

## Chapter 32 – The Best Laid Plans

The small group grabbed chicken and sadza from the camp kitchen before making their way into the forest. Three men, who Simba didn't introduce to John, led the way. Jackson Mpofo, John, and Simba brought up the rear. It wasn't an arrangement John liked, but the nature of the track required them to move in single file.

John, while still in camp, attached his thirty-round magazine to the AK-47 and chambered a round. He was sure Simba would also have done so. He was conscious of Simba walking with a loaded AK behind him, but he noted in his peripheral vision Simba carried the rifle slung across his back. For now, he was safe.

On the narrow winding track, any attempt Simba made to shoot him might lead to his men also being injured or killed. When the track widened, he'd walk beside Simba to keep a watch on him. And with Simba's men at hand, how could he shoot his onetime friend and survive? Although he was prepared to die to avenge Aneni, he wanted a different ending for Simba; not a quick, merciful death.

John considered Takunda's end far more satisfying. He'd reminded him of what he and Simba had done to Aneni. Before Takunda could make any excuse for his actions, John grabbed a rock and slammed it on his head with enough force to disorientate him. He then guided him to the river's edge and pushed him into the raging torrent. Takunda's waving arms disappeared as the water carried him away. He shouted something, but the crashing torrent drowned out his words. He was conscious and must have known he headed for a watery grave if the rocks in the river didn't finish him first.

What appropriate ending might he find for Simba? He needed him on his own, so he wouldn't be able to call on his men for help. How was that possible, given the circumstances? Simba might strike before any opportunity arose to get him alone. John's mind raced, but planning his next move while keeping an eye on Simba proved difficult.

Might Jackson Mpofo be part of Simba's plan? John didn't like the man. He took him to be a boastful coward. Big-talking men most often turned out to be much smaller than their words. As they progressed through the forest, Mpofo spoke of his exploits. John thought he talked to the man ahead of him, and it took a while before he realised Mpofo was trying to impress him.

The path they followed looked well used and quite different from the meandering route John took when he first arrived at Camp David. He checked often that Simba still carried his rifle slung across his back. The path was smoother than the forest floor, though it still held exposed roots and jagged rocks. Even though winter, the men sweated in the warm daytime temperatures as they kept up a steady pace.

John fleetingly wondered about the wisdom of using a well-worn path when going on operations. He fancied if he led the team, he'd use a different route on each occasion. Perhaps it wasn't so important while they were still in Mozambique.

The afternoon wore on, and the shadows lengthened. The group headed north, allowing John to check Simba's movements unobserved by watching his shadow. Suddenly, he saw Simba's shadow unslung the rifle. John spun around, only for Simba to call a halt for a smoke break. He hoped Simba didn't notice his quick reaction and read anything into it,

and he knew any slip up might cost him his life. He needed to be alert and act before Simba did, even if it meant he couldn't give him the ending he deserved.

John turned to Simba. 'Are we going on through the night?'

'No, we'll stop somewhere tonight and reach Kutuyisa's camp by late afternoon tomorrow.'

John wondered how he would sleep, suspecting Simba had plans for him. He also worried about returning to Comrade Kutuyisa's camp, where Simba might have garnered support over the past few months. When might Simba be planning to strike? The thoughts swirled in John's mind. The longer he waited to deal with Simba, the more perilous his own situation became. Waiting for the ideal opportunity to get Simba alone was risky.

A sudden movement to their right caused all the men to hit the ground. A harsh, ear-splitting cackle, followed by a flapping of wings, betrayed an alarmed hornbill taking flight. Getting to their feet, the men looked sheepish, pointing fingers and blaming each other for their reactions. In the end, most agreed it was Jackson Mpofo's panicked reaction to the bird that startled them. But Mpofo claimed he was just faster than the others to react. 'What if it was an ambush? You'd all be dead, and I'd be the only one to survive.'

'You mean you'd be the only one to surrender?' someone retorted. The group all laughed before Simba got them moving again.

For the entire gruelling trek, the three guerrillas leading the way didn't speak. Even the boastful Jackson Mpofo at last fell silent. The sun dipped behind the trees, so John no longer saw Simba's shadow, but he heard him curse as he tripped over a tree root. His words amplified in the total silence of the winter evening. John glanced at Simba, who responded with a glare.

In the poor evening light, the endless forest looked all the same. Then John recognised a patch of open ground by the river. They were approaching the spot he and Gondo planned to spend the night.

A shiver ran down his spine as he recalled the evening he drove the sharpened stick into the sleeping man's neck. It surprised him how quickly Gondo bled out, with bright red spurts accompanying each heartbeat. It seemed like yesterday when he'd washed himself in the river, making sure no blood remained on his body. He'd dried in the warm night breeze before getting dressed. He remembered the sickening feeling when he tossed the bloodied stick into the water, watching it float downstream. The flow of the river was too low and slow to dispose of Gondo's body, so he left it where it lay.

John hated having to spend the night next to Gondo, but he needed daylight to travel in unfamiliar territory. He abhorred violence, but he felt no remorse about what he did to Gondo and Takunda. At least they died knowing why.

Without warning, a crackling sound like a forest fire interrupted the silence. For a second, the group stood frozen. Then, the thump of bullets hitting the nearby ground broke the spell. The group scattered in all directions. John rushed headlong away from the river towards the nearest trees. The branches slapped across his face, and he raised his hands for protection. Something slammed into his right shin, but nothing slowed his flight.

