

## Chapter 37 – What Now?

John had much to ponder on his way home from his meeting with Parker and David Chimbare. He'd always liked and trusted David, but feared dark forces moved unseen in the country. Where were Clarence and Simba and their supporters? If he applied for officer training, he didn't want to bump into them at Chibondo Camp.

He'd have some explaining to do to Parker. John noticed his friend looking uneasy when he realised he and David knew each other from their time together in a ZANLA camp. Parker might accept David was a terrorist commander, but it wouldn't be so easy for him to accept John was one of them. But how could he explain his presence in the camp without revealing his mission to kill Aneni's tormentors?

And then, what about Martha and Walter? They'd been so good to him, just like substitute parents. Would his new plans now also disappoint them, like he must have disappointed his mother and Judge Barclay? Saying goodbye to the couple he respected and loved would be difficult. They'd supported him, and he hoped his resignation would not count against Walter at work.

Mr Jones was a fair man and would understand a young person looking at different career paths. But Mr Botha would adopt a *told you so* attitude, embarrassing both Mr Jones and Walter. Tomorrow, Saturday, he'd discuss the matter with Martha and Walter and consider their opinions.

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Somehow, a sunny Saturday morning can shatter a Friday night's best intentions. Last night, discussing his plans with Martha and Walter sounded considerate and inclusive, but this morning it sounded like a way of shifting the decision on to them. John realised they'd encourage him to do what was in his best interest, thereby making themselves responsible in part for the decision he made.

No, he'd tell them what he planned, and not seek their opinions. Their reaction to the news would tell him what they thought. Now, he was happier with his approach, though it took him until late afternoon to pluck up the courage to broach the subject.

Walter's enthusiastic endorsement of his plan to apply for officer training with the integrated army was a relief for John. Martha's response reinforced Walter's endorsement, though she was more concerned with how it might affect their future relationship.

'But you'll come home as often as you can?'

'Yes, of course.'

'You're like a son to us. I bless the day the convoy commander knocked on my car window to get you a lift.'

'Thank you, Martha. You and Walter were a lifesaver for me. I don't know what I would have done without you.'

Walter and Martha didn't have children of their own, and John was conscious of the part he played in their lives, a responsibility he welcomed.

On Monday, John made the long walk to the managing director's upstairs office to give him the news that he intended to apply for officer training with the integrated army. His

assessment of Mr Jones's probable reaction was correct. The news disappointed him, but he understood how a young person would try to find a career path by sampling different roles.

Mr Botha's reaction astonished John. 'Well, I'm not surprised. You're the best assistant I've had, and I'll be sorry to lose you. In two years, when I retire, you would have become the warehouse manager. But two years is an eternity to wait for young ambitious types like you.'

'Well, the officer training course only starts in late February, so I've still got a month here.'

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John received a letter of acceptance in response to his application for officer training. It told him a bus leaving Salisbury Railway Station at eight a.m. on the first Monday of February would transport him to Chibondo Camp. His remaining time at work passed quicker than he expected. His Friday farewell drinks at work and his last Sunday dinner with Martha and Walter left him with a tinge of sadness.

Monday morning was a rush. After an early breakfast, John said goodbye to Walter and jumped into Martha's car. She insisted on taking him to the station, though she wouldn't wait to see the bus leave. Around ten others gathered there over the next half hour. Little conversation passed between them as they all appeared lost in their own thoughts. At last, the driver hopped into his seat. The bus vibrated and rattled, even before it moved.

Though John didn't recognise anyone on the bus, he approached the Chibondo Camp with a little trepidation. He worried he might bump into someone from Camp David or Comrade Kutyisa's camp. Like the two strangers at the factory gate, someone may recognise him, even if he didn't recognise them.

At the camp entrance, a fierce-looking sergeant welcomed them with a booming voice, before they'd even alighted from the bus. The trainees all needed to register their arrival before being shown to their ten-bed barrack room number one, where John selected the second bed on the left. The sergeant ordered the men to assemble outside on the road. He then marched the platoon to the stores to be issued with their uniforms. The quartermaster and his staff were expert at assessing each man's size, and within minutes, the process was complete.

