

Chapter 46 – The Ghost Village

The villagers gathered around John, expressing their gratitude for his intervention. If he'd arrived a few minutes later, they might have been counting bodies.

'Samson, tell them they can thank us by informing us about any dissidents in the area.'

'Sah.'

'Now, Elijah, seeing as we're out and about, show me the ghost village where nobody lives but keeps itself tidy.'

'That village is on a different road, Sir.'

'OK, let's go.'

John, Elijah, and Sonny jumped into the Land Rover and set off in the direction Satan and his team went.

'Let's keep an eye out for Satan, in case he hasn't left the area. We don't have Samson and his team to protect us this time.'

The Land Rover rattled its way back to the main road, where Elijah turned left onto the tarred surface. Fifteen minutes later, Elijah turned the Land Rover left onto a dirt road like the one they'd travelled earlier.

Soon, they passed a village where the people ran into their huts upon seeing the Fifth Brigade vehicle. The second village was the same. The scene in the third village was one of utter destruction. All the pole and daga huts were burned, leaving empty shells of crumbling walls. The thatched roofs were all gone. In the bush near the village, an area of disturbed soil about two metres wide and ten metres long hinted at its contents.

Five kilometres farther, they rolled into the last village on the road. As expected, they found it deserted. They got out of the Land Rover and walked through the village. The hard earth surface between the huts was swept clean. 'Look here, Sir. You can even see the sweeping broom marks,' said Sonny.

'Yes, I expect they're hiding up on that rise, watching us right now. But how did they know we might visit their village?'

'This morning, Sir, when we were on our way to join Samson. They saw us drive past on the main road,' said Elijah. 'I can show you the point in the road where they can see us pass.'

'So they've been hiding ever since we passed this morning? What a way to live! Imagine spending your days terrified of a visit from the Fifth Brigade,' said John.

'We should go, Sir. There's only three of us. If they recognise Sonny as the man who set fire to the hut and killed the four elderly people, they may be tempted to seek revenge.'

'I don't think there's any danger of that, Elijah. These people are cowed into submission. They won't want to make matters worse by trying to attack us. Anyway, we should get back to camp.'

The trio drove back to the main road, where they turned left towards their camp. Five kilometres along the road, Elijah stopped the Land Rover and pointed to a rise on their left. 'There, Sir, is their village. I've seen a boy sitting on that large rock as we've driven past. He must warn the villagers when he sees a brigade vehicle passing. That's their early warning system, giving them time to clear things up and hide.'

‘What if Satan and his men approached their turnoff from the other direction? Then, he wouldn’t pass this spot.’

‘That is a long way around, Sir. He wouldn’t drive so far just to attack one little village. If he travelled by the direct route, he must still pass this spot.’

‘Well, tomorrow, we’re going to that village and talk with them.’

‘How, Sir.’

‘We’ll stop just before this point and go on foot. How far do you think it is?’

‘Four or five kilometres, Sir, but they’ll see us coming.’

‘Not if we go in the dark. Say around three in the morning. We’ll take Samson and his team. Sonny, you better not come. They may recognise you and want to get their revenge.’

‘Sir, it was Samson’s team that visited the village when Sonny lit the fire.’

‘OK, Elijah, get one of the other teams.’

John, Elijah and six chosen men stirred at two-fifteen, eating a hurried breakfast and gulping down sweet hot tea. They left Samson in charge of morning deployments and jumped into the long wheelbase Land Rover and drove out of camp.

In the pitch blackness, the eyes of wildlife reflected in the headlights. Suddenly, the headlights disturbed a clan of hyenas slouching across the road, scattering them with their indignant cries.

Their cackles and giggles always sent a chill down John’s spine. He’d seen how a hyena would walk past unsuspecting prey, showing no interest, before turning at the last moment to seize the unfortunate victim in their vice-like jaws. If the poor creature could not escape, the hyena would eat it alive. John accepted the cruelty of Africa was part of its beauty.

A hundred metres before the point from which the village was visible, Elijah slowed the Land Rover and pulled over, edging deeper into the bush to hide it from view. The men jumped out of the vehicle and stood in a group, awaiting orders.

