

## Chapter 26 – Mozambique

Past the ridge, the path grew less challenging, yet caution was necessary in the darkness.

Samuel and John threaded their way through rocks and small bushes on the east side of the mountain, and soon, they entered thick bush, and beyond that, trees. The voices of the pursuing soldiers grew fainter until at last they were silent.

‘We can’t stop now,’ said Samuel. ‘They may still follow us.’

‘Do you know where we are?’

‘Of course. I’ve done this journey many times.’

‘When will we stop?’

‘When we get to the guerrilla’s camp.’

‘So, are you one of them?’

‘Yes, I am. My job is to bring new recruits like you across the border.’

‘When will we get to the camp?’

‘By early morning, if we’re lucky.’

‘You were at Inyazura Station. Does that mean you were recruiting in the Buhera District?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you work alone or with others?’

‘Alone.’

‘But I’ve heard groups of guerrillas go to villages to recruit.’

‘Often, a group returning to Mozambique from an operation in Rhodesia might recruit villagers.’

‘Do they force young men and women to join them?’

‘Sometimes. But I only recruit volunteers, because the willing ones are the best.’

‘Where do the guerrilla groups take the villagers that they recruit?’

‘To one of the training camps.’

‘Would all Buhera District recruits go to the same training camp?’

‘Perhaps! Why are you asking all these questions?’

‘I thought I might meet some of my friends there.’

‘Buhera recruits would probably go to the nearest training camp, so you might meet people you know there. But the training camps are big enough to train recruits from several districts, not just Buhera.’

John’s thoughts were racing. If he was likely to bump into Simba and Katunda in the camp, he couldn’t create a confrontation in front of everyone. He’d have to bide his time and wait for an opportunity to challenge them. But after what they’d done to Aneni, they would be wary of his intentions. He’d have to pretend he hadn’t visited the village and didn’t know about what happened to her. But how could he act normally when he hated them so much?

The lower altitude of Mozambique was a lot warmer than Rhodesia. John followed Samuel through the deep darkness that the large surrounding trees created by eclipsing the light of the moon. He noticed how the decayed vegetation and soft earth quietened their steps on the forest floor. If others, man or beast, followed them, they wouldn’t be aware of it.

In darkness, everything looked the same, making their long trek seem never-ending. At five in the morning, it was still pitch-black when they entered a clearing. 'Here's the guerrilla camp,' Samuel whispered.

'Is this the training camp?'

'No, it's a base for active operations. Teams go over the border into Rhodesia to attack farms and other targets. You won't stay here long. They'll move you on to a training camp.'

'Would the teams operating in the Buhera District be based here?'

'Yes, I think so. But I don't understand why no guards challenged us. Somehow, we must have slipped past them. Wait here! I'll see what's going on.'

Samuel walked up to a rough pile of branches and said something. A sleepy, gruff voice responded. Moments later, a figure emerged from the branches. 'Where is he?'

It was the camp commander, emerging from his office and sleeping quarters. 'How did you get past the guards?'

Samuel shrugged. 'I don't know. We never saw them.'

The commander turned to John. 'Where are you from?'

'The Buhera District.'

'Why are you here?'

'I want to join the guerrillas.'

The commander looked at Samuel with raised eyebrows.

'We've vetted him, Sir. He's OK.'

'But will he be tough enough? We have more than enough helpers, and he looks soft, like a clerical type. Put him in a training group this morning, and then we'll see.'

When the commander walked off, Samuel whispered to John, 'Commander Kutuyisa is not as fierce as he makes out. He looks after his men.'

By now, it was getting light, and others in the camp woke. Soon, the camp was alive with activity. A group of women lit fires to boil water for tea and to cook breakfast. But before John could eat or drink, Kutuyisa attached him to a group going on an early morning run. This, John later discovered, was a punishment group, and included the two guards who missed his arrival in the early hours.

The group snaked out of camp in single file, with John at the rear. As soon as they moved through open space, he passed several runners and fell in behind the leading pair. The route took them about three kilometres out of camp before they circled back. With the camp visible in the distance, John moved past the two leaders, quickening his pace.

They tried to keep up with him, but one soon fell back. John lengthened his stride as the remaining leader struggled to stay with him. With five hundred metres remaining, he raced away and was first back in camp, a minute clear of the next runner.

The man who came in second stood bent double, wheezing and coughing, struggling to breathe. Kutuyisa saw the exhausted man. 'Where is the new boy? He'll be the last one in, I expect. Too late for breakfast.'

'He's standing behind you, Sir.'

Kutuyisa whirled around, startled eyes. 'Well, you are the surprising one. You crept up on me this morning, and now you're sneaking around behind me. Didn't you complete the run?'

'Yes, I did, Sir.'

'Did you take a shortcut?'

‘No, he was always with us, Sir,’ said the exhausted man, struggling to regain his breath.

‘You pop up in the most unexpected places, silent and unseen,’ said Kutuyisa, addressing John. ‘You’re like a leopard, so we’ll call you Ingwe, the leopard. That can be your war name.’

After breakfast, Samuel found John to say goodbye. ‘Good luck my friend. I’ll next see you on the other side. Now, I must return to Rhodesia and find out what’s happened to Isaak. I expect the old rogue will have talked his way out of trouble.’

The camp was not big, with about thirty guerrillas present. John estimated there’d be about six active teams after allowing for the other roles required to run the camp. He assumed a couple of teams might be out on operations.

One of John’s talents was his ability to gain other people’s confidence through his outgoing nature. To discover which teams worked in the Buhera District, and returned within the last few days, he chatted with as many guerrillas as possible. But the guerrillas were reluctant to speak about operational matters.