Throughout the day, more trainees drifted into camp, filling up barrack room number two. Dinner was John's first opportunity to see all twenty trainees on the course. Training would start the following morning, but for now, they were all engaged in animated chatter. John scrutinised the faces but didn't recognise anyone, and no one paid any attention to him or gave any sign of recognition.

Six of the trainees sat apart and spoke Ndebele, so they must have been ZIPRA guerillas. The others would have been from ZANLA.

The next morning, the training began in earnest. With only twenty-eight days to complete the course, time was critical. The instructors from the Rhodesian Army were predominantly white NCOs (non-commissioned officers), who delighted in giving the trainees a hard time. It soon became clear who should succeed in the course and who might not.

To John's delight, early morning runs began each day. In the late afternoon, unarmed combat, boxing, or an obstacle course preceded the cold showers before dinner. He'd not fought in the ring for almost three years, but soon discovered he'd lost none of his skills.

The rest of the day focused on leadership and decision making, communication skills, military law, strategies, tactics, and first aid. Much of the training centred on becoming familiar with Rhodesian Army weapons and protocols.

The two barrack rooms formed a small platoon and trained together, but soon a rivalry developed between the two groups. A huge trainee took control in barrack room two, before extending his influence on barrack room one.

John's barrack room didn't appreciate the man assuming a leadership position. But Kong, as barrack room one soon nicknamed him, was an imposing individual, and most trainees responded with muttered grumbles rather than showing any concrete resistance. Emboldened by Kong's presence, a few other barrack room two trainees tried to impress the instructors by shouting instructions to the others.

The trainees in barrack room one discussed how best to deal with Kong. No one put forward any solution to the problem, but they'd noticed John's physical prowess and relaxed demeanour.

'What about you, Ziyambi? How do you think we should stop him from pushing us around?'

'Have you seen him pushing me around?'

'No, but he bullies several of us.'

'The best way to deal with a bully is to ignore them. If they see you're not responding, they'll go away.'

'Easy for you to say, but look how he treats poor old Gumbo.'

'Kong treats Gumbo like that because he does what he's told.'

'What if he tells you what you must do?'

'He won't.'

Nervous laughter rang out. John's self-assurance sounded like a direct challenge to Kong, and someone was bound to let him know. Sure enough, two days later, Kong marched into barrack room one. 'Ziyambi, tomorrow is a big inspection. Make sure this barrack room is spotless. We don't want barrack room one letting us down.'

John lay relaxed on his bed, reading a book. He showed no sign of having heard Kong.

'Ziyambi, did you hear me? I said, make sure barrack room one is prepared for the inspection tomorrow.'

John lowered his book. 'Why are you telling me?'

'Because you're the big deal in barrack room one.'

'Who told you that? Anyway, I don't recall anyone putting you in charge of this barrack.' A titter went around the room.

John's response surprised Kong. 'Well, Ziyambi, we must all pull together on this course.'

'Yes, but your barrack room must also play its part.'

'Are you trying to be funny, Ziyambi?'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning I'll take you around the back of the barrack room and give you a clubbing if you're not careful.'

John jumped off the bed. 'Do you want to do that now?'

'I'm ready.'

The rest of the barrack room became alarmed until one trainee intervened.

‘Listen guys. You’ll both be booted from the course if you fight outside. Someone is bound to hear of it. Is this how you want your officer training to end? If you want to fight, do it in the boxing ring tomorrow evening.’

The words calmed both men.

‘Right, Ziyambi, I’ll see you in the boxing ring tomorrow evening.’

John’s fellow trainees in his barrack were concerned.

‘You’re a talented boxer, Ziyambi, but that guy is enormous. Have you seen his muscles?’

‘You know, I’ve seen his muscles, but I’ve never seen him at boxing. I wonder why that is. Is he exempt?’

‘It’s probably because there’s no one else of his size.’

The next evening, after the day’s training, John walked to the boxing ring to wait for Kong. His fellow trainees from his barrack room all came to watch. Time passed, but Kong and his supporters did not appear.

