

Chapter 43 – Matabeleland

Monday morning. John enjoyed his breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon with Martha and Walter. He swallowed the steaming cup of tea, said goodbye to Walter, and jumped into Martha's car for a lift to the barracks. The staff car he used while he was David's aide-de-camp was no longer in his possession.

John packed his bag on Sunday evening. It contained very little, his toiletries, a change of underwear and socks, two T-shirts, a long-sleeve winter shirt, and a jumper. He didn't imagine he'd dress in civvy clothes too often.

He waved goodbye to Martha and hurried to find David.

'So, Lieutenant, congratulations on your promotion. Here are the papers confirming your new rank.'

'Thanks, David, but I won't feel like a lieutenant until I put on my uniform.'

'Corporal Nyati is waiting for you outside by the Land Rover. Take care and stay in touch.'

John walked out to the Land Rover parked in front of David's office. A thick-set man wearing a red beret stood by the vehicle.

'Corporal Nyati?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'I'm Lieutenant Ziyambi. Let's go.'

'Yes, Sir.'

The unsmiling corporal was the first member of the Fifth Brigade that John met. He soon discovered Nyati was not a good conversationalist, responding to all questions with one-word answers or the briefest of replies.

John soon gave up trying to get any information from the man. It didn't much matter, because he'd not travelled far on the Bulawayo Road before, so he settled back to enjoy the drive. The drive passed through the small tidy centres of Norton, Chegutu (Hartley), Kadoma (Gatooma), and Kwekwe (Que Que).

Long established commercial farms lined the side of the road, providing the country with its food and a rich source of export income. Memories of his travels between Mutare (Umtali) and the Mozambique border near Isaak's hut stirred for John.

The shortish drive of two hundred and seventy-seven kilometres took about three hours. A little chill ran down John's back as they drove through the gate of the Fifth Brigade's base. It looked much like the other barracks he'd seen, but the soldiers wore unfamiliar uniforms and red berets. Although he was a lieutenant in the notorious brigade, he felt like an outsider.

Following a two-minute welcome from a major in the administration block, Nyati led John to the stores where the storemen sized him up and handed him his uniform and insignias. It always amazed John how the storemen could judge a man's size without taking any measurements. They didn't need to ask him what size boots he wore, or what were his waist, shoulder, or leg measurements. Even the first beret they handed him seemed the correct size.

Armed with his kit inside a duffle bag, and still in his civvies, he returned to the Land Rover, where Nyati waited to transport him to Bulawayo. Before getting back on the Bulawayo Road, they stopped for a toasted sandwich and tea at a café in Gweru. Soon they resumed their journey, turning left at the corner where the Midlands Hotel and the Boggie

Clock stood. The trip to Bulawayo was one hundred and sixty-five kilometres. They were in cattle country now.

Not daring to risk trouble with the Fifth Brigade, the many police roadblocks waved them through when they saw Nyati's red beret and uniform. It helped them complete the trip in a little under two hours.

Soon, they drove down Grey Street, and turned left into Tenth Avenue, and left into Wilson Street. Nyati grunted with satisfaction when he saw the Fifth Brigade Land Rover parked on the east side of the Hotel Victoria.

As they pulled alongside, the face of the other vehicle's driver creased into a broad smile.

'Ingwe, I never thought I'd see you again!'

'Elijah, is that you?'

It was John's second-in-command, whom he put in charge of his training teams when he left Camp David on operations with Simba and his men. For John, it was a relief to find someone he knew and could trust. The sense of foreboding that nagged at him since leaving Harare earlier in the day was lighter, if not lifted.

John grabbed his backpack and duffle bag and thanked Nyati, who was eager to get back to the base in Gweru.

He turned to Elijah. 'How about a beer before we go? You can fill me in on everything I need to know.'

John and Elijah entered the hotel and took the lift to the bar lounge on the sixth floor. The distant views to the south emphasised the vast open spaces of Matabeleland. They settled into the comfy chairs next to a low round table. With the workday concluded, other patrons soon arrived.

'So, you're a sergeant now?'

