

## Chapter 31 – It's Time

The dim, strong-smelling kerosene lamp flickered, reflecting the mood of the men in the tent. Six dark figures sat hunched around the table, talking in hushed tones. If anyone overheard their deliberations, it could mean the death of them all.

The slight, bespectacled Clarence was talking. 'David is due to be gone for around ten days. To make sure you don't miss him, Mahachi, you and your team better set up on the trail two days earlier. He's been gone for three days already, so you must set up five days from now.'

'Yes, Comrade.'

'The rocky part of the trail that narrows and slows progress is the best spot to wait. He'll have two bodyguards with him, so take them out first. After that, he'll be easy.'

'What should we do with them, Comrade?'

'Take the bodies one hundred metres into the forest and bury them.'

'And the car?'

'Push it over the cliff into the river. But first open all the windows. That way, if anyone finds the car, they'll think the occupants escaped through the windows and drowned.'

'But if people see the bullet holes—'

'They'll think it was Skuzapo.'

'What then?'

'We'll wait a few days and then ask Chimoio where he is and when he's coming back.'

The plotters sniggered at the idea of feigning ignorance of the whereabouts of their commander.

Clarence dismissed the small group, and the men left the tent in silence, betraying their furtive exit. Their departure did not escape John's notice. He'd earlier seen them enter the tent well after lights out when most of the guerrillas would be asleep. His distrust of Clarence was even greater in David's absence, though the deputy commander had paid him little attention. He fell asleep wondering if he was being paranoid.

John would have made a perfect boy scout, living by the scouts' motto, 'Be Prepared.' But he wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted him the next morning. At breakfast, looking pleased with himself, was Simba.

'Simba, what are you doing here?'

'I'm a seasoned fighter now, so they've sent me to lecture the trainees about my experiences.'

'I'd be interested to hear about them. When do you start?'

'Clarence will tell me when.'

'Did he send for you?'

'Yes.'

John was suspicious about Simba's explanation.

‘When you were on operations in Rhodesia, did you visit our village?’

‘No. There were lots of government soldiers in the area, so we moved on elsewhere.’

John pondered Simba’s answer. If Simba was lying when he said he didn’t visit the village, he’d know that John was aware of Aneni’s fate. That spelt danger because he knew Simba and Katunda had earlier spoken to Clarence about him. It was probable they realised he planned to avenge Aneni, so they would have discussed some means of pre-empting his actions.

It was too late for Katunda, but now Simba would be desperate to remove the threat he presented. Clarence would be eager to repay him for the slight at the leaders’ meeting.

John didn’t have long to wait to discover what Clarence planned. A comrade he’d not seen before told him he should report to the deputy commander’s office. Clarence sat behind his desk, his glasses reflecting the light coming through the open tent entrance. His manner was quite pleasant and matter of fact.

‘You may have seen Simba here this morning. I requested he come and give us a talk about his operational experience. He’s a senior team commander now, so our new recruits could learn from him. But I’ve since received a message he’s required for an urgent operation in Rhodesia.’

‘Simba’s team is one man short, and it occurred to me it would be an opportunity for you. You’re the only one amongst the trainers and platoon commanders who hasn’t been on operations, or trained in China, or Tanzania.’

‘Simba’s only a team leader, and you’re a platoon leader, but he has practical experience. So, I’d like you to go with him as part of his team tomorrow morning and gain some operational experience for yourself. When you return, your men will respect you more for it.’

‘Thank you, Comrade. How long will I be away?’

‘Not long, I expect. Draw your AK and ammunition from the stores this afternoon.’

John returned to his tent with his mind bursting with thoughts about the assignment. It would be an opportunity to avenge Aneni, but he suspected Clarence and Simba had other plans, so he’d need to be on his guard.

Mid-afternoon, John hurried to the armoury to draw his AK. The quartermaster was expecting him and had already set aside the AK and ammunition. John signed for the weapon and returned to his tent to clean it and check it. He stripped the weapon as instructed in the training sessions. Everything seemed to be in reasonable working order, including the firing pin.

He took hold of the bullets to insert them into the magazine. Strange! They seemed much lighter than the bullets he’d handled in training. Was there something wrong with them? Might they be dummies? Earlier, he’d been surprised to find everything ready and waiting for him in the armoury. Now he was suspicious.

John grabbed a packet of cigarettes and matches from a tent mate, with the promise to repay double. He looked at his watch. Gunslinger should soon return from guard duty, so John hurried to meet him on the edge of the camp. John arrived not a

moment too soon. Gunslinger was punctual, if nothing else. He didn't believe in working a moment longer than he must.

'Gunslinger, my friend, how are you doing?'

The guard looked at John with suspicion. This was the first time since John's arrival that he sought him out.

'Look, I have cigarettes to share with you. Let's sit and talk a little. Tomorrow, I'm leaving on an operation, and I must familiarise myself with this AK, or I'll be a liability to my comrades. I thought you would be the best person to refresh me about my weapon.'