John cleared his throat. ‘OK, men, we’re headed for the village, high on the rise. You will all have noticed it at some point when you passed here. We don’t know if they keep a lookout at night, so we must maintain silence. We must make the village before dawn, or they’ll see us coming and hide. Elijah will lead the way. Right, let’s go.’

The going was tough. It looked straightforward in daylight, but the darkness made it a challenge. The first part of the hike was down a gentle slope, but the small pebbles on a hard sandy base made it difficult to keep one’s footing. A jagged rock or a thorn bush was often the only impediment, stopping the slide. Several times, Elijah needed to quieten the men’s curses, reminding them how far noise travels in the night’s silence.

At last, they reached the bottom of the slope, having completed only a quarter of the distance to the village. In the darkness, the men realised the incline was much steeper than the ground they’d already covered. The small rolling pebbles still presented a problem, though it proved easier going uphill than down.

Soon, the men’s breathing was strained, with one or two of them coughing, so John called for a short break.

‘What time do you make it, Elijah?’

‘Four o’clock, Sir.’

‘Yes, me too. That downhill slope took much longer than we planned.’

‘We’re only halfway there, Sir.’

‘There’s only ninety minutes before sunrise, so we must up our pace. If anyone falls behind, they’ll have to catch up later. We can’t afford to wait for the slowest man.’

The group set off, pressing hard to achieve their deadline. Two men soon dropped back as the other six forged ahead. The climb was much steeper than it appeared from the main road and challenged the men’s fitness. Only fifty metres from their destination, John stepped on a rock that gave way and rolled down the slope. It made little noise, but John’s ankle twisted, sending a shooting pain up his calf. He hobbled up to the large rock where the lookout sat each day.

As the group walked towards the village huts, they bumped into Bundu, heading the other way to start his morning watch. The young boy’s eyes grew round with fear as John put his index finger to his lips.

‘Don’t be afraid, boy. We must talk with the village head.’

‘That’s my uncle, Winston.’

‘Take me to him.’

‘Elijah, spread out the men to make sure no one leaves until we’ve questioned them.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

John followed Bundu to a hut. ‘Tell your uncle I want to talk to him. He needn’t be afraid.’

Bundu disappeared through the door as dawn’s first rays peeped over the horizon. Moments later, a sleepy, wide-eyed man emerged from the inner darkness. John introduced himself and instructed Winston to assemble the villagers.

Winston looked miserable, so John spoke to ease his fears. ‘You’ve nothing to fear if you have nothing to hide. Tell that to your people as you assemble them.’

Soon, a group of villagers stood chattering in whispers, confused by their predicament. How did the Fifth Brigade bypass their early warning system? John stepped forward and raised his hand to silence them. When a hush descended over the group, he spoke.

‘We are here to find dissidents. If you’re not a dissident or hiding one, you’ve nothing to fear. You may know of atrocities committed by the Fifth Brigade, but that Fifth Brigade is not us. My men will now question you. Answer them truthfully, and you will be safe.’

John turned to Winston. ‘My men are hungry and thirsty. Make us tea and something to eat. It will improve their mood and work to your people’s advantage.’

Out of the corner of his eye, John noticed his two lagging men enter the village and made a mental note to bolster his platoon’s fitness regime. Elijah took charge of the comprehensive interviews, followed by a careful search of the huts and the surrounding area, a slow, painstaking process.

John interviewed Winston Moyo and his family. His sprained ankle throbbed and swelled, so he sat on a log under the enormous tree on the edge of the village. Each family member came to him one at a time and sat on the ground, answering his questions.

After interrogating the villagers, John and Elijah agreed they found no sign of dissident activity in the village. John could not walk, and a villager fashioned a walking stick out of a sturdy branch. The village women prepared a meal for his men with more sweet hot tea, and a relaxed atmosphere developed. The late afternoon sun had lost its bite and bathed the village in a golden glow. Winston suggested John could use a vacant hut if he wished to rest or even stay the night if he wanted.

Elijah grew concerned. 'Sir, you cannot cross that ground with your ankle in that condition. I'll send the men to pick up the Land Rover and come and fetch you.'

'No, Elijah, my ankle is killing me. I need to lie down. And this will give me the opportunity to talk with Winston and gain his trust. We need the villagers' cooperation. I'll stay the night, and you can pick me up in the morning.'

