

Chapter 40 – The Aftermath

In the morning, John had second thoughts about the knotted bundle of sticks he kicked off his top step the previous night. Perhaps someone in the barracks could tell him its meaning. He searched the area outside, but the item was nowhere to be found. He realised then, someone watched his movements and was trying to frighten him. If not frightened, John was at least concerned that someone took the trouble to threaten him with traditional witchcraft. At breakfast, he spoke to David about it.

‘Don’t worry, John. We’ll be heading back to Salisbury at the end of the week. Joshua Nkomo has ordered ZIPRA to disarm for the sake of peace, so our work here is done. Stay alert for anything suspicious, and don’t hang about in dark corners.’

‘You might joke about it, David, but someone is trying to scare me or give me a warning. You might be safe in the officers’ lines, but in the NCOs’ quarters, I feel exposed. The area has no lighting, and talking about dark corners, it’s full of them. Someone must have watched me return to my room, and when I kicked the bundle of sticks away, they retrieved it. Perhaps some Ndebele will not accept ZIPRA’s defeat and will make more trouble.’

‘OK, John. I’ll speak to the colonel, but what he can do? With the Ndebele unhappy, he might struggle to get answers.’

The colonel promised to make enquiries with his men. But by the week’s end, as David and John tossed their things into the back of the Land Rover, ready to leave for Salisbury, he’d heard nothing back. It didn’t help that the Ndebeles in the ranks felt betrayed and were resigning in large numbers.

John’s stay in Bulawayo was a disappointment. At least David had the advantage of keeping up with events in real time. John appreciated David taking him into his confidence, but hearing what had happened couldn’t compare with hearing what was happening. Now he was eager to return to Salisbury and see his mother again. He’d also missed his cosy room at Martha and Walter’s house.

In the bright Salisbury morning, the Bulawayo troubles seemed a world away. The residents of Salisbury went about their business as if nothing had happened in the country’s second largest city. The newspapers kept them informed in a general sense, but most of Salisbury’s Shona population had never visited Bulawayo. For them, the events may just as well have occurred overseas.

Everyone was aware of the rivalry between the Shona in Mashonaland and the Ndebele in Matabeleland, but John experienced it first hand, and it coloured his thinking. As a Shona, he suspected the Ndebeles’ motives. It ended his former indifference, not because of the fighting in the camps, but rather the small bundle of sticks tied with string and left on his doorstep. One or more Ndebeles in Brady Barracks meant him ill, and he wasn’t about to forget it.

On their return to Salisbury, David needed to meet with his superiors to debrief about the Entumbane uprising. It gave John the opportunity to take a couple of days’ leave. His priority was to visit Norah, his mother. Again, his phone calls weren’t successful, so he headed for Livingstone Avenue to see her.

At his mother's apartment block, he waited between the automatic gate and the front entrance, hoping a car or someone would enter or exit, giving him access to the building. Once again, John found himself nervous about the time since he'd last seen his mother. How would she react to him? The last visit left them both angry.

With his thoughts a million miles away, John almost missed his mother's red Alfasud pulling up at the automatic gate to enter the property. Just in time, he slipped through the gate behind her car and followed her to her parking space.

As Norah exited the car, she saw him. 'Oh, it's you! Come for your annual visit, have you?'

'I've tried to phone you several times, but you never answer.'

'Well, I don't wait by my phone all day, hoping my son will call every year or two.'

'The army sent me on an unexpected trip to Bulawayo. I tried to phone to tell you, but there was no answer.'

'How long have you been away?'

'Over two weeks.'

'And what about the year since your last visit?'

'I've been meaning to call, but the army keeps me busy.'

'Well, seeing as you're here, you can help me carry the shopping into my flat.'

John picked up the heavy bag of groceries and followed Norah up the stairs to her apartment. Norah prepared tea in the kitchen, returning with a tray of tea and biscuits. She used fine bone china cups, a milk jug, sugar bowl, and tea strainer. She'd lost none of the affectations she acquired while living in Judge Barclay's house.

'Mum, you needn't have bothered with all this. Mugs would have been fine.'

'This isn't the army, John. You need to maintain standards. You could have been a gentleman. If you'd gone to Oxford like Hugh planned, he would have helped you into a legal career and perhaps even helped you to become a judge like him.'

'Yes, but Hugh isn't here. I'd still be studying at Oxford, or only just graduating, so he couldn't have helped me, could he?'

'If you hadn't gone to Mozambique, Hugh might still be here.'

'You're not blaming me for his death, are you?'

'He had heart trouble, and your disappearance was devastating for him. It was just too much.'

'OK, Mum! I'm not here to argue. Let's leave it at that, shall we? Anyway, I'd better be going.'

'But you've only just got here.'

'I've work to do. Don't worry, I'll visit you again soon.'

'In another year's time?'

John pecked his mother on the cheek and left. He wasn't sure if his visit was a success. Although an improvement over the last one, a barrier still existed between them, and new ones emerged. How could things have come to this? His mother was cool and matter of fact, and he wondered if their relationship would ever fully mend.

He appreciated the sacrifices she'd made to give him the best opportunities in life, and he understood her disappointment at the way things turned out. But her sacrifices also led her to

unexpected opportunities and a privileged lifestyle. It was unfortunate that Hugh Barclay died before his time, a tragedy for his mother.