‘Don’t get too comfortable, Ingwe,’ said Kutuyisa. ‘You can’t go on operations until you’ve been through our training programme at the main camp. Gondo’s team has just returned from Buhera. He brought back volunteers to help with our struggle. They left for the training camp only a few days before you arrived.’

John turned his attention to Gondo. Might he be the leader of the guerrilla group that terrorised his village? He commented on Gondo’s skills on the obstacle course and in the early morning runs. Flattered, the man responded to his interest, and the two often chatted.

Kutuyisa noticed the apparent growing friendship between them. ‘Gondo, you are soon to train another batch of recruits for operations over the border. Take Ingwe with you to the training camp and reunite him with his fellow Buhera recruits. When you have completed the training, bring back the ten best recruits with you.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

Two weeks had passed since John’s arrival at the operations camp, and Kutuyisa now ordered his transfer to the much-talked-about training camp, a two-day walk through the bush. John heaved on his backpack, said goodbye to Kutuyisa and the others, and walked out of the camp with Gondo.

The overgrown trail was dense with large trees and bushes and proved heavy going. Slopes, rocks, and ravines slowed their progress, and John wondered how it could be so warm at this time of the year. They stopped at a shallow stream and splashed water on their faces to cool themselves. Sweat trickled down the front of their chests and stained the underarms of their shirts. John’s lips tasted salty. This was nothing like the Rhodesian terrain or climate.

As daylight slipped away, Gondo and John stopped for the night at a convenient spot with thick concealing cover near a stream.

‘We must be careful,’ said Gondo. ‘Few Rhodesian soldiers come here, except the Skuzapo. The whites call them the Selous Scouts. They operate in small teams, pretending to be guerrillas, and their white members blacken their faces to look like Africans. They’re very dangerous.’

‘How many cross-border operations have you been on?’

‘At least six.’

‘And you’ve just completed one?’

‘Yes, in Buhera, your area.’

‘And what do you do on operations?’

‘Attack farms, ambush cars on the road, even convoys sometimes. We visit villages to tell them about our struggle and bring back volunteers for the cause.’

‘Do you get lots of volunteers?’

‘Yes, but Buhera is not the easiest.’

‘But Commander Kutuyisa said you brought back Buhera volunteers from your last trip.’

‘Yes, two young men.’

‘What if they don’t volunteer?’

‘That’s too bad for them. One young woman resisted, so we cut her face.’

‘You cut her face?’

‘Well, I didn’t. The two volunteers wanted to prove their loyalty, so they did it.’

‘You forced them to do it?’

‘I didn’t need to. I suggested it, and they were quite eager to show their commitment to the cause.’

‘What if they refused?’

Gondo shrugged. ‘We don’t waste volunteers who are keen to join us.’

‘So you wouldn’t have killed them, to make an example of them?’

‘No. Perhaps some shouting to scare them. Most people do what they’re told.’

‘You say they cut the woman’s face?’

‘Yes, with tin snips. They cut her lips and ears. Oh! She cried that one, but we taught her a lesson. We need women in the camps, so we couldn’t just let her refuse to join us. If we didn’t punish her, others would also refuse.’

John shook with rage, but in the darkness, Gondo didn’t appear to notice. Along with Simba and Katunda, he was culpable, and must pay for his crime. But what could John do? Everyone knew they were travelling together to the training camp. What excuse would he have for turning up alone? If he could find it, that is. Gondo had given him an idea of its location. But in this thick bush?

Now was the perfect opportunity to kill Gondo. He might never have another chance. A further problem occurred to John. If he arrived at the training camp with Gondo, Simba and Takunda would tell him their mutilated victim was his lifelong girlfriend. It would shatter the guerrillas’ trust, leaving him in peril.

No, tonight he must act. But how? Gondo always kept his AK-47 nearby. They gathered dry wood and built a small fire, and Gondo produced small strips of meat. John borrowed his knife to sharpen two sticks to hold the meat over the fire. First, he held the sticks over the flames, taking care to not let them catch alight. The sharpened points needed to be fire-hardened to pierce the meat.

‘Should we light a fire when the Skuzapo may be in the area?’

‘It’s OK, our guards didn’t think the Skuzapo were here at present.’

‘You mean the guards who missed my arrival with Samuel?’

Gondo laughed. ‘Yes, those same ones!’

After eating, Gondo found a comfy hollow in the ground for a bed. He took off his boots and squeezed the top of one into the other, forming a pillow, with the boots’ toes pointing towards his feet. Soon, he fell asleep.

John watched the prone figure, his chest rising and falling with his deep breaths. Gondo cuddled his AK-47 like he might cuddle a woman. His knife lay half under him, fastened in its sheath with the stubborn button-snap Gondo struggled to open earlier. It would be impossible to get either weapon without waking him.

Earlier in the evening, John eyed the AK-47 and even used Gondo's knife to sharpen the cooking sticks, but now, both weapons were inaccessible to him. With no experience of killing a man, he'd hoped it would be a quick, clean process. He considered waiting for the next opportunity but realised he was only putting off the task. If he couldn't deal with Gondo now, how would he manage with Simba and Takunda later? Delaying now would only make it harder.

The fire's dying embers glowed in the darkness with a varying intensity, almost looking alive, like a beating heart. John got up, stripped off his clothes, and walked to the fire, gazing into the embers, oblivious to his surroundings. The ebb and flow of the glowing embers reflected his resolve to avenge Aneni, receding one moment and strong the next. He took a deep breath and picked up the two sharpened sticks.

John walked to the edge of the stream. The ripples sparkled in the moonlight with a soft gurgling sound. He tossed one stick into the water and watched it bob downstream until it floated out of sight.