'Yes, thanks to you putting me in charge of the training teams when you left Camp David.'

'What happened after I left?'

'That afternoon, Comrade Clarence told us not to expect your return. He said you'd not had any combat training, so you wouldn't survive active operations in Rhodesia. He also said Comrade David wouldn't be returning, so he was now in charge.

'The next morning, the Rhodesian forces hit the camp from the air, and soon after, with a ground attack. We all scattered, and many died. It happened so fast; it was all over in thirty minutes.'

'What did you do then?'

'The day after the attack, when everything settled, we re-entered the camp to assess the damage. It was total chaos. The camp lay in ruins. I'm not sure what happened to Comrade Clarence because he wasn't amongst the dead. There was no sign of him, and we wondered if the Rhodesians captured him. We were surprised when Comrade David arrived later in the day and assumed control.

'A few days later, they moved us to the assembly points, which was where they recruited me for the Fifth Brigade. They didn't tell us much about it, other than it was a ZANLA brigade they'd train at Inyanga. But I'm surprised you're here, knowing your views about protecting women and children. Have you changed your thinking?'

'No, I haven't changed my views on women and children, but they needed a replacement for the lieutenant the dissidents killed.'

‘The dissidents didn’t kill him. Satan did.’

‘Satan?’

‘Yes, he’s a lieutenant in another platoon. The two didn’t get on because our lieutenant had similar views to yours. Satan is always trying to gain favour with the North Koreans, and he was pressing our lieutenant to get more kills. The lieutenants had a big fight, and Satan shot him. It will be hard for you to stick to your principles with Major Kim and Satan pushing you for better results.’

‘But you said Satan was a lieutenant. How are my results relevant to him?’

‘Like I said, he’s always trying to find favour with Major Kim, so he makes it his business.’

‘I don’t think he and I are going to get along.’

‘We are fortunate that Major Kim and Satan don’t stay in our camp, but they visit sometimes. Their camp is almost one hundred kilometres from ours, so they don’t visit too often, though Satan has operated in our area without our knowledge.’

‘Well, that will have to stop.’

The two finished their beers and took the lift to the ground floor. Elijah carried John’s duffle bag. ‘Is your kit in here?’

‘Yes, I picked it up in Gweru at lunchtime.’

‘When we get to the camp, I’ll get my man to prepare your uniform with the insignias, so it’s ready by the morning when you meet the men.’

The sun was setting as they drove out of Bulawayo into the Matabeleland bush. The intense orange of the sun silhouetted the trees before it sank into a beautiful sunset.

‘In winter, when the weather is dry, the sunset is also beautiful,’ said Elijah.

‘But I love the fresh air in the rainy season.’

As they drove the kilometres, not a single person could be seen.

‘How quiet it is here,’ said John.

‘Yes, no one goes out for fear of meeting the Fifth Brigade.’

‘Are the dissidents active?’

‘No, they’ve gone to ground, and it’s difficult to find them. Everyone is terrified of the Gukurahundi. But if you travel after sunset, they might fire off a shot or two, but it’s rare, because they don’t want to attract the brigade to their area.’

Near Figtree, Elijah slowed the Land Rover and turned right onto a dirt road.

‘The Plumtree Road separates our area from Satan’s. But sometimes he has crossed over to build his numbers.’

‘The number of dissidents he’s apprehended.’

‘The number of people he has killed. It doesn’t matter if they are dissidents. He kills lots of villagers; men, women, and children.’

‘What do you do with the dissidents you catch?’

‘We have not found many, but Major Kim doesn’t want them. He says we must kill them, so we do. If we give them to Satan, he tortures them before he kills them. Sometimes, he shoots them when he’s in a hurry, but he enjoys burning them in their huts.’

‘Well, we won’t have Satan working in our area.’

‘That will be very difficult, Ingwe.’

‘I’m not called Ingwe anymore, Elijah. I’m Lieutenant John Ziyambi, but you can call me John.’

‘That’s fine, Sir, but the men like to give the officers nicknames. The nicknames help to strike fear in the hearts of the villagers. I will say you are *The Leopard*. That is what Ingwe means.’