

Chapter 42 – An Opportunity

John strode along Jameson Avenue (renamed Samora Machel Avenue), heading for the bar at the Jameson Hotel. He'd often met David Chimbare there for drinks at the end of a warm day at the barracks. It was somewhere they could talk privately, with little chance of bumping into anyone they knew. The officers' mess at the barracks was not suitable for a confidential conversation.

But this time was different. He sensed David had something on his mind. His suggestion for after-work drinks sounded more formal than usual, and John guessed it was work-related.

He walked into the hotel and stopped at the bar entrance, surveying the crowded room filled with noisy patrons, de-stressing after a busy day at work. David's waving arm caught his eye. For David to arrive before him was unusual. Perhaps he wanted to make sure they got a corner table, which would afford greater privacy. Something important must be afoot.

David sat sipping his beer and already had a bottle of Lion Lager and a glass, waiting for John.

'Hi, David. What's up?'

For several seconds, David didn't answer, then, choosing his words, he spoke.

'John, I've been selfish. For a while now, I've been aware you'd prefer a more active role in the army. I first realised it that day in Brady Barracks when we watched the RAR preparing for action. You have always been active with your running and training, but now you have a desk job, running errands for me, and looking after my requirements.'

'A job I've enjoyed, David, because you've always kept me informed of what's going on, and of the thinking at the higher levels, so I've never felt excluded. Believe me, I've appreciated the inside information you've shared with me.'

'Yes, but there's no long-term future for you as my aide-de-camp. While you sit at a desk working for me, other lesser men are promoted. Several of those commissioned with you are now lieutenants, while you have remained a second lieutenant. When I've put your name forward for promotion, the powers that be always reject my recommendation, citing your lack of operational experience.'

'I understand.'

'Now, it's come to my notice there is a vacant lieutenant's position available with the Fifth Brigade. ZIPRA dissidents killed the former lieutenant, and they need a replacement. The brigade has both North Korean and local officers, but they aren't too impressed with the locals, who are, for the most part, former ZANLA guerillas who failed the officers' course. They are looking for more capable officers, and with your background, you'd have no problem getting the posting. For you, it would mean an immediate promotion to full lieutenant.'

'There are rumours about Fifth Brigade atrocities. You know my views about abuse of women and children.'

'Well, you would determine your men's actions. They needn't take part in anything you don't approve. The Fifth Brigade was supposed to purge the ZIPRA dissidents, which at last count numbered around five hundred. Unfortunately, they've made no distinction between

ZIPRA guerillas, members of ZAPU, and civilians. As a result, they've detained, tortured, and killed many Ndebele and Kalanga men of fighting age.'

'I don't know, David, I'd be taking orders from my superiors and not free to run things my way?'

'When you're out in the bush, John, no one sees how you run things. If you have the loyalty of your men, you can do whatever you like.'

'OK, David, I'll have to think about it.'

'Don't leave it too long. They need an answer by five o'clock on Friday. And remember, when the Gukuruhundi is over, you'll be ideally placed for further promotion. Don't forget, more money and privilege come with each rank.'

John tossed and turned in his bed, struggling to sleep. He couldn't get his conversation with David out of his mind. He'd always aimed high in what he wanted to achieve, but the Fifth Brigade was never part of his plans. They had a murderous reputation, and he couldn't imagine himself fitting in with that lot.

The following morning in the barracks, John raised a few of the questions that kept him awake half the night.

'David, you told me once before the Fifth Brigade's equipment, codes, and communications were not compatible with the National Army. I've not been through their training programme.'

'They've told me the men reporting to you would bring you up to speed. But seriously, John, you can't imagine the differences would be any obstacle to you?'

'If I accepted the position, when would I start?'

'Next Monday. That's why you must give your answer by Friday. On Monday, one of the Fifth Brigade's men can drive you to their base in Gweru (formerly Gwelo). There, they'll give you your uniform and weapon and take you on to Bulawayo, where your platoon sergeant would meet you and give you a lift to the camp.'

'Tell me again! When would I be promoted to full lieutenant?'

'Your promotion would be immediate, but you'd get your rank insignia in Gweru when they give you your uniform.'

'I'd need a couple of days off to complete my arrangements here in Harare.'

'That's no problem. So, you accept the posting?'

'I'll give you my answer on Friday.'

'If you don't accept, you'll owe me for the couple of days off you've requested.'

'Yeah, sure!'

The two laughed, as neither imagined the days off would be repaid.

That evening, John told Martha and Walter about the offer. The couple were supportive of him progressing his army career, but were concerned about the Fifth Brigade's rumoured atrocities.

'John, you're such a sweet, innocent boy. How will you handle those brutal men?'

Martha was unaware he'd already killed two men in the most brutal fashion, so perhaps he'd fit in just fine. She always worried about him when he spent time away, but John assured her he'd be back soon, though he couldn't say when.

His visit to his mother, Norah, was a little more difficult.

‘What! You’re joining those killers? How could you? Thank goodness Hugh isn’t here to see the level to which you’ve sunk.’

‘No, it won’t be like that, Mum. Surely you don’t imagine I’d do such things. I’ll make sure my platoon behaves.’

‘Oh yes! We’ll see! And heaven knows when I’ll see you again. That’s if I see you again.’

‘Whenever I have leave, I’ll come and visit you.’

Once again, John’s visit to his mother ended with anger and hard feelings, and it was always a relief for him when the visits ended. Norah had not forgiven him for his contribution to ending her idyllic existence. Both she and Judge Hugh Barclay had invested far too much of their hopes and dreams in supporting John’s future success. But his impulsive reaction to Aneni’s death ended any chance of that.

On Friday morning, John told David he’d accept the posting. David was sorry to be losing his services, but thought it best for his friend’s army career.

‘I won’t be getting another aide-de-camp, John. There wasn’t enough to keep you busy. It was one thing working with a friend, but I wouldn’t want another junior officer hanging around me the whole time. As I said before, it was selfish of me to keep you for so long, causing you to miss those promotion opportunities, but hopefully you’ve learnt something working for me. Oh, and by the way! Wear civvy clothes on Monday. You won’t need your National Army uniform for now, but keep it at home, just in case.’

On Friday afternoon, the two friends said goodbye, promising to keep in touch. John returned to Martha and Walter’s relaxing home, determined to make the most of his last weekend with them. But in bed at night, he worried if he’d made the right decision.