

## Chapter 49 – The Cat’s Away

The kerosene lamp flickered in the large tent, filling the area with its distinctive smell. The occupants huddled around the camp table on which sat the lamp and several empty and half-empty Chibuku cartons with their pungent smelling contents. Major Kim, Satan, Jackson Mpofo, and the corporals Andrew and James, enjoyed themselves, laughing about John’s platoon on the other side of the Bulawayo-Plumtree Road.

‘Kim, you’re lucky to have me to keep your numbers up. Otherwise, they’d boot you all the way back to Pyongyang.’

‘That’s right, Satan. Because of you, I’m stuck in this mosquito-infested bush.’

‘You mean you’d rather be back in North Korea than enjoying the benefits of the free world?’

‘In North Korea, I’d have a proper bed to sleep in instead of this rickety camp bed.’

‘Well, if you’d allowed me to cross the main road and stir up those Ndebele dissidents that Lieutenant Ziyambi is protecting, your numbers would be much higher. Then they might have made you a colonel and rewarded you with an early return home.’

‘No, I promised Ziyambi you’d not enter his area while he was away.’

‘But what if I enter his area now he’s back from leave and get rid of him? Wouldn’t you like that?’

‘And how would you do that? His men are so loyal to him, they’d fight you to the last.’

‘There’s always someone who will betray their master.’

‘How would you find that someone?’

‘Aha! I already have him. When I got rid of that last useless lieutenant, I moved two of my men to his platoon. One has transferred his loyalty to Ziyambi, but the other keeps in touch.’

‘And what does he say?’

‘Every Saturday night Ziyambi goes alone to the end village to visit an Ndebele woman.’

‘Which end village is that?’

‘The one that was always empty when we arrived.’

‘Don’t they run and hide when he goes there?’

‘All his vehicles tie a white cloth to the driver’s wing mirror. If the villagers see a white cloth on any army vehicle, they know it’s his men, and they don’t need to hide. We could tie a white cloth to one of our vehicles and drive to the village and catch Ziyambi and the villagers unawares.’

‘Catch him first, and once you’ve dealt with him, the villagers will be unprotected. Then use the white cloth signal to catch them unawares. What I suggest is this,’ said Kim, lowering his voice.

The men all leant forward to catch the major’s words as he outlined the approach he favoured.

‘That’s a good idea, Kim,’ said Satan. ‘We’ll do that.’

‘Satan, didn’t your man say there’s a guard stationed at the entrance to each village road?’ said Jackson Mpofo.

‘If we tie a white cloth to the driver’s side wing mirror, the guard will think we’re fine to pass.’

‘But he’ll recognise we’re not from his platoon.’

‘We’ll just drive by without stopping, and if it’s before dawn, he won’t get a clear view of our faces.’

‘Satan, how will you tell when Ziyambi’s visiting the woman?’ said Kim.

‘He missed seeing her yesterday, so he’ll be desperate to visit next Saturday night. Jackson, Andrew, James, and I will drive past the guard in the early hours when the man’s half asleep. Then, when we have Ziyambi, we’ll bring him here and deal with him.’

‘No, no!’ said Kim. ‘Don’t involve me. If something goes wrong, I know nothing about your plan.’

‘OK! Then we’ll go to Antelope Mine and drop him into a shaft. He might as well spend eternity with his Ndebele friends. Ziyambi’s a traitor, and that’s what he deserves.’

‘Instead of taking him to the mine, wouldn’t it be simpler just to shoot him and leave him there?’

‘No, I want him to suffer. We won’t shoot him. We’ll just push him into the mine shaft. I hope the fall doesn’t kill him. It would be better if he lay in pain amongst the other bodies and died a few days later from his injuries or starvation.’

‘Tell me. Why do you hate Ziyambi so much?’

‘Even from when we were kids, he always thought himself superior, living in a white man’s house and turning up at the village in his fancy chauffeur-driven car.’

‘So you envied him?’

‘No, I didn’t envy him. He was a sellout. Every cut I made on his girlfriend’s face made me smile when I thought about how he’d react when he saw her without lips, ears, and a nose. The moment I saw him in Mozambique, I knew there’d be trouble. He killed Gondo, the leader of the group that came to our village and recruited us. Gondo was the one who suggested we cut the woman because she refused to join our ZANLA brothers. Then at the camp, Ziyambi murdered my friend Takunda, who helped me cut the woman. Although he pretends to know nothing about Takunda’s disappearance, I’m sure he was responsible. Now, he’d like to get me.’

‘So you want to get him first?’

‘Yes. So can I carry out the plan?’

‘If I know nothing about it, how can I stop you from carrying out your crazy idea?’

Satan smiled. ‘Jackson, fetch us another round of Chibuku.’

Jackson Mpofo frowned. He was a sergeant. Satan should have asked a corporal to fetch the beer cartons. But Jackson realised it was Satan’s way of asserting his authority, and it would be foolhardy to question the smallest detail of his order. He rose from the camp chair and walked to the stores to collect five more cartons of Chibuku beer.

Kim stroked his chin. ‘And once you’ve got rid of Ziyambi, I’ll be short of a lieutenant. Headquarters won’t be too pleased with me asking for yet another replacement.’

‘Don’t tell them. Give Ziyambi’s pips to Jackson and tell him he’s promoted to lieutenant.’

‘I’ve no authority to promote anyone.’

‘It’s not a real promotion. Keep it quiet from Jackson and headquarters, and no one will question it?’

‘What about these two?’ Kim gestured towards Andrew and James.

‘They won’t be a problem. You boys won’t be a problem, will you?’

‘No, Sir, the corporals answered in unison.’

‘And what about Ziyambi’s platoon? You’ve heard how loyal they are to him.’

‘Once Ziyambi has disappeared, they’ll soon fall into line.’

‘Is Jackson is strong enough to control Ziyambi’s platoon?’

‘No, but they’ll understand it’s me in charge, and Jackson is just carrying out my orders. Jackson’s a coward. You saw how he hurried off to fetch the Chibuku. He’s a sergeant, and he should have ordered Andrew or James to go.’

Andrew and James sat grinning at Satan’s view of Jackson. Not for the first time Satan undermined his sergeant’s authority in front of his men.

‘True, but that’s what happens when you intimidate your men, Satan.’

‘And you don’t intimidate them, Sir?’

‘If Jackson takes over Ziyambi’s platoon, who’ll be your new sergeant?’

‘Perhaps one of these goons. Or maybe someone else from my platoon.’

With Satan’s last comment, the smiles on the two corporals’ faces evaporated. A moment later, Jackson returned with the fresh Chibuku beer cartons. Knowing Satan, he couldn’t help but worry what they might have discussed in his absence.

Satan opened his new Chibuku carton and raised it. ‘Come on men, let’s drink to the success of Operation Ziyambi.’ The laughter and chatter in the dimly lit tent continued until the early hours.