

## Chapter 53 – Resolution

John's mood belied the glorious sunset on the balmy evening as he drove to Winston's village. He'd not seen Cebile on his brief visits following Satan's capture. She'd been with the other women, tending the crops in the field beyond the nearby hill.

On Friday, John received official confirmation from Major Kim regarding the Unity Accord signed between Robert Mugabe's ZANU and Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU, merging the two parties into ZANU-PF. The Fifth Brigade would withdraw from Matabeleland as soon as practical, with Major Kim's command being one of the first to leave. John's orders were to leave on Monday, only three days hence.

Competing worries troubled John. How would he break the news to Cebile? He'd not prepared her for his pending departure, and now he regretted it.

He'd not slept well since his last visit to the village. Simba was always on his mind. For years he'd dreamt of revenge for Aneni's mutilation, but now he realised one cannot exact revenge without losing something of oneself. John wished he could have avenged the atrocity against Aneni earlier, when his thirst for revenge drove him mad with rage. He'd not thought too much about Aneni in recent times, not since he'd met Cebile. Now, punishing Simba seemed more like a duty than an uncontrolled craving for revenge. And could he leave it to Winston to see it through?

John had rejected the prospect of a simple revenge against Simba. Execution with a bullet wouldn't have been satisfying. No, he needed him to suffer, but now it felt like he was suffering along with him. Somehow, the sweet satisfaction of revenge was missing. And it all seemed so long ago. But the passing of time didn't reduce Simba's culpability and shouldn't reduce the severity of his punishment. Would Aneni have approved of his actions taken in her name?

Cebile was not sitting on the log to greet him. John grunted in satisfaction that she'd paid attention to his warning about staying within sight of the village. Moments later, when he drove into the village, the empty square surprised him. Where were the villagers? Usually, when he arrived, they rushed to greet him, gathering around his Land Rover in excitable chatter. The children always pressed in close, preventing him from opening the vehicle's door.

As John pulled up, Winston came out of his hut and half-raised his hand in a welcoming salute.

'Winston, where is everybody?'

'Everyone is here, Sir.'

John noticed one or two men sitting outside their huts, and two women cooking in the communal kitchen. They all avoided looking at him.

'Why aren't they coming out to meet me?'

'They are afraid, Sir.'

'Afraid! Afraid of what?'

'Last night, Sir.'

'What about last night?'

‘Very late, Sir. We heard shouting from the old sangoma’s hut. Then, the terrible screaming lasted for about ten minutes. Everyone was frightened. Some said it was the old sangoma’s spirit that screamed. But we knew it was not.’

‘OK, but why is everyone hiding now?’

‘They’re afraid of you, Sir.’

‘Why are they afraid of me?’

‘They say you have swallowed Satan’s spirit, and now you can be like him. They say before, you wouldn’t allow such a happening. The Leopard was a kind person, a protector, but now you are an avenger.’

‘Didn’t you tell them you also approved of the punishment?’

‘No, Sir, I cannot tell them that. I must live with these people, but you are free to leave whenever you wish.’

‘Where is Cebile? I must talk to her.’

‘Cebile is sick, Sir. She cannot see you.’

‘Winston, I have orders to pack up the camp tomorrow and leave for Harare on Monday. It’s my last chance to see her.’

‘I will talk to her father, Sir.’

Winston returned with Cebile’s father a few minutes later.

Her father spoke. ‘Cebile says she will not see you, Sir.’

‘Is she really sick?’

‘She does not wish to see you, Sir.’

‘Does she know I am leaving for Harare on Monday?’

‘Yes, Sir. She says it is best you leave without seeing her.’

‘Well, then I must go.’

Winston walked with John to the Land Rover. ‘You looked after us, Sir. Our village will not forget you.’

John said nothing in response.

‘What must we do with those in the sangoma’s hut, Sir?’

‘In ten days, burn the hut. Evil lives there.’

‘Should we let them out first?’