Gunslinger couldn't disagree with John's opinion that he was the best person to run through the workings of the AK. They sat under a tree and lit up two cigarettes. John was not a smoker, but he'd make an exception on this occasion.

Soon, both their AKs lay disassembled on the ground as Gunslinger pointed out the parts and how to reassemble them. 'Now copy what I do with my AK.'

As Gunslinger focused on lighting another cigarette, he didn't notice John swap their magazines. When they finished reassembling the AK-47s, John thanked Gunslinger for his help and gave him what remained of the packet of cigarettes. 'Thank you, my friend. I will always remember how you helped me. I wish you good luck in everything you do.'

John returned to his tent and removed the bullets from the magazine. He cleaned it and checked the spring worked properly before reinserting the bullets. Now he could relax knowing his AK was ready for action. He hoped Gunslinger wouldn't need to use his weapon to defend himself. Despite Gunslinger's gruff manner, John quite liked him for his childlike naivety.

He'd held his breath when Gunslinger reattached the magazine to his AK, but he didn't seem to notice the lightness. He wondered how often Gunslinger removed and cleaned all the rifle's parts and checked his magazine; rarely as far as he could tell.

John wasn't taking any chances and slept with his AK in his arms under the blanket. Tomorrow would be a big day.

The camp was quiet, and no one stirred. Everyone was asleep or lay with their own thoughts. John's nerves buzzed with anticipation. Simba had his team to protect him, but John was determined Simba would die before he did. He wondered if Simba was awake and what he might be thinking.

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It was still dark when John's recruits stirred for their early morning run. Today, he wouldn't be joining them. He'd already notified his teams he'd be away for a spell and put Elijah in charge during his absence. John's backpack held all his possessions, including his civilian clothes, so there was no need for him to pack.

He wondered if a single magazine of bullets was sufficient for an operation in Rhodesia. The quartermaster assured him Simba's men carried more than enough ammunition and magazines for their purposes. That information didn't put John's mind at rest. It might be enough for their purposes, but was it sufficient for his?

After breakfast, John was ready, but Simba appeared in no hurry to leave. 'I must report to Clarence for further orders before we go.' Simba turned and beckoned to a

tall man hovering in the background. 'This is my second-in-command, Jackson Mpofo.' Jackson was well over six feet tall and muscular, about the same height and build as Simba.

'Mpofo, that sounds like an Ndebele name?'

'Yes, but I'm Shona. The comrades said it might come in useful if I went undercover with ZIPRA.'

'Can you speak Ndebele?'

'Only a little.'

'Well, that won't help you undercover if you're not fluent.'

A flicker of irritation flashed across the big man's face. Either he or his comrades had not thought through their plan to pass him off as an Ndebele. Perhaps it was a joke.

Simba interjected. 'Don't worry about him Jackson, Ingwe always finds a problem with every plan. He should be in ZANLA intelligence.'

It was mid-morning before Clarence called Simba to his tent. Jackson and the rest of his team sat in the shade of the trees, seeking shelter from the bite of the winter sun. John, annoyed to have needlessly missed his morning run, returned to his tent, and lay down on his mat.

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In the privacy of his tent, Clarence spoke to Simba in a low voice, in case someone overheard his plan.

'Sit down, Comrade. So, Ingwe knows what happened to his girlfriend?'

'Yes, Comrade, he knows everything.'

'Then he is here under false pretences.'

'Seeing him here in camp surprised both Katunda and me. We never believed he supported the cause. He always praised his mother's employer for the help he received. Ingwe never knew his real father, so he treats his mother's boss as a substitute father. Here in camp, he looks and sounds like the others, but we've heard him speaking with a white man's accent. On the phone, you couldn't tell he was a Shona. Once, he told us he might move to England with Aneni, his girlfriend.'

'I suspected as much. The way he arrived without Gondo, and then we found Gondo's body. And Takunda's disappearance. It all adds up. You were right to believe he wants to kill you, but are you now ready to kill him?'

'Yes, Comrade. Since I've been away, I've seen plenty of killing. One more will mean nothing to me.'

'Good! You must take the first opportunity to kill him before he tries to kill you. Will your team support you in this?'

'Yes, Comrade, they will.'

'Excellent! He has an AK, but you needn't worry, because I made sure the armoury gave him dummy bullets, so he can't shoot you. When you are killing him, you and your team might like a little fun. Shoot his knees first.' Clarence grinned at the picture in his mind. 'Tell him, the knees are from me.'

'Yes, Comrade, I'll tell him.' A broad smile spread across Simba's face.

‘Now don’t forget, you must do it tonight at the latest. Every moment you let him live is an opportunity for him to harm you.’

‘I have my men to support me, Comrade.’

‘Overconfidence is always a big mistake. Now don’t let me down.’

‘You can rely on me, Comrade. This is Ingwe’s last day.’

‘OK! Good luck! You’ll find out how well I reward my friends.’

Simba stood up and saluted the deputy commander before leaving the tent. He called to his men lounging under the trees.

‘OK! Come on, comrades, we’re leaving. One of you, go and fetch Ingwe. He’ll be in his tent.’