

Chapter 45 – Major Kim

John was just completing the morning inspection when a Land Rover pulled into the camp. The passenger side door swung open, and a slight man emerged. Two towering armed guards jumped out of the back and stood behind him.

‘Major Kim,’ said Elijah under his breath.

‘Yes, I guessed it might be him,’ said John.

The major stuck out his chest and marched towards John. The excessively wide crown of his hat added to his imposing and authoritative appearance, but nothing could disguise his lack of height, cutting a rather comical figure. To John, he looked like a toy soldier.

‘Lieutenant Ziyambi, what is going on here?’

John saluted the major. ‘It’s our morning inspection parade, Sir, where we give our instructions for the day to each team.’

‘Inspection parade? We don’t waste our time on such nonsense here. Get the men out, looking for dissidents.’

‘Dismiss the men, Samson. We’ll finish this later.’

‘Sah.’ Samson jumped to attention and saluted John, making a deliberate show of the discipline prevailing in the camp.

John turned to the major. ‘A morning inspection helps with discipline, making the men more alert and enthused.’

‘How many dissidents have you dealt with this week?’

‘This is only the third day, but we’ve dealt with four.’

‘Only four! Lieutenant Satan has caught and executed over twenty.’

‘Yes, but ours were genuine dissidents. The village head reported their presence. We are trying to gain the villagers’ trust in this area.’

Major Kim glowered at John. ‘I’m sure Lieutenant Satan’s captures were also genuine dissidents. You need to get your numbers up, Ziyambi. We don’t need parades and the villagers’ trust, or any other National Army nonsense here.’

‘I’ll keep that in mind, Sir.’

‘Make sure you do.’

Kim turned on his heels and strode back to the Land Rover. The two guards gave John a withering look before following the major. The driver spun the tyres, throwing up a shower of stones and dirt as he sped out of the camp.

‘Well, Elijah, that was a warm welcome.’

‘I warned you about the major, Sir. He and Satan are a dangerous pair.’

‘Yes, I can see that.’

‘Sir, you told the major we dealt with four dissidents, but we only caught two.’

‘Elijah, we must inflate our numbers if we want to keep him out of our hair. Next time, I’ll multiply our kill by three or four. Those dissidents are buried. They’ll never know how many we caught. You keep a tally of the kills, so inflate the numbers when you report them to the men each week. They’ll assume some of the other teams must have caught dissidents, and they’ll soon get confused.’

‘But, Sir, the men talk amongst themselves.’

‘Proceed slowly and don’t make it too obvious. In a few weeks, who’ll remember the tally? Besides, are the teams going to say they didn’t achieve those numbers? No, they all have their pride. Soon, they’ll say we’ve under-reported the numbers.’

‘I hope so, Sir.’

‘Right, let’s get the teams underway.’

By mid-morning, the teams completed around three hours of search and interrogation. Then, an excitable call came in on the radio from Samson’s team. Elijah asked the radio operator to speak more slowly, as he couldn’t understand what he said. ‘Put Samson on. I want to talk to him.’

Samson’s deep voice came over the radio.

‘Samson, what’s going on?’

‘Elijah, we’re at the village where we caught the dissidents the day before yesterday. Satan’s team has been here and burnt the village. They’ve killed the village head and many men. The women are hysterical. They say Satan is headed for the next village on their road.’

‘So, the village head’s attempt to curry favour with the Fifth Brigade didn’t work,’ said John.

‘No, it didn’t work, Sir.’

‘Come on Elijah, let’s get going. Tell Samson we’re on our way.’

‘Sir, can I come too?’

‘OK, Sonny, hop in the back.’

Elijah stepped on the accelerator, and the Land Rover raced along the dirt road, bouncing over potholes and ruts, rattling the bones of the occupants. John held on to the grab handle to steady himself on the hair-raising ride. If he hadn’t, he might easily have been ejected from the vehicle. Sonny was silent, sitting in the back seat and holding on tightly to his nearest grab handle.

Twenty minutes later, the Land Rover skidded to a halt in the smoking village. Samson came forward to meet them.

‘They’ve burned several of the huts, Sir. Only the old men are unharmed. The others, they buried near the spot we buried the two dissidents. They raped some of the women but didn’t kill any.’

‘You said Satan has moved on to the next camp.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Right. Get your men and lead the way.’

‘Sah.’

Elijah had no difficulty keeping up with Samson’s long wheelbase Land Rover as they raced over the deteriorating dirt road. The next village was only five kilometres farther on, and John strained his ears for any sound of rifle fire but heard nothing. The flying dirt raised by Samson’s vehicle forced them to drop back a little.

Without warning, they found themselves in the village, which straddled the road. Samson’s men jumped out of the vehicle ready for action, just as Elijah pulled up behind them.

The sudden arrival of John’s men took Satan’s Fifth Brigade team by surprise. They were busy lining up all the able-bodied men with their hands tied behind their backs. It was likely they intended to shoot them. And they’d locked the women and children in a hut. John could

only guess at the purpose. He was furious at the intrusion into his area. 'Where is your leader?' he shouted.

'I'm here, Mauya,' said a large, fearsome-looking man.

The shock of hearing his traditional name, known only to those from his village, stunned John. It took a few seconds for him to recognise his childhood friend, Simba, who'd changed from a fresh-faced young man into the weathered killer before him.

'What are you doing in my territory?' John demanded.

'Major Kim gives me the freedom to act wherever I choose.'

'The major might, but I don't. In the last village you killed the headman. He kept us informed about the dissidents in this area.'

'You didn't need the headman to keep you informed. Every Ndebele of fighting age is a dissident.'

'That's not true. In the future, stay on your side of the main road.'

'Major Kim won't like that.'

'In my area, we don't terrorise innocent villagers, rape the women, and burn the huts.'

'Hah! Before you arrived on the scene, your man, Sonny, lit the blaze that burned four villagers in a hut.'

'On your instructions.'

'But he enjoyed it.'

'Not anymore. The men chose well when they picked Satan as your nickname.'

'As with you! I've heard about The Leopard, who slinks around, keeping out of sight.'

'Enough! Now get out of my area.'

'Are you sure you want to cross me and the major?'

'Go now, while you can.'

'You outnumber us this time, Mauya, but believe me, you'll regret it.'

'Samson, cut these men free and then interrogate them. Deal with any dissidents you discover.'

John watched the man he'd sworn to kill drive off with his team of murderers. He'd long wondered when, or if, their paths might cross, or if the Skuzapo killed Simba in Mozambique? Now he had his answer. But John was aware of the danger he faced, with Simba knowing where to find him.

'Elijah, put guards at the entrance to the roads leading into our area. We don't want a repeat of what happened this morning.'