I’m sorry, Sir, but I was boxing in the gym and needed to change. I came as soon as I could.’

‘It’s no excuse, Ziyambi. You are on one hour detention after class for the rest of the week.’

It was John’s first taste of English public-school discipline. But in the end, it was worth it. The next edition of the school magazine showed a photo on its front page of him with triumphant raised arms, and Adewale on the canvas in the boxing ring. The headline read, ‘The Nimble Shrimp floors the Lumbering Prince.’ John knew he didn’t knock Adewale down, and that the boy had tripped, but that’s how legends began.

One or two boys in the class began calling John by the nickname Shrimp, but his icy glare soon put an end to that.

John declined Mr Symes’s invitation to join the school boxing club. Instead, he opted for cricket and rugby, as the school didn’t offer soccer. He was a hero in the first form, and no sixth formers approached him to fag for them. He decided public school in England wasn’t so bad after all.

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Only seven weeks since the start of the school year, and it was already the half-term holiday. Most boys went home for the ten-day break, but John and several other overseas pupils remained at the school. An informal atmosphere prevailed, and the senior and junior boys enjoyed each other’s company, using the sporting facilities, and sitting together at mealtimes. But this was a temporary situation, prevailing until the term resumed.

Another seven weeks later came the two-week Christmas holiday. This time, John would go home. Arthur, the taxi driver, arrived to take him to Heathrow to catch his flight.

He looked forward to seeing Aneni again, but now realised how much he loved his school. He’d enjoyed his time there and worried that the six years he thought would stretch forever, now risked going too fast. His initial concern about being an outsider evaporated. His black skin and African features were a novelty in the school, adding to his popularity. In contrast to Adewale’s arrogance, he was modest. He was also brave, athletic, and intelligent, one of the brightest boys in his class. It was no wonder he was popular.

To a degree, John felt sorry for Adewale. The boys tolerated the prince because of his size and strength. Few others would dare to repeat John’s defiance of the big African, so they humoured him. Before his arrival, Adewale was unique as the only black boy in the school. Now, John threatened that uniqueness, and he wondered if that was the reason Adewale picked on him.

The South African Airways (SAA) flight to Johannesburg was a pleasant surprise because the brand-new Boeing 747 was now in service. Again, John sat in a window seat, but now he needed to disrupt two passengers to reach the aisle. Two large women filled those seats, making him feel pinned against the window.

On this trip, no air hostesses guided him to the planes or airline counters. On seeing his return ticket, the airline staff realised he’d flown before and could manage on his own. Back in Joburg, his connection to Salisbury was the evening flight filled with businessmen. John was among the last to board, and he found the Viscount’s cabin choked with cigarette smoke, resembling an English fog.

Now, close to home, John's excitement at being back was building. On the Boeing 747, his school was on his mind, but on the Viscount, his thoughts turned to Aneni and his mother. It would be a brief visit, but a thrill to be making it.

The Viscount made a smooth landing, and the passengers all rushed to collect their cases in the overhead lockers and disembark. It was a relief for John to leave the cabin and breathe in the fresh Rhodesian air.

He found his mother and Mortimer waiting in the arrivals hall outside customs. Norah couldn't hide her joy at seeing her son again. He'd been gone only one school term, but she thought he'd matured. It was true, few boys his age, black or white, experienced what he had.

It was dark by the time they reached the house, but Philemon and Stanford delayed their dinner until their return from the airport. The group sat under the shelter of Stanford's veranda roof, eating and chatting late into the evening. They all wanted to hear John's news.

Judge Barclay was out for the evening, but earlier told Norah he'd talk with John the following night.

After his exhausting flight, John slept well that night. In the morning, he was refreshed and ready for one of Philemon's breakfasts. Sitting in the fresh morning air, eating breakfast, and listening to the adults' chatter was one of his favourite moments. Later, he caught up with Thomas, the gardener, and Abigail, the housemaid. Nothing much had changed. He'd been gone just over three months, but it felt much longer.

That evening, before dinner, Judge Barclay called for John to come to the lounge. On this occasion, a confident John walked into the lounge and shook the boss's hand.

'Well, young man, how are you finding things at my old school?'

'Wonderful, Sir. I just love it.'

'Excellent. I've received a report from your headmaster, my old friend, Sebastian Bromley. He tells me you are doing very well and are excelling at sports and in class.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'I said you'd be home for Christmas and at the end of the school year. But you've done so well, I think you deserve a reward. So, I'm also going to bring you home at the end of the second term in March/April. And if you continue to excel, you'll come home at the end of each term.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

'Now tomorrow, Mortimer is taking you and your mother to the village. But first, this evening, we'll have our staff Christmas party.'

Judge Barclay rarely attended his staff's Christmas parties, but in honour of John's return, he joined them briefly to toast John's future success and wish them all a Merry Christmas.