Later at dinner, John walked across to Kong, who sat surrounded by his barrack room two mates. ‘What happened to you? I thought we were meeting in the boxing ring this evening.’

‘You know, I forgot all about it. It wasn’t important, anyway.’

John gave Kong an incredulous look before returning to his seat. ‘He says he forgot.’

‘More likely, someone in his barrack room saw you in the ring and warned him.’

The episode elevated John to be the effective leader of barrack room one. Kong no longer tried to give orders to anyone outside his own barrack room, not even Gumbo, so John believed it was the end of the matter.

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In the early hours one morning, John rose to go to the toilet block for a pee. As he crossed the open ground behind the barrack room, two shadowy figures approached him. They held knobkerries and clearly meant no good. The men stood well apart, dividing his focus. Suddenly, one swung at him. John swayed back as the knobkerrie whistled past his ear and grabbed it as it thudded into the ground.

The man tried to pull his knobkerrie from John’s grasp, but a sharp elbow into his chin sent him reeling. Now, John faced the second man, who saw his partner running from the scene. It made good sense, and he was quick to follow.

John was unharmed, but he wondered what was behind the attack. It couldn’t have been a robbery because no one takes their money or valuables to the toilet block in the early hours. Might it have been a targeted attack? Could Kong have been behind it? John didn’t trust the man, but somehow, it didn’t seem likely.

Others said they’d noticed two men loitering behind the barracks late at night and assumed they were cleaners. Nobody recognised them, and it seemed their identity and motives would remain a mystery.

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A few trainees expressed their dissatisfaction with both the instructors and the course. Others who understood discipline and respect for senior ranks maintained a stoic silence. The physical training and academic coursework were punishing. Four trainees didn’t make it past the second week. Of the rest, five, including John and Kong, excelled, but one was expelled for stealing another trainee’s watch. It left four leading trainees vying for the top-student

prize. The competition was intense. They were all in excellent physical condition, but none could match John in the academic coursework.

John graduated at the top of his class, only days before Robert Mugabe's ZANU was declared the winner of the February elections. Walter and Martha were so proud of his achievement, and even prouder when, at his commissioning ceremony, they saw him receive his commissioning certificate. He was now a second lieutenant in the army, and Colonel David Chimbare was quick to claim him as his aide-de-camp.

John got his commissioning certificate framed and gave it to Walter and Martha to hang on their lounge wall.

The norm was for newly commissioned officers to live on base, but as Colonel David Chimbare's aide-de-camp, John had the privilege of living at home with Walter and Martha. On rare occasions, certain military duties required him to stay in Cranborne Barracks. In his role, he was on permanent call for David Chimbare, but most of the time, he worked normal office hours, which left him free to socialise with Parker.

'So Ziyambi, what now?'

'I must try to find my mother.'

'Will the people from your village know what's happened to her?'

'I've considered that, but it's a last resort. I don't want to visit the village. There are too many sad memories there.'

'But also, lots of wonderful memories, I imagine.'

'Yes, but the sad ones haunt me.'

'You'll have to face it one day.'

'Maybe.'

'What else are you planning?'

'I've got a couple of enemies in Zimbabwe. They planned to kill me in Mozambique, but I escaped when the Rhodesians ambushed us. For all I know, they may still try to kill me.'

'And if they're not planning to kill you?'

'One of them destroyed Aneni.'

'OK! I get it. You better not tell me more. But remember, if things get too hot here in Zimbabwe, my father will facilitate you joining the British Army. But you may have to attend Sandhurst first. Twenty-eight days officer training won't cut it in the British Army.'

'Will the British Army accept a former ZANLA guerrilla as an officer?'

'Well, you've explained why you were in Mozambique. To me, it doesn't seem like you were a serious part of the struggle, but if there's any problem, my father should be able to fix it.'

'When will you return to the UK?'

'Prince Charles, Lord Soames, the governor, and the rest of us will all be gone within days after The Independence Day Ceremony. Will you be there?'

'Yes, I'll be with David.'

'Then we better say our goodbyes before the ceremony. Afterwards, we'll be busy packing up and we may not have the chance to get together again.'

'Well, at least you've got my new address at Martha and Walter's house.'