

## Chapter 27 – Camp David

John walked in the general direction of the training camp, which Gondo indicated the previous evening. He knew he needed to walk east, but that could be anywhere between north-east and south-east. The sun rose in the east, but it wasn't a precise compass for his purposes. The meandering stream appeared to flow towards the lighter part of the sky, so he thought it best to stay close to it.

After trudging for over two hours through the forest, John concluded he was lost. As the sun rose higher in the sky, it became more difficult to judge where the east was.

Another warm day, and soon he was sweating again. The forest lacked distinguishing features, making it difficult for him to gauge his progress. It felt like he'd walked all morning, but was still at his starting point. If he lost his way here, he could starve to death, and his mother would always wonder what befell him. Now, it was too late for second thoughts about his impulsive plan to track down Simba and Takunda. He realised it was dangerous to make any big decision when in an emotional state.

John walked with his head down, looking at the forest floor, picking his way over fallen branches, rocks, and any other obstacles that might impede his progress.

'Stop!'

John jumped at the shrill command. He hadn't noticed the man standing in front of him with his AK-47 at the ready.

'Who are you? What are you doing here?' demanded the man.

John guessed from the man's appearance he was one of the guerrillas.

'I'm looking for the training camp. Comrade Kutuyisa sent me.'

'He wouldn't send you alone without a guide.'

'I had a guide. His name is Gondo. Men attacked us last night, and we ran into the forest, but became separated. I thought Gondo might have gone on ahead of me.'

'I haven't seen Gondo. How do I know you're not Skuzapo?'

'Gondo warned me about the Skuzapo. Perhaps it was they who attacked us.'

'You must wait here with me. You cannot go ahead until you have a guide. I could have shot you.'

John sat on a log and waited with the guard. His attempts to make conversation with him were hopeless, and a boring three hours passed.

'What are we waiting for?'

'When the next guard comes to relieve me, I will take you to the training camp.'

'How much longer will that be?'

'Not long.'

'My name is Ingwe. What's your name?'

'They call me Gunslinger. I shoot first and ask questions later.'

'Let me guess. What are your favourite movies?'

'Cowboy movies, I like cowboys. When the struggle is over, I'll go to America and become a cowboy.'

John rolled his eyes. 'Good luck with that.'

An hour later, the relieving guard arrived, and John and Gunslinger were on their way. Four kilometres further on, another guard challenged them. Gunslinger said something to the guard, who waved them past after studying John through narrow, bloodshot eyes.

‘That guard would have shot you,’ said Gunslinger. ‘He said it’s not too late for me to shoot you.’

‘Would they reward you for shooting a recruit? If Gondo’s not here, they’ll credit you with bringing me in.’

Gunslinger grunted with satisfaction.

On the edge of the camp, yet another guard stopped them. He walked around John, studying him, before letting them pass. They walked to a tent where Gunslinger stood to attention and called out to the occupant. A slim, bespectacled man emerged and stared at the newcomer for a full minute before turning to Gunslinger.

‘Why have you brought this man here?’

‘He got separated from Gondo, his guide.’

‘You know the rules, to shoot unaccompanied strangers on sight?’

‘Yes, Sir, but he knows Gondo and Comrade Kutuyisa.’

‘That’s no excuse. I’ll talk to the commander and see what he says. He might have you both shot. Wait here.’

The bespectacled man walked off, leaving Gunslinger and John standing outside his tent.

‘You see, the trouble you have made for me? I should have shot you when I had the chance. Now I will look like a fool.’

‘Now that we are friends, you can’t shoot me, Gunslinger. Don’t worry, I’ll vouch for you.’

‘We are not friends. Why would they pay attention to you? We are in big trouble. Comrade Clarence will recommend to Comrade David that he execute us.’

‘Comrade David is the camp commander?’

‘Yes, and Comrade Clarence is the deputy commander. Comrade Clarence trained in China, where they taught him to always shoot unaccompanied strangers.’

‘But I wasn’t unaccompanied. Don’t forget, you accompanied me.’

John’s comment appeared to comfort Gunslinger for a moment, but then his concerns returned.

‘But you were unaccompanied when I first saw you. That means trouble for me.’

Across the camp, Comrade Clarence emerged from a tent and beckoned the two. As John got near, he noticed a man sitting behind a desk.

‘This is Comrade David, our camp commander,’ said the surly Clarence.

‘Come in, come in,’ said Comrade David. ‘Now tell me why you are alone?’

John related what happened from the time he left Comrade Kutuyisa’s camp to his meeting with Gunslinger. Comrade David listened to his explanation, nodding from time to time.

‘You say you ran into the forest when the men attacked?’

‘Yes, Sir.’ John showed the commander the cuts and abrasions he got when he and Samuel raced up the hill with the Rhodesian soldiers’ bullets whistling past them. Comrade David didn’t seem to notice the injuries were already healing.

‘Did you see which direction Gondo ran?’

‘No, Sir, it was too dark.’

‘So now you are here for training?’

‘Yes, Sir. And may I say how pleased I am to be here at Camp David?’

Comrade David laughed. ‘You have a sense of humour. I think we’ll get along. He’s amusing, don’t you think, Comrade Clarence?’

‘Yes, Comrade,’ said Clarence, not looking in the least bit amused.

‘Find Ingwe a place in a tent.’

‘Yes, Comrade.’

Clarence led John to the first tent on the east side of the camp. In the meantime, Gunslinger slipped away, pleased to leave John in Clarence’s care.