John gasped for air. For his fitness, he'd not run too far or fast, but bullets whistling past one's ears can take one's breath away. He heard shouting in the distance. It sounded like someone calling for help. He didn't see where the others fled. The shooting came from

their front. The river lay to their left. They could only run for the trees, or retreat. But where were they? He couldn't hear any nearby sounds or detect any movement.

A single shot rang out, and the shouting stopped. Now all was silent. It took John several minutes to realise he lay in a deep hollow. If he moved, he might run into Simba, giving him an ideal moment to strike. But that worked both ways. He might also run into the men who ambushed them. They must have been Skuzapo. Who else?

How long should he wait? If he moved too soon and gave away his position, he'd be in danger from both sides. If he stayed too long, he invited discovery. John realised he needed to get as far away as possible from the area.

Ambush training in Camp David showed him how a team of half a dozen men could lie undetected in a small area of forest, even when their presence was known. His teams trained in a small valley about twenty metres long by ten metres wide. One team would hide, and another team would walk through on a search. Seldom was anyone discovered, even though those hiding believed they had insufficient cover. The secret was to stay still.

After two hours, John thought it might be safe to move, but he'd lost his bearings on his flight from the river. Just as he was about to rise, a sound caught his attention. Someone approached his position with slow, cautious steps. John strained his eyes in the darkness but saw nothing. The forest's thick canopy and a moonless night blotted out the sky.

He readied his AK, pointing towards the approaching sound. When almost upon him, the sound stopped. Who or what made the sound? In the inky darkness, he couldn't tell, but someone or something was close. John held his breath, with his finger on the trigger of his AK. Then, after a few moments, the steps moved past him. The question remained, was it two feet or four, human or animal? The sound moved in a clear direction, suggesting it must be human. An animal might move in a more random manner, particularly if it grazed on the lush vegetation. But what animal grazed at night?

More time passed, and John stayed where he was. The footsteps convinced him not to travel on such a dark night. He didn't have to wonder whether friend or foe made the sounds. Under the circumstances, both Simba's team and Skuzapo might be considered foe.

As soon as the light of dawn enabled him to make out his surroundings, John rose and dusted himself off and stretched his weary joints. What a night! He needed to head west, back into Rhodesia, and avoid everyone on his journey home. He dare not run into any of Kutuyisa's or Simba's men, or Skuzapo. It would be a long, cautious return. though time was irrelevant at the present.

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John reached the edge of the forest by mid-afternoon. He searched for an identifiable tree, and behind it he scraped out a shallow hollow and buried his AK and ammunition, wrapped in his ZANLA uniform. It took him until early evening to pass through the thick bush area on the edge of the forest. Now, only a short open stretch of land lay between him and the steep mountain ridge that marked the border with Rhodesia. At dusk, he would cross the open ground and begin the climb.

The mountain ridge looked different from the Mozambique side of the border. When he and Samuel crossed into Mozambique, Rhodesian soldiers pursued them, and he didn't

stop to look back at the ridge. But John thought he recognised the pass through which they'd entered the country.

Finally, it was dark enough for him to go. Caution, not speed, was paramount. He was back in his civilian clothing, and unarmed. On either side of the border, discovery was his greatest threat.

Winter was the best time to tackle the arduous ascent. With his fitness, and no pursuing soldiers and gunfire, John found little difficulty reaching the top of the ridge. He turned to check no rising moon silhouetted him against the sky. Then he paused a few seconds to savour his return to his homeland.

He descended the slope, keeping an eye out for any sign of Rhodesian soldiers guarding the border, or guerillas heading back to Mozambique. At the bottom of the slope, in front of him, stood Isaak's hut. It occurred to John, he'd not eaten anything since leaving Camp David and now felt ravenous. But as he neared the bottom of the slope, he saw the hut stood in darkness. It appeared Isaak wasn't there.

As he approached the hut, all was quiet. The door was unlocked, and he pushed it open, bit by bit. The creak in the overwhelming silence sounded way too loud. A dead giveaway if anyone was nearby. In the pitch-black interior, he could see nothing. The stale air smelled overpowering. There was little prospect of food there.

John was exhausted. A chilly winter night tempted him to stay, but remaining there would be dangerous. Last night he'd not noticed the cold, thanks to the adrenaline coursing through his veins. He exited the hut with regret, closing the door behind him. Perhaps a ditch somewhere would protect him from the cold. Fortunately, winter was dust dry, and sleeping in a ditch would not be a bad option.

Tomorrow he'd have to decide what to do. He realised he shouldn't return to his village or go home to Judge Barclay's house if his name was on wanted lists in the Buhera District police stations. In Buhera, someone would report his presence, and he couldn't repay the judge's kindness by turning up at his house, placing him in an impossible position.

He'd go to Salisbury and look for factory work in the industrial sites. There, he'd wait out the events following Bishop Abel Muzorewa's new government. When things were settled, then he'd return home to his mother and Judge Barclay. Would it be too late for him to take up his studies at Oxford? But what about Simba? That was unfinished business.

As he lay in a dip in the ground twenty metres from the dirt road, exhausted but with sleep eluding him, the thoughts went round and round in John's head. One moment, thoughts of home warmed him, and the next, his hate of Simba burned within him. Perhaps it wouldn't be such a cold night after all.