‘No. That would be dangerous for the villagers. Set the thatched roof alight, and when it collapses, throw dried fallen branches over the wall to create a great fire. It will release the spirits of those who entered the hut. After the wooden door burns and the embers cool, clear out the ashes and knock down the hut’s wall. That way, you will break the sangoma’s spell.’

John got into the Land Rover and crawled out of the village, watching its slow retreat in the rearview mirror. Reluctant to leave under such circumstances, a bitter taste filled his mouth. The relationship he’d built with the village shattered in a moment. Winston said the village would not forget him, but how would they remember him? Any hope of staying in touch with Cebile was gone. He thought it ironic he’d avoided the pain of having to tell her he was leaving, but now he wouldn’t have to?

Revenge against Simba left him feeling empty, not triumphant, and it had played out in his absence, branding him as the monster that replaced the devil the villagers earlier feared.

John drove down the rough track for the last time with a heavy heart. His grim silence was in sharp contrast to his uplifted mood on earlier trips, when he'd hum his favourite tunes to himself.

Back in camp, Elijah informed him of a radio message from Kim. The major and his platoon from south of the Bulawayo to Plumtree Road struck camp earlier that afternoon and were on their way to the Fifth Brigade base in Gweru. Tomorrow, Sunday, John's platoon would pack as much of the camp as practical and prepare the site in readiness to leave on Monday morning. But in the meantime, this Saturday night, he'd spend drinking with his men.

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Alcohol puts some people to sleep, but it had the opposite effect on John. His restless night was not only because of the beers he drank. His thoughts of Cebile, the village, and Simba kept him awake, tossing and turning for much of the night.

In the morning, the platoon started packing up the campsite and tidying the area. John was tempted to pay another visit to the village and Cebile but procrastinated. As the mid-afternoon turned into early evening, he realised it was all too late. The villagers' mood was unlikely to have changed overnight.

The men found packing up the camp and tidying the area tiring. But in the early evening, the beers flowed again: Chibuku and Lion Lager. As the horizon swallowed the sun, the campfires cooked the meat and charred the mealies over the flames. Earlier, the cook prepared the sadza and spinach. The men, pleased to be going, filled the surrounding bush with beer-fuelled songs.

Monday morning dawned grey and cool, with a gusty wind blowing dust in everyone's eyes. The unseasonal weather matched John's mood as the men packed away the last of the camp essentials. At eight o'clock, the convoy eased out of the campsite onto the road to Bulawayo. Elijah drove with John beside him and Sonny in the back seat.

John leant against the corner between the back of his seat and the door. He rested his head against the window and closed his eyes, focussing on the thoughts that swirled in his mind, pleased that Sonny's piping voice kept Elijah engaged.

One positive was he'd visit his mother again and continue to repair their relationship. John's mouth watered when he thought of Martha's cooking and the mature dinner conversations he'd missed while in the Matabeleland bush. His imagination filled with the aroma of those tasty meals.

By the time the Bulawayo power station's cooling towers came into view, the sun was coming out, and John's mood lifted as he joined in Sonny and Elijah's chatter. They'd only driven about forty kilometres, and already his life in Matabeleland seemed like a mad dream. The pursuit of dissidents, Major Kim, Satan, Winston's village, and Cebile all gone like fallen branches swept away by a torrent of water in a raging river. The lure of Harare exerted a stronger pull than his time in the Matabeleland bush. He'd enjoyed the latter, but now, only thoughts of Cebile still lingered. It was a strange mix of regret and anticipation.

The convoy drove through Bulawayo without stopping. As the kilometres clocked up, issues so important a week ago now seemed trivial. John just wanted to rid himself of the stain of the Fifth Brigade. He was glad he resisted Major Kim's pressure to improve his

numbers, and although it might yet have a negative impact on his military career, he felt cleaner for it.

A little before lunch, the convoy arrived at the Fifth Brigade base. Everyone headed to the canteen for something to eat. After lunch, John swapped contact details with Elijah and said goodbye to his men, before hurrying to the stores to return his uniform. A vehicle waited to give him a lift back to Harare. He groaned when he saw the driver was the silent, unsmiling Nyati who'd driven him from Harare to Gweru when he first joined the Fifth Brigade.