

Chapter 44 – Another Planet

The Land Rover bounced along the dirt road for four kilometres before turning into a cleared area with several tents. Three small campfires provided the only light in the pitch-black night. The headlights of the Land Rover caught shadowy figures retreating into the darkness.

‘Not exactly a welcoming party, Elijah.’

‘No, Sir, the men are afraid. They don’t know what to expect from you, their new leader. Until I saw you, I was also concerned about a new lieutenant. We all are aware of Major Kim’s expectations, and that’s why I was so surprised to see you. I don’t know how you’ll manage with the major.’

‘I’ll worry about that when the time comes.’

‘Here’s your tent, Sir. The best tent in the camp. Now I’ll take the duffle bag and get my man to prepare your uniform. I’ll also bring Corporal Samson to meet you. He’s a good man. You can rely on him.’

John entered his tent and surveyed the simple scene. A lit kerosene lamp stood on a small trestle table next to a made-up camp bed. It looked cosier than he’d expected, despite the overpowering smell of kerosene. A long wooden crate lay on one side of the tent. He opened it to find an AK-47 rifle, a handgun, and several boxes of bullets.

‘Those belonged to your predecessor, Sir. He looked after them well.’ Elijah was back, standing at the tent’s entrance. Behind him stood a tall, lean young man. ‘This is Corporal Samson, Sir. He has brought us some dinner.’

After dinner, when Elijah left, John lay on his camp bed thinking about his situation. Here he was, camping in the bush with a band of notorious killers. It was a world away from his public school in England. How did it come to this? It was like living on another planet. In the morning, he’d have to stamp his authority on his men. But somehow, he couldn’t imagine seeing them as his men.

John turned off the kerosene lamp and lay in the darkness. The stillness of the bush was overwhelming. A sudden loud cackle broke the silence. Other more distant cackles and wooooo-uppps responded. Hyenas!

The next thing he knew was a cheerful voice announcing his hot water for his shave and wash was ready.

‘Morning, Sir, my name is Sonny.’

At first, he thought a woman brought him the enamel bowl of steaming water, but on further inspection, he realised it was a slender young man with a high-pitched voice.

Morning already! John felt he’d only just put his head on the pillow.

‘I’m your batman, Sir, and number one executioner of dissidents.’

‘And you’re proud of that?’

‘Yes, Sir.’ Sonny didn’t recognise his new lieutenant’s distaste for his claimed pre-eminence in executing supposed dissidents.

Just as John finished dressing in his new uniform, Sonny returned with his breakfast. Being waited on was a novel experience for him. But he was happy to accept the privileges of his new rank.

Elijah came to collect him while Samson lined up the platoon. As he emerged from his tent, John saw a platoon of thirty-two men watching him with mixed expressions. Several looked sullen, while others looked puzzled. As he approached the platoon, Samson made a show of bringing the men to attention and saluted their new lieutenant.

The men in their camouflage uniforms and bush hats looked more suited to jungle warfare than the Rhodesian bush.

‘Right men. I’m Lieutenant Ziyambi. I don’t know how you’ve operated till now, but I’ll tell you how you’ll operate from now on. Women and children are off limits. You will not rape or kill innocent villagers. We are here to deal with dissidents. I’ll have the final say on the fate of any dissident we find. No one is to mete out any punishment without my prior approval.’

Samson dismissed the men, who fell into an animated chatter, waving their arms, and arguing.

Elijah came to talk to John.

‘Sir, the men are confused. Many volunteered, willing to deal out harsh treatment to suspected dissidents. They saw what happened to their last lieutenant when he tried to curb their over-zealous behaviour. They’re debating how long you’ll last when Satan visits. Some of them are worried about you.’

‘Tell the men not to worry. Satan will not be welcome here, and if he crosses the road into our area, I’ll deal with him.’

‘But, Sir, is that wise? If Satan hears such words, it will be like an invitation for him to challenge your authority. Some of our men admire Satan.’

‘Then those men must join him. I’ll not have animals in my platoon.’

Later, Elijah returned with the news no one wanted to transfer to Satan’s platoon. It transpired a fear of Satan was stronger than the admiration any held for him.

‘Good! Now that they understand how I operate, let’s get on with the task we’ve been given.’

Elijah and Samson, the NCOs, split the platoon into five teams of six men, with two remaining in camp. Then, they allotted each team an area to patrol. No team patrolled the same area on consecutive days, so if a team missed something, the next team might notice it. This also created an incentive to avoid being shown up by a following team. The safest course for any team was to assume the villagers were dissidents, or at least supported them.

John was determined to change the system, requiring the teams to provide concrete proof of a villager’s guilt. He would forbid punishment for entire villages. If a team found any suspected dissidents, they needed to call in, and he and the NCOs would drive to the village to satisfy themselves of each villager’s guilt.

Soon, the spirit of the platoon lifted, and laughter and good-natured arguments replaced the former nervous figures skulking in the darkness. A small minority grumbled about the fresh approach, as their bloodlust remained unsatisfied, but no one voiced objection.

John was curious. ‘Tell me, Elijah, have any of our teams burned huts with villagers inside?’

‘Only once, Sir. Your predecessor wouldn’t allow it, but when Satan shot him, he took control of the platoon for a short time prior to your arrival. One morning, he led one of our teams to a village where all the people were missing, aside from four elderly villagers. It was

clear someone warned them, and they'd run into the bush. So when the four elderly villagers claimed everyone was away, Satan ordered the men to lock them in a hut and set it alight.'

'Were you there?'

'No, Sir, but Samson drove the truck.'

'So, one of our teams burned the hut?'

'Yes, Sir. Sonny lit the fire.'

'What happened next?'

'Nothing, Sir. We returned to that village twice more, but no one was there. Satan was suspicious because it was too tidy for an abandoned village. He said next time we visit, we must burn all the huts.'

Over the next few days, there were several false alarms with wrongly accused villagers. Then, one afternoon, a village head told a team there were dissidents sheltering in his village. He hoped to curry favour with the Fifth Brigade.

When John and the NCOs arrived at the scene, they found their team guarding two men who sat on the ground with their wrists bound behind them. Their rifles leant against a nearby hut. Samson could speak Ndebele and questioned the men. It transpired they weren't from the village but arrived without notice, seeking refuge. The village head didn't want to risk the wrath of the Fifth Brigade and reported their presence.

The men admitted their banditry, and John suggested sending them to Major Kim, but the two men became agitated. They said Major Kim would pass them on to Satan, who would torture them. They insisted on being shot by their captors, rather than handed to Satan.

The two men saw John's deliberation. They looked him in the eye. 'You must shoot us, Sir, not Satan.'

John struggled with the decision, but knew what was expected of him.

'OK, Samson, grant them their wish.'

The corporal and his team marched the dissidents down a slope into a gully, where they passed from view. The minutes ticked by.

John waited for the shots, but nothing happened. 'What's going on, Elijah?'

'The dissidents must first dig their graves, Sir.'

An uncomfortable fifteen minutes passed before two shots rang out. John felt each of those shots sear into his conscience. The reality of what he'd signed up to when he joined the Fifth Brigade came home to him. Was promotion through the ranks worth this?