

Chapter 48 – R and R

Major Kim didn't visit John's camp too often, but when he did, his message was always the same. Lieutenant Satan was doing a wonderful job, while John's numbers were disappointing. 'My superiors would regard me as a failure were it not for Lieutenant Satan's exemplary performance, which hides your shortcomings.'

'I can only find dissidents, Sir, not create them.'

'Lieutenant, you are too friendly with the Ndebele. It won't look good on your service record.'

'I have no cause to love the Ndebele, but I won't persecute people just for the sake of meeting targets.'

'You've been here for over twelve months and are due for leave. Take it with immediate effect.'

'Right, Sir, but while I'm away, I don't want Satan and his men operating in my territory. It would ruin all my contacts with informants who keep me apprised of what's going on in the area.'

'Lieutenant Satan does well in his own area. He doesn't need your area to boost his numbers. Take your leave from tomorrow.'

John exhaled as the tail lights of the major's vehicle disappeared around the corner of the rough dirt track. He always felt relieved when Major Kim drove off in his Land Rover. Kim said nothing about his brush with Satan soon after his arrival. Had Satan told Major Kim about their encounter when he crossed the main road to torment the villagers in John's area of responsibility? The episode was an embarrassment for Satan when John ordered him off his territory. Perhaps he'd kept quiet about it. But for John, it enhanced his reputation with the Ndebele villagers.

The next morning, Elijah drove John to Bulawayo Airport where he'd catch the plane to Harare.

'Now remember, Elijah, while I'm away, I don't want Satan coming into our area. Major Kim says he won't, but if Satan tries to enter our area, I want you and the boys to stand up to him and tell him to leave. I'm only away a week, and I'll deal with the consequences if there's any trouble. Don't forget to meet my evening flight next Sunday.'

John waved goodbye to Elijah as he crossed the tarmac to the steps leading up to the Vickers Viscount plane that operated between Zimbabwe's two largest cities. He looked forward to being home in Harare and catching up with Martha, Walter, his mother, and David Chimbare.

The seat next to him was vacant, so John sat back and enjoyed the short one-hour flight while thinking about the past twelve months. A lot changed in that period. He'd become hardened in his dealings with dissidents, though he liked to imagine he was fair in his treatment of the villagers. No longer was he the gentle English public school product. Now, he could hold his own in the most brutal of environments. To a few, he was a loyal friend, but his enemies feared him.

John's mind turned to Satan, better known to him as Simba. His hatred for his erstwhile friend had not abated, and he wondered how he might exact revenge for Simba's brutal disfigurement of Aneni, the love of his life. While they were both in southern Matabeleland,

the opportunity for revenge teased John, but Simba was secure while under Major Kim's command.

Soon, the fasten seatbelts sign came on as the Viscount prepared to land at Harare Airport, and John's thoughts returned to his loved ones. This was a break he was determined to enjoy. He grabbed his hand luggage from the overhead locker and hurried down the plane's steps and through the terminal building to the taxi stand. Taxis were seldom enough for the arriving passengers, and latecomers to the taxi stand were often left waiting for one of the infrequent taxis to arrive.

John hadn't the time to warn anyone of his visit, so it was a wonderful surprise for Martha when she answered the knock on her door. They spent the day catching up on each other's news, and in the afternoon, Martha cooked a special homecoming dinner. When Walter returned home from work in the evening, John had to repeat everything. Walter added to the celebration by opening a bottle of wine at dinner. That night, John slept well in his comfortable bed in Martha and Walter's cosy house. Much time had passed since he'd felt so relaxed.

After breakfast the next morning, Walter said goodbye and left for work. Martha got John to drive her to the various sewing ladies' houses to pick up the garment orders she'd given them. They'd much to talk about, and Martha was making every minute count.

The following day, John went to see his mother, but she wasn't home, so he'd try again the next day.

Thursday morning, already! The week was passing by so fast. As usual, John waited at the automatic gate for a car to enter or exit the property, the only way he could gain access to his mother's apartment block. He didn't have to wait long before the gate slid open for a car leaving the apartment's parking area, allowing him to nip through before it slid shut again.

John held his breath as he knocked on the door and waited for a response. He was in luck. His mother was home. A smile crossed her face as she saw him, and he breathed more easily. His earlier visits were met with a frown, but on this occasion, she seemed pleased to see him.

'When are you coming back to Harare?'