John's life seemed to be a juggling act between navigating the new Zimbabwe and reconciling with his mother. At home with Martha and Walter, his concern for Norah dominated his thoughts, and while on duty as David's aide-de-camp, he pondered the developments in the country. Life was so simple when he lived in Judge Barclay's house, with only thoughts of Aneni in the village and school in England. Sometimes, he felt the Bush War ruined everything.

Robert Mugabe and his ZANU party fought against white rule for years. John thought it ironic that Rhodesia's RAR soldiers, under the command of white officers, secured Mugabe's position in the new Zimbabwe. Mugabe claimed ZIPRA's uprising aimed to bring down his government, while ZIPRA accused ZANLA of starting the fighting.

The Rhodesians revelled in the success of their forces, putting down the uprising. But Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU believed the whites sided with ZANU against them. And several whites, particularly in Bulawayo, also felt that way. The ZIPRA guerillas, fearing for their safety, deserted the National Army and assembly points en masse. David greeted John's return to duty with the news.

'It looks like you might have been right, John. ZIPRA guerillas are deserting the amalgamation process, so there could be more trouble heading our way. There's a rumour circulating amongst the top brass that Mugabe has a surprise planned for the ZIPRA dissidents.'

The rumour proved correct when, only six months later, Mugabe announced the secret deal he'd made with North Korea ten months earlier. He signed the agreement a month before the first Entumbane clashes, which suggested a pre-meditated plan to suppress ZAPU and its military wing, ZIPRA. Joshua Nkomo said the agreement was designed to enforce a one-party state.

Under the agreement, North Korea would provide equipment and instructors for a special brigade to deal with political dissidents. The North Korean instructors arrived in the same month Mugabe made the deal public.

John and David chatted over a couple of Lion Lagers at the Jameson Hotel bar. Most times, John waited for David to volunteer confidential information about happenings in the country. But Mugabe's announcement about his deal with the North Koreans aroused his curiosity.

'David, what's behind this Fifth Brigade Mugabe has announced?'

'It's an independent brigade answering directly to the chief of the army and through to the prime minister's office. Its uniforms will differ from the National Army, and with their tanks and armoured personnel carriers, they'll be the only mechanised brigade in Zimbabwe. Also, I hear their radio equipment and codes will be incompatible with the National Army.'

'Why the differences?'

'Perhaps they want their activities to remain secret.'

'Couldn't the National Army do the job?'

‘The National Army’s role is to protect the country. The Fifth Brigade will be for special counter-insurgency operations. I suspect the National Army wouldn’t want to carry out the Fifth Brigade’s mission.’

‘Why not?’

‘I believe they’re going to deal with the dissidents in Matabeleland. The National Army still has several ZIPRA officers who may have divided loyalties.’

The armed forces’ amalgamation process continued, but proved ever more fragile. Within six months of announcing the deal with North Korea, Mugabe claimed huge arms caches were found on ZAPU-owned properties, which proved they were planning a coup. He dismissed Nkomo, seized ZAPU-owned properties, and detained senior ex-ZIPRA officers. This was the final straw for most ex-ZIPRA fighters, who resigned from the National Army, or deserted with their arms.

In April 1982, Salisbury’s name-change to Harare distracted the population’s focus. Most Shonas celebrated the change, while the Ndebele were indifferent and the whites disapproved. John was ambivalent as his loyalties straddled the Shona and European cultures, and he still held reservations about his place in the new Zimbabwe.

Opinions differed according to how things evolved for each individual since the birth of the republic. A few who prospered under the Rhodesian regime were neutral, as with Martha and Walter, whose circumstances remained unchanged following independence. Others, like Norah, decried the change. Since Judge Hugh Barclay’s passing, her life became mundane and lonely, and her son disappointed her.

Soon, the focus returned to the ZANU and ZAPU divide. Mugabe cited the abduction and murder of six tourists at Insuza on the Victoria Falls Road as further evidence of the banditry carried out by ZIPRA dissidents. Further, the episode threatened the country’s tourist industry. Something needed to be done about it.

In January 1983, Mugabe deployed the North Korean trained Fifth Brigade to Matabeleland to purge the dissidents. The operation was called the Gukurahundi. In Shona it meant ‘the rain that blows away the chaff before spring.’ It was the word emblazoned on the Fifth Brigade flags at their December 1982 passing out parade.

The government gave the Fifth Brigade the details of demobilised ZIPRA personnel and ex-ZIPRA deserters, any of whom may have been dissidents. The stage was set for an unsettled period in the country.

John puzzled over the reasons for establishing the Fifth Brigade. He recalled the celebrations in the officers’ mess at Brady Barracks after the RAR quelled the Entumbane uprising. The Battle of Bulawayo was touted as the end of ZIPRA’s power, but Mugabe persisted in claiming ZANU remained a coup threat to the country.

Yes, Matabeleland and the Midlands suffered banditry incidents, but did that need a mechanised army brigade? Couldn’t the police have dealt with the problem? David Chimbare didn’t seem to have any answers why an army brigade was required. Something bigger was afoot. John was sure of it.