'Sir, you can't stay here alone. When we leave, you would be at their mercy. They could kill you.'

'I'm sure you don't believe that, Elijah.'

'Well, I'll tell Winston I'm leaving two men here with you.'

'All right, if you must.'

The villagers all watched Elijah and his men descend into the valley. The two less fit men remained to protect John should things go wrong. Ever-accommodating, Winston found shelter for them to stay overnight.

Later, Winston led John to the hut set aside for his use. Basic, but comfortable enough for his purposes, John sat on the single chair and took off his heavy boots. It was a relief, but he wondered how he'd put them back on in the morning if his ankle continued to swell. He hung his shirt over a string attached to the poles supporting the thatch, and lay on the sleeping mat with his hands behind his head, thinking about his mother, Martha, and Walter. Where would this spell in the Fifth Brigade lead?

A soft voice at the doorway interrupted his thoughts. John grabbed his handgun from under the cushion he was using as a pillow.

'Sir, can I talk with you?' The voice of an older man.

'Yes, what do you want?'

'Sir, we are not dissidents here in this village.'

'Yes, I know that.'

'Can you protect us from that other one they call Satan?'

'I will do my best for you.'

'If you protect us, I can give you my daughter.'

'You can't give me your daughter, old man. Only your daughter can give herself to me.'

'But I will not object if she comes to you.'

'I'll protect this village. There's no need for payment. Your daughter should not be the price.'

'Then I'll tell her what you have said.'

John settled back on his pillow, thinking about the old man's visit. The Fifth Brigade had raped many women, so he must have thought giving his daughter to a senior brigade officer would protect her from a similar fate.

All was silent in the village. Even the village dog had long stopped barking. John was still awake when he heard the curtain that covered the doorway rustle.

'I have come, Sir.' A young woman's voice.

'Who are you?'

'I am Cebile, Sir. You spoke to my father.'

'Didn't he tell you I don't need payment for protecting the village?'

'Yes, Sir.'

‘Then why are you here?’

‘I have brought some muti and leaves to help your strained foot, Sir. If you take off your socks and trousers, I will wrap your leg.’

Cebile helped John remove his thick army trousers and applied the cold muti to his ankle and lower calf. She wrapped the area in two young banana leaves and secured them with string. Already the throbbing pain reduced. Was it because of the muti, or because Cebile distracted him? He marvelled at how she’d managed in the darkness to wrap his leg. Everything she did by touch, making it a sensuous experience. She massaged his foot and calf, and all the day’s tension drained out of him.

John woke as the first rays of the sun glowed through the thin curtain covering the doorway. He must have fallen asleep while Cebile massaged him. It seemed like she’d stayed all night, but he realised he must have dreamt some of it. He didn’t know when she left his hut.

Soon after he woke, Cebile brought him a bowl of hot water to wash himself, and removed the banana leaves from his leg. To his surprise, it felt much better, letting him put on his boot with only minor discomfort. When he dressed, she brought him a breakfast of bread and honey, and hot tea. Sonny did a decent job of looking after him, but somehow, he couldn’t match Cebile’s attention.

In daylight, John studied her face and figure and realised just how attractive she was with her smooth skin and bright eyes. Perhaps he’d been a little hasty in declining her father’s offer. He quickly dismissed the thought. It would have been a business transaction rather than a mutual attraction. The former didn’t appeal to him, though the latter might.

Bundu raised the alarm when he saw a Land Rover pass on the main road, but John used his radio to confirm it was Elijah coming to pick him up. The villagers took to John, and they all lined up to wave him goodbye when Elijah arrived fifteen minutes later to drive him and his two guards back to camp. Before he left, he gave them some advice.

‘Winston, when you think the Fifth Brigade is coming, you run and hide, taking your cooked food and animals with you. But when your village is so clean, they will know someone lives here. Don’t sweep away the fallen leaves, leaving fresh brush marks on the ground.

‘And don’t forget, you must tell me if dissidents come into the area. I will return often to see if you have news for me. I’ll tie a white cloth to my wing mirror, so when I pass on the road down there, you’ll know it’s me and not Satan coming to visit. All my men’s vehicles will have a white cloth on the wing mirror, so you won’t have to run and hide each time you see them.’