'No one's said anything about that.'

'Living here on my own in this beautiful apartment is lonely. Wouldn't you like to live here with me?'

'Martha and Walter would be sorry to see me leave their home, but in the army I'm away often, and they will have got used to my absence.'

'Then live here with me, your mother. I've also got used to your absence, but it would be nice to see you more often.'

'Alright, I'll talk to them about it. I spend little time there, anyway.'

Norah made lunch as they chatted. It smelt good, and with his first mouthful, John commented it was the first time in years he'd tasted his mother's cooking.

'You have progressed well in the army, but what are you doing in Matabeleland?'

'I look after a prescribed area where the villagers rely on my platoon to keep them safe.'

'The papers say the Fifth Brigade has killed many Ndebele. Are you involved in that?'

'Well, it's my duty to deal with dissidents. But nowadays, there aren't many left.'

'Deal with dissidents? So, you have killed some?'

'Those are our orders, but I'm criticised for my low numbers.'

‘There are rumours of atrocities.’

‘My men haven’t committed atrocities, though they’ve had to execute a few dissidents. Simba is also a lieutenant in the Fifth Brigade. He’s one of those responsible for the rumours.’

‘They say if you lie with dogs, you will get their fleas, and your reputation will then follow you to your grave.’

‘Mother, I do not lie with dogs.’

‘But who will believe you?’

John left his mother’s apartment with a spring in his step. Despite her interrogation about his part in the Gukurahundi, she’d been more understanding on this occasion. The earlier visits always ended with harsh words and anger, but now she wanted him to live with her, a sign their relationship could be mended. When the time was right, he’d broach the matter with Martha and Walter. Perhaps he could keep his accommodation in both places. That way, everyone would be happy.

Now, John looked forward to Friday when he’d arranged to meet David Chimbare at the Jameson Hotel bar at five-thirty. It would be like old times. But tonight, he’d have a pleasant, relaxing evening with Martha and Walter.

On Friday morning, Martha washed all John’s clothes and ironed them. The pair chatted all day without running out of topics of conversation. In the late afternoon, John headed for the Jameson Hotel. This time, he was there before David and ordered their beers to await his friend’s arrival.

John kept his eye on the door, watching for David, but somehow, he missed his entrance. A tap on his shoulder alerted him to David’s presence.

‘So, John, how are things in Matabeleland?’

‘You may know more about that than me, David.’

‘I understand, Major Kim thinks you are underperforming.’

‘I can’t execute people just because they are Ndebele.’

‘Of course not. Under other circumstances, I’d be worried they were planning to release you from your command. But there are strong rumours Mugabe and Nkomo will sign an agreement whereby ZANU will absorb Nkomo’s ZAPU to become ZANU-PF. The PF stands for patriotic front. I think the signing is imminent, which means the Gukurahundi will end, and you’ll be returning to Harare soon.’

‘And what then? I don’t want to stay in the Fifth Brigade. They’re not for me. As my mother says, “If you lie with dogs, you will get their fleas.”’

David laughed. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll find something else for you.’

Saturday, John spent with Martha and Walter, chatting over cups of tea and a light lunch. Martha prepared a special dinner that evening because his leave was ending. Walter opened another bottle of wine.

Sunday reminded John of his junior schooldays when Sunday afternoons left him with the sinking feeling that a whole school week lay between him and the next weekend. Martha and Walter also seemed a little subdued.

Before he knew it, John was back on the Viscount, heading for Bulawayo. He wondered what might have gone on in his absence. He’d given Elijah strict instructions in the event Satan entered his territory. But was Elijah strong enough to withstand an encroachment by the evil lieutenant?

As he walked from the plane to the terminal, he saw Elijah waiting on the balcony. He tried to read Elijah's face when the sergeant saw him. A smile would signal all was well. But a serious expression...

When John approached Elijah, his sergeant's face split into a beaming smile.

'So, Elijah, all is well?'

'Yes, Sir. We caught one dissident while you were away.'

'Well done! Soon you'll be Major Kim's blue-eyed boy.'

Elijah laughed. 'I don't think that's possible, Sir.'

'And you didn't get any visitors?'

'No, Sir. Satan and Major Kim did not visit us.'

'Hmm! That's strange. I thought Major Kim wanted me away to give Satan a free hand in my absence. I wonder what they're up to. Things are too quiet for my liking.'