‘You can sleep here,’ said Clarence, pointing to a reed mat next to the tent doorway. ‘Just follow the others in your tent, and they’ll show you the camp routine for recruits.’

John counted eight reed mats in his tent, four on the left and four on the right. His mat lay by the door, though the rolled-up tent sides allowed entry from any point.

Soon, two recruits came to the tent, and John introduced himself. They told him about the political orientation session after supper that evening, and the dawn run the next morning. They also said Comrade David was all right, but Clarence was a bastard. John had already worked that out for himself. David seemed an amiable fellow, but Clarence oozed a malignant presence.

John couldn’t yet gauge the size of the camp, but he estimated it to be at least ten times larger than Kutuyisa’s active operations camp. That suggested at least four hundred guerrillas, maybe more.

The camp ran north, south, along an open clearing the size of a football field. Clarence’s office tent was on the south-east side of the clearing near the camp entrance. Fifty metres on, lay a row of tents stretching into the forest. On the west side of the clearing stood David’s large tent, behind which lay several rows of tents extending back into the forest.

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That night, as he lay on his mat with his single blanket wrapped around him, John thought about his mission. He’d not seen any sign of Simba or Takunda at supper or the political orientation session. But that wasn’t surprising, given the number of guerrillas and the darkness. Perhaps they’d gone to another training camp, though Gondo told him he took all his recruits to this one. What if they weren’t here? He was on a mission, with no interest in becoming a guerrilla. If they weren’t here, he’d need to get out, somehow.

The two-day trek from Kutuyisa’s camp proved exhausting. Despite the reed mat and single blanket, and his backpack as a pillow, John slept well.

The activity and chatter of his tent mates woke him when the light of dawn was still imperceptible, but within minutes, daybreak was upon them. The morning light arrived as fast as the evening light disappeared.

Soon, everyone was ready for the pre-breakfast run. Fresh recruits took one path, while veterans took another. Like his first early morning run in Kutuyisa’s camp, John fell in behind the two leading runners, but to avoid unwelcome attention, he fell back.

After breakfast, the recruits received training in guerrilla tactics. About sixty recruits assembled, and it was there that John saw Simba and Takunda. He pretended to not notice them, but his mind was racing, steeling himself for their inevitable meeting. Gondo’s words

increased his hatred for both, but somehow, he needed to pretend not to know of Aneni's fate, and to act as normal as possible.

At lunchtime, he couldn't avoid the pair.

'Mauya, what are you doing here?' said Simba.

'Here, they call me Ingwe,' John replied with a forced smile.

'How is it you already have a war name and we do not?'

John shrugged. The feigned surprise, Simba and Takunda expressed at seeing him, did not fool John. He was certain they'd noticed him before lunch at the guerrilla tactics training.

'We never expected to find you here,' said Takunda. 'Have you been to the village since you returned from England?'

'No, I was on the train to Inyazura, but I slept and missed my stop. On the train, I met a recruiter who convinced me my place was here with my comrades. I'll go to the village once I'm finished here and am sent on operations to Buhera.'

'Aneni will be waiting for you,' said Simba.

'I'm sure she'll understand once I explain things to her.'

Lunch was over, and the instructors ordered the recruits to various areas of training. Simba and Takunda went off in one direction, and John in another. Appearing pleased to see his erstwhile friends was the hardest thing he'd ever done. He was sure they'd seen through his forced smiles.

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John's favourite time of the day was dawn and the early morning run. The winding route passed through thick forest and ran along a stream with a steep bank. Someone claimed the course was ten miles long, but John estimated it to be around ten kilometres. The challenging terrain drew out the runners, with twenty minutes separating first from last.

Each day John ran, he noted the characteristics of the course. He'd taken to running alone in the middle of the group. If someone tried to run with him, he'd adjust his pace to drop them. Soon, he ran most of the course on his own, with no one else in sight. Much of the narrow course meant running in single file, and this also contributed to the runners spreading out.

It didn't take him long to realise that keeping a low profile was his best course of action, so he held back, running in the middle of the group. Simba always ran well ahead, with Takunda lagging behind.

Simba and Takunda arrived at the camp three weeks earlier than him and appeared well settled. Their tent was at the far end of his row, and he only saw them during morning runs and training. John discovered new recruits were always placed in tents furthest along the row, but because of his unexpected arrival, he was allotted a vacant space with senior recruits.

With limited free time at the camp, John seldom crossed paths with Simba and Takunda outside training hours. This suited him because having to pretend they were still pals proved agonising. He sometimes saw them across the camp watching him. Clearly, they were suspicious about him being there. He realised his story about why he was in the camp was rather thin. An attractive young woman often accompanied them, and John noticed Takunda appeared to stick close to her, often whispering something when he caught their eye.

On a warmer than usual night, John lay with his blanket on the reed mat, trying to get to sleep. It was difficult, thanks to the snores and deep breathing of the other occupants of his

tent. He lay with his eyes closed, when he felt someone lie up close against him. John opened his eyes and was surprised to find it was the young woman.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I thought it was time we met.’

‘Aren’t you Takunda’s friend?’

‘I know him and Simba, and wondered why they hadn’t introduced us.’

‘Does Takunda know you’re here?’

‘He doesn’t own me.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Maita.’

‘That’s a nice—’ Before John spoke another word, she straddled him, her blanket falling open as she did so. He caught his breath as he saw her naked, girlish body.